

BIBLICAL PAGES

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Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 4 From slavery to 'diakonia'

Introduction

How many times do we perceive work as a burden, an obligation weighing on our shoulders, a punishment for humankind? Is it really so? How do the Scriptures present work?

We shall briefly deal with its genesis and meaning, in order for us to grasp the deep meaning of how Israel first and then Jesus related to it. Jesus Himself worked, He was a carpenter at Nazareth and He approached His first disciples in their workplace. This will question our own way of relating to work, which should take into account our dignity and human mission.

In the hard labour of some fishermen here comes the Word. The workplace becomes a theological place, because it welcomes the Word who is operating and who gives a new meaning and a new perspective to work itself.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

Come, Holy Spirit,
enlighten our minds,
so that we can remember our origin,
our divine task of co-creating.
Come, Holy Spirit,
give us a penetrating mind
so that we can grasp the depth of the Word
inviting us to widen our horizons,
to act not as slaves
but with the trust of children,
in liberty, in truth, for communion.

1. Lectio (to read the Word / to listen to it)

Luke 5:1-11

1 Now it happened that He was standing one day by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the crowd pressing round Him listening to the Word of God, 2 when He caught sight of two boats at the water's edge. The fishermen had got out of them and were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats – it was Simon's – and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Then He sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

4 When He had finished speaking He said to Simon, 'Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch.' 5 Simon replied, 'Master, we worked hard all night long and caught nothing, but if You say so, I will pay out the nets.' 6 And when they had done this they netted such a huge number of fish that their nets began to tear, 7 so they signalled to their companions in the other boat to come and help them: when these came, they filled both boats to sinking point.

8 When Simon Peter saw this he fell at the knees of Jesus saying, 'Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man.' 9 For he and all his companions were completely awestruck at the catch they had made; 10 so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were Simon's partners. But Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on it is people you will be catching.' 11 Then, bringing their boats back to land they left everything and followed Him.

Foreword

In Genesis, man has the original vocation of settling in the garden of Eden to cultivate ('avad') and take care ('shamar') of it (cf Gn 2:15). Through the gift of the garden, man is allowed both to get some food and nourishment and to grow to maturity through his work.

Exodus stresses the change in the social condition, from slaves to free men, from hard labour masses to a people with its own God, whose service they are at by their own free choice. In Exodus, work is dealt with from chapter 5 to 19:8: everywhere 'work' is rendered by 'avad', but the meaning is different. In Ex 5, avad refers to the work of people who are slaves ('missim'), hard and gratuitous labour ('sivcot'). The verb 'avad', coupled with 'inah' which means 'to oppress', 'to enslave', means 'to enslave through hard labour'.

In chapter 7, the meaning changes: avad is used instead of 'hagag', which referred to a pilgrimage, a sacred festival. So, by substituting the word 'hagag', 'avad' gets the meaning of celebrating a festival for God, of worship service. This service is the work of cultivating an existential relationship with Him and consequently of serving our brothers and sisters in the community, given that God is the One who commands us to respect the values of community.

There is a change from slavery to service. This change frees man because it involves the liberty of accepting God's presence as a gift to be cultivated, and therefore of getting back once again the identity man originally received: to work, to cultivate.

'Avad' refers therefore to both the hard labour of the farmer, of the workman and of the craftsman, and to that particular work which is the liturgical service in the temple.

According to Gn 2, work is not a consequence of sin but a task belonging to the very dignity of God's creature. The difference between work as a service (Ex 7) and slavery (Ex 5), is that in the latter case the person is subjected to work and has no freedom, but what he has to do is decided by another man. Creativity is got rid of, so. In Ex 6:2-8 instead, God reveals Himself as the God of liberty and of liberation. Thus Israel passes from non-existence to existence because, according to the Bible, if a man is not free, he is similar to a thing.

In old Israel, if someone had to sell himself into slavery because of his debts, his closest relative could intervene and ransom him. God behaves as Israel's closest relative, thanks to His covenant with Abraham, and decides that His people has to be freed from slavery. It is not a change of mastership, but Israel becomes free as it is part of God's family. The sign of the end of slavery is the Sabbath, the right to rest.

In Ex 35 work is clearly identified as liturgical service and should be performed "with a generous heart" (Ex 35:5): it has its own value and gives joy. To be at the service of the Lord is the work of one's whole existence, and this service builds up the community.

In the passage we are dealing with in this Lectio, what provides scope and dignity to working is the change from the limitations and the failure of one's own work (the basis of the covenant and relationship with Jesus) to liberation, represented by the triad 'work-service-diakonia', through which one can get back both dignity and a new mission, given that it is a new form of the original mission of cultivating the garden ('avad') and receiving the gifts of God in a way which is conducive to life and communion, not to slavery.

We should get back the gift of the work place – similar to the garden – and make it fruitful.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 1-2 Jesus catches sight
- 3 Jesus teaches the crowds from the boat
- 4-8 Jesus talks with Simon: His word opens up Simon's horizon
- 9-11 The fishermen are awestruck: Jesus' promise transforms their work

This is the third part of the Gospel, called: Jesus' Galilean ministry (4:14-9:50), Chapter 5. It comes after the second part, called: Prelude to the public ministry of Jesus (3:1-4:13). In particular, the passage we are dealing with is placed after Jesus' day at Capernaum and His decision to go to a lonely place. The crowds were trying to prevent Him from going elsewhere, but He replied, 'I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns too, because that is what I was sent to do.' Line 4:44 goes on: "And He continued His proclamation in the synagogues of Judaea."

Previously, in Nazareth's synagogue, He had made His programmatic speech and, after reading Isaiah's prophecy (Is 61:1ff), had announced that that text had been fulfilled on that very day "even while they were listening". The Lord's year of

grace had just begun, a time of liberation for all the oppressed, a time when the word they had heard would be fulfilled in them.

With the beginning of Chapter 5 the setting is completely different. The proclamation is no longer made within the synagogues, but on the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret. This proclamation will be linked to a particular event, making it concrete... A hard labour will be turned into something else, nourished and fulfilled by the Word in all those who will be listening to it.

Jesus catches sight

I Now it happened that He was standing one day by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the crowd pressing round Him listening to the Word of God, 2 when He caught sight of two boats at the water's edge. The fishermen had got out of them and were washing their nets.

Here the setting is stated in a very precise way, as well as the placement of all the 'characters', providing a detailed context within which "Jesus catches sight".

If we translate the text literally, the crowd is 'lying on Jesus' and listens to Him. The verb used to convey the meaning of 'pressing round Him' makes us understand that they were trying to touch Him, but also that they were 'founded' on Him, they were entrusting themselves to Him. Generally speaking, the crowd is anonymous... However, it is interesting to note that they are pressing, 'lying on' Him from whom the Word comes: this is already a foresight of the discipleship He will call some of them to, later on.

Jesus is standing by the lake. He is firm, like a rock. If this is coupled with the attitude of the crowd, we are reminded of Lk 6:47-49 (Someone who listens is like the wise man who built his house on the rock; cf also Mt 7:24).

The crowds are listening to Jesus. Then Simon will receive the task of putting into practice the word of Jesus.

The boats are at the water's edge. The fishermen have got out of them and are washing their nets.

Twice, then, the Lake is a central place. It is the place where Jesus meets some fishermen. The Sea of Galilee is the setting where Jesus meets man in his natural habitat and everyday occupations. It is a workplace, a place of hard labour, of successes and delusions, but it is turned into a very 'ambo' from which the gospel is proclaimed.

At the same time, the lake will turn into a place of danger and fear, when Jesus falls asleep and the disciples think they are lost (Lk 8:24). Thus, it highlights one's limitations, but shows also how they can be overcome.

And what about the water of the lake? Those who are not used to it, living far from it, are afraid of it. It hides the abyss, darkness. To fishermen it is sometimes a source of life, but it can also betray them and show their failures... Water is a symbol of the unknown, of the mystery that each of us hides in himself: it can make you safely sail but it can also kill you!

In the passage we are dealing with, the waters of the lake are the workplace, the place-gift that will be renewed by Jesus' word. The boat is indispensable to fishermen. Matter-of-factly, the first disciples are presented as fishermen.

Jesus catches sight of two boats. Here the verb 'orao' is being used. As we already know, it refers to seeing beyond what is immediate, and to know through sight. But what does Jesus see beyond the two boats?

Jesus teaches the crowds from the boat

3 He got into one of the boats – it was Simon's – and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Then He sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

To see is the prelude of action: Jesus gets into Simon's boat and asks him to put out a little from the shore. Simon obeys, symbolically distancing it from stability, from security, and into the unknown. This was not the first time that Jesus met Simon. Previously (cf Lk 4:38-39) He had been at his house and cured his mother-in-law, "who immediately got up and began to serve them". The term used in 4:39 is 'diakonia', the service proper of those who are free, in opposition to 'doulos', the work of the slaves. Simon had already seen a woman "raised" by Jesus (the term is the same as that used for the resurrection). This work is like a thanksgiving, grateful and spontaneous, making us free (it can be performed even on the Sabbath Day) and not letting us go back to slavery.

Jesus is teaching from the boat. The boat is an instrument of work, from which an authoritative teaching is imparted: we infer it from Jesus' seated position, typical of a master. This teaching involves the materiality of things, work, the instruments of work... It makes them stay far from the 'terrafirma' land, as they are meant to make concrete that word which will renew the meaning of work itself.

Jesus talks with Simon: His word opens up Simon's horizon

4 When He had finished speaking He said to Simon, 'Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch.' 5 Simon replied, 'Master, we worked hard all night long and caught nothing, but if You say so, I will pay out the nets.' 6 And when they had done this they netted such a huge number of fish that their nets began to tear, 7 so they signalled to their companions in the other boat to come and help them: when these came, they filled both boats to sinking point. 8 When Simon Peter saw this he fell at the knees of Jesus saying, 'Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man.'

Jesus asks Simon "to put into deep water"...

In the place where the very meeting takes place, the word turning the work into something different takes pride of place.

Simon understands the importance of the word, in the failure, in the unsuccessful hard work. His subsequent actions will be founded on that authoritative word.

While the crowd is described as lying on Jesus in order to listen to Him, as lying on His word in order to be founded on Him, the Rock, Simon decides that it is time to advance: and he acts. What is implied in that? He has to acknowledge the power of the word, in a very concrete way, so that his actions may be motivated. And he puts out into deep water and pays out his nets, thus hoping that his failure may be turned into a success.

However, work is not required from Simon only. He has to take the initiative and direct the work, but all those who are with him on the boat have to work too: “Pay out the nets”. Thus the superabundant catch belongs to the plurality of people involved in the work; in fact, even to their companions in the second boat, called to help them.

The fishermen are awestruck: Jesus’ promise transforms their work

9 For he and all his companions were completely awestruck at the catch they had made; 10 so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were Simon’s partners. But Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on it is people you will be catching.’ 11 Then, bringing their boats back to land they left everything and followed Him.

Awe, inadequacy. Simon’s reaction recalls the typical, biblical reaction of man when confronted with the greatness of God (cf Is 6:5; Jr 1:6; Ezk 1:28). He does not confess any particular sin, but his sinful human nature that realizes it is in front of God. Then we could regard it as coming from his fear of God, and his inability to bear God’s greatness and beauty, coming from that perception.

In fact, growth is necessary to pass from being awestruck to feeling one’s inadequacy, and then to changing one’s worldview. Now he will have to catch people, not fish. Jesus is very able in leading him to that conclusion. The turning point is “Do not be afraid”, a reassurance that we can see in each and every theophany related in sacred scripture. “Do not be afraid”. That sentence reminds us of the fear of God. But it also establishes a relation of closeness, confidence and trust in Jesus: Simon is learning to know Him gradually, and in the end he will let Him upturn his life. He calls Jesus “Master” in line 4, and now, in line 8, he calls Him “Lord”.

Simon must agree to be ‘caught’ out of the waters himself by his Lord, in order to cherish his mission of taking people out of the sea – where man cannot live – which is a symbol of immobility.

Work is turned into an action that is necessary for the life of man, and that makes man escape from death and asphyxia. To catch living people may also mean that water – formerly a symbol of death – is transformed into a life-giving place, renewing man, and a sacramental symbol.

People will be caught alive from the waters. The work, done “on” the Word, is new, it does not crash the person’s identity, but it establishes a new relation with other people... to catch different people in the same net means to gather them to unity, and to rebuild the new people freed from the power of death.

The boats are no longer useful: they are brought back to land and left there. In order to fulfil his mission, Simon needs to preserve his identity (being a fisherman); and he needs also not to forget the event (the miraculous catch); but he has to leave behind everything else; and he also has to choose the relevant instruments, useful to catch living people. What does he have to choose? How can he discern what to choose?

If the goal is to catch living people, by “putting out into deep water”, it is necessary to get rid of what binds one to the land, what one already knows, and to become flexible in order to grasp the opportunities provided by concrete events, including conflicts. However, the modality of the new work cannot be the product of one’s imagination, but it is a Person, Jesus Christ, and His way of relating to people, which is always relevant for those who stand in front of Him, always appropriate... “They left everything and followed Him”.

In conclusion, man’s work must be inspired by Jesus and by His liberty, making Him the Lord of the Sabbath too (Lk 6:33), of that day devoted to rest which God gave to man as a seal of familiarity with Him.

What then is the meaning of work, if we regard it according to Jesus’ life? The teaching He delivered from the boat has become a concrete indication, laden with symbolism: to catch living people in a different net.

Following Jesus must be the drive behind the new work: to heal, to teach, to be surrounded by people, to be at the service of others with the same liberty of children, not with the subjection of slaves.

The encounter with Jesus changes everything. When the fishermen meet Jesus, they have to entrust themselves to His word, and their work is turned into a service to others, conducive to life, to being freed from death, to be gathered in unity... And they have to let themselves be helped by Jesus, so that the word may be fruitful not only for themselves but for their brothers and sisters too.

The text highlights the fact that Jesus’ invitation reveals the true meaning of acting in favour of man’s liberation and of giving him life. Jesus’ word is therefore the foundation of man’s work both as far as the personal response is concerned (Simon’s ‘Diakonia’) and as the communion of brothers and sisters (‘Koinonia’) is in its turn. The latter is created when the brothers and sisters, gathered by Jesus’ word and invitation, start to act according to His teaching, and that becomes concrete, a reality gathering people to unity; catching not fish but living people... And it is also a mission to preserve life and to cooperate in its growth.

2. Meditatio

(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)

Jesus relates to people by getting into the concrete reality of the men and women that He encounters. How much do I let myself be involved by Jesus in my daily

chores? How do I approach other people's lives? Standing aloof, or do I get into the boat with Him?

Not only does Jesus get close to people, but He also opens up for them a new horizon. Does my work place become bigger? Does it become a place of liberation? Or is it a place of slavery? Do I perceive my work as an intolerable burden, or instead as my acting in the history of the world, giving my contribution to life's growth, and showing by my actions a life-giving path?

Am I aware that I need to entrust myself to Jesus in order to follow Him without being self-centred, without relying on my projects and without fighting my shortcomings on my own?

Jesus is the model of a new mission. Do I enjoy following Him, walking on the path of communion, inviting other people "to put out into deep water"? Or do I leave everything as it is, in order to avoid problems?

Do I see – like Jesus – in the encounters with other people some opportunities to discover the new modality of the "here and now"? We do not have to daydream, but to fulfil God's dream in the reality of our work. Is my 'sorority' growing and becoming a 'diakonia' for the world? Is it similar to a liturgical service to God? Is my work building up unity with my sisters?

Here is a witness inviting us to ponder once again on n° 4 of the Rule of Life.

Paola is 47 and has a degree in Contemporary History. At first she worked as a researcher for many cultural institutions in Bologna, then for Associazione Orlando, and in the last four years as the head of the Centre for female documentation in Bologna. After twenty years of historical and cultural research, she felt the need to start working in alternative economics, and to learn cultivating the land and producing food. A year ago or so, she became a founding member of the agricultural cooperative 'Arvaia', whose aim is to cultivate the land respecting earth and people, and to be 'sustainable' and 'solidal'. Now, while she is learning, she is in charge of herbs, she works in the orchard, as well as in the kitchen where the products are transformed, and does everything it may be needed day by day. Her wish is that the voluntary work of the present, based on the production of biological products and trying to impact less on the environment, and also based on different human relations, not relying just on money and the logic of profits, may become a true job later on, in order to demonstrate that another kind of economics is possible.

3. Oratio **(to pray the Word / to repeat it)**

Our new beginnings

Lord, may we really welcome in us the challenge to start afresh.

Help us not to gaze just what we have made, as if what we keep in granaries could exempt us from sowing in the open fields.

Help us not to regard time as a menace (of course there will be struggles, we will need efforts and so on).

Help us not to stand still in the comfortable 'yesterday'. Help us not to find an excuse in our own insecurities and fragility preventing us from advancing.

May we find You again, Lord, beyond the circle of our own routine.

May we find You again, Lord, in the novelties, in what we get through the unexpected and the different, in what we feel and experience now for the first time.

May we rediscover You once again in what we do not know and in what we have to learn yet, in what is being formed at the moment and in what we are beginners; in the surprising joy and sorrow of our new 'births'.

May we find You again in the dawn of life, in hidden work and its fascinating blossoming, surpassing us, in what is emerging and about what we have no certainties, in what we do not look for but that is coming towards us.

May we meet You again in the imperative arriving to us from so many places, saying: "Start afresh!"

Jose Tolentino Mendoza

4. Contemplatio **(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

Let ourselves be guided by Jesus towards the depths of our heart...

Let us allow Jesus to meet us there: it will be a new beginning, starting with our own limitations and shortcomings, for a renewed 'diakonia'.

5. Collatio **(to share the Word)**

Let us ponder this text in our meeting: it is a work similar to liturgical service; it is 'sinodia', to be walking on the same path, together, in order to understand how we have to go on. Let us share the resonance of the Word in us, in order to co-operate in the common journey, and our 'diakonia' will be renewed, as will the work common to all of us.