

# **BIBLICAL PAGES**

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## **Jesus' places and relations**

### **Lectio n° 6**

## **The Sea: a revealing encounter**

### **Introduction**

The sea. A place full of meaning, the symbol of the primordial chaos, of void, of death. According to the ancient Eastern view, it was a negative symbol. It was called 'Jam', a god who was trying to deface the splendour of the cosmos and was duelling with the god of creation, 'Baal'.

In the Bible, the sea explicitly refers to the Exodus (Ex 14:15-31). Basically, the biblical man can grasp God's power when he sees Him at work in ruling over the sea, keeping in His hands the whole of creation.

Matter-of-factly, starting from Genesis, when God divided "the waters under the vault from the waters above the vault", the emerging of the land in between the sky and the sea represents the harmony of God's creation. The land is the balancing point. The sea is menacing... The biblical man is scared of entering it, anguished because he compares it to entering Sheol, as well as death and nothingness (cf Ps 18:17, 20; Jonah 2:4, 6; Ps 107:23-30).

God has the power to rule over the sea, as it was apparent in Exodus: the divine power turns the Red Sea into "walls of water to right and left of the Israelites" (Ex 14:22). The Psalms refer to that divine power as a walking over the waters (Ps 77:20)

In the passage we are dealing with, why is Jesus making His disciples meet Him while at sea? While at sea, with "a wind against them"? And what about us? Would we be ready to meet Jesus while "hard pressed in our rowing" and with "the wind against us"?

In this Lectio, we will discover how Jesus is leading us to face what scares us... Let us look at Him while He goes towards the disciples, while He relates to all those who are tired and anguished... He walks on the sea, makes of it a path, but none can trace His footsteps (cf Ps 77:19), given that they are God's very footsteps.

### **Let us invoke the Holy Spirit**

*God our Father,  
pour Your Holy Spirit unto us,*

*for Him to put off the noise of our words,  
for Him to make silence and listening reign,  
for Him to lead Your Word from our ears to our hearts:  
thus we will meet Jesus  
and will come to know His love.  
He lives and reigns now and in the Age of Ages.  
Amen.  
[Monastery of Bose]*

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

### **Mark 6:45-52**

*45 And at once He made His disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side near Bethsaida, while He Himself sent the crowd away. 46 After saying goodbye to them He went off into the hills to pray. 47 When evening came, the boat was far out on the sea, and He was alone on the land. 48 He could see that they were hard pressed in their rowing, for the wind was against them; and about the fourth watch of the night He came towards them, walking on the sea. He was going to pass them by, 49 but when they saw Him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost and cried out; 50 for they had all seen Him and were terrified. But at once He spoke to them and said, 'Courage! It's me! Don't be afraid!' 51 Then He got into the boat with them and the wind dropped. They were utterly and completely dumbfounded, 52 because they had not seen what the miracle of the loaves meant; their minds were closed.*

This is Chapter 6 of St Mark's Gospel, immediately after the first multiplication of the loaves. Previously, the twelve had been sent out in pairs: they taught, cured sick people, cast out devils, and then gathered again round Jesus and related everything to Him. Jesus would have liked to take them to a lonely place in order for them to have a rest, but the crowd saw them getting into the boat and followed them. Jesus got off the boat and "took pity on them". Then "He broke the loaves and began handing them to His disciples to distribute among the people." At the end, "they collected twelve basketfuls of scraps of bread and pieces of fish".

In Chapter 8, the second miracle of the loaves will take place. Once again, Jesus will feel sorry for all those people and will involve the twelve in distributing loaves of bread and fish, this time in heathen land. Once again, seven basketfuls of the scraps left over will be collected at the end.

But how much of those events were the disciples able to grasp? In 6:52 and 8:16-21, St Mark highlights that their hearts were "closed": "they had not seen what the miracle of the loaves meant". St John will remind us that the crowd, after being fed, was about to come and take Jesus by force and make Him king, but "He fled back to the hills alone" (Jn 6:14). In St John's Gospel the passage which is parallel to the one we are dealing about here (Jn 6:16-21) comes also after the miracle of the loaves: the crossing of the sea of the disciples is characterized by their hardened hearts, in contrast with Jesus' compassion. They are 'blind men',

who cannot grasp His revelation of Himself as God, the God who is nourishing us and giving us life.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- Jesus makes His disciples get into the boat
- Jesus goes off into the hills to pray
- Jesus can see that they are hard pressed by the wind and walks on the waters towards them
- The encounter: Jesus encourages them and reveals Himself
- Jesus gets into the boat

#### Jesus 'makes' His disciples get into the boat

Let us stress the verb 'to make', from the Greek 'anagkazo', which means "it was necessary for Him to make them get into the boat". Why was it necessary for the disciples to cross the lake and to go on ahead to the other side, near Bethsaida?

Jesus "made His disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side", making them leave the crowd and sail onto the sea.

In Exodus, Moses 'made' the Israelites leave Egypt, and that event was at the same time and event of liberation but also of leaving comfort behind. In the same way, Jesus does not want the twelve to rest on their successes, to dream of becoming Jesus the King's prime ministers... They have to go towards Bethsaida, in heathen land. By crossing the sea, they have to leave behind their ideals of nationalism and the current view of the Messiah's role. They have to cross the sea on their own. The boat protects them from the danger of sinking, of being overcome by danger... and allows them to reach the other side of the lake as if in a new exodus, this time from Israel to the heathen lands. If Israel is the place they have to go out of, it has become a symbol of oppression... But will they be able to make it on their own?

#### Jesus goes off into the hills to pray

In the meantime, Jesus sends the crowd away, after feeding them, and He goes off into the hills.

In the parallel text by St John (6:15), when the crowd was about to take Him in order to make Him king, He went off as well. There He would follow the disciples' crossing of the lake from afar. He did not want acclamations...

St Mark has already pointed out in 3:7 that He "withdrew with His disciples", after the Pharisees and the Herodians "went out and began at once to plot against Him, discussing how to destroy Him."

St Matthew relates that Jesus withdrew in 4:12 and 14:13, respectively when the Baptist was arrested and when the news of his death reached Him. We can infer that withdrawing is a way of avoiding being killed: the growing misunderstanding resulted in the arrest and death of the Baptist, and that would be Jesus' path too. Jesus is detached from the extremes, from both royalty / power and death.

In the passage we are dealing with here the evangelist states that Jesus goes off into the hills “to pray”. He detaches Himself from this world in order to meet His Father. In Mk 1:35, after the programmatic day in Capernaum, we see Jesus going off to a lonely place and pray. When they find Him, He will answer, “Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can proclaim the message there too, because that is why I came.” “That is why I came...” obviously, from the Father.

In conclusion, we can say that when He decides to withdraw, He places Himself in front of the Father, so that He can understand His path on the earth, His life as a man. But can Jesus the Man-God be really separated from His Father? No, of course, but the awareness of Jesus the man grows by placing the human events under the gaze of the Father, in an ‘evolution’ that makes Him understand His Self-Giving as a man, while receiving the incessant gift of the Father.

In this passage, Jesus’ encounter is placed in between the Father and the disciples: He is in the middle, waiting for the hardened hearts to recognize God in Him. He is very patient and does not push them, following in the footsteps of God making a covenant with Israel.

#### Jesus can see that they are hard pressed by the wind and walks on the waters towards them

Two pictures oppose each other: in the night, the boat in the middle of the sea; Jesus alone on the land. The sea and the land, respectively symbols of chaos and harmony in Creation. Jesus alone on the land is the synthesis of His relation with the Father through prayer. He is the only one visible of the two, as the God-Man. And through prayer, the Father entrusts Him with the task of acting, creating harmony, seeing... And Jesus first of all sees... He sees the disciples struggling with all that is negative: the night, the sea, the hard-pressing wind. He can see that they are hard pressed in their rowing, that they are anguished (‘basanizo’ in Greek) struggling with the sea. St Mark highlights that the wind was against them, and opposing them on their sailing towards Bethsaida. They are compelled to face their own resistances.

In Mk 4:37, while crossing the sea, the disciples experienced “the great gale” and “the waves breaking into the boat so that it was almost swamped”, while Jesus was asleep. They woke Him up and He rebuked the wind and the sea.

In the Israelites’ view, the wind was God’s instrument in the fulfilling of His salvific plan, a powerful force of nature the Lord made use of: in the Israelites’ flight from Egypt, the wind opened a salvific path in the Red Sea (cf Ex 14:21); the wind “rained down meat on them like dust, birds thick as sand on the seashore... They ate as much food as they wanted, He satisfied all their cravings” (Ps 78: 26-29).

Back then as well as now, the wind is an instrument, conducive to the manifestation and revelation of the Lord and of His salvific plan. Everything – including the disciples’ resistances – is conducive to preparing Jesus’ encounter with them. In fact, “about the fourth watch of the night” (that went from three to six o’clock in the morning, when the sun was rising), Jesus “came towards them, walking on the sea”. Here we are reminded of Psalm 117:27, “Yahweh is God, He

gives us light”, as well as Psalm 77, “Meditation on Israel’s past”, that we have already quoted in the Introduction: “Your way led over the sea, Your path over the countless waters, and none could trace Your footsteps.” (Ps 77:19)

Both the moment (the sunrise) and the action (walking on the sea) that St Mark attributes to Jesus, are attributed in the Psalms to God, as the Light-giving One and as the One whose path “led over the sea”. And Jesus is therefore revealed as God.

Jesus is approaching the disciples, but which kind of encounter will it be? “He was going to pass them by...” Was His aim perhaps opening the road for them? Yes, indeed. In fact, in parallel, in Exodus, when the Israelites fled Egypt, the Lord was marching in front of them, “by day in a pillar of cloud to show them the way” (Ex 13:21).

#### The encounter: Jesus encourages them and reveals Himself

The encounter takes place: but when they see Jesus walking on the sea, the disciples think He is a ghost. A body with a weight, flesh and blood, should sink, shouldn’t it?

This is the problem of man, a creature, when facing evil. Jesus does not love drama, He does not wish to amaze the crowds and to be acclaimed, as we have already seen. Let us compare then His walking on the sea to the idea of the disciples that He should be a ghost. St Mark and St Matthew, as well as St John, as we have already seen, relate this event, which must have been very relevant to their own communities.

The problem is, once again, that the disciples project their own views on Jesus, they regard Him according to their own ideas and prejudices. The idea of the ghost comes from their fear but is in fact a parody of reality. It is also a weightless solution, with neither flesh nor blood, for walking on the sea, something that they deems ‘impossible’. The atmosphere is dark, they are so scared that they cry out (‘anekrazo’), a cry that they are unable to control and that they cannot stop. The mind gives birth to a ghost, something that is weightless, an impossible creature that cannot be made of flesh and blood: it is the projection of their own minds, still they are terrorized. The disciples – with their hearts of stone – are not aware of His true flesh and identity, but attribute to Him their own projections. (The heart must be regarded according to the Bible’s mind, ie as the place where thoughts, projects, rationality, behaviours and, in a word, the whole person, come from).

Their hearts are unable to recognize Jesus: He is the One who fed the crowds, a good thing giving Him popularity and success, but nothing more than that. He has been placed into a ‘category’, their own ‘category. In his Gospel, on the contrary, St Mark is trying to make his readers investigate the basic question in depths: Who is Jesus?

Jesus Himself speaks to His disciples. He does not scold them... On the contrary, He tries to encourage them. In the chaos of negative events they are experiencing, His voice powerfully resounds: “Courage! It’s me!” This seems to be just a

reassurance, but if we read correctly the sentence related by St Mark, “ego eimi”, “I AM”, that is the revelation that Moses received when he saw the burning bush. This meeting is therefore once again a meeting of revelation: Jesus is suggesting to His disciples His true identity, His being God. A God who is a concrete person present in the history of His people from the very beginning, concrete because He has a precise substance and actions; He is not a dreadful ghost. Now Jesus is saying that that God is the same identical friendly person who is in front of them, the very One who called them to share His life.

### Jesus gets into the boat

The meeting goes on with a further approach: Jesus gets into the boat. The wind drops. That wind, opposing their crossing of the sea towards Bethsaida, towards heathen land, which they had to confront on the sea, drops. The One who rules over the sea, over the chaos and disorder, gets into the boat, thus bringing back order and harmony into creation. This is St Mark’s view. St John adds that they reached the shore immediately. But what are they telling us?

Jesus made them confront evil on their own, with their minds and labour: it was difficult for them to open up, to reach the other shore, to leave behind the Jewish mentality, but they had to become able to welcome a God different from their expectations. That implied accepting that God was not confined to Israel, by overcoming their own ‘ghosts’ and also the fake Jesus produced by their minds. The ghost was an image that did not correspond to the real Jesus. Their resistances are a consequence of their ignorance about Jesus: only His revealing His true identity and their welcoming Him into the boat will make the wind drop.

The evangelists seem to tell us that Jesus Himself and His initiative is the initiative of a God who reveals Himself and who frees man from his illusions; He also rules over chaos... Thanks to Him they can complete their crossing, as He gets into their boat, ie He joins them in their situation and shares with them the ‘crossing of life’ which opens us up to the knowledge of the utterly Other and makes us go towards our neighbour, including the heathen. He will meet the Syro-Phoenician woman immediately afterwards, won’t He? (cf 7:24ff) He will meet the deaf man in the Decapolis, won’t He? (cf 7:27) There, once again He will multiply the loaves. Jesus is aware that “the children should be fed first” (Mk 7:27), still, when the Syro-Phoenician woman replies that “little dogs under the table eat the scraps from the children”, her daughter will be healed.

Jesus the man understands His very being and what He has to do by praying (cf Mk 6:46) and thanks to the events. The second miracle of the loaves takes place in the Decapolis (Mk 8:1) and the scraps left over will fill seven basket, the very number of the heathen nations. Jesus is leading His disciple to open up, even though in 8:21 He will have to say once again: “Do you still not realise?”

From this encounter on the sea we gather the idea that Jesus is the only one who can enable a new exodus of the disciples – to their amazement. A new exodus from their old way of thinking. These disciples are still walking on a path of growth: the whole of St Mark’s Gospel relates about their path of discipleship.

They did not realise the miracle of the loaves, because their hearts were hardened (cf l. 52); they did not understand that Jesus was revealing Himself as the compassionate God feeding His People, exactly like in the Exodus. They did not understand that He ruled over the void, over the sea, over death, and that He was revealing Himself as the God of Life, feeding not only Israel but also all the nations.

They did not understand and they were astonished... “They were utterly and completely dumbfounded, because they had not seen what the miracle of the loaves meant; their minds were closed,” the text says. Astonishment is a positive feeling, making one start to open oneself up, and to let oneself be touched by new things and events, and to give up one’s prejudices, and to start softening one’s hardened heart.

## **2. Meditatio** **(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)**

This is a very important encounter. On the sea Jesus reveals Himself as the God of Israel’s history, accompanying His people from the very beginnings. This meeting with Jesus takes place in our own chaos, disorder (the sea).

Jesus compels His disciples... Am I able to recognize my symbolic sea, that dark area of my self that Jesus is compelling me to cross in order to meet Him in all truth? How do I feel when I have to face my own resistances towards the Lord? Is my struggling a moment of grace when I can recognize Him and give up my own ‘ghosts’?

Jesus prays, He prepares the meeting with His disciples in prayer. How do I regard this prayer on Jesus’ part? Is it meant to understand what He has to do in a concrete way to fulfil the Father’s will or is it rather a stay in a lonely place to be consoled?

Jesus sees, then He walks on the sea, opening up a road. Do I have the same eyes as Jesus? Can I see like Him? Do I despise the difficulties and burdens of the other Sisters? Can I see the resistances of my Sisters? Do I pass judgement on them? Or do I rather go out to meet them, like Jesus? ‘To walk on the sea’ may mean that I have to overcome the temptation of sinking into judging, to overcome negativity.

Jesus reveals Himself and gets into the boat. When I meet the Lord, am I helped to reveal myself? Have I already gotten rid of my ‘masks’ and ‘ghosts’ of the others? Do I have the courage to reveal myself as I really am, with my pluses and minuses too? The struggle to overcome and welcome other Sisters’ resistances starts from truly welcoming my self: if I let Jesus re-order my chaos, letting Him get into my own boat, the fruit of meeting and welcoming Him will be that peace allowing me to welcome others.

N° 5 of our Rule of Life invites us to be open when we read this text: the boat of the Church we are part of involves us to recognize the Lord's presence in history.

*“Each of us will lovingly live in the mystery of the Church, so that our example may be conducive to the ever new relationship of the Church to the world. We shall therefore be attentive to the voice of those the Holy Spirit has made the Church's guardians. (cf Ac 20:28) We shall live in communion with them, always exchanging views and seeking advice. Together with them, we shall be aware that the anxieties and the urges of the ecclesial community are indeed our own: we shall present them to the Lord in the liturgy.”*

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Dearest brothers and sisters,  
my name is Fr Antonio and I come from Naples. I'd like to thank you for letting me be your guest as well as for letting me make an experience I had missed for a few years.

When I arrived here, as somebody of you may remember, I was on the verge of a nerve crisis but I went home purified of all the toxins I had piled up in my life... It was something that I could compare to a spiritual tsunami, a healing and life-giving bath.

Thanks to this, I hope I will be able to start again my apostolic commitment, with an increased serenity and patience (by the way, my first community's patron is St Mary of Patience).

I did not change idea about the present situation of pastoral and liturgical anarchy of the Italian Catholic Church, and I share this idea with other authoritative people. However, after spending four days in silence and prayer, and gazing at the participants' faces and listening to their experiences (I am not very talkative), I felt in myself an inner peace which I had lost and which I was losing completely.

The leadership of my bishop – to whom I will always be grateful – his simplicity, his ability to interact with us all is one of the most beautiful fruit which helped my re-generation (and somebody said he could see that on my face).

He sowed so many seeds in me – and I think also in all of you... We should try to care for them and use them in our respective communities as well as in the Church at large, at the right moment and in the right way, and they will bear fruit immensely for a very long time. On the contrary, should we keep the fruit for ourselves, they would rot and would not be conducive neither to the good of the community, nor of the Church, nor of ourselves.

Still, it will be necessary for us to get involved also in practical, as well as pastoral and liturgical problems (Don Milani used to say: Clean hands are useless if you keep them into your pockets), if we want the Church to be more beautiful than she actually appears, that Church that pope Francis I is trying to revolutionize day after day or, better, to bring her back to her very origins: a Church poor for the poor.

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

Lord, teach us to welcome life in its unpredictable vortex,  
which is at the same time blinding and difficult.  
Teach us to embrace its contradictory substance,  
given that it mixes flexible and inflexible things, light and heavy things, sunrises  
and sunsets.  
Ant the truth is that we are called to embrace all that.  
Teach us wisdom, make us able to see a 'path' in each and every situation,  
both when the season is extremely limpid and clear,  
and when the shadows prevent us from understanding,  
or when it is very hard for us to accept something.  
Teach us to refer our successes to You,  
and the footsteps which are firm and steadfast,  
but also our incomplete and winding 'maps',  
the geography of our suffering and hesitating lives,  
of our omissions, of our advancements and flights, incoherence and sense of guilt.  
Teach us not to lose hope in spite of vulnerability,  
vulnerability that we may see in our very selves as well as in others.  
Teach us to see with Your very gaze, Lord,  
and may our eyes see beyond appearances and the nearest horizon;  
may they turn our wounds, for instance, into a process of growth and  
encountering.  
May we learn to recognize Your footsteps, Lord,  
and Your neighbour's, in both the void and the presence,  
in the menacing desolation as well as in confirming and strengthening hope.

*Card Josè Tolentino de Mendonca*

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

Let us be invaded by astonishment, by re-living in ourselves the experience of  
letting Jesus enter the various situations of our lives, even the most intricate of  
them. May the Holy Spirit give us eyes to recognize His soft steps in the various  
events of our lives.

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

Let us share our experience of the Word of God, and how God is accompanying  
us in our difficult crossing.