

# **BIBLICAL PAGES**

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## **Jesus' places and relations**

### **General introduction**

Let us start this year's journey by going back to the relevant places of Jesus' life, that is, the places where the encounters related in the Gospels take place.

The journey begins, exactly as last year, where we can start journeying with Him, meeting at first those "who are in the house" with Him, then moving further and further away. We must be ready for this journey of the Word crossing our own paths, our situations, enlightening them.

### **Lectio n° 1 The house of mercy**

What is Jesus asking us? What is the meaning of "to leave everything and follow Him"? Maybe detaching ourselves from our own world, daily life, the places we live in, our friends? In the text from St Matthew's Gospel we are dealing with today, it is St Matthew himself who finds out what Jesus is demanding: from his first promptness when he is still seated at the tax office desk, to the discovery of the true meaning of "following Him... And he is trying to tell us that indeed.

I think that we can identify St Matthew's house with the place where Jesus' calling is understood and discerned, a house Jesus takes him back to, so that His life and Matthew's life may reciprocally be involved with each other, and St Matthew may be opened up to Jesus' ethos.

Which key is able to open the door of St Matthew's house to communion? Which is the root of each and every calling? Maybe to be just... Not apparently... Then we had to start listening...

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

*God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
You love all Your children and want them to be saved:  
pour upon us that Holy Spirit You consecrated Jesus with,  
that Holy Spirit You sent to bring the good news to the poor.*

*Give us an excellent understanding of both the Gospel and man,  
so that we can bring Jesus to all our brothers and sisters,  
helping them meet Him who is the one and only Saviour.*

*O Infinite Tenderness,  
come and visit Your people  
and in the blood pouring from Your Son's Cross  
welcome each and everybody with the embrace of forgiveness;  
enlighten those who are in darkness and in doubt  
and lead them to the haven of truth and peace.*

*O Virgin who heard and listened to the Word of God,  
make us docile disciples of that Word.  
Beg the Holy Spirit with us, that He may come down  
and renew the face of the earth.  
(Card. Marco Cè)*

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

### **Matthew 9:9-13**

*9 As Jesus was walking on from there He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and He said to him, 'Follow me'. And he got up and followed Him. 10 Now while He was at the table in the house it happened that a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and His disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?' 12 When He heard this He replied, 'It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. 13 Go and learn the meaning of the words: "Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice." (Ho 6:6) And indeed I came to call not the upright, but sinners.'*

This is Chapter 9 of St Matthew's Gospel, Part 2 (The Messiah's deeds, 4:7-16:20). This is the very core of Jesus' work of teaching and proclaiming salvation. In fact, the Sermon on the Mount is followed by ten miracles. St Matthew's call occurs after the healing of the paralytic, when the question of the identity of Jesus, who forgives sins, sets the souls on fire.

In the text we are dealing with the place where the encounter occurs is the house (l. 10), a place which is present in the preceding episode too: after being healed, the paralytic goes back home. He gets up and goes home. The house is the place he can go back to not only because he is now able to walk, but also because he has received forgiveness of sins, the gift of communion.

However, in St Matthew's call, the meaning of this place which is the symbol of family life is expanded: St Matthew is suggesting us that Jesus turns a sinner's house into a place where the one who has been called by Him can share the communion he has received with his guests. But who is he sharing communion with? Maybe with the pure, the just, the perfect? In fact, St Matthew is relating something different, having learnt it from his encounter with Jesus, which touched him deeply. So, let us go and learn Jesus' ethos ourselves.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- A call and prompt response 9:9
- In the house 9:10-11
- The key of mercy 9:12-13

A call and prompt response

*9 As Jesus was walking on from there He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and He said to him, 'Follow me'. And he got up and followed Him.*

It is wonderful when somebody takes notice of us. Jesus takes notice of a man. First of all He sees a man, somebody with a name. The call is therefore specific: Matthew, 'man of God' or 'gift of God'. He is a man sitting at the desk of the tax office. This is what Matthew says (he is named 'Levi' in the parallel passages of Lk 5:29 and Mk 2:13) in order to qualify himself. Just a few words, but opposing his name, his original call, 'man of God', to his job of tax collector for the Romans (a 'publican', 'public sinner').

The parallel passages, by calling him 'Levi', highlight his belonging to that tribe which was excluded from the holy land's partition, given that their heritage should be to serve the Lord: in ancient Israel the Levites' task was 'surveillance of the Tabernacle and of the Temple in general'.

Matthew is seated: the verb 'katameno' suggests stability, being rooted. Nonetheless he lets Jesus gaze at him, and he is astounded. He, the protagonist, relates just one of Jesus' words: "Follow me".

Jesus is incisive, He does not want to convince. Matthew gets up and follows Him. The verb used here is the same used for the resurrection: he raises from a static position. He obeys because he is attracted to Jesus, without delay. St Matthew relates very little of what happened between Jesus' invitation and his getting up. Perhaps we can try to find out what really happened in this fundamental event of the evangelist's life by what he writes in the following lines.

After getting up and following Jesus, where does He lead him to? Does 'to follow' denote just a physical movement? Of course it means to stay with Him but, above all, it also implies to learn from His way of life and deeds. Then, where is Jesus leading him to? Is He leading him to a spiritual retreat? No, Jesus is entering St Matthew's house, He is not afraid of being contaminated by the house of a public sinner. In fact, Jesus is leading him to go back to his house, to his daily life, to his friendships, which cannot be exactly qualified as 'religious'. But St Matthew's house becomes the place of a privileged encounter of Jesus'.

In the house

*10 Now while He was at the table in the house it happened that a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and His disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?'*

St Matthew's house is the place where Jesus can meet his friends, ie publicans and sinners. "Follow me", as said by Jesus, does not lead Matthew far away from his ordinary life, but makes of him a protagonist of Jesus' very search for communion with publicans and sinners.

This is indeed what Jesus meant when He said, "Follow me". Matthew had to learn to care for the sick, for those who were suffering, for those who had 'missed the target' (this is the meaning of 'amarthia', 'sin'), exactly as Jesus cared. Matthew has a direct experience of their same feelings, but now he brings with him the calling, a new gaze, a new strength allowing him to behave differently: no longer as a sinner, but as a raised man.

The house is of course a place of conviviality, but also a place where all the present are called to being raised, and to sharing communion with Jesus. All are sitting at the same table, all have equal dignity and all are lords.

But how come is the Master eating with publicans and sinners?

#### The key of mercy

*12 When He heard this He replied, 'It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. 13 Go and learn the meaning of the words: "Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice." (Ho 6:6) And indeed I came to call not the upright, but sinners.'*

It is as if the house of communion and resurrection had a key, the key of mercy.

The great 'foreword' is Jesus' statement, "It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick". Thus He is giving precedence to the sick and all those who are suffering. His call precedes each and every of His deeds...

"Go and learn..." Two verbs. Let us try to understand their meaning.

"Learn" is an imperative. Its object is "Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice", a quote from Hosea 6:6, which in fact cannot be divided from Ho 2:19-21, related to the prophet's wedding with a whore ('Gomer'), a symbol of Israel's infidelity to his God.

When the prophet has to deal with the woman with many lovers, he has to take initiative: instead of punishing her, he has to seduce her and speak to her heart, in order for a new intimacy to be born. She shall be made a bride "in uprightness and justice, and faithful love and tenderness". The beginning of religion of the heart with Hosea is not just a feeling, but affections are the root of behaviours. The relevant word is 'hesed', a Hebrew term rendered in Greek by 'éleos', meaning interior disposition, interior attitude to God. Hosea 2 is adding that those dispositions are indeed the bridegroom's gifts to his bride: 'hesed', 'éleos', is a firm decision, a will to establish a covenant, that is the relation indissolubly bonding two beings and implying fidelity. Therefore 'hesed', 'mercy', is not an instinct of goodness, but a willing goodness as well as the response to an inner duty, whatever it happens. God is faithful in His mercy.

Going back to the text we are dealing with, St Matthew seems to be telling us that mercy is the call preceding each and every action on man's part, which in its turn becomes the 'dowry', what gives us the right dispositions of the heart to follow Jesus.

The call is not a voice in the air, a wave of sound, but an attraction / seduction (according to Hosea) calling us to be close to Jesus and to be raised by Him. Thus, 'mercy' does not just mean to set one's heart close to the poor in order to raise them, but implies Jesus' very own gaze, preceding us, that gaze thanks to which we can follow Him as we are allowed to respond to the interior dispositions that He Himself has given to us as a gift.

Then, if in Hosea we saw an upturning of God's initiative through the prophet, a radical change of the adulterous woman thanks to the gifts of her lover, the imperative "Go and learn" becomes an essential rule:

- we have to learn that we are all waiting to be transformed by God's gifts and above all by His mercy;

- "Go" is the command that all those who – in their daily lives, day by day – experience Jesus' gaze have to obey. And, exactly as St Matthew, they have to transform their house from being just a place of conviviality with the Master into being a house of communion, a house of resurrection, following the style and ethos of Him who called them.

The new perspective that Jesus offered St Matthew, so that he could learn to establish genuine relationships with God and his brothers and sisters, is not right for the upright (but who can deem himself to be upright?) but rather for sinners. The upright stand by the Law and are regarded as just men because they conform to it. On the contrary, those who have missed the target have no other possibility than to receive a gift, to be called to "get up". They have no sacrifices to offer because they are out of the sacred circle, so to speak, but their one and only possibility to move is to be preceded and transformed in their inner attitudes towards God by Jesus Himself. Thus the house becomes a 'house of mercy', the centre of an active force, where many others who have missed the target can gather.

As we have said before, there is much more in the event than what the evangelist reported. St Matthew did not tell everything, he did not write a 'spiritual diary'. What he left behind cannot be related because it does not regard a conversion or mental adherence, but the upturning of his heart, touched and surprised by the transforming love of mercy, preceding us.

Still, he clarifies that "Go and learn" does not mean to discuss but to learn to let ourselves be preceded by God's love, who loves us in our unworthiness. To learn means also to let ourselves be seduced by God's love, drawing us to Himself – as in Hosea 2 – while accepting that our expectations must be overturned. Where? In the house, in the place and in the moment when, to the Pharisees' eyes, everything seems to be obvious, and people are divided in two groups, saints and sinners.

"Go and learn" is another way to express the dynamics of following Jesus, which starts from the house of mercy by subscribing to His mission: God is faithful to

His logic of love, love preceding us. “So it is proof of God’s own love for us, that Christ died for us while we were still sinners.” (Rm 5:8)

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

Jesus’ encounter with Matthew at the desk of the tax office, described in a synthetic way, was amplified and became explicit in his house with the publican and sinners gathering there... There the true amplitude of Jesus’ deeds is revealed... He anticipates man’s sins. Therefore, once again, we have to wonder: is it easy for us to recognize in Jesus a God with such features?

- Jesus gazes to raise man, not to crush him. How many people are crushed by our gazes instead?
- Jesus is not afraid of going to a house regarded as ‘impure’, with people similarly impure, and of sharing a meal with them. Are we really ready to shatter our respectability? How much?
- Can our house – the place of conviviality and familiarity – become a house of mercy, a house where Jesus is a guest, together with His logic of love preceding us?
- Are we really ready to welcome Jesus’ imperative, “Learn”?

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*Here is the experience of a house / cenacle. The name ‘cenacle’ is a clear reference to the action of sharing meals, sharing our lives. What must be the ‘style’ of that sharing? Love preceding us and healing us.*

*In 1983, in a neglected house at Saluzzo, Sr Elvira Petrozzi (aka Madre Elvira) started the Community of the Cenacle, where many young people were welcomed after going astray and suffering from delusions, but trying to find the meaning of life.*

*These young people came from everywhere and so the houses of the Community, called Fraternities, have multiplied over the years: first in Italy, then in Europe, then in other continents. Currently there are 72 houses in 20 countries of the world.*

*The Community is not only a place where one can recover from drug addiction, but indeed a ‘school of life’, a ‘great family’, where those who are welcomed can feel at home and find once again their dignity, peace at heart, joie de vivre, a wish to love, and their wounds can be healed.*

*Those who are welcomed into the Community are proposed a journey of rebirth based on a simple, family oriented, orderly life. They are freely welcomed and*

*are offered true friendship, discipline and fraternal sharing. Work is rediscovered as a gift, and the effort it entails as the way to grow to maturity and responsibility. Prayer and faith in Jesus Christ, who died and was raised to life for us, are the response to the need of infinite love inhabiting in man's heart.*

My name is Chiara and I am one of those who knocked at the door of the Cenacolo Community after being a drug and alcohol addict, and experiencing depression, eating disorders, personality disorders; and being admitted to a psychiatric unit a few times... At the root of all that lied a sense of desperation and solitude.

As a child, I was extremely sensitive: family quarrels were too heavy a burden to carry for me. I often saw my mother crying and, being dependent on her, I felt bad. My father was often away, due to his job, and the time I used to spend with him was very little.

I started feeling 'lost', with no focus, and no guidance. I tried to find someone to guide me, but I was deluded all the time: no one was able to fill the void I was feeling. I was looking for someone to deeply love me, but didn't find anyone. The world saddened me too, and violence and negativity that I saw when I watched the telly made me afraid of everything and filled me of doubts. I wondered whether God was really existing. That was the worst moment of all: doubting of God, all the rest lost its sense, and I fell into a never-ending abyss. Many many times I tried to commit suicide, but many many times God saved me, in the end taking me to the Community!

One of the most beautiful moments of my life was when I first met Mother Elvira, before joining the Community. I was angry, keeping my arms crossed, I had piercings and a T-shirt with a phrase, "No rules at all!" But Mother Elvira ran to me as if I were the prodigal son, embraced me and said, 'Love, leave everything and come here!'. 'No,' I replied, but Mother Elvira told my mum that in the end I would come and so it happened.

A year after that first meeting, Our Lady took me back through different routes and, "If so She wills, be it so!" At my first interview I met a girl who smiled at me and embraced me... I was thinking, 'Why is she doing that? She does not even know me!' I was always trying to find a 'con' behind those luminous faces and behind the interest they showed in me. Then, finally, I wondered, 'Maybe it is all genuine and true...'

Now I can give witness to the fact that, if I am still here, it is because God really exists! It was not easy because I had to learn to live, to sleep, to eat moderately... I had to re-learn to live, but all that was possible because once again I found God as Father and Mary as Mother: and those are the two people I can rely on.

Now I live in a little fraternity and, as the girl who welcomed me at the time, I am lucky to be able to welcome and love other girls in my turn; and they help me feel a mother and a better person. I work in the kitchen,

learning to make 'pasta' by hand as it was customary in Italy many years ago; then, with a sister, I animate the liturgy by playing the guitar and flute, and the village people who come to Mass are very happy.

My life is simple but beautiful and joyful and I no longer need to find something 'transgressive' not to be bored: in fact, to live here in Community is the most transgressive thing I have ever done...

I thank all our priests and sisters who welcomed and loved me, supporting me in my journey. I thank my parents for the faithfulness they show regarding the community path. I thank above all Our Lady who so tenderly took me by the hand, surpassing by her silent love all the doctors who for years tried to find a solution for me, but to no avail. I thank them too, because they tried and didn't find a way, given that otherwise I would not have been here!

### **3. Oratio**

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

Come, Lord Jesus, and look for each and every man  
whose soul is saddened, who is suffering in the body,  
who lies in despair for a hidden sin.

Come and look for me.

Freed from the sin that paralyses me within a meaningless existence,  
may I walk in Your presence and run to each and every man,  
proclaiming that in You all men can find life once again  
and find out that they are all brothers.

Mercy of God, raising us up above all misery,

Mercy of God, spring of all our joy,

Mercy of God, who from nothingness called us to existence,

Mercy of God, who embrace all Your works in Your hands.

Mercy of God, who crown everything that exists now and that will be in the future,

Mercy of God, we are all immersed in,

Mercy of God, loving comfort of desperate hearts,

Mercy of God, in whom all hearts find rest and those who are afraid find peace,

Mercy of God, who inspire in us hope against all hope,

Come upon us!

### **4. Contemplatio**

**(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

Let us keep our hearts dwelling in the house of mercy... It is not a place outside us, but the hidden place, the inner dwelling where we can be reborn. Let us thank and give praise to the Lord who dwells in us.



## **5. Collatio**

**(to share the Word)**

Let us share our new birth. May it become firm while we learn to give mercy to others, being the first to walk towards them and giving them as a gift our own experience with the Word.