

# **BIBLICAL PAGES**

by Sr Maria Chiara Ventriglia

## **Jesus' places and relations**

### **Lectio n° 8**

### **In the desert, a meeting of the opposites**

#### **Introduction**

The place we follow Jesus into in this last meeting of the year is the desert. What does the desert recall to our minds? Solitude, boredom? Biblically, the desert is Israel's path of faith, the place where they learn to trust in God. Once they have come out of Egypt it is the place where their faith is put to the test, but also the place where Israel can experience how life is a gift from God, who cares for man (cf Dt 2:7): God gives bread, water, meat.

Then, when they have reached the Promised Land and become unfaithful, they will be led into the desert once again, in order to become aware of their adultery, to acknowledge it, and to experience God's jealous love (cf Os 2).

Then the desert is a place where one is put to the test, but also a place where one can discover love. In it, Israel is reminded of the experience of its first love, of a privileged relationship with its God. Israel is the bride; God is the jealous bridegroom who is not resigned to accept Israel's infidelity. The desert is therefore a place where Israel can listen to God and be a witness of His wonders: the prophet Isaiah states that God "will turn the desert into an Eden and the wastelands into the garden of the Lord" (Is 51:3).

In the desert experience, the two most relevant and apparently opposite poles are: a test revealing the hearts (cf Dt 8); and the jealous love of the Bridegroom (cf Os 2).

In the Gospel, the term 'desert' occurs just a few times; more often we find a reference to 'deserted places'. In any case, the desert of the Gospel is not a sandy desert, but rather a rocky desert, the product of erosion due to wind, water and of the sudden alternation of heat and cold.

From a symbolical point of view, both the desert and the deserted places recall to our minds Israel's experience, face to face with God: the crowds that in the Gospel follow Jesus are called to recognize in Him that God who cares for His people; and to re-establish a trusting relationship with the Lord Giver-of-Life; and, finally, in Jesus to rebuild a filial relation, listening to Him and discerning while being tested.

In this respect, the text of this Lectio is very relevant. In it, the characters that Jesus meets in the desert set Him in-between two opposite poles, which will come up all along His path. He is the Man-Son who once again can re-discern what lies in His heart, exactly as Israel had to do in the desert (cf Dt 8), and they recapitulate and foretell the ultimate end of His passover: to reconcile in Himself God with His creatures, who were originally in communion with Him but now are torn apart between opposite tensions.

Jesus the Reconciler will bring men and women well higher than the situation they were in the Garden of Eden: the reconciliation of all things in Him (cf Col 1:20). Thus the flesh, indeed all flesh, will be reconciled with God and, glorified by the Life-Giving Spirit, will enter the Trinity... A truth that is prefigured by the Lord's Ascension, isn't it?

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

*Lord Jesus, send Your Spirit so that He may help us to understand the Bible in the same way the Emmaus disciples understood it thanks to Your help.*

*With the light of the Word, You helped them discover the presence of God in the shocking events of Your condemnation and death.*

*Thus the cross, which seemed to end all hope, appeared to them as a spring of life and resurrection.*

*May You help us keep silence in our hearts, so that we may be capable of listening to Your voice in Creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, especially in the poor and suffering.*

*May Your word change us so that, like the two Emmaus disciples, we may experience the power of Your resurrection and give witness to our brothers and sisters that You live in our midst as a source of fraternity, justice and peace. Amen.*

## **1. Lectio**

**(to read the Word / to listen to it)**

### **Mark 1:10-13**

*10 And at once, as He was coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on Him. 11 And a voice came from Heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on You.'*

*12 And at once the Spirit drove Him into the desert 13 and He remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after Him.*

Let us deal with the text.

The three lines we are dealing with are preceded by Jesus' baptism and are followed by St John the Baptist's arrest, as well as by Jesus' proclamation of the "Good News from God" (1:14). Mk 1:1 states: "The beginning of the Good News

about Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. From that we infer that Jesus is indeed the Good News of the Father, the Man who is the Son of God.

The unexpected event is that both God and man can be found in the person of Jesus. God and man seemed to oppose each other, but now they are in harmony. But where does Jesus reconcile the opposite poles, according to St Mark? In the few lines of our Lectio, that symbolic place is the desert. In it, Jesus is placed between two couples of opposites: the Holy Spirit who descended upon Him and Satan; the wild animals and the angels.

In 1:3, St Mark speaks of a desert in which the way of the Lord must be prepared. In 1:4, St John appears in the desert to baptize people. To Jesus’ mind, the desert is a place where important encounters, decisive for His being and mission, take place. However, St Mark does not specify the single temptations as, on the contrary, St Matthew and St Luke do.

Here the focus is on “being”, on “being in the company of...”. And the background is the biblical meaning of the term ‘desert’. The desert provides a specific meaning to Jesus’ encounters: if it was helpful for the appearance of the Forerunner, for the preparation of a way for the Lord, now the desert is the place where a new Exodus may start, each and every creature’s exodus in Jesus’ person. Which kind of relationships is Jesus going to establish there?

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 1. 10. Jesus in relation with the Holy Spirit
- 1. 11. Jesus in relation with the Father, as a Son
- 1. 12- 13a. Jesus meets Satan
- 1. 13b. Jesus meets the wild animals and the angels

#### Jesus in relation with the Holy Spirit

*10 And at once, as He was coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on Him.*

If, as Deuteronomy states, the desert is the place where the heart is put to the test, we should try to understand the conditions Jesus finds Himself in, what drives Him, what His heart feels. I suggest we start from the One who drives Him into the desert, ie, the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to note that line 10 highlights the fact that the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus while He is coming up out of the water. As we have already briefly said, St Mark is presenting Jesus’ baptism: to come up out of the water is a figure of the resurrection, and refers to Israel’s experience of coming out of the waters of the Red Sea and starting the journey to the Promised Land. And, as the People of God is led into the desert, Jesus will be too. This argument makes us focus on the first couple of opposites: water and desert.

St Mark specifies that the heavens are torn apart: the cry of the prophet Isaiah (“Oh that You would tear the heavens open and come down”, Is 63:19) is fulfilled. Heaven and earth are no longer irreconcilable.

Jesus sees a dove, the form the Holy Spirit takes, descending on Him. St Mark highlights Jesus’ awareness, it is Him who sees... That same Spirit who will drive

Him into the desert is now coming down as a dove. The baptismal water, together with the Dove, call to our minds the passage of the Flood and the first covenant with Noah: to be immersed in death and the dove as the first proclamation of the new creation in God, when God will not destroy living beings any longer (cf Gn 9:15). The Spirit descending on Jesus is like a new creation: in Genesis too, the Spirit was “sweeping over the waters” (Gn 1:2). Now, a new creation is starting, a new humanity is starting in Jesus. According to St Mark, Jesus is passive, docile... He does not say anything, He does not do anything, He just welcomes what is offered to Him. St Mark does not relate any dialogue with St John. The protagonist is Jesus only, and His awareness.

#### Jesus in relation with the Father, as a Son

*11 And a voice came from Heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on You.’*

From those same heavens that have been torn apart, as a sign of an irreversible communication, a voice comes: “You are my Son, the Beloved”, with reference to Psalm 2 and Is 42:1. The Voice speaks to Jesus: “You...” St Mark highlights that, differing from the other evangelists. It is Jesus who hears and listens to the voice. Here it is what inhabits His heart in the desert: the echo of the voice of the Father. Jesus is aware that He is loved, that He is THE Beloved, the One His Father takes pleasure in. In this case too, Jesus does not say anything, does not do anything, but bears in His heart the revelation that His Father’s favour rests on Him.

In these first two relevant encounters (respectively, with the Spirit and with the Father) we can see through, or imagine, that in spite of His apparent passivity, Jesus has all the indispensable qualities to be driven into the desert. In silence and listening to God, those qualities can be obtained, and one becomes steadfast, faithful to the God of Life who, from Jesus onwards, would like to take pleasure in His creatures, and would like to establish a new covenant. But what does ‘to take pleasure in’ mean? Shall we fulfil His expectations for Him to take pleasure in us? Shall we bravely behave in the desert?

In fact, God the Father ‘takes pleasure in’ by loving us, mercifully looking at us, freely acting in accordance with His will of goodness, closeness to us, being a gift for us.

The descent of the Holy Spirit and the Father taking pleasure in Jesus are parallel: “I love You; I am with You; I reveal to You that my will is to establish a free relation with You; You are the One on whom my Spirit descends and rests”. The Spirit is indeed the Gift made Person. The heavens are open, and in Jesus God and man are closely linked. Jesus is there, full of the Spirit and of the voice of the Father; He is not alone in the desert.

#### Jesus meets Satan

*12 And at once the Spirit drove Him into the desert 13a and He remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan.*

Love resting on Him, the Holy Spirit, drives Jesus into the desert, “at once”. This adverbial phrase is repeated; we did find it at l. 10, referring to Jesus coming up out of the water. There is a link therefore between the two events. The urgency of the election is followed by the urgency of the period in the desert. In the desert Jesus will be tempted by Satan: Love makes Him face immediately a counterfeit will of the Father. For how long?

All the evangelists write “forty days”. Forty is a number referring to a limited wholeness, a limited period of time. It refers to the forty years of Israel’s exodus, but it is also the period corresponding to a generation. As a consequence, St Mark implies, Jesus is staying in the desert for a limited period of exodus, taking upon Himself the whole meaning of His public life: all His life is an exodus, a time to be put to the test. Jesus is tempted by Satan all His life.

If in the Old Testament Satan is presented as the accuser of the just man Job (cf Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7), in the Gospel Satan appears as the one who presents himself as a counsellor and a helper.

In St Matthew’s and St Luke’s Gospels, Satan’s help is conducive to coming to power, in all its forms. In St Mark’s Gospel, it implies the power of a Messiah who boasts about his prestige all his life. How many times does the name ‘Satan’ occur in St Mark’s Gospel?

The first occurrence is in the line we are dealing with, then there are four further occurrences: when Jesus is accused of driving out devils through the prince of devils, He replies, “How can Satan drive out Satan?” (Mk 3:24); “If Satan has rebelled against himself and is divided, he cannot last either...” (Mk 3:26); “Those on the edge of the path where the Word is sown are people who have no sooner heard it than Satan at once comes and carries away the word that was sown in them” (Mk 4:15); and when St Peter tries to rebuke Jesus about His passion, He rebukes him in His turn by saying, “Get behind me, Satan! You are thinking not as God thinks, but as human beings do” (Mk 8:33)

On this background we understand that in the desert – term that we find twice, one time after the other, as if to stress the importance of the place and of its meaning – Jesus remains, stays, between the Spirit and Satan, that is, between love and opposition to His image as Beloved Son, a Son who is constantly listening to the Father, who is indeed His Image, the image of a God of peace and reconciliation, faithful to the covenant of life for each and every of His creatures (as we gathered from the references of l. 10).

According to St Mark, Satan is the one who is suggesting to Jesus a path contrary to the face of that Father whom Jesus has come to reveal, as well as contrary to the Father’s project that Jesus has come to fulfil. The whole of Jesus’ life is – in a way or another – subjected to the test of faithfulness to the face of the Father; and St Mark highlights that by writing “stays”, “remains”. He must be put to the test constantly so that what is in the depths of His heart may come to the fore.

Being subjected to a test means to stay between opposites exactly as the Spirit willed, when He drove Him into the desert. Love will reveal to Him the face of God all along His path. Jesus learns to stay... How can one ‘stay’ between opposites? Does one have to agree sometimes with one of the opposites and sometimes with the other? When he relates about Jesus’ period in the desert, St Mark does not relate about arguments with the devil, not even the replies quoting

the Scripture against Satan's lies. Jesus is not presented by St Mark as the winner who overcomes temptations but as the new Man who is capable 'to stay', letting the new covenant and the new creation take flesh in Him. In this new creation the opposites can exist together because the Holy Spirit, Love, by revealing the opposite takes Satan's power away. In this case, there is no compromise and no complicity, but simply the power of evil is taken away.

The Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the desert: Love exposes 'non-love'. According to St Mark, the desert is the place where that can take place; and we can call 'desert' all the places where Love exposes its opposite, where a-priori one can encounter Love and experience Him (cf Os 2), enabling us to acknowledge what is love and what is not love.

If, as we have already said, the whole of Jesus' life is a desert, a constant revelation of what is opposite to the Holy Spirit and to the Father's Love, the climax is on the Cross where Jesus stays, as the revelation of non-love crucifying Him, but which is powerless in front of Love, in front of the Holy Spirit. As it was announced by St John the Baptist before baptism: "I have baptised you with water, but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit" (Mk 1:8). The Spirit will be given by the Risen Jesus.

Love unifies and surrounds everything, turning death into resurrection, changing death from inside, as it turns the test into a declaration of love. The principle of that transformation is given to man when he is baptised in the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' path of fidelity to love, some people or groups will try to tempt Jesus and make Him act according to human thinking, not as God thinks (cf Mk 8:33). In the same way as Satan, people will suggest different paths, leading to prestige and power. The term 'to tempt' is used by St Mark also in 8:11 and 10:2, and refers to the Pharisees.

#### Jesus meets the wild animals and the angels

*13b He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after Him.*

In the desert Jesus meets two further categories, also representing opposites: the wild animals and the angels. In this case the evangelist simply says: "He was with the wild animals..." That reminds us of Isaiah 11:2, dealing with a universal reconciliation which will take place when "the Spirit of the Lord rests on Him"... Then, "the wolf will live with the lamb, the panther lie down with the kid" (Is 11:6). It is the new Messianic Era re-establishing peace and harmony, a new covenant of peace reconciling what used to oppose each other. St Mark is in fact suggesting that Jesus is the Reconciler, the One who, filled with the Holy Spirit, IS the New Covenant in His flesh and blood. He constantly builds peace between the creatures, up to the adder: "The infant will play over the den of the adder; the baby will put his hand into the viper's lair" (Is 11:8). Jesus, as a child, will touch with His bare hands the very roots of sin (the serpent), the enmity, the break of the original communion, the break of the founding love relation, given that He is full of the Holy Spirit... and He will give the Spirit that makes us one with the Father.

St Mark specifies the action of the angels, and of nobody else: they look after Jesus. The angel is a messenger; St John was a messenger too. He served Jesus, he prepared a way for Him in the desert. But St Mark explicitly mentions the act of serving only one more time, referring to the women on Calvary: "Among them were Mary of Magdala, Mary who was the mother of James the younger and Joset, and Salome. These used to follow Him and look after Him when He was in Galilee" (Mk 15:40-41).

Biblically speaking, here the reference is to Psalm 90:11, quoted also by St Matthew.

In conclusion, we can say that as temptation concretely takes place through situations and people, in the same way help and support will come to Jesus through people, all along His path in the desert of existence.

If it is common belief that masculine and feminine are respectively linked to action and passivity, here the positions are upturned: the women act, Jesus seems to be passive. But is it really so? In spite of its apparent passivity, starting from His baptism, Jesus' human will is called to respond to God's will, to conform to it, to His being the Son of God. It is a hidden and silent work... In the Gospel we can have a glimpse of it in the answers Jesus gives to those who are putting Him to the test, as well as also in His determination to fight the misunderstandings of His own disciples.

## **2. Meditatio**

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

In these encounters that Jesus has in the desert, we are impressed by His silence and His apparent passivity, which are in fact attention and discernment of the events.

- How much am I able to 'ruminate' the events and the Word, in order for me not to be tossed here and there when, on the contrary, the situations request me to take side?
- Are my 'deserts' (as the place of experience and discernment) capable of making me regard Jesus' humanity as a constant work, illumined by the word and the Spirit, for Him to become a concrete answer in the various events of life, not just on one occasion?
- Do I look for some 'desert moments', where I can experience the intimacy of God the Father's love, and I may become more focussed on my exclusive belonging to Him and I can also improve the understanding of my self, finding out what averts my gaze from Him?
- In which situations (my 'opposites') should I look for peace, letting myself be reconciled by Jesus and by His Spirit, in order for me to feel as a creature walking on a path of novelty of life, and as part of the new covenant?

- As Pope Francis says, “what is most important is to start processes”. Do I long for a path between the opposites? Do I really wish not to be overcome by death, and to unmask all those paths which have nothing to do with the Gospel?

In his book ‘Letters from the desert’, Brother Carlo Carretto wrote: “When we speak of a ‘desert of the soul’, when we say that the desert must be present in our lives, we should not think just of going into the Sahara Desert... And if you won’t be able to go to the desert, you will have to ‘make a desert’ in your life... every now and then parting company with men, and looking for solitude, so that in silence and prolonged prayer you can rebuild your soul. That is indispensable, and that is the meaning of the ‘desert’ in your spiritual life... You must abandon everybody and everything and stay in the company of God alone... But the desert is not the definitive place, just a step, because our vocation is ‘contemplation on the streets’. You must go back to civilization, you must mingle with men, you must bring your intimacy with God to the noise of their city.”

Nº 7 of our Rule of Life states: “In one’s own path towards Christ, each of us will imitate Mary: each of us will learn from Her “Fiat” to welcome the Word of God; from Her life with Jesus at Nazareth, each of us will learn the meaning of her participation in society...” Inevitably the ‘desert’ will appear in our daily lives as an opposition between ‘being’ and ‘looking’.

Here is the witness of some novices who clearly experienced the two poles of the desert:

At the moment, very few days separate us from ‘our day’: the day of consecration. That day will be the end of Novitiate and the beginning of a new life. We will not have to put on a new habit or to change our name, as it is the custom in other religious orders. We will be given a cross: it is the cross that will give us a new habit and name.

Our habit will be ‘nudity’ and our new name ‘null’. In fact, we would like to fulfil our mission as ‘hidden stones’, as our Founder taught us during Novitiate.

We spent a very beautiful time at Venegono: we were reborn. In the very beginning there were many anxieties and perplexities. The mission – we were told – involved the “African sun”, the poor explaining the Gospel to you, insomnia at night because either of war or of peace, radical poverty up to martyrdom, dirty hands sharing everything they had. But at present we were in a ‘castle’, full of comforts we had not looked for, and we were leading a more comfortable life than we were at home with our parents. However, we had to put our trust in it. We had to believe that, if we were there, that must be our very place. Not with the passivity of those who obey but who do not believe, but with the faith of those who believed not only that through Novitiate the will of God would be fulfilled but also that we would be given as a gift the presence of God.



We tried to learn to do nothing, of course without letting laziness rule us... Not so easy! When you do nothing, you are alone with yourself. And the little grains of sand of the desert dry up your blood and compel you to be naked with yourself.

Thus, we realized that our home was inhabited by fears, anger, pride, sense of shame, inferiority complex, and many other guests, that we hardly knew. They were dwelling in our house and we had to stare at them in the eyes and say, 'Yes, there is room for you too'. They were entitled to be there. And thus we heard some knocks on the door and we had to open to hospitality, commitment, hope.

One day doubt knocked and we made 'him' sit down. The following day it was the turn of courage. We stumbled and we stood up again, many times. Until finally we heard God knocking on our door and we found a note saying: "I want you all for me, let us become one: you will be my bride".

We are consecrating ourselves to God and to nobody else. We offer our whole life to God and to nobody else. We will not let anybody take away our mission from us.

In a few days, in the desert of Venegono, we will consecrate ourselves at the presence of the Comboni community and of our most strict relatives.

We thought it wise to advise our relatives to come one day in advance prior to the ceremony, so that they could be better introduced to the event. It will be a great opportunity for us to tell them about our vocation, one of the greatest treasures we have received, thanks to them too.

It will be different from the ceremony of the first vows as it was conducted in the last few years, when many people were gathered around the newly-professed. We prefer to stay recollected in our novitiate, so that the habit and the new name may become truly ours and utterly consign us to God, and God only.

Many thanks to all those who cared for us and who have prayed for us, from the bottom of our hearts... These few lines were written by someone who realized that at the bottom of his heart there is a new little window, from which a new breeze, extremely fresh and never experienced before, enters.

(The novices)

### **3. Oratio**

**(to pray the Word / to repeat it)**

*Lord Jesus Christ, we are put to the test too, in the desert of our lives.*

*We are lured by so many suggestions and promises.*

*Only with You we can clearly discern what all those things do not have to offer.*

*Yes, in them there is no trace of love.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, You didn't want success without love, power without love, God without love.*

*You believed in the word of the Father: "You are my Son, the Beloved".*

*May You help us to feel in the desert of our hearts – where we pursue tricky mirages – that power of the Holy Spirit allowing us not to be prone to idols, and also making us relate of the wonders of the Lord of peace, of You who reconciled all things by infusing them with the Spirit of Love.*

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

Let us listen, with the ears of our hearts, to the Holy Spirit speaking to us with His ‘voice of silence’, revealing to us the presence of God in ourselves, pointing to us the path of Love,

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

Let us share with the Sisters all the thoughts that the Lectio aroused in us, together with our experiences of discernment in Love and prayer, no matter how little they may be.