

BIBLICAL PAGES

by Sr Maria Chiara Ventriglia

Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 7 He revealed Himself

The one who crosses the sea can guide other people; the one who experiences something great, or difficult, can lead others who are in the same situation. This is true for individuals but also for communities. But it is possible because the individual himself, or the community, has been dragged out of the sea, or of chaos.

Jesus, the Risen One, has dragged us out of death, because He is the First-Fruit of those risen from death. And the waters of the sea seem to turn into baptismal waters we must be submerged in, in order to be renewed like St Peter, or in order to be fished from them.

The Sea of Tiberias is the place where the Risen Jesus encounters the disciples: on the shore, after the crossing. He reveals Himself... but they have to recognise Him. Which are the signs of His revelation? How does the Risen One manifest Himself in order to involve them in His presence, in order for the community to understand that He is near them in their everyday lives? Small gestures: sharing a meal...

A banquet will turn the place of the first calling into a place where a mature following – after crossing the Lord's death and resurrection – will be able to really understand and welcome all those signs that they were unable to get during His earthly life, but that are capable of transforming them into a community.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

God our Father,

we offer You this time of our lives

and we want to listen to Your Word,

found in the Holy Scriptures:

send Your Holy Spirit into our hearts,

so that we do not resist Your voice

with closed and hardened hearts,

but we welcome Him in order to store it in our hearts,

ponder over it and put it into practice.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

John 21:1-14

1 Later on, Jesus revealed Himself again to the disciples. It was by the sea of Tiberias, and it happened like this: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two more of His disciples were together.

3 Simon Peter said, 'I'm going fishing.' They replied, 'We'll come with you.' They went out and got into the boat but caught nothing that night.

4 When it was already light, there stood Jesus on the shore, though the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. 5 Jesus called out, 'Haven't you caught anything, friends?' And when they answered, 'No', He said, 'Throw the net out to starboard and you'll find something.' So they threw the net out and could not haul it because of the quantity of fish.

7 The disciples whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord.' At these words, 'It is the Lord', Simon Peter tied his outer garment round him (for he had nothing on) and jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples came on in the boat, towing the net with the fish; they were only about a hundred yards from land.

9 As soon as they came ashore they saw that there was some bread there and a charcoal fire with fish cooking on it. 10 Jesus said, 'Bring some of the fish you have just caught.'

11 Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net ashore, full of big fish, one hundred and fifty-three of them; and in spite of there being so many the net was not broken. 12 Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' None of the disciples was bold enough to ask, 'Who are You?'. They knew quite well it was the Lord. 13 Jesus then stepped forward, took the bread and gave it to them, and the same with the fish. 14 This was the third time that Jesus revealed Himself to the disciples after rising from the dead.

Let us approach the text.

The placing of Chapter 21 is a bit peculiar, given that it is placed after the first conclusion of St John's Gospel. Perhaps it is an epilogue, or something added by the first Johannine community towards the end of the first century of the Christian Era (circa 90 AD), addressed to the believers of the coast of Asia Minor, the main city of which was Ephesus. Perhaps its aim is to highlight the disciples' post-paschal relation with Jesus, and how the Risen One may manifest Himself in their everyday lives, and also how with Him all the internal conflicts (maybe those with the Palestinian community) may be overcome.

The place where the encounter with Jesus occurs is also important: the sea of Tiberias, referring to the disciples' first calling and to the mission entrusted to them by Jesus from the very beginning (cf Mk 1:16-20), turning them from fishermen into 'fishers of people'. There is also a reference to the miraculous catch of Luke 5:1-11. All that because the passage immediately following the one we are dealing with here (Jn 21:15-23) relates the calling and the mission entrusted to Simon Peter, by the triple declaration of love he is invited to make by the Risen One, in order to renew their friendship after the wounds of his denial, and to show that he is ready and mature for the definitive 'Follow me', in spite of his shortcomings and weakness.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 1 Introduction

- 2-3 The disciples
- 4-6 Jesus manifests Himself
- 7-8 The disciples' reaction
- 9-13 An invitation
- 14 Conclusion

Introduction

1 Later on, Jesus revealed Himself again to the disciples. It was by the sea of Tiberias, and it happened like this:

- “Later on...” Is that a casual introduction or does it refer to something else? Probably it is a link to the preceding conclusion. However, it must be noted that we find the same words in Jn 13:7, in a very peculiar context: the washing of the disciples' feet. And when St Peter says to Him, ‘Lord, are You going to wash my feet?’, Jesus replies, ‘At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.’ “Later”, ie, after being washed. ‘If I do not wash you, you can have no share with me.’

Removing His garments, taking a towel, wrapping it round His waist as if He were a servant, and then putting on His outer garments again, are all actions that anticipate what will happen to the Master: His kenosis and exaltation, as Phil 2:7-9 puts it. To be washed allows them to have a share with the Lord and His life, His death and resurrection. Then, “later on, Jesus revealed Himself again to the disciples”.

- “To reveal” is a technical term, a heritage of the Jewish traditions, which refers to Christ's manifestation in a way different from that of the verb “to show”, which occurs when the Risen One appears.

“He revealed Himself...” says the text. In Jn 14:21 Jesus will state that He will love and reveal Himself to all those who love Him.

- Where? The sea of Tiberias refers us back to Chapter 6, the chapter of the “Bread of life”, where Jesus specifies who He is for His own: food allowing them to live out of eternal life, out of God's very own life.

Summarising all those considerations, we must conclude that we are invited to read the text thus: Jesus reveals Himself and invites His disciples to have a share with Him, to be part of His life. And He makes the invitation through His self-giving, through love, given that – as He promised – He will reveal Himself to those who love Him. “I will love him”, followed by His revelation, fulfils the participation offered as Bread of Life (Jn 6:48) or, moreover, as Living Bread, nourishing us all the time, “my flesh, for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51).

Therefore, revealing is different from just showing Himself, because it implies communicating Himself, being recognised as love/gift and as Life-giving food. But what is the context of all that?

The disciples

2 Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two more of His disciples were together.

3 Simon Peter said, 'I'm going fishing.' They replied, 'We'll come with you.' They went out and got into the boat but caught nothing that night.

The disciples who gather together are seven in number: five of them mentioned by their respective names; two more unnamed. The text opens up itself towards its reader: while the number seven is a symbol of fullness, the fullness of discipleship, "two more" may refer to anyone of the rest, but also to anyone of us...

Simon Peter decides to go fishing. This is his job. However, in both the more ancient gospel, ie Mark's, and in Luke 5, Jesus calls him to follow Him and promises him that He will turn him into a fisher of men: "From now on, it is people you will be catching" (Lk 5:10). What is Simon Peter hoping to fish here? Is "I'm going fishing" the sentence of a deluded man, going back to his past and to his past job, or the sentence of someone who is looking for a 'new path', a new way after meeting the Risen Lord in the upper room? From there they have been sent as Jesus Himself was sent by the Father (cf Jn 20:21).

"I'm going fishing" is a present continuous, therefore referring to an action which is going on in time. It is a mission, a task he has been entrusted with. But how?

The other disciples go with Simon Peter: "We'll come with you". They keep on going with him... But "they caught nothing that night". This statement refers us back to Lk 5:5: in that very moment, to follow Simon Peter was of no help. They had to face failure. The time was not right. When then?

What is the Johannine community pondering upon in the text we are dealing with? Their questions (on their post-paschal relation with the Lord) are: How can we feel His presence in our daily lives? How can we recognise Him? What should we do? Who should we follow in the community?

Why is the text referring to the miraculous catch related by St Luke, and to that meeting with the Lord?

Jesus manifests Himself

4 When it was already light, there stood Jesus on the shore, though the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. 5 Jesus called out, 'Haven't you caught anything, friends?' And when they answered, 'No', He said, 'Throw the net out to starboard and you'll find something.' So they threw the net out and could not haul it because of the quantity of fish.

It is early morning. The same time of Jn 20:1, the dawn of Christ's resurrection when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and "it was still dark".

Here Jesus stands on the shore when it is already light, but there is not enough light for the disciples to recognise Him. Jesus is on the shore, He is beyond the sea, He crossed chaos and death.

Jesus “stood”, as He “stood” in 20:19, 26. He is a source of stability for His disciples, being in their midst and in front of them, and the calm and serenity of this dawn is for them like a new beginning.

Jesus asks. He addresses His own with the term ‘paidia’, which referred to children from the age of three to seven. In 1 Jn ‘paidia’ seems to refer to the members of the Johannine community as a whole: by becoming members of the community, they benefited from the remission of sins through Christ’s name, by the anointing “you have all received” (1 Jn 2:20, 27).

In the context of the passage we are dealing with, then they are all equal, even Simon Peter and the beloved disciple.

Both Jesus’ question and the term He addresses them with highlight their present state: they are defined both by a lack (in the present failure) and by a benefit. But in spite of the failure, Jesus is not negative. The writer wants to highlight the gifts that the community possesses, that anointing that makes them unique but at the same time one in the community.

Jesus takes into consideration the whole of reality, with its negative but also positive points. This is a first result of the encounter with that man standing on the shore that they do not know: they get a new point of view. They are still in the middle of the sea, and they have caught nothing, but they have got potential. A good starting point, because the Risen One will guide them: “Throw the net out to starboard...” He gives them concrete directions on their specific situation, even though He has not been recognised yet.

As they once obeyed the Lord’s word (cf Lk 5:5), so they obey the word of the unknown man now. They take a risk. Now the Risen One can manifest Himself everywhere. Even Mary Magdalene did not recognise Him at first.

In spite of all that, the passage testifies to the fact that the Risen One appears in a familiar context, where some elements of a past event, already experienced in Jesus’ company, recall to mind His way of being present, His way of being-with. This is the feature through which they can recognise Him.

In the original text, the great quantity of fish is defined as a “multitude”, a term which occurs also in Lk 2:17 and 6:17, referring to the Gentiles. What they have caught brings to their minds what they have already experienced, then, but it is also a calling for the Johannine community to go on a mission to the heathen peoples and to fish living people thanks to the Lord’s word, at the opportune time. This passage is an answer to the Johannine community’s questions: Who should we follow? After the Lord’s Passover, which of His words are sending us on a mission to fish living people?

The disciples’ reaction

7 The disciples whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord.' At these words, 'It is the Lord', Simon Peter tied his outer garment round him (for he had nothing on) and jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples came on in the boat, towing the net with the fish; they were only about a hundred yards from land.

“It is the Lord”. This is a declaration of trust, on the beloved disciple’s part, the one who at the tomb “saw and believed” (Jn 20:8), after reaching the tomb first but letting St Peter who had come second go in first (Jn 20:6)

Even now, as at the tomb, Simon Peter and the beloved disciple act in synergy: Simon Peter trusts in the word of the beloved disciple and jumps into the water, but first he ties out his outer garment.

At the Last Supper, he was asking, “Why can I not follow You now?” (Jn 13:37). And Jesus warned him about his denial. Now Simon ties out his outer garment, and that brings us to mind the meaning of Jesus’ gestures during the Supper. He wrapped a towel round His waist, as a slave whose task is to serve. Those gestures are a symbol of His service: to give away His life and to take it back again, His death and resurrection. St Peter goes into the water with his outer garment tied and he re-emerges beside Jesus, as if to have a share in the death and resurrection of his Lord. Only thus he reaches the shore, through the sea, through his weakness and denial. Only by plunging into the sea himself, he will be able to fish people, after renewing his friendship with the Lord and being entrusted with the sheep and the lambs, ie the community (cf Jn 21:16-17). Only now he can follow Jesus.

An invitation

9 As soon as they came ashore they saw that there was some bread there and a charcoal fire with fish cooking on it.

10 Jesus said, 'Bring some of the fish you have just caught.'

11 Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net ashore, full of big fish, one hundred and fifty-three of them; and in spite of there being so many the net was not broken. 12 Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' None of the disciples was bold enough to ask, 'Who are You?'. They knew quite well it was the Lord. 13 Jesus then stepped forward, took the bread and gave it to them, and the same with the fish.

On the shore they see a charcoal fire with fish and bread. The charcoal fire recalls Jn 18:8, where St Peter denied Jesus. Here Jesus makes an invitation, gives him another possibility: to add what they have caught to what is already on the charcoal fire. It is Simon Peter who drags the net ashore. In spite of being “full of big fish”, it does not break. And the charcoal fire – the sign of denial and of division – now becomes the sign of union between what Jesus brought and what Simon Peter will bring.

“The net was not broken”. The term used here is different from that of Lk 5:6. Here we find ‘schizo’, which can be compared to ‘schismata’ of 1 Co 1:10, 18: while the term used by St Paul refers to the divisions in the community of Corinth,

the term used here underlines that what Simon Peter does, does not provoke breaks, schisms in the community.

It is as if on the shore it were hidden what the Risen One offered Himself, enriched by the labour and trust of all the disciples. Labour, because the net full of fish had to be dragged ashore... And trust, because they trusted St Peter, who was able to drag it ashore and not break it. They do not make questions, by now they have understood He is the Lord, especially because of the super-abundance of the catch, like in the former miraculous catch, or like at Cana, or at the multiplication of the bread and fish. They recognise Him in this kind of 'offertory', where what they give is what they have received. They recognise Him especially when Jesus draws near to them, takes the bread, gives it to them, as well as the fish: they recognise Him in the banquet, through communion.

"To have a share with Him", announced at the Last Supper, is now becoming concrete in a banquet where the disciples, thanks to Him, can share their own part of fish, and trusting in His word, they can bring Him living people. Now the time is right.

Conclusion

14 This was the third time that Jesus revealed Himself to the disciples after rising from the dead.

The writer concludes: "This was the third time that Jesus revealed Himself to the disciples". Why does he specifies that this is the third time? Perhaps he wants to convey the wholeness of what he recorded about the Risen Jesus' manifestations to the disciples. Here we see the different souls of the community: the charismatic dimension of the Johannine community and the more institutionalized one. The synergy between the two disciples, highlighted by the evangelist, reveals the Risen One as the focal point one has to be nourished from, in order to walk together on His path.

2. Meditatio

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

Jesus "stands", as a reference point; He asks; He provides a different point of view; He gives the bread and the fish in a banquet of communion.

- If Jesus revealed Himself "later on", which is the right time to recognise the presence of the Risen Jesus in our midst, both as individuals and as a community? Which signs help us to recognise Him?
- What is He asking me in particular, and our community? "Daughters", all of you have the anointing, the Holy Spirit, but how do you nourish communion? Are you able to be at the same time Peter and the beloved disciple, institution and charism? Which shortcomings do you detect?

- Is the Risen One the focus of our communion as sisters? Am I bringing Him to my brothers and sisters, ie to all those who have been entrusted to me by Him, in order for me to give them back to Him? Am I enriching this gift by care and benevolence?

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

*I may be wrong, Lord, but I like to guess
that You are prompting me to go out more and more
to proclaim the necessity as well as the urgency
of passing from the Most Holy Sacrament
to Your other kind of presence, real still,
in the Eucharist of the Poor...
The theologians will argue,
a thousand objections will be made...
But woe to all those who feed on Your Body
but cannot see You while You are scanning rubbish to find food,
always driven away,
while You live in a subhuman condition
in utter insecurity...
(Dom Helder Camara)*

4. Contemplatio (to contemplate the Word / silence)

Let us open our hearts to recognise the Risen One, all the time and everywhere...
It is always the right time to follow Him, to pay attention to the feeble sound of
His Spirit, urging us to make unity in diversity.

5. Collatio (to share the Word)

Let us share the thoughts arising in us after reading the text. Let us share the
charisms too.