

BIBLICAL PAGES

by Sr Maria Chiara Ventriglia

Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 4 A place of sharing

Which were the Apostles' tasks while they were following Jesus? We know what they were doing before meeting Him. Jesus was a carpenter, some of the apostles were fishers, St Matthew a publican...

Now let us imagine the place where Jesus meets them and redefines their tasks too. What is the meaning of "becoming fishers of men", as the Master promised them? The answer is not simple. They found out its meaning not once and for all, but during their whole subsequent lives.

Let us stay in a solitary place, a place that St Mark is showing us in this passage. That place will become crowded, and Jesus will be teaching there. In that very place, where Jesus meets the crowds, the disciples will discover that there is some work to do there too, and they are prompted by Jesus to start working, and to lend their hands – so to speak – to His compassion. Let us examine Jesus' relationship with His disciples in this unexpected workplace.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*Come Holy Spirit,
open our eyes and our hearts,
so that we may recognize Your Word in human words.
Come Holy Spirit,
help us to work in harmony with Your Word.
You, who are present in everybody, make us one.
Make of us the instruments of sharing the one and only Bread,
the one and only Love.*

1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

Mark 6:32-44

32 So they went off in the boat to a lonely place where they could be by themselves. 33 But people saw them going, and many recognised them; and from every town they all hurried to the place on foot and reached it before them. 34 So

as He stepped ashore He saw a large crowd; and He took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and He set Himself to teach them at some length. 35 By now it was getting very late, and His disciples came up to Him and said, 'This is a lonely place and it is getting very late, 36 so send them away, and they can go to the farms and villages round about, to buy themselves something to eat.' 37 He replied, 'Give them something to eat yourselves.' They answered, 'Are we to go and spend two hundred denarii on bread for them to eat?' 38 He asked, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see,' And when they had found out they said, 'Five, and two fish.' 39 Then He ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass, 40 and they sat down on the ground in squares of hundreds and fifties. 41 Then He took the five loaves and the two fish, raised His eyes to Heaven and said the blessing; then He broke the loaves and began handing them to His disciples to distribute among the people. He also shared out the two fish among them all. 42 They all ate as much as they wanted. 43 They collected twelve basketfuls of scraps of bread and pieces of fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Let us approach the text.

This is Chapter 6 of St Mark's Gospel, placed in the section called 'The mystery of the Messiah, misunderstood by the disciples' (Mk 6:6b-8:26). After the sending of the Twelve, St Mark deals with St John the Baptist's murder, a clear example of the rejection of the mission. St John is the forerunner, exactly because his mission and proclamation is described as difficult, having to face the same hostility that all those who prepared the way for Jesus encountered.

Jesus, who is the model for the disciples, has to correct their initial enthusiasm when they come back from their mission, making them face their own helplessness when confronted with hostility, as well as the disproportion between their helplessness and the needs of mankind. How should they face all that?

The work they have been entrusted with is a way to "cultivate and take care of the Garden" (Gn 2:15). In particular, they will have to operate to make the Kingdom grow, and to care for all those they have been sent to. It will not be a task as easy as it may appear at the beginning...

In the passage we are dealing with, Jesus goes with them to a lonely place, because they even had no time to eat. There they are entrusted the task of giving something to eat to the crowd. They do not understand, but the Master calls them imperatively, He invests them with that task, makes them His co-operators, even though they seem to be passive and reluctant ones. They will be encouraged to carry on with their mission anyway, notwithstanding the little or much they possess.

But which is the task they are given in that place?

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- A peculiar place 32-33
- The compassionate Shepherd 34
- Two imperatives confront each other 35-37a

- The little they have 38-40
- A place of sharing 41-44

A peculiar place

32 So they went off in the boat to a lonely place where they could be by themselves. 33 But people saw them going, and many recognised them; and from every town they all hurried to the place on foot and reached it before them.

Already in Mark 1:35 the reader's attention had been focussed on a 'lonely place': it is the place where Jesus "goes off" after a day spent teaching and healing in Capernaum, because He is aware that healings and wonders may give rise to misunderstandings about His work. Deserted places are also those where He stays after healing the leper (Mk 1:45), as He "could no longer go openly into any town".

Thus we understand that the deserted place is linked both to prayer and to His relationship with the Father, as if in solitude – with no chaos originating from the people's requests – the genuine face of the Father could be seen. The disciples are proposed to 'read', to understand reality with the light coming from that Face, exactly as Jesus does. They have also to reconsider their own needs, and to address their task with no delusions of grandeur. The deserted place thus becomes the place where truth can be attained. St Mark tells us that it becomes the place where the needs of the crowd precede Jesus and His own. Mankind's needs are waiting for an answer but, in order for the disciples not to respond with their own aspirations, they have to tread a path starting from the deserted place, from essential things and from uncertainty, so that one's own helplessness may come to the fore. It is the purification of one's own mission and work.

The compassionate Shepherd

34 So as He stepped ashore He saw a large crowd; and He took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and He set Himself to teach them at some length.

Jesus steps ashore in a place where the needs and expectations of many people precede Him: "He saw a large crowd". The deserted place, the place where the truth of one's own being can emerge before the Father, is always mysteriously populated by faces waiting, by expectations of physical healing and of words healing the hearts, by the wish to be able to see a God bending down and caressing our wounds and sorrows, rejoicing with each and everyone and because of each and everyone.

Jesus feels compassion: His gaze is never sterile, but moves His humanity; and then His feelings prompt Him to act. The verb used in Greek to render 'compassion' is 'splanchnizomai', which refers to the 'womb of mercy'. This is the Biblical phrase to express God's mercy, never used to refer to man's mercy. It is relevant therefore to note that St Mark attributes to Jesus the same compassionate gaze of God, in particular, of God the Shepherd of Israel, who

cares for His people. Matter-of-factly, in the Scripture God is a Shepherd (Ps 23:1; 80:2).

We would expect mass healing, but Jesus teaches the crowd. The Shepherd guides His people by teaching, He instructs them (1:22; 2:13; 4:2; 10:1; 11:7) on a variety of things. It is a new Exodus, and Jesus the Shepherd is leading His people out of a new Egypt, out of a new but also old slavery, the ignorance of God.

In Exodus (Ps 77:52-53; 95:7) the people “of His sheepfold” was brought out, guided “like a flock” by the Shepherd. Now the Shepherd is also the Master, and His compassion makes Him wish to reveal Himself not only as the fulfilment of their desires, but also as the One who establishes a relationship with man, who reveals Himself, who reveals the face of the Father, while He is shepherding the flock. In this new Exodus, the Master’s compassion would like to crush all their idols, that are inevitably fabricated when man is in need, like it happened to the Israelites in the desert.

Two imperatives confront each other

35 By now it was getting very late, and His disciples came up to Him and said, ‘This is a lonely place and it is getting very late, 36 so send them away, and they can go to the farms and villages round about, to buy themselves something to eat.’ 37 He replied, ‘Give them something to eat yourselves.’ They answered, ‘Are we to go and spend two hundred denarii on bread for them to eat?’

As the time passes, the crowd becomes a burden to the disciples. They do not know how to relate to them. They have experienced fame, success thanks to the crowd but now that they should care for them, they want to get rid of them. They take the initiative: “Send them away,” they say to Jesus. This is an imperative. They order Jesus what to do, how to get rid of them. They seem to care for them but in fact they don’t. They are not genuinely preoccupied. Their one and only preoccupation is that they should care for them but in the desert there is nothing to eat. Here the ancient worry of Israel in the desert, during the Exodus, resounds; but this time in order for the disciples not to commit themselves.

Jesus’ imperative replies to their words: “Give them something to eat yourselves!” The Shepherd is different from the evil shepherds of Ezekiel 34:2, 8. The compassionate Shepherd is prompted by His ‘womb’ to commit Himself. In St Mark’s Gospel the Shepherd is not a detached leader, but a shepherd who becomes a sheep, sharing man’s hunger for God on the cross.

The new imperative suggests them that they have to convert their gaze, but they are unable to comply, and they reply, “Are we to go and spend two hundred denarii on bread for them to eat?” Will it suffice? To find a solution without committing themselves seems to be their answer. But Jesus’ imperative has been very strong, “Give them something to eat yourselves”, not in the future but now, as the Greek verb suggests.

The place they are in is turning into a workplace where to serve their apprenticeship, even though they are reluctant apprentices. But that is the work that Jesus requests from His own, a work with Christological features (what Jesus is) and ecclesiological ones (what the disciples are).

The little they have

38 He asked, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see,' And when they had found out they said, 'Five, and two fish.' 39 Then He ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass, 40 and they sat down on the ground in squares of hundreds and fifties.

A new imperative hits the disciples: "How many loaves have you? Go and see". To work with Jesus is not fideism... They have to go and see what they have. Is it much or little?

This is not the first biblical event focussed on bread. There were the miracle of the flour and the oil by Elijah (1 K 17:7-16) and the multiplication of loaves by Elisha (cf 2 K 4:42-44). However little they had, after sharing it, it was enough. This is the very dynamic of the Kingdom that Jesus asks the disciples to proclaim: it is the logic of the little seed of mustard, or of the yeast in the dough.

In the Bible 'bread' is the symbol of life, because in Hebrew it means 'nourishment': "The first thing in life is water, and bread..." (Si 29:21). It is also a good that must be shared (cf Gn 18:5); it is a gift from the Lord and a sign of His blessing (Ps 128:2); and last but not least a symbol of the word of God (cf Dt 8:3), nourishing in the desert.

The numbers 'two' and 'five' are symbolic too, and they may be interpreted in many various, or even controversial, ways. In any case, we can try to guess what St Mark tried to convey by those numbers about the relationship between Jesus and His disciples: 'five' could be a symbol of 'grace', 'favour'; 'two' could be a symbol of 'division', 'unity broken'.

Jesus orders the disciples to go and see, but what? How much 'grace of life' there is in that little they have, in spite of their inner division. That word that Jesus taught is symbolized by that bread which nourishes life and which allows us to regard life as a grace given by the Father, who goes on nourishing His children, shepherding His flock, and guiding them.

"They sat [the people] down on the ground in squares of hundreds and fifties", as Psalm 23:2 proclaims: "In grassy meadows He lets me lie". The groups of hundreds and fifties are a prophetic symbol of a new community in the Spirit.

A place of sharing

41 Then He took the five loaves and the two fish, raised His eyes to Heaven and said the blessing; then He broke the loaves and began handing them to His disciples to distribute among the people. He also shared out the two fish among them all. 42 They all ate as much as they wanted. 43 They collected twelve

basketfuls of scraps of bread and pieces of fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

This episode is called the multiplication of bread and fish, even though the text does not explicitly make use of the term ‘multiplication’, highlighting the importance of prayer and sharing instead.

In the first moment Jesus takes what the disciples have, raises His eyes to Heaven and says the blessing.

In the second moment He breaks the loaves and divides the fish.

The new work entrusted to the disciples is to lay what comes from Jesus’ hands at the foot of those who were waiting for it. Jesus does not give it directly; they have to distribute it among the people. Thus, Jesus’ work is subjected to their own will to convert... They have to pass from their own imperative (“Send them away”) to Jesus’ imperative, urging them to be co-protagonists of the flow of life originating from compassion. Now they are immersed in their new task, in their new mission which starts from the little they have but is subject to their will of sharing and benefits also from the grace of life springing from the Shepherd’s compassion.

The deserted place has become a place of sharing, of sharing the bread, yes, but also of sharing one’s life, regarded not as an impossible commitment but open to receive the blessing from Jesus’ hands first. The ‘flow of life’ originating from the Father comes to Jesus, who raises His eyes to Heaven, and becomes a blessing, allowing Him to break, divide (no longer in a negative but participative sense) that life which has become word in His teaching. And that bread, passing first through the rough hands of the disciples, then reaching everybody.

Only thus all could “eat as much as they wanted”. Sharing did not make anyone poorer. On the contrary, “they collected twelve basketfuls of scraps of bread and pieces of fish”. ‘Twelve’ may be a reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, a reference to plenitude, already hinted to by the number ‘seven’, deriving from the sum of 5 and 2.

Jesus is urging His own to enter the logic of giving, without human considerations and pettiness. Their work for the Kingdom must be founded not on the superabundance of goods and tools, but on a circular sharing of goods, thus revealing God who is incessantly giving Himself to man, a God of compassion, a Shepherd whose sheep are aware of belonging to.

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

Let us discuss once again two fundamental features of work according to Jesus’ plan: *prayer* and *sharing*.

Let us wonder whether and how much they are present in our own work, and in our life in general too...

A first witness

...This was how Focolare founder Chiara Lubich, when she launched the Economy of Communion project in 1991, explained the origins of the “communion of goods” in the movement, both material and spiritual.

In 1943 in Trento, the war had destroyed the city, and many had lost their homes, jobs and families. Faced with such despair – and in light of the words of the Gospel they meditated on in the shelters – Chiara and her early friends decided to take care of those most in need.

“Our goal was to implement the communion of goods as much as possible in order to solve the social problems of Trento. I thought, ‘ There are two or three places where the poor people are... Let’s go there, let’s bring what we have, let’s share it with them.’ Simple logic, really: we have more, they have less. We will raise their standard of living so that we will all reach a certain equality.”

Eight years later, the communion of goods is still a vibrant reality in the movement. Each person gives freely according to his or her possibilities, often expressing gratitude for what they’ve received. Experiences are multiplying all over the world.

“I went to buy 10 kg of wheat for my chickens,” says one person from Croatia. “The man who sold it to me did not want money. I donated what I had saved for the communion of goods, which is extraordinary in this pandemic.”

Of course, it’s not always possible to donate goods and money. Still, the commitment reinforces the value of the gesture.

“I recently sold some wine to a neighbour. He gave me more money than he had to, and he didn’t want any change. I gave it for the communion of goods, but it wasn’t easy; I had to overcome my human way of thinking.”

The experience of receiving after giving often happens. It is the evangelical “Give and it will be given to you” (Lk 6:38) that Chiara and her early friends tangibly experienced.

“We helped some families who had lost their jobs because of the crisis caused by the pandemic, donating food, medicine and school supplies,” they write from Macedonia. “It was little help, but one of them told us that it was enough to eat for two weeks. Shortly after, another family made a donation that covered their expenses. Everything was circulating.”

The joy of giving and the joy of receiving happens frequently. In Serbia, the communion of goods reached a family with children where father and mother are sick and unemployed. They live off the produce from their garden, and to pay the bills, Toni helps out in the parish.

“When we went to bring him money, he was borrowing to buy wood. We explained to the family where the help was coming from, and they were moved because they felt that God, through us, ‘had looked their way’.”

The communion of goods, after all, is nothing more than an instrument of divine providence.

(Chiara di Lorenzi,
www.focolare.org/en/2021/02/10/gods-providence-sharing-in-eastern-europe/

Wednesday, February 10, 2021)

A second witness

“We need young people to open up new ways of working; we older people are happy to support them through our work and by sharing what we have and what we know.” This is what Koen Vanreusel said when he spoke about his commitment to young business men and women all over the world. Koen has 4 children and 9 grandchildren and is the managing director of ‘Easykit’, a Belgian company which employs 100 people. His views stem from the fact that he follows the principles of the Economy of Communion (EoC) and are the reason why he will be visiting Assisi, Italy, from March 26-28, 2020 for ‘The Economy of Francis’ gathering. This event was initiated by Pope Francis for young economists and business men and women from all over the world.

Koen, how do the principles of the Economy of Communion inspire your work?

The Economy of Communion is the fruit of the ‘culture of giving’ which began within the Focolare Movement. Its roots lie within the Gospel, where it says, ‘Give and it will be given to you’ (Lk 6:36-38). This gives rise to a new economy – more specifically, an economy of communion. Practically, as regards my company, this means putting the person at the centre of the work and respecting each person’s dignity: with our employees we try to create a family, a community. We have nine stores in different places and we are always careful to create a good relationship with all the employees. In addition, joining the EoC means donating a part of the company’s profits each year to those in need and thus making a contribution to combating world poverty.

What difficulties do you encounter in living the Economy of Communion at work and how do you overcome them?

We are a company the same as any other on the market and we face the same difficulties. But when we have problems, we try to create an atmosphere in which we can talk to colleagues and management about the situation. I also find that it is important to share these experiences with other entrepreneurs who are followers of the EoC. When we meet, there is always a great sense of trust and so we talk about the difficulties and together we try to see what opportunities there are.

How do you try to involve your employees in living the ‘culture of giving’?

Our employees know that we share the company’s profits with the poor: we provide them with information about the support that the company is giving to others so that they too can feel involved. In addition, at the end of the year, when calculating profits to be shared with those in need, the employees receive a percentage and can decide to what they will donate this money. In this way, they participate in the allocation of the company’s profits. We also try to be role models and set an example by contributing something extra at work beyond the call of duty, by doing something free for a colleague or supplier and by showing that this also gives great joy.

How did you come up with the idea of supporting businesses that have been started by young people both in European countries and in other continents?

During one of the annual meeting of European EoC managers, we met young people from Serbia and Hungary who showed great appreciation for our business model and so we decided to share it with them. We supported them when they started a company in one of their own countries and continued to do so as the enterprise developed: we are very happy that this involvement means that we can share knowledge and our way of working. Then, during the EoC international meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, we met a group of young Congolese entrepreneurs who were determined not to abandon their war torn country but to stay and help people in need by starting a company. We felt we wanted to remain in contact with these young people and accompany them in their experience by offering them our skills. We want new generations of business men and women to join the Economy of Communion.

What effects could the EoC paradigm have if applied on a large scale?

It can help to build a fairer society with a smaller gap between rich and poor and a lower rate of poverty. By working together we can discover that a better world is possible. We will tell you about it in October, in Brussels, on a day dedicated to this very topic.

(Claudia di Lorenzi,

www.focolare.org/en/2019/09/21towards-the-economy-of-francis/

Saturday, September 21, 2019)

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

Please keep us in Your fatherly hand, as Your children;
make us one in the one love who poured forth from Your fatherly heart; ...
make us one in the desire to progress and to make of the world a better place;
make us one in the fulfilment of our mission, in prayer and in any other activity;
make us one through brotherly solidarity, that willingly shares all that it possesses;
make us one through the spirit of mutual sharing and co-operation, through abnegation and mutual service;
make us one on our common path of life;
so that, in the end, we can all be joined in You!
(Jean Galot)

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

Let us open our beings to Jesus' imperative: Give! May it resound deeply within us; may we be innerly transformed into the "women of gifts"; may we find the meaning of each and every task of ours.

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

Let us share with the Sisters what we felt while we were listening to the Word.