

BIBLICAL PAGES

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Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 5

A place of transformation

A high mountain. The place where man can meet God. The wish that has ever inhabited man to meet Him coexists with the ancestral fear of getting in touch with the Godhead. Desire and fear always accompany us, given that we guess that the meeting with God is destined to change everything permanently, and us too.

That meeting makes us understand what is hidden in the depths of our being, of our identity, and is calling us to be transformed. If the mountain is the place where we can meet God, it is the place both a gift and a promise come from, ie something that has to do with the meaning of our evolving lives.

In the Scripture, man is meeting God on the mountain: it is called Mount Sinai for Moses, Mount Horeb for Elijah. But in all cases this revelation of God Himself to man, provides him with a direction to continue journeying, with a new meaning and with his life transformed. But are we willing to be transformed? Are we willing to 'put on' a new existence, closer and closer to what God is showing us about Himself?

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*Come in our midst, Holy Spirit of God,
enlighten our minds and open our hearts
so that we may give room in our lives
to the coming of Your Kingdom.*

*Give us intelligence and 'heart'
so that our existences may be filled
with Your hope, Your love and Your faith.*

*Come in our midst, Spirit of the Risen Christ,
enlighten our minds and open our hearts
so that we may give room in our lives
to the commitment of being living members of Your Church.*

*Give us intelligence and 'heart'
so that we may inhabit Your Church,
in love and in prayer,
in order for us all to be a sign of hope
which silently builds in the world
Your kingdom of justice, love, and peace.*

1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

Mark 9:2-8

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain on their own by themselves. There in their presence He was transfigured: 3 His clothes became brilliantly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them.

4 Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. 5 Then Peter spoke to Jesus, 'Rabbi,' he said, 'it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three shelters, one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' 6 He did not know what to say; they were so frightened.

7 And a cloud came, covering them in shadow; and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him.' 8 Then suddenly, when they looked round, they saw no one with them any more but only Jesus.

Let us approach the text. This is Chapter 9, immediately after the First Prophecy of the Passion to the disciples. And also after the turning point of St Mark's Gospel, ie St Peter's profession of faith.

The context as a whole describes a situation of difficulty, rejection and lack of understanding on the disciples' part, here as well as in the Second and Third Prophecies of the Passion that will ensue.

However, in all three, after the disciples' reaction we find Jesus' reply / instruction.

St Peter who dares to rebuke Jesus is called 'Satan', as he is presenting Jesus with the same temptation of the desert, that is, going after a success, in line with the Jewish Messiah. If St Peter does not think as God thinks but as human beings do, as Jesus rebukes him, what is then God's way of thinking?

Let us keep that question in our hearts in order to understand the good news leading to the resurrection, to a life fulfilled according to God's plan of salvation, taking flesh in fragility and in the dynamics of the life cycle, in the dynamics of human life as well as in the life of a seed: dynamism from death to life.

Rejection, death, sufferings... they all pose questions to life... What is the Father revealing on the mountain? What is promised and revealed to man in the meeting? In the light of the Transfiguration we can re-read the preceding lines dealing with losing one's life in order to save it: a transformation is about to manifest itself, and can be revealed little by little, while we are taking off what is not in harmony with Jesus and becoming more and more similar to Him.

Let us follow Jesus up on the mountain with this readiness and willingness. And we will have a glimpse of the promise contained in human flesh inhabited by God; as well as of God's plan transforming death into a more powerful life.

In Line 1 of Chapter 9, immediately preceding the text on the Transfiguration, Jesus states: "In truth I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power." To see the transfigured Jesus is therefore equal to understand God's very plan for humanity.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- On a high mountain 2
- The event 3-4
- The reaction 5-6
- The cloud and the voice 7
- Only Jesus 8

On a high mountain

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain on their own by themselves.

The text opens by giving the time: “Six days later...” Why? What is St Mark telling us?

- In Exodus 24:16, six days from God’s promise to give Moses “the stone tablets (the Law and the Commandments)” (24:12), the Glory of the Lord appears. Moses will stay there for forty days and forty nights.

- In Genesis 1:26-31, God creates man on the sixth day. What is about to happen is then something belonging to the essence of man “created in the image and likeness of God”.

- In the Bible, the number six refers to incompleteness: there is something incomplete, announcing its fulfilment. In this case too we can say that the number six precedes a promise.

Keeping in mind those three aspects, St Mark is trying to say that if Jesus is leading His disciples on a high mountain, the ensuing encounter with God has to do with the promise about Jesus’ humanity as well as every man’s, a promise of glory, a promise which is part of God’s plan exactly as the tablets given to Moses on Mt Sinai. What is about to happen is God’s instruction / self-revelation, about His Son’s life and man’s life too.

Jesus leads on the mountain only St James and St John, the more impulsive disciples (“sons of thunder”, Mk 3:17), and the more influent one, St Peter, who speaks on behalf of all the twelve (Mk 8:28). In 8:32 St Peter did take Him aside to rebuke Him... And the Transfiguration will take place in a lonely place (8:31), revealing the true face of the Son of Man, of the persecuted One, revealing a promise of a more powerful life, of the divine life of Jesus springing up from the gift of His Self, from His faithfulness to the face of the Father, from His being ‘not for Himself’ (Mk 15:30-31). The Transfiguration gives us a glimpse of what will happen at the Resurrection.

The protagonist is the Father: in Greek the verb ‘metamorphote’ is a passive aorist. The Father is taking the initiative... It has been called a ‘divine passive tense’. The meaning is ‘to change form’, ‘morphè’. The same term occurs in Philippians 2: “Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, / did not count

equality with God / something to be grasped. / But He emptied Himself, / taking the form of a slave, / becoming as human beings are.” (2:5-7)

Here, in the encounter on the mountain, Jesus is passive. The pre-eminent action is the Father’s, when He reveals Jesus to the disciples.

The event

There in their presence He was transfigured: 3 His clothes became brilliantly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them. 4 Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus.

The change in the “form” of Jesus is the revelation-event. Jesus goes from the “form” of a slave to the “form” of God. Here ‘form’ is not conveying its philosophical meaning, but means that Jesus became the icon of the Godhead.

In fact, St Mark is relating something about His clothes. The clothes refer to identity: St Mark specifies that they became brilliantly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them. White is the colour of the Godhead: Heavenly light, more brilliant than any other earthly light. St Mark is trying to describe the glory of the Godhead...

According to the Jewish tradition of the Targum, the Aramaic version of the Bible that was read in the Synagogues at the time, clothes of light, clothes of glory belonged to Adam and Eve in Paradise. Losing them implied losing the ability to be transparent for each other. According to Midrash Pesiqta de Rav Kahana (based on Is 61:10, “like a bridegroom wearing his garland”), Adam’s clothes of glory will be given to the Messiah, who will be shining from one end of the world to the other. The Messiah will be the New Adam.

Here at the Transfiguration the clothes of glory refer to the fact that the Son of Man who will be rejected and killed is indeed the Messiah as well as the New Adam. Moses too, after meeting God on Mt Sinai (related in Ex 34), goes down the mountain with the tablets of the Testimony and he carries with him a sign of glory: his face was shining (34:29) even though his light was transient.

The Fathers of the Church talk about the Taboric Light specifying that it is uncreated. It is God-given. It makes us partake of a transformation process which is the goal of man. St Gregory Palamas suggests that the disciples’ eyes were transformed, they were made able to see the glory of Jesus, to see beyond the form of the Son of Man.

The term that St Mark makes use of to relate about the apparition of Moses and Elijah refers us to the gift too. The Greek verb is a passive aorist of the verb ‘horao’, ‘to see’. The passive form indicates that they were given the gift to see, and they could see Moses and Elijah. But why Moses and why Elijah?

All the synoptic gospels agree: they were talking to Jesus. St Luke specifies that they were talking about His ‘exodus’. Both of them experienced journeying on

foot but, above all, both of them encountered God. They ‘experienced’ God when they were rejected and in difficulties with those around them. Both for them and for Jesus, God’s revelation transforms tiredness, persecution and lack of understanding. It is not a candy from God but the revelation of His way of thinking, of the necessity of proclaiming that all that happens is in God’s power, and that He transforms everything into an event of salvation, and nothing is out of His light. The one and only power we must refer to is His salvific will: everything is referred by God, when we meet Him, to salvation, seen as a new way of communion, as Light shining in darkness, as Life shattering death to pieces, by transforming death itself.

The reaction

5 Then Peter spoke to Jesus, ‘Rabbi,’ he said, ‘it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three shelters, one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ 6 He did not know what to say; they were so frightened.

Why is St Peter speaking? Why is he taking initiative and trying to direct events beyond his reach? He intervenes, and St Mark highlights that they were frightened.

The One who deemed Himself to be the Son of Man, the One who said that He was going to be put to death and rise again, was He really the Messiah? They had believed in Him as the powerful and winning Messiah... This is a genuine identity and religious crisis... but how could He be put to death?

In spite of all that, here once again St Peter wants to take decisions, to plan Jesus’ future exactly as in 8:32: “We will make three shelters”, says the Greek text. In the middle, however, we will put Moses and the security of the Law, with what we know and we have learnt so far. It is right to stay here, we do not want problems of any kinds.

The cloud and the voice

7 And a cloud came, covering them in shadow; and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him.’

Both the cloud and the voice are theophanic signs, signs of the manifestation of God in the Old Testament (cf Ex24:15-18; 40:34). They are signs of the invisible presence of God. In the same way as for both Moses and Elijah the cloud in the desert and the voice on Horeb (1 K 19:13) respectively showed that God was about to meet them and was walking with them in difficult times, now the cloud covers all of them and the voice addresses the disciples testifying to the true identity of the Son of Man, who is persecuted: “This is my Son, the Beloved”. Then comes an imperative: “Listen to Him”.

Here the term used is the same of Lk 1:35 when at the Annunciation Mary is covered by the shadow of the Spirit. Here it is clear that only by being covered by the shadow of the Spirit, it is possible for man to refer what he sees and its meaning. St Peter and the other two are part of a meeting where their eyes are enabled to witness a transformation, a hidden reality, then all the other senses are

pushed into an experience raising their awareness and knowledge. They listen to the voice and learn that the Son of Man, the Rejected, is the Son of God, enjoying an exclusive prerogative of love, even on the path of sufferance caused by men.

In this encounter transforming them, the three disciples must be passive in the shadow of the Spirit, like Jesus, in order to let God speak. St Paul will say in 2 Co 3:18: “And all of us, with unveiled faces like mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the image that we reflect in brighter and brighter glory; this is the working of the Lord who is the Spirit.” In this case too, the verb used is a passive present (“are being transformed”), and the durative form shows that the transformation is actually going on.

“Listen to Him”... Is that a seal on the proclamation of the Passion? Of course it is another way to tell St Peter to follow Him. You are not suppose to lead. The Beloved is giving you a new word. He is the only One who is in harmony with the path leading to the Resurrection, showing the way of Life. It is a path of freedom, the good news of the definitive transformation or, better, of the right method to be transformed gradually up to becoming similar to the Image, the Beloved Son, clothed in glory, the new Adam with shining garments opening the way to His brothers and sisters: He loves and opens us up to love; He is raised and “will transfigure the wretched body of ours into the mould of His glorious body” (Ph 3:21). This promise is the gift that the disciples receive on the mountain, the promise of resurrection which is about to come.

Only Jesus

8 Then suddenly, when they looked round, they saw no one with them any more but only Jesus.

“Suddenly” they look around and they do no longer see anyone, but “only Jesus”, ‘monos’. Their eyes go back to their ordinary ability, and in ordinary days their one and only focus must be Jesus.

Israel’s basic imperative, “Shemà”, now becomes “Listen to Him”. Moses and the prophets converge on Jesus; and the Trinitarian experience of the voice of the Father and of the shadow of the Spirit now can be experienced in advance just in Jesus the man.

In 2 P 1:16-19 St Peter will give witness to the Transfiguration: “We had seen His majesty with our own eyes... We ourselves heard this voice from Heaven, when we were with Him on the holy mountain”. This witness discriminates both the past and the future. The past, as the word of the prophets becomes like a lantern in a dark place until the light of the day comes and the star of the morning rises in men’s hearts. The future, as it unmasks fake prophets.

Only Jesus remains with them. Of the meeting on the mountain, only Jesus remains, ‘monos’. He is the only One, there is nothing else to be revealed about Him. He is the genuine meeting with the Father in the Spirit, the image of the

hidden reality behind each and every encounter with God we are called to; He is the revelation of God's glory, the star of the morning rising in our hearts.

Yes, the gift and the promise of the clothes of glory on the mountain, once again turn the meeting with God into a transformative event, opening their hearts to the divine Life through light, transparency, shine, that must involve them into a dynamism leading them to the similarity with the image of the One who is the mirror of the Eternal Glory (cf Ws 7:25-26; Heb 1:3).

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

Let us ponder how Jesus behaves during the encounter on the mountain, and also how the disciples behave in a different way. What do those different attitudes mean with reference to our relationship with God?

- Jesus is with His own, but He does not prepare them to the event. He is single-minded: He is utterly open to and ready to be 'crushed' by the transforming love of the Father, who wants to reveal His Son, who wants to let them see His glory, which is His own and which does not manifest itself in ordinary life.

When and if are we so open and prompt in our meetings with God? Who are we really meeting? Are we willing to let ourselves be illumined, beyond our daily life's blurredness? Are we really wishing to let ourselves be illumined?

- Of course we do not have extraordinary experiences. Nonetheless we have to accept the gift and the promise which follow the invitation to listen exclusively to Jesus, in whom we have to find each and every indication for our lives. We have to mirror ourselves in the words and in the life of Jesus, so that the bride may take up the same form of the Bridegroom, and may proclaim it to the world in all transparency of the self.

- How much are we similar to St Peter? Do we make plans ourselves instead of following Jesus? Do we want to 'pilot' the end of His story, because a God who walks along men's sufferance is a scandal? Is a weak God a scandal? Are we able to guess in the encounter with the God of Jesus His true power, involving us, transforming us in spite of all our shortcomings?

- We are called to beauty. Where is the beauty of the image that has been carved on us? Do we believe that beauty is not an aesthetic feature but the form of love inhabiting us, a dynamism leading us to the resurrection?

Federica's witness (from 'Scuola Apostolica')

"Beauty!" Why talk about it? And above all, why that exclamation point? Why is she standing there on display? It is used to highlight a concept and

attract attention but what is the point of attributing so much importance to something as natural as ephemeral?

I'm used to beauty. I just need to open the window and look around to see it in all its majesty and magnificence. I even pride myself on knowing how to see and recognize it in those small details that often escape us, hidden as they are among the folds of life... I am grateful for beautiful things: knowing how to recognize them enriches and brightens our days, puts us in a good mood and prepares us to face in a different way the hardships that await us every day. Yes, I have always viewed the phrase 'Beauty will save the world' with scepticism. After all, since I was a child I have breathed the popular adage that 'Nothing is great!'. How then can beauty – as beautiful as you want but still accessory – contribute to the salvation of this world?

The answer I had given myself until then was that it was nothing but a manifestation, sometimes explosive, sometimes whispered, of the existence of God and of His presence.

That afternoon my gaze opened and now, when I experience something beautiful (because despite the bad period there are still beautiful things!), words, faces, and experiences that touched me resurface. And there is so much gratitude.

- Beauty is amazement: realizing that something is there, exists... This awareness can change the course of our day, the way we face it, mess up the cards...
- Beauty is conversion: if I let myself be amazed, if I welcome newness, if I recognize it, if I offer hospitality, it will no longer be just my eyes that see beauty but I will also involve my heart. Seeing with the heart allows me to recognize beauty even in what is apparently its denial.
- Even pain is beauty. Or rather, even in pain it is possible to see beauty. At first this was very destabilizing. "But have we gone crazy?" Then, little by little, many painful and unpleasant moments emerged and together with them the awareness that there too I had experienced beauty. Not always, but certainly when I let go and "embraced" that pain. I realized that thinking about those moments now I don't just remember the dark, the ugly, the suffering, the pain. Paradoxically, together with the tears, gratitude emerged for having lived them, for having been there. And the awareness that every time I had stopped and "lived" with a painful experience, I had found myself with something beautiful that would now be difficult for me to give up.
- Beauty is not perfection. Quite the opposite. It's disorder, inconsistency... And I don't know why all the people I care about most come to my mind... And even the guys I fight with every day but who I could hardly do without.

- Beauty is action: it is opening the door and letting people in, not just looking from the threshold... I smile to myself. I think that from now on I will spend a lot of time looking for beauty and savouring it. It's not enough for me to contemplate it from the window, I want to experience it!

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

Let us contemplate the glory of Your transfiguration, O Christ,
glory of the only-begotten Son of the Father.
You went up a high mountain to pray,
Mt Tabor and Mt Hermon rejoice in front of You.

Moses saw the glory of God in the fire,
now he is contemplating it in the light of Your mortal body.
Elijah couldn't see the face of the Lord,
now he is contemplating it in You, born from a woman.

The disciples listened to the voice of the Father,
now they proclaim that You are the Word made flesh.
We too, obedient to the voice of the Spirit,
now confess You as our Saviour and only Lord.

4. Contemplatio

(to contemplate the Word / silence)

Let us be transfixed by the light irradiating from the transfigured Jesus. May it awake the light hidden in us. Let us join Jesus in the Spirit to give praise to the Father.

5. Collatio

(to share the Word)

As we are 'women of listening', we can tell the sisters a word imprinted by the footstep of Jesus, the footstep of His beauty that we experienced during this meeting.