

# BIBLICAL PAGES

by Sr Maria Chiara Ventriglia

## Jesus' places and relations

### Lectio n° 5 Spending the night on the mountain

We need fresh air, spaces of freedom where God can find a home, open doors: our desire for establishing a relationship with Him in all truth, being genuine and overcoming those 'superstructures' that restrain us, tying God instead of leaving Him room and initiative.

We need a path to tread, so as not to deviate to the right or to the left... And that safe path is Jesus. But we also need a mountain, the very place where – through our relationship with God – we can follow in the footsteps of His Son Jesus, thus learning to be free daughters and not slaves, trusting daughters instead of control-freaks, trying to keep everything under control, God included.

The only reins to hold, the Church Fathers say, are our selfish passions. And from the purified heart the "image of God" will emerge, and we will recover the discarded "likeness" too, that likeness to be pursued following Jesus our brother, who is the perfect Image of the Father.

The mountain, a space of freedom, will be the focus of the prayer that I propose to you after Jesus' exit into the night.

#### Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*Holy Spirit,  
soul of my soul,  
I can cry, 'Abba Father', only in You.  
It is through You, O Spirit of God,  
that I can ask,  
and You tell me what to ask.  
O Spirit of Love,  
awaken in me the desire  
to walk with God:  
only You can arouse it.  
O Spirit of Holiness,  
You search the depths of the soul  
in which You dwell,  
and You cannot tolerate in it  
even the slightest imperfections:  
burn them all in me  
by the fire of Your love.  
O sweet and gentle Spirit  
orient my will more and more towards Yours,  
so that I may know it clearly,  
love it ardently  
and do it effectively.  
Amen.  
(St Bernard of Clairvaux)*

# 1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

## Luke 21:37-38

37 *All day long He would be in the Temple teaching, but would spend the night in the open on the hill called the Mount of Olives.*

38 *And from early morning the people thronged to Him in the Temple to listen to Him.*

Let us approach the text.

These are the last verses of Chapter 21 of St Luke's Gospel, at the end of the eschatological discourse, which was started as Jesus' response to those who were speaking of the beauty and preciousness of the Temple. "All those things you are staring at now – the time will come when not a single stone will be left on another," Jesus said. "Everything will be destroyed" (Lk 21:6)

The Lucan text was probably written between 80 and 90 AD, therefore after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans (70 AD).

The passage we are dealing with is immediately preceded by Jesus' invitation to watch and pray at all times; and it is followed by the mention that the feast of the Passover was drawing near; and that Judas had agreed to hand Jesus over to the chief priests.

In fact, this passage closes the section devoted to the public ministry of Jesus, after which come His Passion, Death and Resurrection.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 37a All day long
- 37b The night and the mountain
- 38 From early morning...

### All day long

37 *All day long He would be in the Temple teaching,*

In 19:45-48, after His solemn entry into Jerusalem, Jesus starts going to the Temple.

From 21:37a the invitation to watch and pray at all times, (Lk 21:36) is being clarified for us. Not only we see the emergence of Jesus' daily life, but also His way of relating as a Man night and day, either in a public space (the Temple) or in a secluded place (the Mount of Olives), with the common denominator that each and every time is a time of grace, 'Kairos', a time He 'dwells' in, being the One sent to inaugurate "the year of grace from the Lord" (Lk 4:19).

But what are the implications of Jesus' teaching in the Temple during the day?

In some way, He immerses Himself in the historical dimension of Jerusalem, as far as its relationship with God is concerned. If in Lk 4 Jesus stands up to speak in the synagogue at Nazareth, now in the Temple He will teach everyday (19:47), but bringing His personal experience of God, of the Father.

In fact, from 19:47 onwards, His impact with the Temple is a Messianic sign: He enters it and drives out "those who were busy trading", (cf Zc 14:21) expelling them from the Temple they had turned into a "bandits' den" but which must be once again a "house of prayer".

Indeed, in St John's Gospel Jesus calls it, "My Father's House" (Jn 2:16)

Jesus' teaching in the place where God is present for the Israelites is focussed on a pair of words: the day and the temple. He is communicating through words and gestures, as we have just seen.

The verb 'teaching' is a present continuous form, denoting continuity. St Luke in 19:47 emphasizes that Jesus taught in the Temple every day. And then in 20:1, on one of the days during which He was teaching and evangelizing people in the Temple, the Scribes and elders questioned Him about His authority.

Every day, then, in the institutional religious place par excellence, Jesus is teaching, evangelizing, with an authority that annoys the institutional religious leaders. If in Lk 4:18-19 He had made a programmatic announcement (“He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives... to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”), now that the power of the Temple is approaching its end He fulfils the announcement by a good announcement, a joyful, liberating news, thus necessarily becoming an element of rupture with the ruling class.

### The night and the mountain

*...but would spend the night in the open on the hill called the Mount of Olives.*

The text says that Jesus went out at night. The verb in the original is a present participle, denoting once again a continuous action. Its meaning is ‘going out’, and the place Jesus is leaving is mentioned.

In Mt 21:17 this verb is used to say that He is leaving the city, a symbol of rejection and closure, to spend the night at Bethany

In our verse (37b), Jesus is leaving the Temple, another symbol of rejection and closure, in order to spend the night in the open on the Mount of Olives. In fact, Jesus is leaving two narrow spaces, and goes out into the night.

Let us stay on the Mount of Olives, at night. It is the place of a special encounter; it is the place we shall focus our attention on in our meditation. This mountain is located east of Jerusalem; the Garden of Gethsemane lies at its foot.

In Lk 22:39, Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives and once there He prays. The verse we are dealing with just states that He goes there at night, but in other passages St Luke shows that night and prayer are linked, as in 6:12, where he says that Jesus spent the night in prayer. The night is the time of vigil, of waiting, and of the possible encounter also for the servants of 12:38. Therefore, we can say that Jesus goes out of the Temple in order to keep watch and pray.

This is what He recommended to His followers in the verses preceding n° 37 and, given that this is the last word of His public ministry, it is a fundamental assignment.

Outdoors. Jesus addresses a God who is a Father of Freedom, of open spaces, of the pungent air of the night; and not of the suffocating air of the Temple, full of noises and odours, full of opposition and power. However, if we give a closer look, Jesus’ spending the night in the open is rendered with a verb whose meaning can broaden our gaze. In fact, we find it not only in Mt 21:17 that has been already quoted (regarding moving away from the city and spending the night in Bethany), but also in some books of the Old Testament such as Ruth and the Song of Songs. There it means to spend the night elsewhere, implying that one is not sleeping in his own bed.

For example, it is used in Boaz’s invitation to Ruth, who was crouching at his feet on the threshing floor (Ruth 3:13). And also when the Bridegroom spends the night between the breasts of his Beloved in the Song of Songs (Sg 1:13).

In conclusion, prayer and spousal references render this second part of verse 37 rather ‘dense’: it takes us out with Jesus from the institution of the Temple, from religion made power, from a God with whom we trade, to the open spaces of the mountain whose characteristics are very different: spousal. And we have to open ourselves up to those.

On the Mount of Olives Jesus’ encounter with the Father takes place in prayer and, taking as references the texts from Ruth and Song of Songs, we can say that Jesus’ prayer is His consecration as a Bridegroom, the Bridegroom of Mankind, that Bridegroom that St John the Baptist had announced in 3:16: “...Someone is coming, who is more powerful than me; and I am not fit to undo the strap of His sandals; He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire”.

Yes, that strap of the sandals which St John the Baptist is not fit to undo is the right of the bridegroom, belonging to the One who is to come. In fact, once again it is Ruth that clarifies that removing the sandals was a sign of the transfer of the right of levirate. The shoe was the symbol of the owner’s right: as Boaz was

Ruth's husband and therefore redeemer, so Jesus is Israel's husband as well as the husband of mankind, and His sandal cannot be taken away.

Jesus prays to His Father at night on the Mount of Olives, like the one who in Psalm 54:8 flees far away to spend the night in a solitary place; like the wise man who seeks wisdom and spends the night under her branches (Si 14:26). But the term 'to spend the night' occurs in some other places, helping us understand that Jesus' watching and praying during the night on the mountain is indeed the model for us of a wise man in whom prayer and wisdom do meet.

Then, in 22:39, Jesus' prayer on the mountain will become pressing, anguished and with sweat of blood. That will be His last prayer vigil and in it wisdom will show as abandonment and obedience to the will of the Father, in order to be the true Bridegroom, the Lover of Mankind up to the end, up to laying down His life so that each and every creature can be in communion with Him. That will happen when Jesus the Bridegroom will send the Holy Spirit, the Fire of Love, that fire announced by St John the Baptist in 3:16, that fire that Jesus has come to bring to the earth (cf Lk 12:49). Holy Spirit who makes the marriage come true.

### From early morning

*38 And from early morning the people thronged to Him in the Temple to listen to Him.*

"Early morning" occurs twice in St Luke: in 24:1, at the resurrection; and in our verse.

Here the people, "from early morning", have already gathered in the Temple to listen to Him. And Jesus, after the prayer to the Father, experienced in the freedom of the Mountain and in the silence of the night, is once again in the Temple. There is no question of going back. From the experience of the night comes the new, living word, capable of attracting and fascinating, which is one of Jesus' features. It is the beginning, early in the morning, of the time of grace, of a time of fulfilment of promises, but also the time of that good news incessantly repeated, of that good news which will be revealed in its full and definitive form "early in the morning": the resurrection, the relationship with a living God, with a God of the living, indissolubly united to mankind even in His glory.

From the Mountain, in the early morning, after His passion and death, the Bridegroom spending the night in the Father with all His humanity will be proclaimed to the women as "living": "He is not here, He is risen." He will also gather His own on the Mountain to be the Bridegroom who gives a definitive mission to them, ie to wait for the Holy Spirit, that "the Father has promised... the power from on high". Only with this expectation of freedom and life will the disciples go back to the Temple to give praise to God (24:53).

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

On the mountain Jesus meets the Father, bringing all mankind with Himself. But what does that encounter tell us?

- What does the recurring cycle of day and night bring to us? A routine or a kind of prayer that turns into attention to the Father and irradiation of His presence to others?

- Do we also know how to go out, and to find spaces where the freshness of our faith and hope can come to the fore, and we can become 'charity' ourselves?

- Where is our own ‘mountain of prayer’? Can it be identified not in a physical or geographical space but in an inner dimension, a cell in the heart where we can incessantly celebrate the praises of God as well as rediscover the dimension of profound communion?

- Where do we spend the night? During the night, prompting us to prune away all that is superfluous, do we know how to stay on the mountain, go out towards God, or do we prefer to remain in our safe depths?

- Are we women of the “good morning”, capable of receiving, listening, seeing the good news, the life of the Bridegroom at work in the world, through the Spirit, for a universal communion?

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

I’ve gone out, Lord.  
But I’ve carried with me all my heavy burdens.  
I’ve gone out in the night, Lord,  
in order to see nothing but Your light.  
I’ve gone out and onto the mountain, Lord,  
in order to find Your presence.  
By spending the night in silence,  
in the prayer that You make spring from my depths,  
little by little I could experience freedom,  
communion with You and with each and every creature,  
which finally frees me from my heavy burdens.  
And in the end, on the mountain, I’m finally alive.

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

May prayer make our hearts bigger. May liberty in the Lord change our outlook on life, on relationships, on history.

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

Let us share with the Sisters the experience that comes from reading the Word and praying on it, being enriched by the different resounding of it which reveal the face of God in each of us.