

BIBLICAL PAGES

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Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 6 Two worlds in the Temple

An argument. How many times did we experience that arguing is a waste of time? Was it due to deafness on other people's part, or to self-centredness and guilty rejection? When one doesn't want to hear, that is not due to indifference but rather to a spiritual illness dividing people, creating hate, leading one to throw stones to the enemy or adversary.

If in our spiritual journey we are idolatrically attached to a worldly look on God, we will be prevented from looking up, changing our perspective, being involved in the proclamation and whole life of Jesus, exactly like all those who were arguing with Jesus in the Temple, who misunderstood His words or were scandalized by them.

Exactly as in the Temple, the place where one could meet God, there are some who obstinately refuse to know Him, who do not recognize Him in the One speaking to them with the Father's words.

Thus, the Temple becomes a place of confrontation, instead of being a place of meeting. And they pervert the place, being unable to raise their gaze. They do not meet God but just their selves. And they confront Jesus who does not discuss out of discussion's sake, but in order to reveal to them the Father's will to show Himself to man, like He did at the burning bush.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

Come, Holy Spirit of God,

come and visit once again my life.

Come, so that I may not be afraid to stay in Your presence.

I beg You to stay with me, so that I may stay with You.

Come, Spirit of Life,

so that the hours may not pass

without leaving a mark.

Come, Spirit of Truth,

and support all those who say 'Yes' in their daily choices.

And be silently present also in those who say 'No',

letting themselves be prey to evil or indifference.

Come, Spirit of Christ,

*give us the gift of acknowledging Him in the Word,
and of letting ourselves be guided by the Father.*

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

John 8:21-30

21 Again He said to them:

*I am going away; you will look for me
and you will die in your sin.
Where I am going, you cannot come*

*22 So the Jews said to one another, 'Is He going to kill Himself, that He says,
"Where I am going, you cannot come?"' 23 Jesus went on:*

*You are from below;
I am from above.
You are of this world;
I am not of this world.
24 I have told you already: you will die in your sins.
Yes, if you do not believe that I am He,
you will die in your sins.*

25 So they said to Him, 'Who are You?' Jesus answered:

*What I have told you from the outset.
26 About you I have much to say
and much to judge;
but the One who sent me is true,
and what I declare to the world
I have learnt from Him.*

*They did not recognize that He was talking to them about the Father. 28 So Jesus
said:*

*When you have lifted up the Son of Man,
then you will know that I am He
and that I do nothing of my own accord.
What I say
is what the Father has taught me;
29 He who sent me is with me,
and has not left me to myself,
for I always do what pleases Him.*

30 As He was saying this, many came to believe in Him.

Let us approach the text. This is Chapter 8 of St John's Gospel, part of the so-called 'Book of the Signs' (Chapters 2-12), spanning from 8:1 to 8:59. Jesus discusses in the Temple with the Pharisees (8:13) or, more generally speaking, with the Jews (8:22). It is the Feast of Shelters (Sukkôt) (7:1-10:21), with its rituals of water and light. This is exactly the context in which Jesus declares Himself to be "the light of the world" (8:12). He has just prevented them from stoning a young woman; and at the end of the Chapter they will try to stone even Him (8:59).

What is He giving witness to? To the fact that the Father is light? What is He revealing? The passage we are dealing with here is framed by Jesus' discussion with the Jews, who reject as invalid His testimony about Himself. Jesus reminds them that the Father is giving witness together with Him... But they do know neither the Father nor Him.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- Jesus is leaving 21-22
- A change of perspective 23-24
- Who are you? 25-27
- The lifted-up One 28-29
- Epilogue 30

Jesus is leaving

21 Again He said to them:

*I am going away; you will look for me
and you will die in your sin.*

Where I am going, you cannot come

22 So the Jews said to one another, 'Is He going to kill Himself, that He says, "Where I am going, you cannot come?"'

"Again He said to them..." "Again": He is willing to go on with the discussion. Is He willing to be polemic? No, He isn't. He just wants to denounce them and to make them aware that they are closed to God's action, as well as that they are misunderstanding Him.

The evangelist often makes use of the technique of misunderstanding, but above all he describes Jesus in dialogue, representing Him as the One who is trying to build bridges, as the One who is trying to build up relations, even when He makes His addressees stumble over their own certainties. It is a way He employs to make them go on discussing, and to let new elements emerge, so that they are not passive but active parties of the dialogue, involved in the progression of the discussion.

The whole dialogue is a big misunderstanding. We can gather that from the very first words. "I am going away," Jesus says. "Where I am going you cannot come."

And they immediately misunderstand Him: “He is going to kill Himself...” But where is Jesus going? He does not say, “I’m going to die”, as if everything would end up in Sheol. He is aware that by revealing the Father He is approaching His own death, but He knows where He has come from and where He is going to (8:14); He knows that “He had come from God and was returning to God” (13:3); “I came from the Father and have come into the world and now I am leaving the world to go to the Father” (16:28). Thus He shows that He is fully aware of His own origin but also of His own goal.

Can really His addressees go to the Father if they do not recognize Him, who is the Father’s envoy, the One who reveals Him, the One who gives witness to Him? (8:16, 18) But they do not establish communion with Him, and therefore they are not able to know and discern.

To die in their sins means that they will not be able to overcome their own death. They have a false image of God, a deformed image, a sick gaze which missed the point, ie their own sins which, therefore, will not be able to heal. They are not able to gaze at the God of Life, of communion, and they are still under death’s power, alone. Their gaze is unable to see that Jesus revealed to them God as judgement of salvation and the maker of a new beginning in the deadly situation of the adulterous woman that they had brought along (8:11). They do not gaze at that God that Jesus – as the Light of the world – is revealing to them as Father, entering not the Temple built of stone but the conscience of all those who let themselves be illumined. Those who walk in light “have a share in one another’s life” (1 Jn 1:7).

Yes, we must let ourselves be illumined if we want to have life, given that “anyone who follows Jesus will not be walking in the dark, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). Light is life, given by the One who is Life Himself and who “has Life in Himself” (Jn 5:26). This light, revealed by Jesus in all its richness and fullness, taking flesh in Him, shows that God is always the giver as well as the keeper of life (as in 8:11), and that man has been created for life and communion. Jesus sheds light on the meaning of life. And the Jews think that Jesus is going to commit suicide; they misunderstand Him and regard Him as a giver of death, not as the revealer of life... This misunderstanding cannot lead them to the place where Jesus is going. “Where I am going, you cannot come”.

A change of perspective

23 Jesus went on:

You are from below;

I am from above.

You are of this world;

I am not of this world.

24 I have told you already: you will die in your sins.

Yes, if you do not believe that I am He,

you will die in your sins.

“You cannot come...” because “you are from below”. ‘To be from’ denotes the origin, the nature and the attitudes of somebody.

“You are from below, I am from above”. The two perspectives are one the opposite of the other, because they derive from different origins. The former is a limited perspective, self-relying, comprehending the things that are “below”. The latter is a perspective opening up man to the gift of revelation, to the “above”. Jesus is from above: we can see Him in the act of revealing.

The phrase ‘from above’, ‘another’, occurs firstly in Jn 3:3, 7, 31. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he is to be born from above (3:3). That, implicitly, means “to be born of the Spirit” (3:7-8), subjecting oneself to His ineffable action which always precedes and follows us.

On the contrary, the Jews “are from below”, as opposed to freedom from prejudices and harmony with “the One who comes from above” (3:31), to give witness to what He has heard and seen (3:32). Therefore, we could say that there are two different attitudes: being self-centred, focussed on one’s own certainties, or being open to the divine.

The two origins (“below” and “above”) correspond also to another couple of attitudes: to be of this world or not to be of this world. “For this is how God loved the world: He gave His only Son” (Jn 3:16). We realize then that St John gives two different meanings to the term ‘world’.

The latter has a positive meaning, referring to the whole universe and humankind and the goodness of creation. The former has a negative meaning, referring to the rejection of God’s plan and to lies.

Jn 12:46 presents the event dividing the two attitudes: if Jesus has come into the world as Light, to save the world (12:47), His word – either welcomed or rejected – spoken in obedience to the Father’s command, will divide, will judge the world (12:48-50). His own are in the world (13:1), they are part of the creation that God loves, but they do not belong to ‘non-love’, ‘hate’ (15:18ff), they are not of this world, whose prince has already been judged (16:11). Jesus does not pray for ‘this world’ (17:7, 11), because His word is life-giving but life cannot be given to non-love.

In this passage there is also a warning: “ If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins”. To believe allows us to escape the clutches of death, and to welcome the Son who is revealing the Father, and to establish communion with God. There is a progression from a single sin (line 21, the false idea they have of God) to many sins, deriving from that one: non-love, rejection, lies. The dividing line is to believe that Jesus is “I am He”, ie the same God who revealed Himself to Israel in order to lead them out of slavery. A change of perspective is therefore necessary.

Who are You?

25 So they said to Him, ‘Who are You?’ Jesus answered:

What I have told you from the outset.

26 About you I have much to say

*and much to judge;
but the One who sent me is true,
and what I declare to the world
I have learnt from Him.*

They did not recognize that He was talking to them about the Father.

Jesus has already stated who He is (line 24, “I am HE”), but still they ask “Who are You?” He has already revealed that He is the same God who revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush, thus becoming a source of permanent discernment for His listeners. The verbal tense is a durative present: He is the true image of the One who sent Him, and the One who sent Him “is true”. What Jesus learns from Him, He declares to the world.

“I am HE” shows Jesus’ unity with the Father, the fact that He is a perfect image of Him. Should they listen to Jesus, they would be able to enter communion with the Father, with that God who is looking for His people, who revealed Himself to Moses... Should they listen to Him, they would know Him, they would establish a relation with Him.

The warning / hope “If you believe that I am HE” is to be put into practice in the present, now before a ‘burning Bush’ that according to the Church Fathers (Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa) was the image and prophecy of Jn 1:14, of the union in Christ of divinity and humanity, and where fire is the symbol of divinity, while the bush is the symbol of the flesh of the Verb. “If you believe...” is to be put into practice now that they are in front of the bush / Son of Man. If the Son of God has become flesh, bringing His human body into the Godhead, into the Fire, without destroying it, with Him the totality of bushes (mankind) can be let into the Godhead, who is burning out of love but does not destroy neither consume...

However, they do not recognize that He was talking about the Father. Their eyes and ears are still closed to Jesus’ words and they cannot reach the Father.

The lifted-up One

28 So Jesus said:

*When you have lifted up the Son of Man,
then you will know that I am He
and that I do nothing of my own accord.*

What I say

is what the Father has taught me;

29 He who sent me is with me,

and has not left me to myself,

for I always do what pleases Him.

It is surprising that those who will lift up the Son of Man will provide themselves the ‘condition’ for Jesus to be finally recognised as “I am HE”.

In St John’s Gospel, to lift up refers to the Passion, Cross and Glorification: it is equal to Isaiah’s Servant of Yahweh “rise to great heights” (Is 52:13). Passion and glory are closely linked in the lifting up, regarded as a throne of glory (kings were

lifted up on the throne, and carried in triumph). The lifted-up Jesus is the mediator between Heaven and earth, the One who can ascend because He has come down from Heaven (Jn 3:13). In the Cross is death, the lowest descent of all in His human condition, contemporary to His being lifted up to the Father. In the lifted-up Jesus are therefore linked Heaven and earth, man and God. He is at the same time on the earth (as a Man on the cross) and dwelling with the Father (glory), given that humanity and divinity are both present in Him. Once again we have to contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation in Jesus, God made flesh, as Moses did in front of the burning bush.

When I am lifted up, Jesus says, you will have the last and extreme possibility to understand that “I am HE”, the last and extreme possibility to believe that I am the genuine face of the Father: if we look at the lifted-up Man, we will have to change our perspective on God. From a fake face of God (a view from below) to the true face of God (a view to Him who is above). It was the same in the desert, when the Jews had to look at the snake lifted up by Moses (Jn 3:14), which made them change their views on God, believe in a God who saves from idolatry, from death caused by the fiery serpents’ bites (Nb 21:6).

“When I am lifted up from the earth, / I shall draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32). “They will look to the One whom they have pierced” (Jn 19:37), as to “a fountain... to wash sin and impurity away” (Zk 13:1), as “from His heart shall flow streams of living water” (Jn 7:38), ie the Holy Spirit. And they will see Him as ‘salvation’ (cf Ws 2:1-2, 13-15).

To look at Jesus lifted up on the cross, to contemplate His being given as a gift both to men and to the Father, makes us realize the love of the Father: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9; 12:45); and we will see the reciprocal gift on the Father’s part to the Son, and in the Son to us men.

We have to acknowledge Jesus’ deep unity with and utter faithfulness to the Father and the fact that He receives everything from Him and does and tells all that comes from Him. He is transparent: He does nothing out of His own will. “The Father and I are one”. (Jn 10:30) To do what pleases the Father means not only being one with Him but also doing His will. Then, when we look at the Lifted-One, we can see the Father, His love for the world, His glory.

“You will know that I am HE” gives us hope for the future because:

1) If Jesus is “I am HE”, He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob announced to Moses, the God of the living ones that can be seen in the descent / ascent, Cross / Glory with the Father, the new Burning Bush pointing to the Eternal Life, that is never consumed, that carries with Him each and every man that the Father gave Him.

2) The Holy Spirit is poured out of Jesus’ side, superabundantly flowing as the gift of the reciprocal love of Father and Son: He will interiorly teach us, He will let us know (knowledge = communion), He will let us enter the mystery of the gift of the Eternal Life of the Father and the Son.

Epilogue

30 As He was saying this, many came to believe in Him.

“Many came to believe in Him.” This seems to be a positive epilogue but in fact, in the following lines, those same Jewish believers will argue with Jesus about discipleship after His statement: “You will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32). They will reply that they are free already, but Jesus is referring to the slavery of sin... And in the end they will try to kill Him...

How many fathers are there? In the contrast between darkness and light, which is typical of St John's, here comes the opposition between the Jews, children of lies who have the devil as their father (and not indeed God or Abraham as they proclaim); and Jesus, who is the genuine Son of the Father. Whoever is from God listens to God's words, ie Jesus' words, but they do not listen because they are not from God.

In St John's Gospel, line 30 is very relevant because it stresses the instability of the knowledge of Jesus, while highlighting that knowledge must increase and faith grow constantly. And that, conversely, sometimes the rejection is obstinate.

We really have to pass from one world to the other, and take a stand for Jesus, here and now. Where shall we start from? From below or from above? From one world or from the other? The solution is in the Spirit who makes us “be born from above”, who is given by the Lifted One to whom we have to look at in order to see the Father. And we have to let us be embraced by Them to have a share in Their communion and to conquer Life Eternal.

2. Meditatio

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

In the Temple, God's place, Jesus answers those who are questioning Him. The dialogue and subsequent misunderstandings, as presented by St John, show Him as extremely keen on entering in a relationship with His listeners. His pedagogy is delicate and attentive to His public, and trying to lead them to a genuine knowledge of the face of the Father, even when the debate is heated.

God can no longer be met in the Temple made of stones, but in the body of Jesus, who is the New Temple, destroyed by death but rebuilt at the Resurrection (Jn 2). There they will worship God “in Spirit and Truth”.

- There is a confrontation between two different worlds: What would Jesus tell me? And how would I react?
- Jesus knows where He is coming from: Where am I from? From which world?
- Jesus knows where He is going: Is my gaze willing to change perspective?

- Jesus is leading us to the Father: Who am I leading people to by my words? Either to myself or to Jesus?

- Jesus is clearly speaking: Which kind of relation do I have with Him? Am I patient, hasty, honest, rough? Am I wearing a mask?

- Jesus is the New Temple: Who can people meet through me? Am I really a temple of God?

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

Lord, the Lifted One, how can I meet You?

Alas, our gaze is not focussed on You.

Where are we from? From below?

But You have come to draw us all to Yourself... Do it!

We are tired of spinning around,

we would like to re-emerge from the world of rejection and lies and self-reliance.

Draw us out of sterile arguments. Make us worship You and in You, the Father.

Save us, O Saviour of the world.

4. Contemplatio

(to contemplate the Word / silence)

Let us be attracted by the fire of the burning bush, by "I am HE", by the Lifted One, by the Man-God, the New Temple.

5. Collatio

(to share the Word)

Let us share the Word resounding in us in a spirit of fraternity, as temples of the Lord.