

BIBLICAL PAGES

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Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 8 From the desert to the spreading of the good news

There is a place within our selves, a place of the heart, a lonely place where a silent growth is taking place all the time. This place is not easily accessible to anybody, not even ourselves, as it is inhabited by Him who is more intimate to us than ourselves. It seems to us a lonely place because God's presence is inviting us to join Him there, but in fact He is not invasive, He does nothing and lets our liberty look for Him, find Him, decide to stay with Him. And not only that. This place is like a womb from which we are driven towards others, and then we can communicate to others the encounter we have made.

In the passage we are going to meditate in this Lectio there is a lonely place too, a physical place Jesus retires to but which becomes a place where the spreading of the good news starts from.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*Holy Spirit of God,
give me a docile heart, capable of listening.
Take away from my chest the heart of stone
and give me a heart of flesh instead,
so that I may be able to welcome the Word of the Lord
and I can put it into practice (cf Ezk 11:19-20).*

*I want to listen to the words of the Lord (Ps 83:9).
Father, let Your face shine on me and I shall be safe (Ps 80:3).
Teach me Your ways, that I may walk in Your truth;
give me a simple heart
to fear Your name (Ps 86:11).*

*May I learn to live in silence as Mary of Nazareth,
and cherish the Word in my self,
so that I may be found by God who is constantly looking for me.*

(Card. Carlo Maria Martini)

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

Luke 4:42-44

42 When daylight came He left the house and made His way to a lonely place. The crowds went to look for Him, and when they had caught up with Him they wanted to prevent Him leaving them, 43 but He answered, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns too, because that is what I was sent to do.' 44 And He continued His proclamation in the synagogues of Judaea.

Let us approach the text.

This is Chapter 4 from St Luke's Gospel. It is a very important chapter, because it is the only one of the synoptic gospels relating Jesus' programmatic discourse (4:16-30), the beginning of His ministry at Nazareth and the rejection by its people. This is a typical theme of St Luke's: the spreading of the Word. Here Jesus "passed straight through the crowd and walked away" (4:30), going down to Capernaum, teaching, driving devils away, healing Simon's mother-in-law, laying His hands on all those who were ill and curing them. He also rebuked the devils and ordered them not to reveal that He was the Christ.

And then comes the passage we are dealing with in this Lectio, which is one with the beginning of Jesus' ministry at Nazareth: here we find the opposition of home country and foreign land too, Nazareth against Capernaum, His own people rejecting Him and foreign people welcoming Him. This will be the recurring dynamic of the whole third gospel. These very few lines show that dynamism: the Word is going to spread and cannot be confined even when it is welcomed. There must be something that drives it then. What is it? The lonely place.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 42 retreat
- 43 spreading
- 44 proclamation

Retreat

42 When daylight came He left the house and made His way to a lonely place. The crowds went to look for Him, and when they had caught up with Him they wanted to prevent Him leaving them,

After meeting so many people after sunset, Jesus now goes to a lonely place (not necessarily the desert).

The desert / lonely places occur many times in St Luke's Gospel. The desert is the place:

- where the Word pours down on John (3:2);
- where the voice of the prophet must be heard (3:4);
- the Spirit of God leads Jesus to (4:1);
- Jesus goes to after curing the leper (5:16);
- the devil drives the possessed to (8:29);

- where the multiplication of the bread takes place (9:12);
- where the man with hundred sheep leaves the ninety-nine in order to go after the missing one (15:4).

First of all, it is the place the spreading of the original proclamation starts from by the Word's initiative (with St John the Baptist). Then the Word made flesh is strictly related to the desert when He is tempted, as well as whenever He prays the Father in solitude (as after healing the leper), as well as when He wants to share His life (in the multiplication of bread) or when He goes after the missing sheep. This lonely place may be regarded as a place of rest, but in fact it isn't. It may be regarded as a place where one can be isolated, but in fact it isn't. On the contrary, paradoxically the desert appears as a place of communion. In the lonely place all the potentialities of the good news are contained. There may be in it healing, exorcism, compassion and so on, given that it is basically the place of prayer (9:18), allowing Jesus to be focussed on the Father as well as on His own identity of envoy. It is a place whose loneliness makes one come to terms with the nakedness of the immediate experience that must be elaborated, in order to advance on the 'path'.

In the passage we are dealing with, the lonely place is the place where Jesus meets the crowds who are looking for Him. It is a hospitable place but not static. Jesus' encounters are all relevant, and this one is relevant too of course, but in spite of that Jesus cannot be bound to a specific place, He has to go on. The crowds "went to look for Him, and when they had caught up with Him they wanted to prevent Him leaving them"... In Greek, the imperfect tense shows that their actions are durative, ie they try all the time to limit the spreading of the Word. The crowd, an anonymous and heterogeneous aggregation, is opposed to the people ('laos'); and they are not in harmony with the spreading of the good news. In fact, their aim seems to be to possess Jesus, His Word and its effects.

Their reaching Him in the lonely place could be an occasion for sharing His experience of communion, for being with Him in a place blessed with Grace, for being with Him with all their expectations and needs.

Spreading

43 but He answered, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns too, because that is what I was sent to do.'

How does Jesus relate to the crowd? He speaks to them. In-between the two sentences, in the Greek text we find the preposition 'dè' which in this case does not mean 'but', but 'in fact / because'. The second sentence does not oppose the first, but specifies and explains it without solution of continuity. Jesus does not reject the crowd's pressure, He does not drive them away in a bothered manner (this is a confirmation that the lonely place is not a defence and that He does not want to isolate Himself). He rather wants to try to make them understand that there is a 'beyond', that the Word must spread in spite of Capernaum's welcoming. He wants the crowd to understand that the Word has to 'go on a journey'. "It is necessary...", in Greek 'dei'. This adverb occurs in other places of

the Gospels, for instance when Jesus is announcing His passion, death and resurrection. It is a necessity... In the events, God's salvific power comes to the fore; it is evident that God is making use of those events.

Jesus makes His words even more explicit: the salvific event is the proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom of God. If we go back to the programmatic discourse in Nazareth's Synagogue, with which the present text is one from a narrative point of view, the good news is linked to Isaiah 61:1-2. The Kingdom of God is present 'today' because today "the Scripture has been fulfilled" (4:21) in the minds of those who are listening to the proclamation. According to the Scripture, poverty and affliction become places where one can experience God's mercy and liberation in Jesus. Listening then becomes obedience.

The good news to the poor of Isaiah, that Jesus makes His own, proclaims the liberation of prisoners and freedom for the oppressed, the inauguration of the year of grace of the Lord, the year pleasing to the Lord, with a reference to Lc 25:8-54 (the Jubilee Year when debts are condoned and freedom is given back to everyone).

The time God enters history by His salvific action, is the time the Scripture is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Anointed One and the envoy. The 'today' recurring in the third Gospel (cf 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 19:5; 23:43) as the core theme of St Luke's theology, is a synthesis within the temporal dimension of the theme of salvation with relation to human choices. In the 'sèmeron', in the 'today', man can welcome or reject Christ. It is the place of faith, where Jesus of Nazareth upturned the very notion of 'time'. If time is for man, in Jesus the 'today' is for each and everyone the time and place of salvation. And in the believers' lives it is the mark of the decisive moments of their life of faith.

St Luke highlights that the good news is fulfilled inasmuch as it is listened to (4:21) and obeyed. Jesus is very aware that He is being sent to proclaim, so that the journey of the Word may become a 'today', a time when faith is experienced and the Word fulfilled, both as liberation from and external oppression and from sin, thanks to forgiveness. This proclamation cannot be stopped, but it needs some stops in a lonely place, useful to ponder on the experiences that He has made as well as to communicate to the crowds the urgency of the proclamation, and to be the place the proclamation spreads from.

There is a Word that must be strong and authoritative to the eyes of men and women of all times. This Word proclaims the fulfilment of the Scriptures, the fulfilment of the promises. For all those who welcome the Word, for all those who open themselves up to faith, the Scripture is fulfilled today.

Proclamation

44 And He continued His proclamation in the synagogues of Judaea.

At Nazareth Jesus started His journey (4:30), and this action is rendered by St Luke with an imperfect continuous tense. Then, from the very beginning of His ministry, the evangelist describes Jesus' journey as the journey of the Word, of the proclamation of the Word which started at Nazareth and was rejected. This journey will be all within the borders of Israel, except for a brief stop in Samaria (cf 17:11). Now the journey stops in Capernaum and in its synagogue a devil is driven away. Jesus feels the urge to go, driven by His awareness of being the Son of the Father... This awareness is evident from the first chapters onwards (2:49) and seems to grow on the journey.

The lonely place includes in this text different features that can be found elsewhere too: it is a stop conducive to prayer, with Jesus carrying the burdens and infirmities of those He has encountered on His way and presenting them to the Father (as in 5:16); but it is also the starting point of a new bit of the journey (as in the search for the lost sheep, 15:4). From the lonely place the proclamation starts spreading once again.

St Luke highlights how all that takes place in Judaea, and in synagogues in particular. We wonder why...

In fact, synagogues were the places where the reading of the Law was followed by the actualizing reading of the Prophets, as it happened at Nazareth. If the proclamation in the synagogue of Nazareth was a programmatic one, the shift from the Scripture to Himself took place in a synagogue meeting. History can rejoice in the Good News at the proclamation of the 'today', in which Scripture is fulfilled in Jesus, in His word listened to and welcomed, and in His deeds.

It is of paramount importance for the spreading of the Word and of the proclamation that their fulfilment is today, starting from Scripture, according to the synagogue service arrangement.

Jesus is not a free preacher, His proclamation is the good news that God's promise in the Scripture has been fulfilled. The Lord has visited His people, St Luke says (1:68; 7:16); His deeds show His intervention in the history of mankind (Lk 4:33; 6:6); and even after His resurrection, the Risen One will open up the minds of the disciples to the understanding of the Scriptures, referring to Him (24:27, 45). In Acts it is also through the Scripture that the good news spreads (1:16; 8:32, 35).

In conclusion, we can say that Jesus was visiting the synagogues of Judaea because the synagogues were the places where the Scripture could be listened to and actualized. In Acts too, the disciples Peter and John will proclaim the 'Kerigma' first of all in synagogues (cf 13:15; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 19, 26; 19:8).

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

- Jesus and the crowd in the desert: a balance between an identity strengthening itself in solitude and mercy which does not reject those who are coming...

- As far as we are concerned, which is the fulcrum of that balance? Maybe to learn in solitude to be merciful?

- Let us look at Jesus in His way of behaving, when He stops, rests, looks at the world with the same gaze of the Father, fulfils in history the promise of the Father, fulfils His mission of envoy.

- As far as we are concerned, how much our lives, personal callings, missions are focussed on the Father?

- The crowd looks for Him, reaches Him, tries to make Him stay...

All these actions are expressed in the text by continuous tenses. We should be the ones to repeat them nowadays.

- How and why do we look for Him?
- Are we touched by His experience of the desert?
- How much, on the contrary, are we trying to possess Him and His work? Are we the people of God recognizing the fulfilment of the promise of the Scriptures, by welcoming the Lord's visitation in our personal history, or are we rather an anonymous crowd rushing here and there to get some benefits?

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

*Teach me, Lord, to stay in the lonely place of my being
according to Your ethos.*

Not with fear

but with the certainty that I will be meeting the Father,

that my gaze will deepen,

that my calling will mature.

Then, send me too,

not as a standard-bearer of ideologies,

but as the joyful witness of Your presence in history,

for which You want to make use of us.

Together, Lord, bright Companion of our dark days,

let us spread the good news that 'today' is the day

of our 'Yes' in faith

to Your silent working to save us,

to the joy of being continually looked for,

*given that You always leave Your solitary place for us,
You are always walking,
God with us till the end of the world.*

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

Let us enter our 'place of the heart' by shattering any wall that we may have built up. Let us enter unarmed, with no securities. May He meet us and may we say 'Yes' to the 'today' of God for us.

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

Like Jesus we are envoys... Let us share the good news we have heard in this retreat.