

BIBLICAL PAGES

by Sr Maria Chiara Ventriglia

Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 5 The Mount: meeting Jesus in order to become prophets

Introduction

Are we really focussed on the quest for God? From the very beginning, mankind has always tried to reach divinity. In mythology and in the various religions, the mountains are indeed the places where the divine may be encountered and where the divinity communicates with man. The mountains are high places, similar to stairs leading to heaven.

However, while in mythology Prometheus the man climbs and tries to conquer the gods' dwellings, the Biblical God, the God of Israel, comes down in order to encounter His people, in order to encounter man: at first He encounters Abraham, showing Himself as the God of the Covenant on Mt Moriah, where He gives Isaac back to him as His gift. And then He encounters Moses on Mt Sinai, making of him the man who is a link allowing communication between God and His people. With Moses, the Biblical mount par excellence is Mt Sinai, the mountain which is also a symbol of the encounter with God, and where the Law will be given.

If the mountain is the place of the encounter, more than one parties come into play. In the passage we will be dealing with now, Matthew 5:1-12, Jesus' encounter and the encounter with Jesus takes place indeed on a mountain, the symbolical place of man's encounter with God.

There Jesus speaks, but to whom?

It will be important for us to discover who the real addressees of Jesus' good news are, in order to see the wish of God's heart for us, revealed by Jesus. Is God's word addressed to few people, or rather to many?

Of course it is clear that climbing up the mountain is no longer a human conquest, but the summit can be reached by welcoming a gift, God Himself, and His wish to be known by man.

Jesus becomes the new 'place' where God and man can meet. He has something to reveal, something that has to do with each and every man or woman of all times and places.

He reveals that God has already come to meet us. That He can be found in the different situations of our lives, and that we have to discover His presence that is already working in us.

Which features is that encounter giving to our lives, to our relations?

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*God our Father, we offer You this time of our lives
and we try to listen to Your word contained in the Holy Scriptures:
Please send Your Holy Spirit in our hearts,
so that we do not resist Your voice with a closed and hardened heart,
but we welcome it in order to cherish and ponder it and to put it into practice.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

Matthew 5:1-12

1 Seeing the crowds, He went onto the mountain. And when He was seated, His disciples came to Him. 2 Then He began to speak. This is what He taught them:

3 How blessed are the poor in spirit; the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

4 Blessed are the gentle: they shall have the earth as inheritance.

5 Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness: they shall have their fill.

7 Blessed are the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers: they shall be recognised as children of God.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness: the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

11 Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account.

12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how they persecuted the prophets before you.

This is the first great speech quoted by St Matthew: The Sermon on the Mount. It includes chapters 5, 6 and 7.

How did St Matthew lead his readers onto the mountain? He has already specified that “large crowds followed Him” not only from Galilee and Judaea but also from heathen lands and even from Great Syria , notoriously ruled by the Romans.

At this point, Jesus was already very famous. He started preaching in Capernaum, which – as St Matthew relates – is in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, a land where – according to the prophet Isaiah – “the people that lived in darkness have seen a great light; on those who lived in a country of shadow dark as death a light has dawned.” (Mt 4:15-16)

We are surprised to find out that the first words of Jesus' preaching, as related by St Matthew, are identical to those preached by St John the Baptist: "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is close at hand". (Mt 4:17) No novelty then?

Well, at least there may be one, which is fundamental. St John invites people to get ready for an event which is about to happen; Jesus proclaims the good news that the event announced by St John is taking place: the Kingdom of God is close at hand, God is close to man, and thanks to that one is able to convert. The demonstration is the calling of the first disciples who, "at once", left everything and followed Jesus.

Jesus goes "round the whole of Galilee teaching" and "curing all kinds of disease and illness among the people". In fact, He gets rid of all that is an impediment of man's relation with God. Within that context, we arrive at the passage we are dealing with in this Lectio: Jesus sees the crowds and goes onto the mountain. After going down, followed by large crowds, the first sign that His preaching is being fulfilled is the cure of the leper: the encounter with Jesus shows that God is for everyone; He can be encountered on the mount but also elsewhere, and He makes the outcast become members of the community once again, through their relation with Him. Once again the good news is focussed on God who has become close to man, in order to bring him back to Himself, in communion. It is from Him that our possibility of purification and conversion originates.

The beginning of Chapter 5 leads us to surprising discoveries which upturn many commonplaces on who and how one can establish a relation with God.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- Jesus' initiative and the audience of His speech
- Teaching
- Prophets

1. Jesus' initiative and the audience of His speech

1 Seeing the crowds, He went onto the mountain. And when He was seated, His disciples came to Him.

The context within which we should read our text is that of God coming to meet us first. Here Jesus takes the initiative after seeing the crowds. All His actions originate from seeing.

Even when God presented Himself to Moses, His approach started from letting Moses see something (Ex 2:25) as well as from hearing the Israelites' groaning (Ex 2:24).

Following St Matthew in paralleling Moses and Jesus, Jesus catching sight of the crowds is similar to God seeing the Israelites and "taking note".

We can say that the first addressee is the crowd, as we have already highlighted: only after seeing the crowds Jesus goes onto the mountain. Thus, He is focussing

their attention on the dimension of the encounter with God, an encounter which is proposed to everybody.

Jesus goes onto the mountain, He opens them to the encounter with God, He is Himself the encounter with God, accessible to everyone.

He does not speak standing like the Roman orators, but He sits down in the same position of a master teaching his disciples.

Only at this point the disciples, out of so many people, feel interrogated and approach Him. It is different from Mt Sinai, when nobody could go up the mountain except Moses.

Therefore, there are two different levels of awareness here, the crowd's and the disciples', even though it is not an elite choice, but the audience is 'open' and each of them can grasp what he can of Jesus' revelation, depending on their own capacity.

In our view, this choice on Jesus' part is very beautiful: at the beginning of His ministry, He did not care to cherish just His closest friends, those who were enthusiastic about Him, who left everything and followed Him. His idea was not to form an exclusive club with those who felt the same as He did; on the contrary, He let His word spread around freely, but at the same time it was clear, precise, incarnated in the human situations of each and everyone.

2. Teaching

2 Then He began to speak. This is what He taught them:

3 How blessed are the poor in spirit; the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

4 Blessed are the gentle: they shall have the earth as inheritance.

5 Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness: they shall have their fill.

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10 Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness: the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

11 Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account.

“Jesus opened His mouth”, the Greek text says. He does not read something else; He does not quote anybody else; He does not speak about ‘prescriptions’. “Opened His mouth” means that His teaching comes from Him alone: He is a master in His own terms, His word is authoritative and, more important than that, the teaching comes forth from His mouth because He is the very ‘image’ of what He is about to say.

The first word He utters is “Blessed”, because in Him man is already blessed, relying on a full and happy relation with God: it is in Him that God is present and reigns. In Him the Beatitudes take flesh, and God Himself takes flesh. ‘Blessed’, ‘Macharios’, meaning ‘happy’, ‘carefree’, was a term used to refer to the gods and

to their lives free from earthly cares and worries, full of happiness. In the Bible, this term occurs many times, referring to the man who lives in harmony with God and walks on God's path.

Then, this first word that St Matthew makes Jesus utter suggests that the first and foremost effect of the encounter happening under our very eyes is the communication of something related both to God and to man's relation with Him, something that God Himself, in Jesus Christ, wants to share with all those who are willing to listen. If on Mt Sinai God gave the Law, the stone tablets engraved by God's writing (Ex 32:15-16), Here St Matthew highlights the fact that, by meeting Jesus, both the crowds and the disciples are the recipients of a new gift. Which one?

We can read the text by keeping in mind what the people who were listening to Jesus knew from Scripture and, implicitly, also the readers of St Matthew's Gospel, who came from the same milieu. But we can also keep in mind the novelty of the change that was happening and that Jesus' audience was supposed to fulfil and to put into practice. Jesus was not calling them to stand still, or to adapt to the times, but He was provoking them with the prophecy of the Kingdom (5:12) and of the presence of God.

The poor in spirit have God with them (Kingdom of Heaven is equal to Kingdom of God; "The Kingdom of Heaven is theirs" means that God is present). And that is the reason why they are happy, they share the divine fullness.

This situation implying the presence of the Kingdom as well as of God is common to "those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness" (5:10). How are the two groups related one to the other? And how shall we regard the 'poor in spirit'?

According to Dt 15:4, 7, "there must be no poor" in the community, as their presence would have signalled that people were selfish and unwilling to share their goods. According to the Scriptures, 'poor', 'pitochos', is he who trusts in the Lord alone, as he has no chance of being ransomed, he has no riches.

In the prophets' mind the poor are the oppressed... However, starting with Zephaniah, the 'poor' become the 'anawim', ie the Israelites subjected to God's will: "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, who obey His commands. Seek uprightness, seek humility..." (Zp 2:3)

We could say that they are those "who do not have any other god than the Lord" (Dt 6:4). Later on, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will say that "You cannot be the slave of God and of Mammon" (Mt 6:24), that is, you cannot be divided between God and an idol, because your whole existence is at stake, as well as the fullness of being. Jesus states that these men are blessed, because God reigns in their existence. They are poor in spirit because their spirit is not divided: it is poor, open, does not oppose God.

We can then understand the parallelism between the first and eighth beatitudes ("to be persecuted in the cause of uprightness"). The fact that now God reigns in the poor of spirit implies that these cannot tolerate injustice: 'anaw' contains in its root the idea of selflessness, of openness to the other. On one hand the poor is he who trusts solely on God; on the other hand he is deemed to be blessed because he

does not subscribe to injustice. In fact, while poverty biblically is never applied to God, justice is one of His very features.

The 'sedacha', 'justice', 'uprightness', means being ready to obey God's will in order to establish solidal and harmonious relations with God and neighbour, and for sharing of goods within the community. Later on, Jesus will say, "If your uprightness does not surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 5:20).

Jesus is in fact proclaiming (and also fulfilling) the will of the Father that we should love, as well as the good relation with, and actual works done in order to get rid of poverty and exclusion. This is far more demanding than formal and slavish observance, and far better than the attitude of those who "parade their uprightness in public to attract attention" (Mt 6:1).

In conclusion, God reigns and is present 'here and now' where the poverty of spirit – not material poverty – becomes a search for uprightness, becomes being thirsty and hungry for justice, superabundant just as the Father's love is.

Through this encounter Jesus reveals that the gift of God's real presence in human history has been given to man. And that presence makes 'losers' able to show the face of the Father and to give Him glory (cf Mt 5:16), exactly as Jesus Himself does. There will be persecutions, because putting into practice the 'sedacha' is opposed by this world: when the idol 'Mammon' reigns in one's existence, he will oppose the poor and spoil the relations with God and neighbour. The poor, as well as those persecuted in the cause of uprightness, are blessed because they make God's dream come to life. His dream is that His children may belong to Him completely and, consequently, establish just relations, sharing their goods with their brothers and sisters. "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done...", say the Father's children, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. (Mt 6:10)

From the mountain, the place of the encounter with God, a hidden reality is proclaimed, while it is being fulfilled.

To be blessed reveals the gift of being made in the likeness of God, that God that we are encountering, that God whose very nature is being 'gift', that God that now is speaking through Jesus, who lowered Himself at the Incarnation, who was rich and became poor, in order for us to become rich too.

Jesus' encounter with a crowd of poor people, of mourners, of those who hunger and thirst for uprightness, gives origin to a movement similar to His, calls men to take action according to the gift they have received, which must emerge out of darkness. God is with them; God is present; but we must show that He is present through our good works. "Already but not yet..." This is how revelation works... That is why some beatitudes have a future tense, but they are also certain, thanks to the works of those who make room for the presence of the Father's love.

"The people that lived in darkness have seen a great light..." (Mt 4:16) Jesus is making us light and salt, given that He makes us able ("You are", not "You will be", 5:13) to reveal God's presence (Light) providing meaning for reality (salt).

3. Prophets

12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how they persecuted the prophets before you.

Jesus neither wishes to please His audience, nor does He invite them to be resigned. He shows how God's writing which carved the tablets of stone, now can write on man's existence, thanks to the encounter with Him and to the gift of His presence. After meeting Jesus, however, there will be a new kind of persecution: being persecuted for His sake. This is the summit of the beatitudes... Of course, not because of persecution in itself, which none of the disciples has chosen as his preferred option, but because persecution implies that one's life has become prophetic. That may be a cause for being glad and rejoicing (5:12). One's life is revealing God, it is no longer dumb, and that is the reason why it does not please everybody...

The encounter on the mount, then, is a call to prophecy, as well as a call to happiness, deriving from one's awareness that God is present in his life, and by sharing it with others.

The encounter with Jesus changes us, provokes us and prompts us to show what in our lives is hidden, now that God has come to meet us with the human features of Jesus, in order for them to become ours too.

It is Him, Jesus, appearing through all the beatitudes: the meek and merciful Man, but also the One who proclaims uprightness according to the heart of the Father, who makes rain come down on the good and the bad, that Father we are called to resemble by looking at His Son.

If our life is prophetic, we will be made 'light' and 'salt': it will reveal what we have been made for, to be proclaimers of the presence of God in history.

On the Mount Jesus does not give instructions and obediences, but His beatitudes are the revelation of the gift of the loving presence of God, changing us and driving us towards a greater love.

The beatitudes relate of the true possibility of making that concrete in our lives, and thus of becoming prophets.

2. Meditatio

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

Let us look at Jesus:

- Jesus meets both the crowd and the disciples at the same time. How are we willing to leave our restricted circle of beloved friends? Are we able to speak and explain things to anybody according to their capacity, without excluding anyone?
- When we meet someone, are we able to take into consideration his attitude and mentality, as well as his prejudices?

- What image of the presence of God in my life do I project? How do I regard the beatitudes: ‘opium of the peoples’ or the discovery of vitality and beauty?
- Jesus is calling us to be prophets: are our lives dumb?
- How much do I practice poverty and sharing within the Family, materially and spiritually speaking? Am I able to be ‘poor’, ie, simple, entrusted to the Lord and therefore free to give myself as a gift to others, and to share my very being?
- In the encounter with Him, Jesus communicates joy. What do I communicate?

Number 4 of our Rule of Life reminds us: “In conformity with our apostolic witness, we shall live all of life’s situations in Christ, and carry out our social mandate in a spirit of service, with responsibility and competence.”

And number 30 adds: “So that you may live in a constant spirit of prayer, you shall schedule in your daily routine and in your life some time to be devoted exclusively to your personal meeting with God.”

If we put into practice both of these things required to us, our life will be prophetic.

Here is a witness of someone who is aware in all simplicity of the prophetic importance of all her work, fighting the culture of exclusion.

Lucia Ercoli is a spouse, mother of three adopted children, in charge of the NGO ‘Solidal Medicine’, working as a doctor at the Vatican Health Department... In addition to that, she directs the GP surgery Pope Francis strongly willed to provide free medical assistance and cures to the poor of the city of Rome. The surgery is open three days a week (Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and Saturday mornings). Many people come to the surgery when it is open, most of them from the outskirts of the city, and they meet welcoming doctors, ready to cure and console them. These are voluntary staff, experts and health department personnel from the Holy See, the Roman University ‘Tor Vergata’, as well as from the Association ‘Solidal Medicine’. Mrs Ercoli defined the surgery as a prophecy:

“We are a community of doctors who felt the urge to put their profession at the service of the poorest of the poor, given that nowadays the gratuitousness of the cures guaranteed by the Italian Constitution is at stake... In fact, in my view this surgery is a prophecy, given that the Church supports it with the authority of the Pope.”

At the beginning of 2019 the surgery got new and bigger spaces, so that it could welcome more and more patients:

“Taking into consideration the upsurge of patients as well as the diversification of their needs, the Pope’s ‘elemosiniere’, Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, gave us further space so divided: a room for visits, a chemist’s and a waiting room, where people can wait and be safe from the elements.”

A year ago a women’s surgery was born, taking care especially of those who are pregnant. A pediatric unity was also started as well as cancer screening.

Three times a month the surgery physically moves to the outskirts of the city through a camper:

“We are trying to heal the main vulnerability which is isolation, segregation, exclusion and personal loneliness. By now people know us, we reach for them and check their health and, if problems cannot be solved on the camper, we refer them to the surgeries in St Peter’s Columnade.”

Ercoli (‘Hercules’) is a surname that very well expresses the power of a courageous woman, spending her life to cure the poor and the frail, and to fight the culture of exclusion which by now pervades hospitals too:

“When the hospitals were turned into ‘firms’, the idea of the hospital as the place of healing was lost. Even in health environments the culture of exclusion became predominant, so that attention to an illness is given only if there is a monetary return.

In addition to that, due to concrete reasons, some people cannot be inscribed in the National Sanitary System, which is no longer ‘universal’ as it used to be. And, last but not least, some people have to choose between buying food or medicines. Nowadays number 32 of our Constitution, guaranteeing free cures to the vulnerable, is at stake...”

With her husband, also a doctor, and the Bishop Paolo Lojudice, Ercoli opened a surgery for children, called ‘Ishmael’s Fount’, in the Cinecittà district. She relates that God manifested Himself powerfully in her life through the Association ‘Solidal Medicine’, at a moment when her faith was decreasing:

“I used to work in the ‘oratories’, for some time in the past I have been also a member of the ‘Renewal in the Spirit’ Association. When my faith was at a low, ‘Solidal Medicine’ was born, and we were welcomed only by a church, St Mary Mother of the Redeemer’s, whose parish priest was indeed Lojudice, not yet a bishop.”

Every day Lucia Ercoli meets men and women who are suffering, who are ill, who have wounds, and she takes care of them because thus she welcomes and honours Christ. This world wants to get rid of sorrow, but there we can meet God, the True Life:

“Our neighbour’s sorrow and fragility remind us of our own, getting rid of illusions and society’s propaganda: ‘Everything is ok; just think about satisfying your own desires and needs; leave aside sorrow, it hurts...’
But that is a great illusion, given that sorrow is part of life, it is indissolubly linked to life, and that the idea it is damaging to the person cannot be demonstrated. Perhaps sorrow is the only way God has to shake us from our drowsiness and to lead us towards Life.”

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

The prophets’ corner

*The prophet, Lord, is not someone who received the ‘truth’
but a witness of goodness.*

He is not able to say sublime words, but he fulfils them.

He proclaims hope in despair,

mercy in sin,

God’s intervention where everything seems to be dead.

The prophet is aware of his own limitations,

of his shortcomings,

of his doubts,

of his inabilities,

of his inexperience;

but he is also serene and brave,

because God has chosen and loved him.

The prophet chooses God’s will,

he lives in an intimate communion with Him.

To be prophets nowadays means...

to pass from words to mission,

being present where people live, work, suffer and rejoice.

You, Lord, are the Prophet we have to listen to and welcome.

Your ‘church’ were the squares, the streets,

the river banks, the mountains.

Each and every Christian man or woman is a prophet:

through them Your mouth is evangelising,

speaking in front of men, of the world, of history.

Lord, may You help us to be prophets on the borders of society,

wherever the true life of people may be.

A. Merico

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

Let us be involved in the encounter with Jesus; let us rejoice for the annunciation proclaimed to us. Let us rejoice and let us cherish the joy that has been given to us... Let us give praise to the Holy Trinity coming to us.

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

Let us share the intuitions that make our path prophetic. May each of us share her experiences in the light of what we have just pondered.