

# BIBLICAL PAGES

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## Jesus' places and relations

### Lectio n° 8 The desert and fruitfulness

We need community experience, relationships in which to surrender to mutual friendship: a balm for moments of trial, an opportunity for mutual growth. Jesus knows how to give us all that. His disciples are those called to “be” with Him, first and foremostly.

We can nourish each other through empathy, reconciled diversity, openness to the future, just when it seems that we are separated from others, that we are “withdrawing”, as the Gospel text I propose to you says. Let us then follow Jesus who withdraws with His people to a place “near the desert, to Ephraim”.

#### Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*Father,  
send the Holy Spirit in Your name.  
He will teach us everything,  
He will remind us of Jesus' word,  
which will stay with us for ever.  
The Spirit will console us,  
the Spirit will support us on the difficult paths of the world,  
the Spirit will guide us to the truth  
so that we may be genuine in love.  
The Spirit will open us up to future events,  
the Spirit will give us as a gift what is Yours.  
Father,  
may Your Spirit fill the life of each of us,  
may He fill our hearts,  
may our community overwhelm with love,  
may prophets be born in it, may our expectations grow.  
May mercy pour forth in a powerful way,  
may she spread around the world, may she blow where she pleases,  
especially where there is sorrow, solitude, hatred...  
May she renew the face of every man,  
may she renew the 'heart' of all peoples,  
may she change the earth.  
With faith united we stand, Father, and we invoke You.*

#### 1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

#### John 11:54-56

*54 So Jesus no longer went about openly among the Jews, but left the district for a town called Ephraim, in the country bordering on the desert, and stayed there with His disciples.*

*55 The Jewish Passover was drawing near, and many of the country people who had gone up to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves 56 were looking out for Jesus, saying to one another as they stood about in the Temple, 'What do you think? Will He come to the festival or not?'*

Let us approach the text.

Chapter 11 is the great chapter of the resurrection of Lazarus, the seventh of the 'signs' that St John relates in his 'Book of the Signs', ie, the Second Part of his Gospel.

The seventh sign is closely related to Jesus' resurrection, and is the final and definitive cause of the Sanhedrin's decision to kill Him.

The fear that the growth of the popularity of Jesus after Lazarus' resurrection in Bethany could ignite a violent repressive response from the Romans, with the undermining of the power of the Temple', makes the Priest Caiaphas say: "It is better that one man dies for the people and not that an entire nation be ruined". The verses that immediately precede the text of this Lectio are a commentary by the editor, a reflection that reads the event by expanding it.

Ultimately, Caiaphas is indeed a 'prophet' when he speaks of Jesus' death for the entire nation, but he does not realize that His death will be not only for the Jewish nation but to reunite the scattered children of God.

Our verses, dealing with Jesus' meeting with His disciples near the desert, should be read in light of that expansion of meaning.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 54 Withdrawing with the disciples
- 55 The Passover
- 56 A different festival

#### Withdrawing with the disciples

*54 So Jesus no longer went about openly among the Jews, but left the district for a town called Ephraim, in the country bordering on the desert, and stayed there with His disciples.*

Jesus needs a place far from the crowd of the Jews, from the loud noise of one thousand opinions about Him, from danger which by now is constant. The Greek text literally states that "He no longer walked openly", with parrhesia, among the Jews. Jesus cannot reveal Himself in all truth, therefore He withdraws from the public exposure by retreating with His disciples near the desert, to the town of Ephraim, given that it had been decided that He should be put to death (Jn 11:53). This is the final and definitive decision that is about to lead to His 'hour'.

Similarly, in Jn 7:1, the evangelist states that Jesus no longer wanted to travel around Judaea, because the Jews were seeking to kill Him. Why? Because "not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He spoke of God as His own Father and so made Himself God's equal" (Jn 5:18). The fact that they wanted to kill Him was common knowledge (cf Jn 7:25), but no one dared to lay his hands on Him because His hour had not yet come (Jn 7:30, 44).

Therefore Jesus no longer travelled with 'parrhesia'. In Johannine symbolism, involving geography too, Judaea referred to the space of guilty disbelief and rejection. Here then we find Jesus with His disciples. They are in a symbolic place that reminds us both of the dimension of the desert (and, consequently, of solitude and trial) and of Ephraim (a place dear to Scripture, referring us to fruitful growth, increase). Jesus' encounter with His disciples and His withdrawal are placed in between the dimensions of aridity (the desert) and of fruitfulness (Ephraim). Jesus does not withdraw on His own, He does not close Himself off from the relationship even when He has to face danger, and when His followers will probably be unable to fully understand Him.

And yet, by involving them, it is as if He entrusted Himself to friendship, in a way similar to His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, recounted by the Synoptics. Jesus never stops being a relationship Himself, He never stops surrendering Himself to friendship, to company, to the circle of friends. But His inner solitude never ceases to be fruitful, like the symbols we have quoted.

But where does the name Ephraim come from? In the Scriptures, Ephraim is Joseph's second son after Manasseh (Gn 41:51-52), a son whom Jacob blesses with the birthright before dying: "He laid his right hand on Ephraim and his left hand on Manasseh..." (Gn 48:14) "His younger brother will be greater than him and

his descendants will become a multitude of nations.” (Gn 48:19) He is the son preferred to the other, who will give rise to the kingdom of the north, to the tribe of Ephraim which, after Judah, is the most important in the history of Israel.

Jesus retreats with His disciples to the aridity and the desert, representing His concrete solitude, and to the nearby Ephraim, a harbinger of fertility, of descendants including a multitude of nations. This places Jesus’ encounter within a dimension of hope and prophecy with regards to the events of the following days: it means for Him passing from the debasement on the Cross to the fruitfulness of the Garden of the Resurrection, from being raised up on the Cross to the multitude of nations that He will gather to Himself (Jn 12:32), and He will gather not only the House of Israel but all the children of God who have been scattered around the world, as Caiaphas predicted.

Therefore, those disciples around Jesus are no longer mere representatives of the tribes of Israel, but the seed of the new People of God, originating from having been “with Jesus”, a People to whom Jesus entrusts Himself, even though He is aware that they are not capable of bearing everything, of understanding up to His end (Jn 16:12), a people who will be subjected to the test of faithfulness, but from whom the salvation achieved by the Risen One will spread to each and every creature.

The fruitfulness of Jesus’ life will come through the Spirit, who will convince this world “about sin, about justice and about judgement” (Jn 16:8).

### The Passover

*55 The Jewish Passover was drawing near, and many of the country people who had gone up to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves...*

Travelling with ‘parrhesia’ would have meant exposing Himself before the right time... And in St John’s Gospel every event happens at its appointed time, full of symbolism. Matter-of-factly, this short week full of symbols (similar to the ‘first week’ seen at the beginning of the Gospel) is related in details up to the sixth day. Then comes the seventh day. It begins in Bethany (12:1). The Passover was drawing near... Jesus’ last week related by St John in his Gospel climaxes in the seventh day, the Sabbath, which no longer coincides with the Passover of the Jews but with the Passover of the True Lamb, the Passover of Jesus on the Cross, the Lamb sacrificed on the sixth day, taken down from the Cross on Friday evening, while the lights of the Sabbath, the Seventh Day, were already visible (19:42).

All this to say that a new time is inaugurated by the Resurrection, the one that begins on the first day of the week (20:1), which is also the time of the first appearance of Jesus to His disciples (20:19), a time that culminates on the eighth day after the resurrection, the day of fullness, with the second appearance of the Risen Jesus to His disciples, with St Thomas present (20:26).

While Jesus is in a friendly relationship with His disciples, in between the desert and fruitfulness, the evangelist points out to us the contrast with the ascent of those going up to Jerusalem to purify themselves on the occasion of the Jewish Passover: a rite that is about to be transformed, a new time that is about to be inaugurated.

### A different festival

*56 were looking out for Jesus, saying to one another as they stood about in the Temple, ‘What do you think? Will He come to the festival or not?’*

Those who go up to Jerusalem seek Jesus; they seek Him while standing in the Temple. They seem to ‘bet’ among themselves whether Jesus will have the courage to show up at the festival.

While Jesus has withdrawn with His disciples, all the expectancy is concentrated in the Temple: they are waiting for Him there, in order to lay their hands on Him.

The evangelist St John emphasizes the Jewish festivals, probably with a precise intention. He wants to highlight the fact that, in front of the Temple with its festivals and the Sabbaths, stands Jesus who is the New

Temple (2:21), the definitive Passover (19:33, 36). He inaugurates the first and the eighth day, He is 'novelty' and the 'fullness of time'. All that came through Moses, the Law, now becomes grace and truth through Jesus Christ.

Jesus will of course go up to the festival, but acclaimed as king on a donkey's colt. This is another dimension, the dimension of glorification, of Jesus' 'hour' in which the grain of wheat, by dying, bears much fruit (12:24).

In our text we find both references to death (the desert) and to fruitfulness (the name Ephraim and its meaning). The dynamics of the friendly relationship, beginning near the desert of Ephraim, will culminate in Chapter 13, in the Supper, when in the hour of His trial Jesus will entrust Himself to His own. His washing of the feet is a purification different from that of the Jews going up to Jerusalem: the Word that has been delivered makes the disciples already clean (15:3).

Jesus dies like the true Lamb, slain, whose bones are not broken (19:36), purifying them through His piercing: "I will pour out a spirit of grace and consolation upon the House of David and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem: they will look to me, the One they have pierced" (Zc 12:10). "...In that day for the House of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem there will be a spring of water gushing forth to wash away sin and impurity" (Zc 13:1).

In the Temple of stones the Jews wonder whether Jesus will go to the festival: they do not know that they are preparing a new festival, a new temple, the body of Christ, a new time, that of the Spirit. There will be fruitfulness that springs from the desert, following the constant thread of the friendly relationship, in the relationship with those He has preserved and looked after (17:12), in the gift fulfilled by loving them to the end (13:1), because it is to them that He will speak with 'parrhesia' (16:25), 'making' them so that they may bear fruit (15:16), as friends, not servants (15:15).

The disciples who were with Him are those who, despite everything, are entrusted with the task of carrying forward the fruitfulness of the Master, that fruitfulness according to which "there is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13).

## **2. Meditatio**

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

Jesus knows how to preserve friendship, He knows how to cultivate relationships of closeness and trust, He grows as a man in the company of His own and makes them grow as His friends. Of course, sometimes He has to correct them, but He cannot stretch too much the limits of their understanding: He is aware that they are a bit naive.

- How do I cultivate friendship? Can I foresee a mutual growth?

- When do I find myself in between the desert and the path to fruitfulness, which is difficult to see? Do I consider the turning points in my life?

I am called to become aware of being one of Jesus' disciples, a woman who follows Him, a woman who dwells with Him in between the desert and Ephraim, in between trials and fruitfulness, with faithfulness.

## **3. Oratio**

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

**My friend**

*Jesus, a friend of men and a friend of mine,*

*here I am like Simon of Cyrene  
while I am carrying the cross of my brother.  
Jesus, a friend of men and a friend of mine,  
here I am like Veronica,  
while I am wiping dry the disfigured face of my sister.  
Jesus, a friend of men and a friend of mine,  
here I am like Martha and Mary  
while I am begging You on behalf of Lazarus, Your friend.  
Jesus, a friend of men and a friend of mine,  
make of me Your dwelling,  
fill me up with Your Holy Spirit,  
so that it is no longer I that live  
but You in me.  
In Your name I pray to the Father:  
do manifest the glory of Your Son,  
our Saviour and our God.  
(Clemens Romanus)*

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

Let us leave our hearts open, so that the Lord may transform the time of trial into a path of growth, so that it may become a place of meeting where we can stay with Him in order for us to get a true knowledge of Him as well as of ourselves.

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

Let us share with the Sisters our own experience of prayer on the Word, in order for us to grow in that friendship which is founded on Jesus Christ.