

# BIBLICAL PAGES

by Sr Maria Chiara Ventriglia

## Jesus' places and relations

### Lectio n° 2 The road, the place where two powers confront each other

Even when we go for a walk in the woods we may make some weird encounters. Even more so if we go into a foreign land.

When we are on the road we are compelled to take a stand, to express an opinion, and to symbolically progress, 'step' after 'step'. We progress by crossing boundaries never crossed before, but above all, by exposing ourselves to unexpected encounters. We do not know entirely how we will behave, how the encounter will unfold and conclude, whether we will be welcomed or rejected, whether we will be able to express ourselves or whether we will be understood. We will probably increase the knowledge of ourselves as well as of our reactions.

We will be called to go further, to choose between compromises or the truth of our selves. We will be ultimately called to not betray the divine deposit that, even in the little events of our daily lives, wants to be working in us in order for our own dynamics of death and oppression to come to the fore: then that deposit will reveal itself in all simplicity as a mirror of freedom and good life.

Let us follow Jesus on the roads of pagan territories, to encounter the very ones who represent oppression and death.

#### Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*God of Light,*

*pour on us Your Holy Spirit*

*so that by listening to the Scriptures we may receive Your Word,*

*so that by meditating, our knowledge of You may increase,*

*and so that by praying we may contemplate*

*the beloved face of Jesus Christ, Your Son,*

*who lives and reigns with You and with the Holy Spirit*

*now and forever. Amen.*

#### 1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

#### Matthew 8:28-34

*28 When He reached the territory of the Gadarenes on the other side, two demoniacs came towards Him out of the tombs – they were so dangerously violent that nobody could use that path. 29 Suddenly they shouted, 'What do You want with us, Son of God? Have You come here to torture us before the time?'*

*30 Now some distance away there was a large herd of pigs feeding, 31 and the devils pleaded with Jesus, 'If You drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.'*

*32 And He said to them, 'Go then,' and they came out and made for the pigs; and at that the whole herd charged down the cliff into the lake and perished in the water. 33 The herdsmen ran off and made for the city, where they told the whole story, including what had happened to the demoniacs.*

*34 Suddenly the whole city set out to meet Jesus; and as soon as they saw Him they implored Him to leave their neighbourhood.*

Let us approach the text.

Our text is in the second part of the Gospel of St Matthew, dealing with 'The Deeds of the Messiah' (4:17-16:20), in the first section which goes from 4:17 to 11:1.

Jesus' deeds are the main issue of St Matthew's text. Both those who were with Jesus at the time and the modern reader wonder whether they are to be recognized as the deeds of the Messiah. In 11.3 it will be St John the Baptist to send his disciples and ask Jesus whether He is the Messiah or whether they should wait for another one.

Our text deals with one of the ten miracles that, after the Sermon on the Mount, constitute "Christ's deeds" (11:2), typically Messianic deeds (cf Is 35:5) that later on Jesus Himself will mention and entrust as an answer to be brought to St John in prison (11:4).

The road is the place where this encounter takes place. It is in pagan land, after crossing the stormy sea with His disciples, and rebuking the wind and the sea to bring them back to calm, as if it were an exorcism.

Jesus has already met many people on the road, but this time He finds someone waiting for Him in pagan land, two demoniacs blocking the way. This miracle is reported also by the other synoptic gospels, but here St Matthew completely relativizes the role of the disciples while focussing on the character of Jesus instead. We can say then that he has a Christological perspective, and also that he broadens his horizon by arranging the characters in pairs (compared to St Mark's and St Luke's): two demoniacs, expressing the plurality of exorcisms we can find in the gospel tradition. But what does St Matthew want to communicate to his community by this miracle?

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 28-29            Encounter;
- 30-32            Liberation;
- 33-34            New Encounter.

### Encounter

*28 When He reached the territory of the Gadarenes on the other side, two demoniacs came towards Him out of the tombs – they were so dangerously violent that nobody could use that path. 29 Suddenly they shouted, 'What do You want with us, Son of God? Have You come here to torture us before the time?'*

Jesus crosses to the "other side", a very relevant term denoting the territory of the pagans. This is the first time that St Matthew shows Jesus crossing Israel's boundaries. He is alone, His disciples are not ready. He arrives, but there are no curious crowds eager to get to know Him, as in 14:35. Rather, two demoniacs.

Apparently, they are the only ones attracted by Him, in fact, pushed out of the tombs, driven out to meet Him, as if they had been waiting for Him.

They come out of the tombs: the verb used here denotes a past action that – however – is still in progress. Consequently, we could infer that they always wished to flee from that place, but that they couldn't, being pushed back into it as if they were prisoners. 'Demoniacs', as they come from a place of death, of being non-living, a situation they are unable to free themselves from. And as soon as they come out they are pushed back into 'death'. They are oppressed, in a rage, difficult to approach, and it is impossible to reduce their strength. Their strength, however, is not able to let them escape from their mortal oppression. On the contrary, that force draws them in as if into a suffocating lair, manifesting itself as an aggression to life, to what is approaching. That force, the force of death, frightens everyone. Therefore that road was barred to everyone: no one could pass or, rather, "had the strength to pass" through that road.

In St Matthew's Gospel, 'road' has nothing to do with the 'sequela' ('following Jesus') as elsewhere. Still, it is a significant place, alternative to the encounter with evil ("another road", 2:12), a place where the coming

Kingdom must be preached (10:7); and finally the place where the Word is rejected (13:4). Of course, as in the other Gospels, it is the place where Jesus' encounters occur.

The fact that the road is barred by the demoniacs' rage and strength tells us primarily that this time the road does not represent an alternative to the encounter with opposition.

If St Joseph was suggested a different road to come back from Egypt and do not go back to Herod with the Child, here the grown-up Jesus is challenged on the road by the opposing force of the demoniacs.

"Have You come here ... before the time?" Which time are the devils referring to? In Matthew 26:18, before Easter, Jesus says: "My time is near". Yes, landing on the other shore shows that the Kingdom is now present in the person of Jesus: "It is through the Spirit of God that I drive out devils, then be sure that the Kingdom of God has caught you unawares." (Mt 12:28)

The time which is near is Jesus' Passover, inaugurating the age when death will be defeated: the tomb will be open and empty, we will be freed from oppression.

Jesus, challenged, does not fret; nor, as in other exorcisms, does He rebuke the devils. It is the demoniacs who scream, who shout out loud. There is a great upheaval in them, when they are confronted with the evidence that Jesus is "the strongest" (cf Lk 11:22) and that He has the power to stay on that road, and enough strength to threaten the force perpetually pushing them back into the tomb, deforming their existences. In fact, Jesus possesses the power of love.

On the road, two opposing forces confront each other: the one barring the road, preventing people from progressing, pushing people into a ghetto, preventing them from living (a force coming out of the sepulchre, associated with uncleanness and death); and Jesus, working through the Spirit of God, a vital force ever creating and re-creating, the Life-giving Spirit, the Spirit of Communion, given as a gift to each and every creature from the Cross.

On that road Jesus must proclaim that the Kingdom is near, that the God of Life is advancing everywhere, that Life is now on that road where death once ruled. Yes, He is there before time, as an anticipation of the proclamation of the Kingdom to the pagans.

### Liberation

*30 Now some distance away there was a large herd of pigs feeding, 31 and the devils pleaded with Jesus, 'If You drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.'*

*32 And He said to them, 'Go then,' and they came out and made for the pigs; and at that the whole herd charged down the cliff into the lake and perished in the water.*

Two forces are confronting each other on the road, but that is no 'fight between good and evil' like in videogames, there is no battle, not even discussion. Jesus does not utter a single word for now... It is the demoniacs who are agitated, as the force of death oppressing them is about to be tamed, and the devils inside them seem to be willing to find a way out.

Nearby a herd of pigs is grazing. The pig is the unclean animal par-excellence (cf Lv 11:7). It grazes. The Greek verb denotes a continuous and passive action. Others gain from the persisting uncleanness.

St Matthew relates that the devils were pleading Jesus to send them into the herd of pigs, if driven out. The Greek verb 'to plead' denotes a past action lasting in time; and the verb 'to drive out' denotes also a continuous action. We can infer from that that they are aware that the encounter with Jesus is always a liberation for man, giving up the logic of death and encountering love. Man belongs to God and the Incarnate Son comes to claim him back and to reveal his kinship. But what happens to the deadly force?

St Matthew suggests that that force is inconsistent, it does not belong to man. By associating it with the pigs, with what for the Jews was unclean, with what was far from God, the text encloses it in itself, relegates it far from man as well as far from God. And this is how St Matthew relates its defeat.

In fact, here Jesus speaks. The one and only word that He says is not simply, “Go”, but in its broadest sense, “Go down”, “Retreat”. No other words, no articulated speeches are necessary, just a clear command to retreat in the only obligatory direction. And this happens on the road, before its time, ie before His Passover. Through this encounter St Matthew gives us an anticipation of the defeat of forces that oppose love and support death. The proclamation of the Kingdom “drawing near” gets a new meaning exactly from the expulsion of devils by the Spirit of God (12:28).

### New Encounter

*33 The herdsmen ran off and made for the city, where they told the whole story, including what had happened to the demoniacs.*

*34 Suddenly the whole city set out to meet Jesus; and as soon as they saw Him they implored Him to leave their neighbourhood.*

These last verses differ from the previous ones because they highlight specific, current actions, compared to the actions of the first verses, that are continuous or past ones lasting over time. Everything is more dynamic in this second encounter of Jesus: after evil has “come out” of men, and has entered the herd, and the herd has “charged down the cliff and into the lake”, the herdsmen run off and make for the city, where they tell the whole story. What prevails in them and in the townspeople?

The presence and closeness of Jesus has caused the defeat of oppression: by charging down the cliff and into the lake / sea, evil has drowned in what is a symbol of chaos and of evil itself; and its defeat is definitive. Focussing on the tomb in which the demoniacs were continually pushed back, and above all on Jesus’ victory over death, how does the town react? They come out of the town to meet Him, they reach Him. Are they going to thank Him for their two fellow citizens brought back to life?

No, they plead with Him (the same term used by the devils, according to St Matthew) to leave their neighbourhood. Their attitude is similar to the devils’: they use their strength to counteract the eruption of life, of the Kingdom of God nearby. They are not interested in the liberation, given that they ultimately “graze” on the logic of distance from God, a logic they stand for in their town. What is unclean (the herdsmen) is kept separate, but it is nourishing their wealth, their interests.

Once again the focus is on the distance from God, on uncleanness / idolatry. Once again Jesus does not respond, He keeps silent. Of course He does not impose His presence on them and does not boast of His action. Christ lets them drive Him away... The time for pagans to hear Jesus’ proclamation has not yet come...

St Matthew perhaps wants to make his post-Easter community reflect on what view of faith it has, with regards to the liberating power of the Lord’s Passover as opposed to the logic of death oppressing it. The Twelve will receive the ministry of driving out devils (10:8) and the Eleven the post-Easter mission (28:19), extended to all nations. However, in any case, one has to choose between God and Mammon (6:24), as in the Sermon on the Mount. One cannot serve both... if he doesn’t want to risk ending up being a prisoner of systems that distance us from love. When one worships other deities, he is a slave. And how will the community of the disciples be able to announce the God-with-us to the pagans until the end of the world? (28:20)

St Matthew suggests to his community that the Spirit of the Risen Christ, the Spirit of God, is always at work, and that His action goes on as the background of existence. Death has been definitely defeated in the deep waters: this has a universal value, it is valid for both pagans and believers, but the risk is that one cannot see the good, being stuck to other interests which he prefers to the presence of the Lord.

Indeed, we often pray to Him begging Him to stay in His Heaven and not interfere, by His logic of love and salvation, with human power and with each and every kind of idolatry.

By driving away the Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Son of God that even the devils recognize, the Easter Lord, in favour of other interests that imprison us, we let evil dynamics persist in us; and the proclamation of the Kingdom of God to the pagans is put at risk.

## **2. Meditatio**

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

Once again we meet a Jesus who utters not just a few words, but the ‘word’, the incisive one that ‘operates’. He does not bargain, He does not argue, He does not get agitated. He lets them drive Him away without boasting about the good He has performed, of taming evil. Is He weak, shy? No, not at all. He is firm. He is aware that He has to go, He has to free, but the response does not always come immediately. The disciples will evangelize later.

- Jesus does not boast of having saved us, He does not reproach us for being rejected. His life is always in us even though many interests foreign to life ‘put a cork’ on it, suffocate it in us. Do we show off our deeds? Do we expect immediate results from others? Do we respect their times? All the good that God does in us and through us does not belong to us, and we become thieves should we appropriate it as if it were ours.

- On the road we always meet someone or something that blocks our path, our progress as Sisters and children of God. How deep have we gone in unearthing the Lord in us? When compromises come our way, to what extent do we let His presence in us overcome our thoughts and mechanisms opposing the good life? Do we let Him drive them away?

- On the road the demoniacs were unconsciously attracted to Life, to Jesus. When someone meets us, does he say, “How pious she is” or “What a beautiful person she is”? Let’s think about it. How much does God’s beautiful life emerge in me? Do I say, instead, “I do my devotions but You, Lord, please stay where You are. Do not change me, please. I am fine like this.”

## **3. Oratio**

**(to pray the Word / to repeat it)**

Lord, You know everything, You see everything.  
Free us from the clutches of this world,  
from its deadly, materialistic, consumerist ideas  
that creeps into our hearts and also into our communities.  
Free me from my self,  
from my ideas, from my interior as well as exterior slaveries,  
from evil addictions,  
from the wounds that brazenly resurface,  
from the tyranny of my emotions and my sensitivity,  
from my sins,  
from the dictatorship of my desires and my excesses,  
from any idolatry and domination.  
I come to You, Jesus, the Free Man par-excellence,  
because You are the only genuine Path to my freedom!

## **4. Contemplatio**

**(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

Let us gaze at Jesus’ steadfastness and let His strength become our own strength, a liberating and humble strength: a blessing for others even though they reject it.

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

Let us share with the other Sisters what the Word has aroused in us.