

BIBLICAL PAGES

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Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 3 Astonishment in the city

Biblically speaking, the city is the place where multiple relations, contrasts, struggles and fellowships come to life, as related by Genesis 4:17-24, where the founding of a city by Cain is mentioned. That is a mirror of man's situation, of the man who is looking for a shelter within its gates, "a refuge for the needy in distress, / a shelter from the storm, / shade from the heat" (Is 25:4).

The inhabitants of a city have common goals, and all of them attend to their respective tasks. However, the city is also a place where one can be marginalised and injustice can occur. It is a place of relations between different people, joining people who are different according to race, culture and religion.

To go through a city means to encounter different people, but which level of relations do they establish? How do they live in the same place and inter-relate to one another?

In the text which is the object of our present Lectio, Jesus is aware of all the dynamics of the town of Capernaum and is ready to become part of them, up to feeling wonder for the new and unexpected relations arising in it. Let us go through the town of Capernaum with Jesus too, so that we may have a share in His very wonder, admiring the faith of a pagan man.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*Holy Spirit, do not let our hearts be troubled.
Reassure us in our darkness, give us joy,
and we shall wait in silence and in all peace
that the light of the Gospel may rise above us.
Lord Jesus Christ, You discern in our depths
a contemplative expectation: we are thirsting for You...
May You fill our souls, when we abandon ourselves to You.
Who will condemn us? Even if our hearts condemn us,
God's heart will be greater and more merciful than them.
Jesus our hope, we understand very little of Your Gospel,
but You make us grasp what Your expectations are.
Jesus Christ, in prayer our poor words are often unable
to express our very wish for communion with You,
but You are already welcoming us.
(Letter from Taizé)*

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

Luke 7:1-10

1 When He had come to the end of all He wanted the people to hear, He went into Capernaum. 2 A centurion there had a servant, a favourite of his, who was sick and near death. 3 Having heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Him to ask Him to come and heal his servant. 4 When they came to Jesus they pleaded earnestly with Him saying, 'He deserves this of You, 5 because he is well disposed towards our people; he built us our synagogue himself.' 6 So Jesus went with them, and was not very far from the house when the centurion sent word to Him by some friends to say to Him, 'Sir, do not put Yourself to any trouble because I am not worthy to have You under my roof; 7 and that is why I did not presume to come to You myself; let my boy be cured by Your giving the word. 8 For I am under authority myself, and have soldiers under me; and I say to one man, "Go," and he goes; to another, "Come here," and he comes; to my servant, "Do this," and he does it.' 9 When Jesus heard these words He was astonished at him and, turning round, said to the crowd following Him, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found faith as great as this.' 10 And when the messengers got back to the house they found the servant in perfect health.

Let us approach the text.

This is part of Chapter 7 of St Luke's Gospel which is in its turn a part of The Galilean Ministry section (Lk 4:14-9:50), following the 'Prelude to the public ministry of Jesus'.

Here the effects produced by the power of the Word are related, following the programmatic proclamation held at Nazareth.

The setting is the town of Capernaum, where Jesus' ministry had already begun (Lk 4:31-44). After the First Sermon (the Beatitudes, 6:20-49), the lines immediately preceding Lk 7:1 highlight the importance of listening to the Word and of putting it into practice, as the building of a house founded on solid ground: they highlight that to dig deeply in order to lay the Word on solid ground is absolutely necessary.

In Lk 7:1-10 a Centurion, who had already heard about Jesus, asks Jesus to manifest the powerful action of the Word so that the healing may occur even though He is not physically present.

A powerful faith is present in the Centurion. He can be compared to a deeply-dug soil, where firm foundations can be laid, foundations on which a relation with God can be built.

This faith has no connotations of race, religion, social status... Not even the gap dividing Jesus' efficacious Word from a pagan man. Thus St Luke is presenting us his dear theme of universal salvation.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- Entering Capernaum 7:1
- The centurion and his messengers 7:2-5
- Jesus on His journey: the second messengers 7:6-8
- Jesus' astonishment 7:9

Entering Capernaum

1 When He had come to the end of all He wanted the people to hear, He went into Capernaum.

Thanks to its geographical location on Tiberias Lake, Capernaum used to be a commercial hub, and a very lively place. The Gospel presents it in a twofold way: as an object of reproach in Lk 10:15 and as the setting of a few miracles (Lk 4:23, 31-40).

This is not the first time that Jesus enters it. It is already 'His' town, the town He comes to and goes from during His journeying through Galilee. Thanks to its features, this town is more suited than Nazareth – a little village – to Jesus' encounters and to the spreading of the proclamation of the Kingdom.

Jesus has already worked wonders in its Synagogue as well as in St Peter's house, that He will regard as His own.

St Luke is stressing that He enters the town – a place of interrelations and exchanges among different people – “when He had come to the end of all He wanted the people to hear”. Now I'd like to focus our attention on the addressees of the Word.

In Greek we find the term 'laos', referring to the people as a community and conveying a sense of belonging. In particular, St Luke makes use of the same term in Acts 15:14, when he speaks of “a people enlisted by God for His name out of the gentiles”. This people is not different from Israel, but actually refers to all the believers in Jesus, that is, to all those who, even though they do not share the covenant of the promise (Ep 2:12), are allowed to have a share in the heritage of Israel. 'Laos' then comes to refer to all those who – Jewish or not – by listening to the Word become the People of Jesus.

Of course this line (7:1) is linked to those preceding it, namely those dealing with listening to Jesus' words, acting on them, and laying the foundations on rock, thus building not just a house but a community, a People, notwithstanding their origins.

Entering Capernaum, Jesus is not just going through a town in a spatial sense, but 'crossing' relations and putting them to the test. Are they listening to His Word?

The Centurion and his messengers

2 A centurion there had a servant, a favourite of his, who was sick and near death. 3 Having heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to Him to ask Him to come and heal his servant. 4 When they came to Jesus they pleaded earnestly with Him saying, 'He deserves this of You, 5 because he is well disposed towards our people; he built us our synagogue himself.'

Which relations does Jesus 'cross' in the town?

We must take note first of the fact that, from line 2 to line 8, that is, in the majority of lines of this passage, Jesus does not say a word. He has already spoken (7:1), and here He is silent. He will speak only at line 9.

Therefore, in order to understand Jesus' mind, we must proceed by intuition. First of all, St Luke presents a relation established at a distance: a centurion who heard about Jesus and who sends some elders to Him.

A 'centurion' was the commander of the 'legion', an officer of the Roman garrison endowed with a certain power and prestige. St Luke describes him as someone who cares for his dying servant and who sends elders (not the Sanhedrin's Elders) so that Jesus "as soon as He arrived, He would save his servant" (as the Greek text goes). It is interesting to note that perhaps here we find a hint to a kind of Jesus' presence, even able to save from a distance.

The envoys talk with Jesus, plead on his behalf. Jesus is listening; He lets them speak; He lets them present the case of the servant with all their additions (their point of view). Is Jesus affected by apathy? Is Jesus unmoved by their arguments? St Luke seems to highlight not only Jesus' listening but also the dynamics emerging from their words: social, religious and racial ones.

Let us try to listen too.

The elders' three arguments:

"He deserves this of You..."

"He is well disposed towards our people..."

"He built us our synagogue himself..."

They are talking about a distinguished person, with a certain prestige. The term used here is 'axios', referring to something that has a similar value out of merit, not out of resemblance, and the difference is thus stressed. Both the centurion and they are distinguished people, but up to a point.

The difference is further stressed by the Greek text when it speaks of "our people". The term used is 'ethnos', referring to 'race'. St Luke, who at the very beginning referred to a community ('laos'), here is stressing the different race of the elders versus the centurion's. "He loves our race..."

The fact that the Centurion had built a synagogue puts him very probably among the sympathizers of Judaism, and due to that merit Jesus should grant him his request.

Jesus on His journey: the second messengers

6 So Jesus went with them, and was not very far from the house when the centurion sent word to Him by some friends to say to Him, 'Sir, do not put

Yourself to any trouble because I am not worthy to have You under my roof; 7 and that is why I did not presume to come to You myself; let my boy be cured by Your giving the word. 8 For I am under authority myself, and have soldiers under me; and I say to one man, "Go," and he goes; to another, "Come here," and he comes; to my servant, "Do this," and he does it.'

"Jesus went with them..." Jesus was walking with them and keeping silent. In another text St Luke makes use of this phrase (cf Lk 24:15): "Jesus Himself came up and walked by their side", walked by the side of the Emmaus pilgrims. He accompanied them and made them understand the Scriptures and opened their eyes. In fact, it was not just a geographical journey...

In the text we are dealing with now, Jesus goes through the town with the envoys, and helps them understand as well.

Then another delegation appears, made up of the centurion's friends. They are similar to him, and they explain his mind in a very clear way. He is presented in an opposite fashion, as not able of welcoming Jesus under his roof, and not worthy of approaching Jesus himself. However, as they relate, one of His words may give health back to his servant / "son".

According to St Peter's words (that St Luke relates in Ac 10:28,) "It is forbidden for Jews to mix with people of another race and visit them". The centurion does not regard himself as an Israelite, but the servant is regarded as a son ('pais'): he is advancing in justice and charity. He can grasp Jesus' message not through the Scriptures, but by his everyday life, made up of commands and obedience, and thus he understands that Jesus is different from any other healer. He understands that His word is powerful, capable of working wonders.

Even though he regards himself as a foreigner, due to his religion and race, he tries to establish a relation with Jesus. In fact, St Luke is quietly expounding the theme of universal salvation, overcoming any divisions, and the gap between religious and not religious, sacred and profane, as at the beginning of his gospel. In Lk 3:6, we find a quote from Is 49:3-5: "All humanity will see the salvation of God". St Luke's quote is longer than St Matthew's and St Mark's, and his aim is perhaps to quote 'universal salvation'. Then in Lk 3:10-14 he tells once again that no job or profession excludes man from salvation, provided that justice and charity are practiced.

Then in Acts 10:2, St Luke presents Cornelius the centurion and the whole of his household, "devout and God-fearing, and he gave generously to Jewish causes and prayed constantly to God." This description makes him similar to the Centurion of our passage: here, too, justice and charity are his distinctive features. "I now really understand that God has no favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him." (Ac 10:35). St Luke relates that St Peter states that "Jesus is the Lord of all" (Ac 10:36).

Jesus' astonishment

9 When Jesus heard these words He was astonished at him and, turning round, said to the crowd following Him, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found faith as great as this.' 10 And when the messengers got back to the house they found the servant in perfect health.

Up to now Jesus has been silent, but His attitude reveals how He is able to “take flesh” and reach the very core of human dynamics. In this text, as well as in each and every age, He starts journeying, passing through and going beyond all shades of social, religious and racial differences, listening to the words revealing different world views. Which is His position? He welcomes everybody, considering the reasons of everyone, but making everyone progress towards an ever greater openness to relations. All the text is focussed on a widening of relations, but they have to converge on the power of the Word, of a faith not founded on physical strength, on touching and being touched. Is that a disembodied faith? Not, it is a faith preceding that in the Risen Jesus.

Jesus expresses His astonishment and admiration: He never saw such a genuine faith in all Israel. If we place our text with the Centurion in-between the promise of universal salvation of Lk 3:6 and the statement of Ac 10:36 (“Jesus is the Lord of all”), Jesus’ astonishment appears to originate from the faith of a pagan man who is able to foresee God’s plan of universal salvation. He can foresee that the Word of God sent to the children of Israel – historically speaking, through Jesus Christ – is an anticipation of the universal lordship of the Risen Christ, of Jesus Christ who is the Lord of all, disregarding social status (master / servant / son), race, religious fellowship. The Word sent by God does not divide people ethnically, racially and so on, but makes them become ‘laos’, a community / People.

Astonishment is rendered with the term ‘thaumazo’. It originates from the fact that a pagan man, aware of the divisions present in the town, as well as of his own unworthiness according to racial and religious considerations, is capable of a gaze of faith looking into the future. And he sees in Jesus, the One he has heard about, the Lord of all, the One in whom each and every ‘flesh’ can find the promise of salvation fulfilled, be him a Jew or a Gentile, slave or free, male or female.

Astonishment is the feeling of Jesus emerging from this text: prior to it, He took His time to listen, to understand the situation, to welcome different views on it, to let faith in Him grow. Jesus’ astonishment (‘thaumazo’) is opposed to the unbelief of Nazareth, His home town, in St Mark’s Gospel (6:6).

Let us now consider Jesus’ astonishment.

It is as if the Centurion were the destination of Jesus’ path into and through the town, begun when He met the first envoys. This ‘path’ starts with ‘merit’, and ends with the pagan man understanding that Jesus’ word can work wonders freely. Beyond all differences, the Centurion feels that he is part of a people (‘laos’), the addressee of the salvific Word.

He accepts and respects the religious rules of Israel, and does not want Jesus to be contaminated by His eventual going into the house of a pagan man. Nonetheless,

he is capable of talking of his servant as of a son, with no distinctions of social status: everywhere, the man who fears and practices justice is God-pleasing.

We can have a look at the path / process that Jesus is nurturing while He is going through the town, culminating in the overcoming of the common belief that one has to be worthy in order to receive salvation, as well as in the trust / faith in the power of the Word, healing the servant / son.

Thus the Centurion is also the symbol of the growth of this faith / trust beyond all divisions.

He provides an unexpected turning to Jesus' path through the town's contradictions. He is the genuine listener of the Word, understanding that God does not make any differences between persons. What a surprise!

2. Meditatio

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

The proclamation of the faith sometimes arouses simple trust in and entrustment to him whom God poses on his path, and who commits himself to accompany him, accepting that he may become an instrument of the Word.

I enclose here the witness of some people who put themselves at the service of young immigrants; and who were capable of arousing astonishment not for their proclamation of the faith but for those everyday qualities that incarnate faith while entrusting themselves to a community.

It was with great enthusiasm that in summer 2015 we said 'Yes' to the Diocesan request of welcoming into our parish house five immigrants from Mali, who later on revealed to be young people full of good-willing, genuine and well-mannered.

In order to integrate them into our community and to give them an occupation, we scheduled their daily tasks, at first working with them ourselves in their house chores and in social works for the community. Thus, step by step, they reached their autonomy. They attended the CPIA (one of them got a secondary school diploma) and now they understand our language and they know how to make themselves understood. Thanks to Caritas, who helped them with bureaucracy, they have always been regular immigrants.

While waiting for their long-term visas, we made them look for jobs, and managed to insert them in a social co-operative, or in the parish offices, or in farms.

At last we managed to get their long-term working visas...

A Caritas-linked association, called Diakonia', sent them on stages and they finally got contracts as workmen at Marano and at Breganze. Two of them are currently working at Trissino and living at Valdagno.

Then, can we say that our objectives have been fulfilled? Yes, but only partially...

The young Africans have been oriented and accompanied on a path which has just started and which will be long and hard. The group of volunteers, while practicing a work of mercy which seemed to be urgent, managed to become more united and friendly to one another.

Of course, this 'adventure' has prompted us to overcome our respective blindness, letting us see the reality of a country with millions of inhabitants, traditions going back to thousands of years, a spirituality reminding us of something that is very deep but which has been forgotten by our civilization. On the whole, we are very happy that we were given this wonderful occasion: to care for somebody poor and needy who had been entrusted to us. However, society has still to open itself up a lot...

From a personal point of view, I had the opportunity "to stay human", expressing my closeness to those young men through concrete gestures, and that is something "good and right", filling me with joy; something that – wishfully – should be given to anyone.

Above all I have received, as an unexpected gift, the re-discovery of eternal and universal values: honesty, not only with relation to money, that is, being utterly genuine while defending our dignity and not offending other people's; respect, bound to humility, while recognizing our own necessities and accepting other people's help; gratitude, which is the most genuine way of all to give back what we have received (and which is much more beautiful than receiving). And, in addition to those: simplicity, learnt from those who are used to be happy with what is essential; patience, as a virtue deriving from sorrows; and strong will, forged by hard and sorrowful situations; meekness, necessary when we have to face violence, embraced as a choice, resulting from one's awareness.

I conclude by quoting a poet who suffered persecution in the last century, full of darkness:

"... love the clouds, love the cars, love the books... love your cat, your dog.. but first of all, love man. Cry for the forests destroyed by furious strong wings, but first of all cry for those who die at sea and for those who are sinking into Evil. May all the riches of the earth give you joy, but, above all, may man fill your hands with joy." (Nazim Hikmet)

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

Give us astonishment, Lord,
for the freshness of the faith
germinating out of our precincts.

Give us astonishment, Lord,
for Your work,
for the Word who knows no barriers.

Give us astonishment, Lord,
as Jesus was astonished out of joy,
because a man in his liberty
gives himself up to the Word.

Give us astonishment, Lord,
because if someone comes to Jesus,
it is because You have already seduced him.

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

Let us share Jesus' astonishment, His regarding as 'great' what to our eyes looks as 'little'. Let us enjoy the beauty of simplicity and wish we can live in all simplicity too.

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

Let us share with the Sisters what the Word suggested to us as well as our experience of prayer.