



Lectio Divina

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THE VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE AND BEAR A SON

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Sunday, January 1, 2023

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind that you read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, you helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to your voice in Creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the force of your resurrection and witness to others that you are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice and peace. We ask this of you, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us your Spirit. Amen.

Reading

A Key to the Reading:

The reason for Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem was the census imposed by Rome's emperor (Lk 2: 1-7). Periodically, the Roman authorities decreed these censuses in the various regions of their immense empire. It was a matter of registering people and knowing how many had to pay taxes. The rich paid taxes on land and goods. The poor paid for the number of children they had. Sometimes the tax was more than 50% of a person's income.

In Luke's Gospel we note a significant difference between the birth of Jesus and that of John the Baptist. John is born at home, in his land, in the midst of parents and neighbors and is welcomed by all (Lk 1: 57-58). Jesus is born unknown, away from his surroundings of family and neighbors and far from his land. "There was no room in the inn." He had to be left in a manger (Lk 2: 7).

Let us try to place and comment on our text (Lk 2: 16-21) in the wider context of the visit of the shepherds (Lk 2: 8-21). As we read, let us try to pay attention to the following: What surprises do we find and what contrasts appear in this text?

A Division of the Text to Help Us in Our Reading:

- Luke 2: 8-9: The shepherds in the field, the first persons invited
- Luke 2: 10-12: The first announcement of the Good News is made to the shepherds
- Luke 2: 13-14: The praise of the angels
- Luke 2: 15-18: The shepherds go to Bethlehem and tell of their vision of the angels
- Luke 2: 19-20: Mary's attitude and that of the shepherds concerning these events
- Luke 2: 21: The circumcision of the child Jesus

Gospel Text - Luke 2: 16-21

In the countryside close by there were shepherds out in the fields keeping guard over their sheep during the watches of the night. An angel of the Lord stood over them and the glory of the Lord shone round them.

They were terrified, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Look, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' And all at once with the angel there was a great throng of the hosts of heaven, praising God with the words: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace for those he favors. Now it happened that when the angels had gone from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this event which the Lord has made known to us.'

So they hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds said to them. As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as they had been told. When the eighth day came and the child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name Jesus, the name the angel had given him before his conception.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What did you like best in this text? Why?
- What surprises and contrasts do you find in this text?
- How does the text teach us that the little ones are great in heaven and the poorest on earth?
- What is Mary's attitude and that of the shepherds concerning the mystery of God just revealed to them?
- What is the message Luke wants to communicate to us through these details?

To Go Deeper Into the Theme

The Context of Then and of Today:

The text of the feast of the Mother of God (Lk 2: 16-21) is part of the broader description of the birth of Jesus (Lk 2: 1-7) and of the visit of the shepherds (Lk 2: 8-21). The angel had announced the birth of the Savior and gave a sign of recognition: "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger!" They were expecting the Savior of a whole people and they were to recognize him in a newborn child, poor, who lies close to two animals! What a great surprise!

God's plan is fulfilled in an unexpected way, full of surprise. This happens today too. A poor child is the Savior of the people! Can you believe this?

A Commentary on the Text:

- Luke 2: 8-9: The first invited persons
The shepherds were marginalized people, not greatly appreciated. They lived together with the animals, separate from the rest of humanity. Because of their constant contact with animals, they were considered impure. No one would have

ever invited them to visit a newly born baby. But it is precisely to these shepherds that the Angel of the Lord appears to pass on the great news of the birth of Jesus. Seeing the vision of the angels, they are full of fear.

- Luke 2: 10-12: The first announcement of the Good News
- Luke 2: 13-14: The praise of the angels: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace for those he favors

A multitude of angels appears descending from heaven. It is heaven that bends itself towards the earth. The parts of this verse summarize God's project, his plan. The first part tells us what happens in the world up there: Glory to God in the highest heaven. The second part tells us what will happen in the world here below: On earth peace for those he favors! If people could experience what it means to be favored by God, everything would be different, and peace would dwell on earth. And this would be to the greater glory of God who dwells in the highest!

- Luke 2: 15-18: The shepherds go to Bethlehem and tell of their vision of the angels
The Word of God is no longer a sound produced by the mouth. It is above all an event! The shepherds literally say: "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this event which the Lord has made known to us". In Hebrew, the expression *DABAR* may mean both word and thing (event), generated by the word. The word of God is a creative force. It fulfils what it says. At creation God said: "Let there be light, and there was light!" (Gen 1: 3). The word of the angel to the shepherds is the event of the birth of Jesus.
- Luke 2: 19-20: Mary's attitude and that of the shepherds concerning these events
Luke immediately adds that, "Mary treasured all these things (events) and pondered them in her heart." These are two ways of perceiving and welcoming the Word of God:
 - (i) The shepherds get up to see the events and verify the sign given by the angel, and then, they go back to their flocks glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard.
 - (ii) Mary, on the other hand, carefully keeps all these events in her mind and meditates on them in her heart. To meditate on things in one's heart means to ruminate them and throw light on them in the light of the Word of God so as to understand better their full significance for life.
- Luke 2: 21: The Circumcision and Name of Jesus
According to the norms of the law, the child Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day after his birth (cf. Gen 17: 12). Circumcision was a sign of belonging to the people. It gave the person an identity. On such an occasion each child received his name (cf. Lk 1: 59- 63). The child receives the name of Jesus that had been given him by the angel before his conception. The angel had said to Joseph that the name of the child had to be Jesus "he is the one who is to save his people from their sins" (Mt 1: 21). The name of Jesus is the same as Joshua and means God will save. Another name that will gradually be given to Jesus is Christ, which means Anointed or Messiah. Jesus is the awaited Messiah. A third name is that of Emmanuel, which means God with us (Mt 1: 23). The complete name is Jesus Christ Emmanuel!

Further Information:

The Role of the First Two Chapters of Luke's Gospel:

These are two rather well known but less deeply understood chapters. Luke writes them in imitation of the Old Testament. It is as though these two chapters were the last of the Old Testament so as to open the door for the coming of the New Testament. In these chapters, Luke creates an atmosphere of softness and praise. From beginning to end the

mercy of God is sung, God who finally comes to fulfil his promises. Luke shows us how Jesus fulfils the Old Testament and begins the New Testament. And he does so in favor of the poor, the *anawim*, those who knew how to wait for his coming: Elisabeth, Zachary, Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna and the shepherds. That is why the first two chapters are history but not in the sense that we today give to history. They were more like a mirror where those, for whom they were written, the Christians converted from paganism, could discover who Jesus was and how he had come to fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament, satisfying the deepest aspirations of the human heart. These chapters were also a mirror of the events that were taking place within the communities in Luke's time. The communities originating from paganism will be born of the communities of converted Jews. But these were different. The New did not correspond to what the Old Testament imagined and expected. It was "the sign of contradiction" (Lk 2: 34), and caused tensions and was the source of much suffering. In Mary's attitude, Luke presents a model of how the communities could react to and persevere in the New.

A Key to the Reading:

In these two chapters Luke presents Mary as model for the life of the community. The key is given to us in the episode where the woman in the crowd praises the mother of Jesus. Jesus modifies the praise and says: "More blessed still are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Lk 11: 27-28). Herein lies the greatness of Mary. It is in the world where Mary knows how to relate to the Word of God that the communities contemplate the more correct way of relating to the Word of God: welcoming it, incarnating it, living it, deepening it, reflecting on it, giving it birth and making it grow, allowing oneself to be overpowered by it even when one does not understand it or when one suffers because of it. This is the vision underlying the two texts of chapters 1 and 2 of Luke's Gospel, which speak of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

An Application of the Key to the Texts:

- Luke 1: 26-38: The Annunciation: "Let it happen to me as you have said!" Opening oneself so that the Word of God may be welcomed and incarnated.
- Luca 1: 39-45: The Visitation: "Blessed is she who believed!" Recognising the Word of God in the events of life.
- Luke 1: 46-56: The Magnificat: "The Almighty has done great things for me!" A subversive and resistance hymn of hope.
- Luke 2: 1-20: The Birth: "She treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart."
There was no room for them. The marginalised welcome the Word.
- Luke 2: 21-32: The Presentation: "My eyes have seen the salvation!" Years of life purify the eyes.
- Luke 2: 33-38: Simeon and Anna: "A sword will pierce your soul" Being a Christian means being a sign of contradiction.
- Luke 2: 39-52: At twelve years: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"
They did not understand the Word of God addressed to them!

The Contrasts that Stand Out in Our Text:

- In the darkness of the night a light shines (2: 8-9).
- The world up there, heaven, seems to embrace our world here below (2: 13).

- The greatness of God manifests itself in the weakness of a child (2: 7).
- The glory of God is made present in a manger, close to animals (2: 16).
- Fear is generated by the sudden apparition of an angel and is changed into joy (2: 9-10).
- Those completely marginalized are the first invited (2: 8).
- The shepherds recognize God present in a child (2: 20).

Praying with the Psalm 23 (22)

"Yahweh is My Shepherd!"

Yahweh is my shepherd,
I lack nothing.

In grassy meadows he lets me lie. By tranquil streams he leads me to restore my spirit.
He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name. Even were I to walk in a ravine
as dark as death

I should fear no danger, for you are at my side.

Your staff and your crook are there to soothe me.

You prepare a table for me under the eyes of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil;
my cup brims over.

Kindness and faithful love pursue me every day of my life.

I make my home in the house of Yahweh for all time to come.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice that which your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

The first thing the angel says is: Do not be afraid! The second is: Joy to be shared by the whole people! The third is: Today! Then the angel gives three names to indicate who Jesus is: Savior, Christ and Lord! Savior is the one who frees all people from all ties! The authorities in those days liked to use the title Savior. They attributed the title of Soter to themselves. Christ means anointed or messiah. In the Old Testament this was the title given to kings and prophets. It was also the title of the future Messiah who would fulfil the promises made by God to his people. This means that newly born child, who lies in a manger, has come to fulfil the hopes of the people. Lord was the name given to God himself! Here we have the three greatest titles imaginable. From this announcement of the birth of Jesus as Savior, Christ and Lord, can you imagine anyone with a higher standing? And angel says to you: "Be careful! I give you this sign of recognition: you will meet a child in a manger, in the midst of poor people!" Would you believe him? God's ways are not our ways!

Monday, January 2, 2023

Christmas Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful Father,

you sent your Son Jesus Christ to bring the new light of salvation to the world. May he enlighten us with his radiance, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 1: 19-28

This was the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'

He declared, he did not deny but declared, 'I am not the Christ.' So they asked, 'Then are you Elijah?' He replied, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' He answered, 'No.' So they said to him, 'Who are you? We must take back an answer to those who sent us. What have you to say about yourself?' So he said, 'I am, as Isaiah prophesied: A voice of one that cries in the desert: Prepare a way for the Lord. Make his paths straight!' Now those who had been sent were Pharisees, and they put this question to him, 'Why are you baptizing if you are not the Christ, and not Elijah, and not the Prophet?'

John answered them, 'I baptize with water; but standing among you - unknown to you - is the one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandal.' This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Reflection

Today's Gospel speaks about the witness of John the Baptist. The Jews sent "priests and Levites" to question him. In the same way, some years later, they sent persons to control the activity of Jesus (Mk 3: 22). There is a very great resemblance between the responses of the people regarding Jesus and the questions which the authority addresses to John. Jesus asks the Disciples: Whom do people say that I am?" They answered: "Elijah, John the Baptist, Jeremiah, one of the Prophets" (cf. Mk 8: 27-28). The authority addresses the same questions to Jesus: Are you the Messiah, or Elijah, the Prophet?" John responds by quoting the Prophet Isaiah: "I am a voice of one who cries in the desert: Prepare a way for the Lord". The other three Gospels contain the same affirmation concerning John: he is not the Messiah, but he has come to prepare the coming of the Messiah (cf. Mk 1: 3; Mt 3: 3; Lk 3: 4). The four Gospels give great attention to the activity and the witness of John the Baptist. Which is the reason that they insist so much in saying that John is not the Messiah?

- John the Baptist was put to death by Herod around the year 30. But up to the end of the first century, the time when the Fourth Gospel was written, John continued to be considered a leader among the Jews. And also after his death, the souvenir of John continued to have a strong influence in the living out of the faith of the people. He was considered a prophet (Mk 11: 32). He was the first great prophet who appeared after centuries of the absence of prophets. Many considered him as the Messiah. When in the year 50, Paul passed through Ephesus, in Asia Minor, he found a group of persons who had been baptized with the baptism of John (cf. Acts 19: 1-4). Because of this, it was important to spread the witness of John the Baptist himself saying that he was not the Messiah and instead to indicate Jesus as the Messiah. And thus, John himself contributed to radiate better the Good News of Jesus.
- "How is it that you baptize if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet? The response of John is another affirmation with which he indicates that Jesus is the Messiah: "I baptize with water, but standing among you, unknown to you, is one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandal." And a bit ahead (Jn 1: 33), John refers to the prophecies which announced the effusion of the Spirit in the Messianic times: "The one on whom you will see the Spirit descend and rest upon

him, is the one who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit" (cf. Is 11: 1-9; Ez 36: 25-27; Joel 3: 1-2).

Personal Questions

- In your life have you had a John Baptist who has prepared the way in you to receive Jesus?
- John was humble. He did not try to make himself greater than what he was. In reality: Have you been a Baptist for someone?

Concluding Prayer

The whole wide world
has seen the saving power of our God. Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth,
burst into shouts of joy! (Ps 98: 3-4)

Tuesday, January 3, 2023

Christmas Time

Opening Prayer

Father, you make known the salvation of mankind at the birth of your Son.

Make us strong in faith

and bring us to the glory you promise.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 1: 29-34

The next day, he saw Jesus coming towards him and said, 'Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. It was of him that I said, "Behind me comes one who has passed ahead of me because he existed before me." I did not know him myself, and yet my purpose in coming to baptize with water was so that he might be revealed to Israel.'

And John declared, 'I saw the Spirit come down on him like a dove from heaven and rest on him. I did not know him myself, but he who sent me to baptize with water had said to me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and rest is the one who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit." I have seen and I testify that he is the Chosen One of God.'

Reflection

In the Gospel of John, history and the symbol join together. In today's text, the symbolism consists above all in recalling texts of the Old Testament which we know and which reveal something concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. In these few verses (Jn 1: 29-34) we find the following expressions which contain a symbolical density or depth: 1) Lamb of God; 2) Who takes away the sins of the world; 3) He existed before me; 4) The descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove; 5) Son of God.

- **Lamb of God.** This title recalls, brings to mind, the Exodus. The night of the first Passover. The blood of the Paschal Lamb, with which the doors of the houses were

signed, was for the people a sign of liberation (Ex 12: 13-14). For the first Christians Jesus is the new Paschal Lamb who liberates his people (1 Co 5: 7; 1 P 1: 19; Rev 5: 6, 9).

- **Who takes away the sins of the World.** This recalls a very beautiful phrase of the prophecy of Jeremiah: “There will be no further need for everyone to teach neighbor or brother: “You will know the Lord, they will all know me, from the least to the greatest, says the Lord; since I shall forgive their guilt and never more call their sin to mind” (Jer 31: 34).
- **He existed before me.** This recalls several texts of the Books of Wisdom, in which it is spoken about God’s Wisdom which existed before all the other creatures and which was with God, like a master of the works in the creation of the Universe and that, at the end, fixed her dwelling among the people of God (Pro 8: 22-31; Eccl 24: 1-11).
- **The descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove.** It recalls the creative action where it is said that the “Spirit of God sweeping over the waters” (Gen 1: 2). The text of Genesis suggests the image of a bird which flies over its nest. An image of the new creation in movement thanks to the action of Jesus.
- **Son of God;** this is the title which summarizes all the others. The best comment of this title is the explanation of Jesus himself: “The Jews answered him: ‘We are stoning you not for doing a good work, but for blasphemy: though you are only a man, you claim to be God’. Jesus answered: “Is it not written in your Law: I said: you are gods? So it uses the word ‘gods’ of those people to whom the word of God was addressed (and Scripture cannot be set aside), Yet to someone whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world you say, ‘You are blaspheming’ because I said, ‘I am Son of God’? If I am not doing my Father’s work there is no need to believe me, but if I am doing it, then even if you refuse to believe in me, at least believe in the work I do; then you will know for certain that the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (Jn 10: 33-38).

Personal Questions

- Jesus offered himself, completely, for the whole of humanity, and I, what can I offer to help my neighbor?
- We have also received the Holy Spirit. How conscious or aware am I that I am his Temple?

Concluding Prayer

Sing a new song to Yahweh, for he has performed wonders, his saving power is in his right hand and his holy arm. (Ps 98: 1)

Wednesday, January 4, 2023

Opening Prayer

Dear Father, You who are the God Almighty and Merciful God, receive the prayer of your children, the Savior that you have sent a new light on the horizon of the world, rises again and shine on our entire lives. He is God ..

Gospel Reading - John 1: 35-42

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon. Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. He first found his own brother Simon and told him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated *Anointed*). Then he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Meditation

In the first chapter of his Gospel, John takes us through a sort time of travel, a week long, punctuated by the repetition, three times, the expression "the day after" (vv. 29, 35 and 43). Our track puts us in the second of these moments, the central one and then the most important one, characterized by physical and spiritual transition of the first disciples of John to Jesus' "day after" the meeting, the choice of the following.

Our scene is crossed and brought to life by a very intense exchange of looks: from John to Jesus (v. 35), from Jesus to the two disciples (v. 38) by the disciples of Jesus (vv. 38- 39); and finally again Jesus speaks to us in his gazing, in the person of Peter (v. 42).

The evangelist uses verbs different, but all full of nuances, it does not deal with superficial looks, distracted, transient but rather of deep contacts, intense, that depart from the heart from the soul. Jesus, the Lord looks at his disciples and us, so that, in our turn, we should learn to look at him. The verb that closes the passage is beautiful; "to look" that means literally "to look inside".

Jesus is walking along the sea, along the shores of our lives and John, acts as a photographer, records it. He uses the verbs in the participle to tell us that today, Jesus still is passing by us, and our lives can be visited and crossed by him and our world can welcome the imprints of his footsteps.

The center of the passage is perhaps precisely in the movement of Jesus, He walks first, then turns and stops, his eyes, his heart, about the life of the two disciples. Jesus "turns", that changes, adapts, leaves his position before and assumes another. Here Jesus is revealed as God incarnate, God came among us, man. He turned from the bosom of the Father and turned toward us.

It is beautiful to see how the Lord draws us in his movements, in his own life; In fact, he invites the two disciples to "come and see." You can not sit still, when he met the Lord, and his presence puts us in motion, makes us get up from our old positions and makes us run. We try to collect all the verbs referring to the disciples in this passage: "followed him" (v. 37); "followed him" (v. 38); "they went ... they saw ... they stayed with him" (v. 39).

The first part of the passage closes with the beautiful experience of the first two disciples who remain with Jesus, they later came into his house and they stayed with Him 'the path of salvation, of true happiness, which is offered to us. only when we accept to remain, to stand still, firm, determined, in love, without turning to and fro, toward one or the other master of the moment, one or the other new love of life. Because when there is Jesus, the Lord, when you were invited by him, nothing is missing.

Questions

- The scan time of this part of the Gospel, with its "day after" shows us that the Lord is not an abstract reality and distant, but he enters our days, our years, in our concrete existence. I'm willing to open to Him my time, to share with him my life? I am ready to deliver into his hands my present, my future, so that He can drive any of my "day after"?
- The disciples make a wonderful spiritual journey, highlighted by the verbs "heard, followed, went, saw, and stayed." Do I want, too, starting this beautiful adventure with Jesus? Do I open my ears to hear, to listen deeply and so I can give my positive response to the love of the Father who wants to join me? Do I feel to be born in me the joy of starting a new journey, walking behind Jesus? And then, do I want my heart and eyes are wide open to begin to see what really happens in and around me and to recognize in any event the presence of the Lord?
- Peter receives a new name from Jesus and his life is completely transformed. Do I feel like today to give to the Father my name, my life and my whole person, so that He may again give me a new birth as his son and daughter, calling me by a name that God in His infinite love he thought for us?

Final Prayer

The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack.

In green pastures you let me graze; to safe waters you lead me;

You restore my strength.

You guide me along the right path for the sake of your name. Even when I walk through a dark valley,

I fear no harm for you are at my side. (Psalm 23)

Thursday, January 5, 2023

Christmas Time

Opening Prayer

All-power and ever-living God,

you give us a new vision of your glory in the coming of Christ your Son.

He was born of the Virgin Mary and came to share our life.

May we come to share his eternal life in the glory of your kingdom,

where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 1: 43-51

The next day, after Jesus had decided to leave for Galilee, he met Philip and said, 'Follow me.' Philip came from the same town, Bethsaida, as Andrew and Peter.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'From Nazareth? Can anything good come from that place?' Philip replied, 'Come and see.'

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming he said of him, 'There, truly, is an Israelite in whom there is no deception.' Nathanael asked, 'How do you know me?' Jesus replied, 'Before Philip came to call you, I saw you under the fig tree.' Nathanael answered, 'Rabbi, you are

the Son of God, you are the king of Israel.' Jesus replied, 'You believe that just because I said: I saw you under the fig tree. You are going to see greater things than that.' And then he added, 'In all truth I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending over the Son of man.'

Reflection

- Jesus returned to Galilee. He met Philip and called him telling him: "Follow me!" The purpose of the call is always the same: "to follow Jesus". The first Christians sought to preserve the names of the first disciples, and of some they even kept their family names and the name of their place of origin. Philip, Andrew and Peter were from Bethsaida (Jn 1: 44). Nathanael was from Cana. Today many forget the names of the persons who were at the origin of their communities. To remember the names is a way of preserving the identity.
- Philip meets Nathanael and speaks to him about Jesus: "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth." Jesus is the one to whom all the history of the Old Testament refers.
- Nathanael asks: "From Nazareth? Can anything good come from that place?" Probably, even in his question there was some of the rivalry which existed among the small villages of the same region: Cana and Nazareth. Besides, according to the official teaching of the Scribes, the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, in Judah. He could not come from Nazareth in Galilee (Jn 7, 41-42). Andrew gives the same answer which Jesus had given to the other two disciples: "Come and see for yourself!" It is not by imposing, but rather by seeing that persons are convinced. Once again, the same way: to meet, to experience, to share, to witness, to lead toward Jesus!
- Jesus sees Nathanael and says: "Truly, he is an Israelite in whom there is no deception". And affirms that he already knew him when he was under the fig tree. How could Nathanael be an "authentic or true Israelite" if he did not accept Jesus as the Messiah? Nathanael "was under the fig tree". The fig tree was the symbol of Israel (cf. Mi 4: 4; Zc 3: 10; 1 Kg 5: 5). An authentic Israelite is the one who knows how to detach himself from his own ideas when he perceives that they are not in agreement with God's project. The Israelite who is not ready to bring about this conversion is neither authentic nor honest. Nathanael is authentic. He was waiting for the Messiah according to the official teaching of the time (Jn 7: 41-42, 52). This is why at the beginning; he did not accept a Messiah coming from Nazareth. But the encounter with Jesus helped him to understand that God's project is not always as people imagine or desire that it be. He recognizes, acknowledges his deception or mistake, he changes his idea, accepts God as Messiah and confesses: "Rabi, you are the Son of God: you are the King of Israel!" The confession of Nathanael is only at the beginning: The one who will be faithful will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending over the Son of man. He will experience that Jesus is the new bond of union between God and us, human beings. It is the dream of Jacob which has become a reality (Gen 28: 10-22).

Personal Questions

- Which is the title of Jesus that pleases you the most? Why?
- Have you had an intermediary between you and Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

For Yahweh is good,
his faithful love is everlasting,
his constancy from age to age. (Ps 100: 5)

Friday, January 6, 2023

Christmas Time

Opening Prayer

Holy Spirit, You who breathed on the waters of creation and guided the steps of Moses in the desert, come today upon us and immerse us in You, so that our every step and thought may be directed towards Christ as we listen to His Word.

Dwell within us, Spirit of the Father, and guide us to the truth of ourselves and to the knowledge of the Son of God who redeems us and makes us one with Him, so that the Father may be well pleased with us too. Amen.

A Key to the Reading:

It is possible that Christ, in His human journey, grew in the knowledge of His identity and the task in human history entrusted to Him by the Father.

The baptism in the Jordan marks this growing in awareness and launches Jesus beyond the borders of His land, Galilee, into a universal mission and into a dimension where He shares the human condition. It is God himself who "descends" to be by the side of human beings, even though aware of their weaknesses, to allow them to "climb" to the Father and give them access to communion with Him. The "pleasure" of the Father that Jesus hears in the Spirit will go with Him always on His earthly journey, making Him constantly aware of the joyful love of Him who sent Him into the world.

The Gospel Text - Mark 1: 7-11)

This is what John the Baptist proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

A Time of Silence

interior, as well as exterior, to open our hearts and allow space for the Word of God to enter into us.

The Word Given to Us:

- *The baptism:*

Purification rites by means of bathing or ablutions were quite common as a daily practice among the Jews at the time of Jesus (cf Mk 7:1-4), as well as among the Essenes of Qumran.

The word *baptism* indicates a bath, a complete immersion in water, and comes from the verb *baptizo*, rarely used in the Greek Old Testament: *to immerse or submerge, producing a permanent change*. We find this in 2 Kings 5: 14: the healing of Naaman, which comes about by means of a series of baths in the Jordan at the command of Elisha. It is from this event that the positive use of the word comes in later times.

- *The baptism of John:*

Is characteristic of this practice (so much so that it becomes known by his name) (cf Mk 1: 4). John works in an unnamed place along the Jordan and baptizes in the flowing water of the river, not in specified places and in waters prepared for the rite. The conversion and penance demanded by him (Mk 1: 4) are more on the moral than on the ritual level (cf Lk 3: 8) and the rite, which signified such an existential change (bath and confession of sins), took place only once in a lifetime. Moreover, John clearly says that his baptism is only the preparation for a more radical purifying event, directly connected with the final judgment of God: "baptism in the spirit" and "in fire" (cf Mk 1: 7-8, Mt 3: 11-12).

The people of Judea and Jerusalem greatly welcomed John's preaching, so much so that large crowds went to him to be baptized (Mk 1: 5) as Joseph Flavius also narrates.

- *Jesus and John at the Jordan:*

John knows quite well that he is not the Messiah and is inferior to him, yet he is called to prepare for His now imminent coming (Mk 1: 7-8). All the Gospels speak of this awareness, emphasized by the use of the verb in the past for his baptism and in the future for the baptism of the Messiah. This reflects the care that the first Christian communities took to show that Christian baptism was superior to John's baptism, as also Jesus, the Christ, was superior to John the Baptist (cf Mk 3: 14; Jn 1: 26-34).

- *Baptism in the Spirit:*

It is the eschatological baptism promised by the prophets (cf Joel 3: 1-5), connected with the fire of the judgment or under the form of sprinkling (cf Ez 36: 25). Jesus receives this baptism soon after and His baptism will be the source and model of the baptism of the Christians. Thus the Christian community is founded on the gift of the Holy Spirit.

- *Jesus came from Nazareth:*

Jesus stands out among the great crowd of Jewish penitents (cf Mk 1: 5) because He comes from an area where only echoes of the penitential preaching of the Baptist had reached in Galilee (Mk 1: 9). For Mark this is an important place: Jesus begins His activities there and is well received. After Easter, it is there that the disciples meet Him (16: 7) and understand Him fully and it is from there that they will leave for their mission (16: 20). In the light of what Mark says immediately after the voice from heaven, Jesus is not only "stronger" than John, but has a nature far superior to that of John. And yet He went down among those who admitted being sinners, without being afraid of suffering any diminution of His dignity (cf Phil 2: 6-7). He is "the light that shines in the darkness" (cf Jn 1: 9).

The second Gospel does not report the reasons for which Jesus goes to receive the baptism of penance, even though the event is one of the most historically reliable among those narrated in the Gospels. What primarily interests the Evangelist is the divine revelation that comes after the baptism of Jesus.

- *He saw the heavens torn apart:*

This is not a kind of special revelation for Jesus alone. The heavens, literally, "rip themselves open," in answer to Isaiah's invocation: "If you would tear the heavens open and come down" (Is 63: 19b). Thus, after a time of separation, a completely new phase begins in the communication between God and humankind. This new

relationship is confirmed and becomes definitive with the redemptive death of Jesus, when the veil of the Temple was "torn" (cf Mk 15: 38) as though a hand from heaven had struck it. The Easter of the death and resurrection is the "baptism wished for" by Jesus (cf Lk 12: 50).

- *The Spirit descending on Him:*

Jesus "ascends" from the water of the river and immediately after, the heavens open and the Spirit "descends" and rests on Him. From now on the period of waiting for the Spirit is over and the direct way that unites God with humankind is opened. Mark shows that Jesus is the only possessor of the Spirit who consecrates Him Messiah, makes Him fully aware of being God-Son, and dwells in Him and sustains Him in the mission willed by the Father.

According to Mark, the Spirit comes to Jesus like a dove. We meet the dove in the story of Noah and the dove is also connected to the waters and the work of God in the world (cf Gen 8: 8-12). Elsewhere, the dove is used as a reminder of fidelity and permanence, and for its faithfulness in returning to the place from which it departed (cf Ct 2: 14; Jn 1: 33-34). The Spirit rests permanently on Jesus and takes possession of Him. In this passage we could also see a reference to the "breathing of the spirit of God over the waters" of creation (Gen 1: 2). With Jesus, a "new creation" really begins (cf Mt 19: 38; 2 Cor 5: 17; Gal 6: 15).

- *A voice came from heaven:*

With the coming of Jesus, communication between God and humankind is restored. It is not a matter of what the rabbis called "the daughter of the voice", an incomplete substitution of the prophetic word, but a matter of direct communication between Father and Son.

- *Came ... saw descending ... was heard:*

We must admire the condescension of the Trinity that "stoops down" towards humankind, *descends* to the Jordan in Jesus to be baptized like so many sinners, *descends* upon Jesus in the Spirit for the sake of His self-awareness and His mission and *descends* in the voice of the Father to confirm His son-ship.

- *You are My Son, My Beloved; My favor rests on You.*

Mark may have deliberately wanted to recall several passages of the Old Testament in order to emphasize, at least by allusion, the importance of the many nuances of these divine words.

First of all, we recall Isaiah 42: 1 " Here is My servant whom I uphold, My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have endowed Him with My spirit that He may bring true justice to the nations." It is JHWH whom introduces His faithful servant. Here, however, the title of "servant" is not used but that of "son", weaving the prophetic text with a psalm of royal and messianic investiture: "He has told Me, 'You are My son, today I have become your father'" (Ps 2: 7). The Evangelist (as the other synoptic) allows the nature of the human-divine identity of Jesus to appear.

- *You are My Son, My Beloved.*

In the light of the Paschal faith, Mark could not have meant this revelation to be that God was adopting the man Jesus. The voice from heaven is a confirmation of a special relationship already in existence between Jesus and the Father. The title Son of God is attributed to Jesus in the very first verse of Mark and again at the end of the passion when the centurion says, "In truth this man was a son of God" (Mk 1: 1; 15: 39). However, this title recurs in various forms and frequently (cf 3: 11; 5: 7; 9: 7; 14: 61). For Mark, the title "Son of God" is especially relevant for an understanding of the person of Jesus and for a full profession of faith. It is so important that eventually it was the proper name given to Jesus by Christians by which they meant to proclaim the

essential elements of their own faith in Him (cf Rom 1: 4): the Messiah king, the eschatological savior, the man who had a special relationship with the divine, the one risen from the dead, the second person of the Trinity.

The fact that the voice from heaven calls Him "chosen" and "beloved" (as will be repeated at the Transfiguration in 5: 7 and 12: 6) emphasizes the completely unique relationship of the Father with Jesus, so special that it overshadows the other relationships between human beings and God. Jacob, like Jesus, is the "only and chosen" son (cf Gen 22: 2) and he is not spared the agony of a violent death (cf Heb 5: 7).

- *My favor rests on You.*

These words emphasize once more the messianic election of Jesus, fruit of the Father's benevolence, that thus shows His absolute preference for the Son in whom He finds joy and satisfaction (cf Is 42: 1). While Jesus, obedient to the Father, begins His mission of bringing humanity back to the Father (cf Mk 1: 38).

5. A few questions

to give our reflection and actions direction:

a) Like us, Jesus lives on a stage in life. He goes from the "hidden life" to His "public life". We are passing from the Christmas season to "ordinary" time. These are the times for us to realize our mission which consists in our daily commitment (often hard and usually dry) to express in our life an awareness that *God the Son is with us as our brother and savior*, by using the gifts received in baptism.

Am I aware of the mission entrusted to me by the Father?

Am I able to express this mission in my everyday life or do I limit myself to special occasions?

b) Our baptism made us "children of God in the Son". God is also well pleased with us and we too are His "chosen" (cf 1Jn 2, 7, 3, 2:21, etc.).

Am I aware of the love with which the Father looks at me and relates to me?

Am I able to respond to this love with the simplicity and docility of Jesus?

c) Our passage contains a manifestation of the Trinity in action. The Spirit descends upon Jesus, the Father speaks to His Son and thus opens a new way of communicating with us human beings.

How is my prayer?

To whom do I usually pray?

6. Psalm 20

Let us pray this Psalm, aware of being chosen by the Father and that the Father is by our side always with great tenderness of heart.

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!
 The name of the God of Jacob protect you!
 May He send you help from the sanctuary,
 and give you support from Zion!
 May He remember all your offerings,
 and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices!
 May He grant you your heart's desire,
 and fulfill all your plans!
 May we shout for joy over your victory,
 and in the name of our God set up our banners!
 May the Lord fulfill all your petitions!
 Now I know that the Lord will help His anointed;
 he will answer him from His holy heaven
 with mighty victories by His right hand.
 Some boast of chariots, and some of horses;
 but we boast of the name of the Lord our God.
 They will collapse and fall;
 but we shall rise and stand upright.
 Give victory to the king, O Lord;
 answer us when we call.

7. Closing prayer

The liturgical context is excellent for an understanding and for praying this Gospel. We, therefore, take up the preface to convey our prayer to God: *Father, in Christ's baptism in the Jordan, You worked signs and wonders to manifest the mystery of the new washing (our baptism). Your voice was heard from heaven to awaken faith in the presence among us of the Word made man. Your Spirit was seen as a dove resting upon Him and consecrated Your Servant with priestly, prophetic and royal anointing, so that all would recognize Him as the Messiah, sent to bring to the poor the good news of salvation. Grant that we may thank and glorify You for this priceless gift, for having sent to us Your Son, our brother and teacher. Let Your kind gaze rest upon us and grant that we may bring You joy in all our actions, Forever and ever.*

Saturday, January 7, 2023

Christmas Time

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send Your Spirit to help us to read the scriptures with the same mind that You read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the bible, You helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of Your sentence and death. Thus, the cross, that seemed to be the end of all hope, became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create silence in us so that we may listen to Your voice in creation and in the scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May Your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, may experience the force of Your resurrection and witness to others that You are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice, and peace. We ask this of You, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed the Father to us and sent us Your Spirit. Amen.

Reading

A Key to the Reading:

The Gospel of this second Sunday of Ordinary Time places us before the celebration of the Wedding at Cana, in Galilee. At that time, just as now, everybody liked feasts: the feast for a marriage or for a Baptism, the birthday party, the feast of the patron or patroness of the Church, the feast at the end of the year, feasts, and more feasts... There are some feasts which remain engraved in our memory and which, over time, acquire a more profound significance. Other feasts, we forget. We no longer remember them because they have lost their significance. The feast of the wedding at Cana, as it has been described in the Gospel of John (Jn 2: 1-11), has remained alive in the memory of the Christian people, and for some it has taken on a more profound meaning. To understand this progressive discovery of the significance of the wedding at Cana we must remember that the Gospel of John is different from the other Gospels. John describes the facts of the life of Jesus in such a way that the readers discover in them a more profound dimension, which only faith can perceive. John, at the same time, presents a photograph or an x-ray. This is why, during the reading, it is good to be very attentive to the details of the text, especially to the two following things: (i) to the attitudes and behavior of the people and (ii) to what is lacking and to the abundance which appear in the wedding at Cana.

A Division of the Text to Help in the Reading:

- John 2: 1-2: Feast of the wedding. Mary is present. Jesus is the one who has been invited.
- John 2: 3-5: Jesus and His mother faced with the lack of wine.
- John 2: 6: The jars for the ablutions are empty.
- John 2: 7-8: The initiative of Jesus and of the servants.
- John 2: 9-10: The discovery of the sign by the chief wine steward
- John 2: 11: The Evangelist's brief commentary

Gospel Text – John 2: 1-11:

There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding. When the wine ran short, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servers, "Do whatever he tells you."

Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washings, each holding twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus told them, "Fill the jars with water." So they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it.

And when the headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing where it came from — although the servers who had drawn the water knew — the headwaiter called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves good wine first, and then when people have drunk freely, an inferior one; but you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs at Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- Which point in this text did you like best? Which one impressed you the most? Why?
- What struck you in the attitude and behavior of the people? Why?
- What kind of lack and what kind of abundance was there in the feast? What is the significance of this detail?
- What did Jesus do and how did He do it to offer wine in abundance?
- Jesus begins the announcement of the Kingdom at a wedding feast. What does He want to teach us with this gesture?
- What is the message of this text for us today?

To Go Deeper into the Theme

The Context in Order to Understand the Photograph and the X-ray:

When we say "photograph", we indicate the facts in themselves, just as they appear before our eyes. When we say "x-ray", we are speaking of a deeper dimension, invisible to our eyes, which is enclosed in the facts that only faith reveals to us.

It is in the way in which John describes the facts that he takes an x-ray of the words and the gestures of Jesus. Through these small details and references, he uncovers the symbolic dimension and, in doing this, he helps us to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of the person and the message of Jesus. In the wedding at Cana, in Galilee, there is the change of the water of the ablutions of the Jews into the wine for the wedding feast. Let us look closely at the details with which John describes the feast, in a way that we can understand the deeper significance of this beautiful and well-known episode.

Comment on the Text:

- John 2: 1-2: *Wedding feast. Jesus has been invited.*
In the Old Testament, the wedding feast was a symbol of God's love for His people. That was what everyone expected in the future (Hos 2: 21-22; Isa 62: 4-5). It is precisely in a wedding feast, around a family and a community, that Jesus performs His first sign (Jn 2: 11). The mother of Jesus was also at the feast. Jesus and His disciples had

been invited. The mother of Jesus takes part in the celebration. This symbolizes the Old Testament. Together with His disciples Jesus is the New Testament which is arriving. The mother of Jesus will help to pass from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

- John 2: 3-5 - *Jesus and His mother faced with the lack of wine.*

Right in the middle of the celebration, the wine is depleted. The mother of Jesus recognizes the limitations of the Old Testament and takes the initiative, in order that the New Testament may be manifested. She approaches Jesus and says, "They have no wine!" Here we have the photograph and the x-ray. The photo represents the mother of Jesus as someone who is attentive to the problems of others and is aware that the lack of wine would ruin the feast. She is not only aware of the problem, but also takes the initiative to solve it. The x-ray reveals the deepest dimension of the relationship between the Old Testament (the mother of Jesus) and the New Testament (Jesus). The statement, "They have no wine!" comes from the Old Testament and awakens in Jesus the action which will bring the New Testament to light. Jesus says, "Woman, what do you want from Me?" That is, what is the link between the Old and the New Testament? "My hour has not yet come!" Mary did not understand this response as negative, as a no, because she tells the servants, "Do whatever He tells you." It is in doing what Jesus teaches that one goes from the Old to the New Testament! Jesus' hour, in which the passage from the Old to the New Testament will take place, is His Passion, Death and Resurrection. The changing of the water into wine is the anticipation of what is new, which will come from the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

At the end of the first century, the first Christians debated the validity of the Old Testament. Some no longer wanted to know anything about the Old Testament. In the meeting of the apostles in Jerusalem, James defended the continuity of the use of the Old Testament (Acts 15: 13-21). In fact, at the beginning of the second century, Marcion rejected the Old Testament and remained only with the books of the New Testament. Some even affirmed that after the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus of Nazareth should no longer be remembered, but that we should speak only of the Risen Christ. In the name of the Holy Spirit, they said: "Anathema Jesus!" (1 Cor 12: 3).

- John 2: 6 - *The jars for the ablutions are empty.*

It is a small point, but with significant detail. The jars were usually full, especially during a feast. Here they are empty! Why? The observance of the law of purification, symbolized by the six jars, has exhausted all their possibilities. The ancient law has already succeeded to prepare the people to be able to have the union of grace and justification before God. The jars, the old Covenant, are empty! They are no longer capable of generating new life.

- John 2: 7-8 - *Jesus and the servants.*

The recommendation of the mother of Jesus to the servants is the last order of the Old Testament: "Do whatever He tells you!" The Old Testament looks toward Jesus. From now on, the words and gestures and actions of Jesus will be the ones to direct our life. Jesus calls the servants and orders them to fill the six empty jars. In all, over six hundred liters! He immediately orders them to draw from the jars and to take them to the chief steward. Jesus' initiative takes place without the intervention of the chief steward. Neither Jesus, nor His mother, nor the servants, were obviously the bosses. None of them went to ask permission from the steward or the bridegroom. Renewal passes to the people who do not belong to the center of power.

- John 2: 9-10 - *Discovery of the sign by the president of the feast.*

The chief steward tasted the water transformed into wine and said to the bridegroom, "Everyone serves good wine first. But you have kept the best wine until now!" The chief steward, the Old Testament, recognizes publicly that the New is better! Where before there was water for the rite of ablutions of the Jews, now there is abundant wine for the feast. There was a lot of wine: over six hundred liters, and the feast was almost over! What is the meaning of this abundance? What was done with the wine which was left over? We are drinking it even now!

- John 2: 11 - *Comment of the Evangelist.*

This is the first sign. In the fourth Gospel, the first sign takes place to help in the building up of the family, of the community, in order to mend the relationships among people. Six other signs will follow. John does not use the word *miracle*, but *sign*. The word sign indicates that the actions of Jesus on behalf of the people have a more profound value, that can only be discovered with the x-ray of faith. The small community which had formed around Jesus that week, seeing the sign, was ready to accept the deeper significance and "believe in Him."

Extending the Information:

- A much-expected wedding

In the Gospel of John, the beginning of Jesus' public life takes place at a wedding feast, a moment of great joy and of great hope. For this same reason, the wedding at Cana has intense symbolic significance. In the Bible, matrimony is the image used to signify the realization of the perfect union between God and His people. This marriage between God and His people was expected for a long time, for over eight hundred years!

- It was prophet Hosea (around the year 750 BC) who, for the first time, represented the hope of this marriage when he narrates the parable of the infidelity of the people before the proposal of Yahweh. The monarchy in Israel had abandoned Yahweh and His mercy, leading the people toward false gods. But the prophet, sure of God's love, says that the people will be led once again to the desert to listen to the following promise from God: "I shall betroth you to Myself forever. I shall betroth you in uprightness and justice, and faithful love and tenderness. Yes, I shall betroth you to Myself in loyalty and in the knowledge of Yahweh!" (Hos 2: 21-22). This marriage between God and the people indicates that the ideal of the exodus will be attained (Hos 2: 4-25). About a hundred and fifty years later, the prophet Jeremiah takes the words of Hosea to denounce the monarchy of Judah. And he says that Judah will have the same destiny as Israel because of its infidelity (Jer 2: 2-5; 3: 11-13). But Jeremiah also looks towards the hope of a perfect marriage with the following novelty: it will be the woman who will seduce the husband (Jer 31: 22). And in spite of the crisis created by the Babylonian exile, the people do not lose hope that one day this marriage will take place. Yahweh will have compassion on His abandoned spouse (Isa 54: 1-8). With the return of the exiled, the "abandoned one" will again be the spouse accepted with great joy (Isa 62: 4-5).
- Finally, looking at the events which are taking place, John the Baptist looks towards Jesus, the awaited bridegroom (Jn 3: 29). In His teachings and conversations with the people, Jesus takes back Hosea's parable, the dream of the perfect marriage. He presents Himself as the long-awaited bridegroom (Mk 2: 19). In His conversation with the Samaritan woman, He discreetly presents Himself as the true bridegroom, the seventh one (Jn 4: 16-17). The Christian communities will accept Jesus as the expected bridegroom (2 Cor 11: 2; Eph 5: 25-31). The wedding at Cana wishes to show that Jesus is the true bridegroom who arrives for the long-expected wedding,

bringing a tasteful and abundant wine. This definitive marriage is described with beautiful images in the book of Apocalypse (Rev 19: 7-8; 21: 2).

- The Mother of Jesus in the Gospel of John
Even though she is never called by the name of Mary, the mother of Jesus appears two times in the Gospel of John: at the beginning of the wedding at Cana (Jn 2: 1-5), and at the end, at the foot of the Cross (Jn 19: 25-27). In both cases she represents the Old Testament which is waiting for the New one to arrive, and, in both cases, she contributes to the arrival of the New One. Mary is the bond of union between what was before and what will come afterwards. At Cana, she, the mother of Jesus, symbol of the Old Testament, is the one who perceives the limitations of the Old Testament and takes the necessary steps in order to proceed to the New one. At the foot of the Cross, she is at the side of the "Beloved Disciple." The Beloved Disciple is the community which grows around Jesus. He is the son born from the Old Testament. At the request of Jesus, the son, the New Testament, receives Mary, the Old Testament, in his house. Both of them have to walk together. In fact, the New cannot be understood without the Old. The New Testament would have no basis, foundation. And the Old without the New would be incomplete: a tree without fruit.
- The Seven Days of the New Creation
The text begins by saying: "*On the third day*" (Jn 2: 1). In the previous chapter, John had already repeated the expression: "*On the following day*" (Jn 1: 29, 35, 43). Considering this, it offers the following schema: The witness of John the Baptist to Jesus (Jn 1: 19-28) takes place on the first day. "The day after" (Jn 1: 29), that is the second day, is the Baptism of Jesus (Jn 1: 29-34). The third day, the call of the disciples and Peter takes place (Jn 1: 35-42). On the fourth day, Jesus calls Philip, and Philip calls Nathanael (Jn 1: 43-51). Finally, "*three days later*" that is on the seventh day, that is, on Saturday, the first sign, that of the wedding at Cana, takes place (Jn 2, 1). Throughout the Gospel, Jesus performs seven signs.
- John uses the outline of the *week* to present the beginning of Jesus' activity. The Old Testament uses the same outline to present creation. In the first six days, God created all things calling them by name. On the seventh day He rested, and worked no more (Gen 1: 1-2: 4). In the same way, Jesus, in the first days of His activity, calls the people and creates the community, the new humanity. On the seventh day, that is, on Saturday, Jesus does not rest, but works the first sign. Throughout the next chapters, from 2 until 19 included, He performs six other signs, always on Saturday (Jn 5: 16; 9: 14). Finally, in the morning of the Resurrection, when Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb, it is said, "the first day of the week" (Jn 20: 1). It is the first day of the new creation, after that prolonged Saturday in which Jesus worked the seven signs. Accused of working on Saturday, Jesus answers, "My Father still goes on working and I am at work too" (Jn 5: 17). Through the activity of Jesus between Cana and the Cross, the Father completes what is lacking in the old creation, in a way in which the new creation can emerge in the Resurrection of Jesus.

Pray with Psalm 148

Alleluia! Praise Yahweh from the heavens,
praise Him in the heights.
Praise Him, all His angels,
praise Him, all His host!

Praise Him, sun and moon,
praise Him, all shining stars,

praise Him, highest heavens,
praise Him, waters above the heavens.

Let them praise the name of Yahweh
at whose command they were made;
He established them for ever
and ever by an unchanging decree.

Praise Yahweh from the earth,
sea-monsters and all the depths,
fire and hail, snow and mist,
storm-winds that obey His word,
mountains and every hill,
orchards and every cedar,
wild animals and all cattle,
reptiles and winged birds,
kings of the earth and all nations,
princes and all judges on earth,
young men and girls,
old people and children together.

Let them praise the name of Yahweh,
for His name alone is sublime,
His splendor transcends earth and heaven.
For He heightens the strength of His people,
to the praise of all His faithful,
the children of Israel,
the people close to Him.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank You for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May Your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice what Your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, Your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word, You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Sunday, January 8, 2023

Opening Prayer

Merciful Father, you have called me to meet you in this word of the Gospel, because you wish that I may have life, you wish to give me yourself. Send, I pray you, your Holy Spirit upon me so that I may let myself be led along the holy way of this passage of Scripture. May I, today, get out of my prison to set out on a journey to seek you. May I recognize the star that you have lit as a sign of your love on my journey to follow it tirelessly, intensely, committing my whole life. May I, finally, enter your house and there see the Lord; may I bend low humbly before you to adore you and offer my life to you, all that I am and all that I have. Lord, by your grace, may I return by a new route, without ever passing through the old paths of sin.

Reading

Placing the Passage in Its Context:

This passage belongs to the first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel, which constitute a kind of prologue to the whole work. Here we are presented with the historical origin of the Messiah as son of David, as well as his divine origin as Jesus Christ, God-with-us.

Matthew immediately leads us into a very deep and engaging meditation, placing before us a precise choice through the persons he introduces in his story: we either recognize and welcome the Lord who is just born, or we remain indifferent even to wanting to eliminate him, kill him. This passage offers us the beautiful story of the journey of the Magi, who come from afar because they want to seek and welcome, love and adore the Lord Jesus. But their long journey and tireless search, the conversion of their heart are facts that speak of us, facts already written on the scroll of our own sacred story.

An Aid to the Reading of the Passage:

The passage may be divided into two main parts, determined by the locality where the scenes take place: the first part (2: 1-9a) takes place in Jerusalem, whereas the second part is focused around Bethlehem (2: 9b-12).

- **Mt 2: 1-2:** The passage begins with precise indications as to the place and time of the birth of Jesus: in Bethlehem of Judea, at the time of king Herod. Within this quite specific description, the Magi suddenly appear, who, coming from afar, arrive in Jerusalem under the guidance of a star. It is they who announce the birth of the Lord king. They ask where they might find him because they wish to adore him.
- **Mt 2: 3-6:** On hearing the words of the Magi, king Herod, and with him all of Jerusalem is disturbed and afraid. Rather than welcoming the Lord and opting for him, they seek to eliminate him. Herod calls the authorities of the Jewish people and the experts in Scripture. It is they, by the help of ancient prophecies, who speak and reveal Bethlehem as the place to find the Messiah.
- **Mt 2: 7-8:** Herod calls the Magi in secret because he wants to use them for his own evil ends. His detailed interest is entirely directed towards the elimination of Christ.
- **Mt 2: 9a:** The Magi, urged by strength of faith and led by the star, leave again and go towards Bethlehem.
- **Mt 2: 9b-11:** The star reappears, moves with the Magi and leads them to the exact spot where the Lord Jesus is. Full of joy, they enter the house and prostrate themselves; they offer precious gifts because they recognise that he is king and Lord.
- **Mt 2: 12:** When they have contemplated and adored the Lord, the Magi receive a revelation from God; it is He who speaks to them. They are new men; they have in them a new heaven and a new earth. They are free of the deceits of Herod and, therefore, they go back to their lives by an entirely new way

Gospel Text - Mt 2: 1-12

After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, suddenly some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east asking, 'Where is the infant king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage. When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'At Bethlehem in Judaea, for this is what the prophet wrote: And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least

among the leaders of Judah, for from you will come a leader who will shepherd my people Israel.'

Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared and sent them on to Bethlehem with the words, 'Go and find out all about the child, and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.' Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out. And suddenly the star they had seen rising went forward and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, ¹¹ and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

¹² But they were given a warning in a dream not to go back to Herod and returned to their own country by a different way.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

I listen deeply to the silent voice of the Lord and let the breath of the Spirit come to me and infuse me. In this silence I seek the Lord and repeat in my heart: "Where are you, my God?"

A Few Questions

- I take the first words that come from the mouths of the Magi and make them my own: "Where is the infant king of the Jews?" Do I really feel attracted to the place where the Lord is because I desire to be with him? Am I ready to leave the dark and old places of my habits, of my comfort, to undertake a journey of faith in search of Jesus?
- "We have come to adore him". Here the Word of the Lord tests me, puts me through a crucible: do I really live in a relationship of love with God? Am I able to open my life in his presence and allow him to enter into my very heartbeats?
- "From you will come a leader who will shepherd my people". Am I capable of placing and giving my whole existence to the guidance of the Lord, to trust in him, in his love, in his so real presence even though he remains invisible?
- "Going into the house they saw the child". It is precisely because they accept to go into the house, to enter into communion, to give themselves fully and truly that their eyes can see, contemplate and recognize. Why is it that I am not aware of the fact that the more I stay outside, the more I am distant from the life of my brothers and sisters and the more I become sad and empty?

A Key to the Reading

I look for some key words, some basic themes, that may guide and help me better penetrate the meaning of this passage of the Gospel, so that my life may be enlightened and changed by this Word of the Lord.

- **The journey:** This passage seems to be shot through with the grand theme of a journey, an exodus, a going out. The Magi, these mysterious characters, get moving, go far away from their land and go seeking the king, the Lord. Matthew presents this fact by means of some verbs that proceed along development of the event: came, we have come, sent them, go, set out, went before them, going into, not to go back, returned. The physical journey of the Magi hides a much more important and meaningful journey, the journey of faith. This is the movement of the soul born from a desire to meet and know the Lord. At the same time it is God's invitation, who calls

and attracts us with his own power; it is he who gets us to stand up and sets us in motion, who offers us signs and does not cease to walk with us. Scripture gives us many important examples, and these help us enter into this path of grace and blessings. To Abraham God said: "Leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you" (Gen 12: 1). Jacob too was a pilgrim of faith and conversion; in fact, of him is written: "Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran" (Gen 28: 10) and: "Moving on, Jacob went to the land of the sons of the East" (Gen 29: 1). Many years later, the Lord spoke to him and said: "Go back to the land of your forefathers and to your kindred; and I will be with you" (Gen 31: 3). Moses too was a man on a journey; God himself showed him the way, the exodus, in his heart, in his depths, and made of his whole life a long march of salvation for him and for his brothers and sisters: "So come, I send you to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, my people, out of Egypt!" (Ex 3: 10). Also the new people of God, we the children of the promise and of the new covenant, are called to go out all the time and to set out on a journey in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus. The exodus never ceased; the liberation that comes from faith is still always active. Let us look at Jesus, at his apostles, at Paul: not one of them stands still, not one of them hides. All these witnesses speak to us today by their deeds and they repeat: "Blessed is he who finds in you his strength and one who decides in his heart to go on the holy journey" (Ps 83: 6).

- **The star:** This is a very important and central element in this passage because the star has the role of guiding the Magi to their destination, of enlightening their nights along the journey, of indicating precisely the place of the presence of the Lord, of giving great joy to their hearts. Throughout the Bible, stars appear as signs of blessing and glory, almost a personification of God, who does not abandon his people, and, at the same time, a personification of the people that does not forget its God and praises and blesses him (cfr. Ps 148: 3; Bar 3: 34). The word star appears for the first time in Scripture in Genesis 1: 16, when, on the fourth day, the story of creation tells us of the appearance in the heavens of the sun, the moon and stars, as signs and as light, to set order and give light. The Jewish term for "star" *kokhab* is very beautiful and full of meaning. In fact, the letters that make up the word reveal the immensity of the presence that these celestial elements bring with them. We find two letters *caf*, which signify "hand" and which enclose the letter *waw*, which means man, understood in his vital structure, in his backbone, which keeps him erect, which makes him rise towards heaven, towards contact with his God and Creator. Thus, within the stars there are two hands, *caf* and *caf*, that lovingly hold within them *waw*, man: these are the hands of God that never cease to hold us, if only we entrust ourselves to them. Then appears the letter *bet*, which means house. Thus the stars speak to us of our journey towards our house, of our constant migrating from and returning there, whence we have come, from the day of our creation and even from all eternity. Often God compares the descendants of Abraham to the stars in the heavens, almost as if each person is a star, born to give light in the night: "Look up to heaven and count the stars if you can" and then he adds: "Such will be your descendants" (Gen 15: 5). Jesus also is a star, the star that takes its rise from Jacob (Num 24: 17), that rises from on high, that is the radiant morning star, as the Apocalypse says (22: 16). In fact, in him has taken flesh the infinite love of God, which bends itself down towards us, his children, and opens the palms of his hands to gather and welcome us. Only such love can give our infinite weakness the capacity and courage, the perseverance and joy of accepting to leave, to go on the long and arduous journey of faith, which takes us to Bethlehem, to the place where God appears to us.

- **The adoration:** The act of adoration is as old as humankind itself, because since the beginning, the relationship with the divinity has been accompanied by this demand of love, of humility, of self-offering. Before the greatness of God, we, little people, feel and discover that we are nothing, a speck of dust, a drop from a bucket. In the Old Testament, the act of adoration appears as an act of deep love towards the Lord, an act that demands the involvement of the whole person: the mind, the will to choose, love full of desire and a body that bows and prostrates itself even to the ground. It is said in several places that the act of adoration is accompanied by a prostration with the face touching the ground; the face of man, his gaze, his breath returns to the dust whence he has his origin and there he recognizes himself as creature of God, as a breath of God's nostrils. "Come in, let us bow, prostrate ourselves, and kneel in front of Yahweh our maker" (Ps 94: 6): this is the invitation of Scripture to us every day, showing us the way to walk so that we may again and again come to the truth and so live fully.

The New Testament goes even deeper in its spiritual reflection on this fact and seems to want to accompany us on a pedagogical journey of conversion and of maturity in our interior life. In the Gospels we see the disciples, men and women, adoring the Lord Jesus after his resurrection (Mt 28: 9; Lk 24: 52), because they recognize him as God. Jesus' words in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman give us a deep insight into the truth of this act, which, after all, involves the whole of life and is an attitude of the heart: adoration is for God the Father and does not happen here or there but in Spirit and in truth, that is, in the Spirit and the Son, Jesus. We must not deceive ourselves; it is not by moving from one place to another, nor by seeking this or that spiritual person that we can adore our God. The movement, the journey is an interior one and takes place in our deepest being and is a complete surrender of ourselves, our life, our whole being, to the wings of the Holy Spirit and into the arms of Jesus, wide open on the cross and ever ready to attract all things to himself. St. Peter says clearly: "Simply reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts" (1 Pt 3: 15). The act of bowing to the ground, of prostrating ourselves before the Lord comes from the heart. If we let ourselves be touched and reach into our hearts, if we allow the Lord to enter our hearts, that sacred space, then He will change us completely, transform the whole of our person and make of us new men and women.

A moment of prayer: Psalm 84

A hymn concerning the trust of man on his journey to the house of God

Res. I have seen your star, Lord, and I have come to adore you!

How lovely are your dwelling-places, Yahweh Sabaoth. My whole being yearns and pines for Yahweh's courts, My heart and my body cry out for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home,
 the swallow a nest to place its young: your altars, Yahweh Sabaoth, my King and my God. How blessed are those who live in your house; they shall praise you continually. Blessed those who find their strength in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of the Balsam, they make there a waterhole, and -- a further blessing -- early rain fills it. They make their way from height to height, God shows himself to them in Zion.
 Yahweh, God Sabaoth, hear my prayer, listen, God of Jacob.
 God, our shield, look,
 and see the face of your anointed.

Better one day in your courts than a thousand at my own devices, to stand on the threshold of God's house than to live in the tents of the wicked. For Yahweh God is a rampart and shield, he gives grace and glory; Yahweh refuses nothing good to those whose life is blameless. Yahweh Sabaoth, blessed is he who trusts in you.

Closing Prayer

Lord, my Father, I have really seen your star, I have opened my eyes to your presence of love and salvation and I have received the light of life. I have contemplated the night changed into light, pain into joy and solitude into communion; yes, all this happened before you, in your Word. You have led me through the desert; you have led me to your house and opened the door for me to enter. There I saw you, your Son Jesus, Savior of my life; there I prayed and adored, I cried and found your smile, I kept silence and learnt to speak. In your house, merciful Father, I have found life once more! And now I am going back, I have resumed my journey, but the way is not the one I took before and my life is not what it was before. Your Word has left me with a new heart, capable of opening itself to love, to listen, to welcome and become home to so many brothers and sisters whom you have placed in my way. I was not aware, Lord, but you have made me into a child again, you have given birth to me with Jesus. Thank you, Father, my Father!

Monday, January 9, 2023

The Baptism of Jesus

Opening Prayer

"We praise you, invisible Father, giver of immortality: you are the source of life, the source of light, the source of every grace and truth, lover of humankind and lover of the poor, who reconciles all with you and draw all to you through the coming of your beloved Son. Make us living people, grant us your Spirit of light so that we may know you, the true One and the One whom you sent Jesus Christ." (*Serapion's Anaphora*)

Gospel Reading – Mt 3: 13-17

Introduction:

This Gospel fragment (Mt 3: 13-17) is part of a narrative section of Matthew the Evangelist, the section that introduces the public life of Jesus. After the flight into Egypt, Jesus lives in Nazareth. Now, as an adult, we find him on the banks of the river Jordan. The meeting of the two is part of the concluding section dedicated to John the Baptist. Anyone who wishes to go deeper into the personality of John and his message (Mt 3: 1-12 has already been presented to us in the liturgy of the second Sunday of Advent) needs to keep in mind the whole of chapter 3 of Matthew. Our passage concentrates especially on the acknowledgement of the divinity of Christ at the time of his baptism. God the Father reveals the identity of Jesus.

A Division of the Text:

- Matthew 3:13: setting
- Matthew 3:14-15: dialogue John-Jesus
- Matthew 3: 16-17: epiphany/theophany

Gospel Text - Matthew 3: 13-17

13 Then Jesus appeared: he came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 John tried to dissuade him, with the words, 'It is I who need baptism from you, and yet you come to me!' 15 But Jesus replied, 'Leave it like this for the time being; it is fitting that we should, in this way, do all that uprightness demands.' Then John gave in to him. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, he at once came up from the water, and suddenly the heavens opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. 17 And suddenly there was a voice from heaven, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on him.'

A Moment of Silent Prayer

so that the Word of God may penetrate our hearts and enlighten our lives.

Some Questions

to help us in our meditation and prayer.

- Why does Jesus “appear” after his hidden life in Nazareth?
- How does awareness of his identity and mission grow?
- Have I, at some time, taken on something new in my life?
- Who or which experience has most revealed to me my identity, vocation and mission?
- What does the memory of my baptism mean to me?

Meditation

A Key to the Reading:

Together with a historical-chronological reading of the passage, the episode of the baptism of Jesus and his meeting with John before he begins his public life, we need to keep in mind also a symbolical reading, assisted by the Fathers of the East, a symbolism that is the framework of this liturgical season of Christmas and which concludes with the full manifestation of God as man: a synthesis of the manifestation-epiphany of the Son of God in the flesh.

A Commentary on the Text:

- Mt 13: 13 The adult Jesus
After John “appears” on the scene (13: 1), Jesus of Nazareth, where he spent his childhood and early youth (Mt 12: 23), goes to the river Jordan. As a good Israelite, he watches the authentic religious movements that spring up among the people. He shows that he approves of the work of John and decides to be baptized with water, not, of course, to receive forgiveness for sins, but to unite himself and share fully in the expectations and hopes of all men and women. It is not humankind that goes to Him, but He who goes towards humankind, according to the logic of the incarnation.

- Mt 13: 14-15 the dialogue of John with Jesus
John's attempt to prevent the baptism of Jesus is his acknowledgement of the difference between the two and an awareness of the new (the New Covenant) making its appearance. "The one who follows me... will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire... his winnowing-fan is in his hand... will clear... will gather... will burn..." (vv. 11-12). Jesus' attitude is still one of submitting to God's saving plan (in this way, do all that righteousness demands), respecting the manner (in humility-kenosis) and the times (the time-kairos). We also see the difference between the two from their families of origin (priestly for John), from the places (Jerusalem for John, Nazareth for Jesus) from the manner of conception (a proclamation to the father, Zachary, in the old style; a proclamation to the mother, Mary), the parents' ages (those of John old). Everything points to the passage from the old to the new. Matthew prepares the readers for the newness of the Christ: "you have heard it said, but I say to you" (Mt 5).
- Mt 13: 16-17 the presentation of God the Father and the Holy Spirit
In Matthew's Gospel we have the solemn "adoration of the Magi" in acknowledgement of the royalty and divinity of Jesus. Luke also adds the acknowledgement of Elisabeth (Lk 1:42-43), of the angels (Lk 2:13-14) of the shepherds (Lk 2:20), and of the old Simeon and Anna (Lk 2:30; 28). All the Evangelists record the proclamation of the divine identity of Jesus by God the Father and the Holy Spirit present in the form of a dove. Matthew says clearly "This is" not "you are" my Son, the Beloved. Jesus is divine by nature and also the new Adam, the beginning of a new humanity reconciled with God as well as nature reconciled with God by means of Christ's immersion in the waters. The heavens are reopened after being closed for such a long time by sin, and earth is blessed.
The descent of Christ into the waters prefigures his descent into hell and the words of the Psalmist come true (Ps 74: 13-14), he crushes the head of the foe. The Baptism not only prefigures but inaugurates and anticipates Satan's defeat and the liberation of Adam.
However, it will not be easy to recognize the Messiah in his weakness. John himself has some doubts when in prison, and he sends his disciples to ask "are you the one who is to come or have we got to wait for someone else?" (Mt 11: 3).

Deeper into the liturgical and ecumenical aspects

In the tradition of the Eastern churches, the Baptism of Jesus is the most important liturgical feast of the Christmas cycle. On 6 January they celebrate together the baptism, birth, visit of the Magi, the wedding feast of Cana, as one fact. Rather than the historical development of the life of Jesus, they stress his theological-saving relevance. They do not dwell on the sentimental aspect, but on the historical manifestation of God and his acknowledgement as Lord.

Cyril of Jerusalem says that Jesus gives the waters of baptism "the color of his divinity" (III mystagogic catechesis, 1).

Gregory Naziazan writes that the creation of this world and the creation of the spiritual world, once foes, reunite in friendship, and we humans, united in one choir with the angels, partake of their praises (PG 46,599).

The descent into the waters corresponds to the descent into the bowels of the earth symbolized by the birth in a cave. The destructive waters become waters of salvation for the just.

The Old Testament readings of the liturgical Vespers recall the saving waters: the Spirit hovers over the waters at the time of creation (Gn 1), the waters of the Nile save Moses (Ex 2), the waters open for the people of Israel to go through (Ex 14), the waters of Mara

become sweet (Ex 15), the waters of the Jordan open before the Arc (Jos 3), the waters of the Jordan heal Naaman the leper (2Kings 5) etc. Jesus then at the wedding feast in Cana transforms water into wine (Jn 2) as a sign that the time of salvation has come. At this feast in the eastern liturgy, there is a tradition of blessing water in a spring or river by immersing the cross three times (the triple baptismal immersion). This recalls the prophet Isaiah: let the wilderness and the dry lands exult (Is 35: 1-10), come to the water all you who are thirsty (Is 55: 1-13), draw water joyfully (Is 12: 3-6).

Psalm 114 (113)

Alleluia!

When Israel came out of Egypt,
the House of Jacob from a people of foreign speech, Judah became his sanctuary,
and Israel his domain. The sea fled at the sight, the Jordan turned back,
the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like sheep.
Sea, what makes you flee? Jordan, why turn back?
Why skip like rams, you mountains? Why like sheep, you hills?
Tremble, earth, at the coming of the Lord, at the coming of the God of Jacob,
who turns rock into pool, flint into fountain.

Closing Prayer

Jesus, source of life, who comes to cancel Adam's sentence, in the Jordan you killed hatred; grant us the peace that is beyond all thought. Resplendent Word sent by the Father, after you have uprooted the sins of mortals, come and dissipate the long and sad hours of the night, and by your baptism, let your children rise resplendent from the waves of the Jordan. May the human race clothe itself in white, come out of the waters as children of God and transform creation into the image of the creator. (From oriental liturgical "chants")

Tuesday, January 10, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of love, hear our prayers.

Help us to know your will

and to do it with courage and faith.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 1: 21-28

They went as far as Capernaum, and at once on the Sabbath he went into the synagogue and began to teach. And his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority.

And at once in their synagogue there was a man with an unclean spirit, and he shouted, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked it saying, 'Be quiet! Come out of him!'

And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry went out of him. The people were so astonished that they started asking one another what it all meant, saying, 'Here is a teaching that is new, and with authority behind it: he gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey him.'

And his reputation at once spread everywhere, through all the surrounding Galilean countryside.

Reflection

- Sequence of the Gospels of the days of this week. Yesterday's Gospel informed us concerning the first activity of Jesus: he called four persons to form the community with them (Mk 1, 16-10). Today's Gospel describes the admiration of people before the teaching of Jesus (Mt 1, 21-22) and the first miracle when he expels the devil (Mk 1, 23-28). The Gospel of tomorrow narrates the cure of Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1, 29-31), the healing of many sick persons (Mk 1, 32-34) and the prayer of Jesus in an isolated place (Mk 1, 35-39). Mark gathers all these episodes which had been transmitted orally in the communities and he joins them together like bricks of one only wall. In the years 70's, the year in which he writes, the Communities needed orientation. By describing how Jesus began his activity, Mark indicates what they should do and how, to announce the Good News. Mark gives them a catechesis, by telling the Communities the events of the life of Jesus.
- Jesus teaches with authority, differently from the way the Scribes do it. The first thing that the people perceive is the diverse way in which Jesus teaches. It is not so much the content, but rather the way in which he teaches that impresses the people. For this reason, by his different way, Jesus creates a critical conscience in people concerning the religious authority of that time. The people perceive, they compare and says: He teaches with authority, in a way different from the way the Scribes do it. The Scribes of that time taught quoting the authority. Jesus does not quote any authority, but he speaks beginning with his experience of God and of his life. His word is rooted in the heart.
- You have come to destroy us! In Mark, the first miracle is the expulsion of the devil. Jesus struggles and expels the power of evil which takes possession of persons and alienated them from themselves. The man possessed by the devil shouts: "I know who you are: You are the Holy One of God!" The man repeated the official teaching which presented the Messiah as the "Holy One of God", that is as a High Priest, or like a King, Judge, Doctor or General. Even today also, many people live alienated from themselves, deceived by the power of mass media, means of communication, by propaganda of business. They repeat what they hear others say. They live as slaves of consumerism, oppressed by the power of money, threatened by debtors. Many think that their life is not as it should be if they cannot buy what the propaganda announces and recommends.
- Jesus rebuked the evil spirit: "Be quiet! Come out of him!" The spirit threw the man into convulsions, and with a loud cry went out of him. Jesus restores the person to himself. He gives him back his conscience and his liberty. He makes the person recover his complete judgment (cf. Mk 5, 15). Then it was not easy, it was not easy yesterday, it is not easy today to do in such a way that a person begins to think and to act in a way diverse from the official ideology.
- A new teaching! He commands even the evil spirits. The first two signs of the Good News are these: his different way of teaching the things of God, and his power over evil spirits. Jesus opens a new road in order that people can attain purity. At that time, a person who was declared impure could not present himself/herself before God to

pray and to receive the blessing promised by God to Abraham. He/she should first purify himself/herself. These and many other laws and norms made the life of people very difficult and marginalized many persons who were considered impure, far from God. Now, purified by the contact with Jesus, persons could present themselves before God. This was for them a great Good News!

Personal Questions

- Could I really say: "I am fully free, master of myself? If I cannot say it of myself, then something in me is possessed by other powers. What do I do to expel this strange power?"
- Today many people do not live, but are lived. Do not think, but they are thought by the means of communication, by mass media. Do not have a critical mind or way of thinking. They are not masters of themselves. How can this "devil" be expelled?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh our Lord,
how majestic is your name throughout the world!
What are human beings that you spare a thought for them, or the child of Adam that you care for him? (Ps 8: 1,4)

Wednesday, January 11, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of love, hear our prayers.
Help us to know your will
and to do it with courage and faith.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 1: 29-39

And at once on leaving the synagogue, he went with James and John straight to the house of Simon and Andrew. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed and feverish, and at once they told him about her. He went in to her, took her by the hand and helped her up. And the fever left her and she began to serve them.

That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were sick with diseases of one kind or another; he also drove out many devils, but he would not allow them to speak, because they knew who he was.

In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place and prayed there.

Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, 'Everybody is looking for you.' He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, to the neighboring country towns, so that I can proclaim the message there too, because that is why I came.' And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out devils.

Reflection

- Jesus restores life for the service. After having participated in the celebration of Saturday in the Synagogue, Jesus went to Peter's house and cured his mother-in-law. Once healed, she gets up and, with her health restored and having recovered her dignity, she begins to serve the persons. Jesus does not only heal the person, but he does it in such a way that she begins to serve life.
- Jesus accepts the marginalized. When it begins to get dark, in the afternoon, at the end of Saturday when the first star shines in the sky, Jesus accepts and cures the sick and those possessed whom people had brought to him. The sick and those possessed were the most marginalized persons of that time. They had nobody to whom to have recourse. They depended on public charity. Besides this, religion considered them impure. They could not participate in the community, it was as if God rejected and excluded them. Therefore, it can very clearly be seen in what the Good News of God consists and that which he wants to do in the life of people: to accept the marginalized and the excluded, and to insert them again to live together in the community.
- To remain united to the Father, in prayer. Jesus is presented to us while he prays. He makes a great effort to have the time and the adequate environment to pray. He rises before the others and goes to a deserted place, to be able to be alone with God. Many times the Gospels speak to us about the prayer of Jesus, in silence (Mt 14: 22-23); Mk 1: 35; Lk 5: 15-16; 3: 21-22). Through prayer he maintains alive the awareness of his mission.
- To maintain alive the awareness of the mission and not to close oneself up in the results already obtained. Jesus is known. Everybody follows him. This publicity pleases the disciples. They go to look for Jesus to take him back to the people who were seeking for him, and they tell him: All are looking for you. They thought that Jesus would go to the banquet. They were disillusioned! Jesus does not pay attention and tells them: Let us go elsewhere. It is precisely for this that I have come! Surely, they must have been surprised! Jesus was not like what they had imagined him to be. Jesus had a very clear conscience of the mission and wants to transmit this to the disciples. He does not want them to close up themselves in the results already obtained. They should not look back. But, like Jesus, they should maintain alive the conscience of their mission. It is the mission received from the Father, which has to orientate their decisions.
- It is precisely for this that I have come! This was the first misunderstanding between Jesus and his disciples. At present, it is only a question of a small divergence. Later on, in the Gospel of Mark, this misunderstanding, in spite of the many advertences of Jesus, will grow and will practically become almost a break between Jesus and the disciples (cf. Mk 8: 14-21, 32-33; 9: 32; 14: 27). Today also, there are some misunderstandings on the way of the proclamation of the Good News. Mark helps one to be attentive to the divergences so as not to allow them to grow until they produce a break.

Personal Questions

- Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve. Peter's mother-in-law began to serve. And I, do I act in such a way that my life is a service to God and to my brothers and sisters?
- Jesus is conscious, aware of his mission through prayer. And my prayer?

Concluding Prayer

Sing to Yahweh, bless his name! Proclaim his salvation day after day, declare his glory among the nations,
his marvels to every people! (Ps 96: 2-3)

Thursday, January 12, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of love, hear our prayers.

Help us to know your will

and to do it with courage and faith.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 1: 40-45

A man suffering from a virulent skin-disease came to him and pleaded on his knees saying, 'If you are willing, you can cleanse me.'

Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said to him, 'I am willing. Be cleansed.' And at once the skin-disease left him and he was cleansed. And at once Jesus sternly sent him away and said to him, 'Mind you tell no one anything, but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your cleansing prescribed by Moses as evidence to them.'

The man went away, but then started freely proclaiming and telling the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but stayed outside in deserted places. Even so, people from all around kept coming to him.

Reflection

- Accepting and curing the leper, Jesus reveals a new face of God. A leper came near Jesus. He was an excluded, an impure person. He should be far away. Anybody who touched him, would also become impure! But that leper had great courage. He transgresses the norms of religion to be able to get near Jesus. And he calls out: If you want, you can heal me. You need not touch me! It suffices that you want, and I will be healed! This phrase reveals two evils: a) the evil of leprosy which made him impure; b) the evil of solitude to which he was condemned by society and by religion. It also reveals the great faith of the man in the power of Jesus. And Jesus profoundly moved, cures both evils. In the first place, in order to cure solitude, he touches the leper. It is as if he said: "For me, you are not an excluded one. I accept you as a brother!" And then he cures the leper saying: I want it! Be cured! The leper, to enter into contact with Jesus, had transgressed the norms of the Law. Jesus also, to be able to help that excluded person and therefore, reveal a new face of God, transgresses the norms of his religion and touches the leper. At that time, whoever touched a leper became impure according to the religious authority and by the law of that time.
- He integrated anew the excluded person in the fraternal living together. Jesus, not only cures, but also wants the cured person to be able to live with the others. He once

again inserts the person in society to live with others. At that time for a leper to be accepted again in the community, it was necessary to get a certificate from the priest that he had been cured. It is like today. A sick person leaves the hospital with a document signed by the doctor of the department where he had been hospitalized. Jesus obliges the person to look for that document, in such a way that he will be able to live normally with others. He obliges the authority to recognize that this man has been cured.

- The leper announces the good that Jesus has done to him and Jesus becomes an excluded person. Jesus forbids the leper to speak about the cure. The Gospel of Mark informs that this prohibition does not serve. The leper, walking away, began to diffuse the fact, to the point that Jesus could no longer enter publicly into a city, but remained outside, in a deserted place (Mk 1, 45). Why? Because Jesus had touched the leper. Because of this, according to the opinion of the religion of that time, now he himself was impure and should live far away from all others. He could no longer enter the city. And Mark says that people did not care about these official norms, in fact, people came to him from everywhere (Mk 1, 45). Total subversion!
- Summarizing. In the year 70, when Mark wrote, as well as today, the time in which we live, it was and continues to be important to have before our eyes models of how to live and how to proclaim the Good News of God and of how to evaluate our mission. In verses 16 to 45 of the first chapter of his Gospel, Mark describes the mission of the community and presents eight criteria in order that the communities of his time could evaluate their mission. The following is the outline:

Text Activity of Jesus Objective of the Mission

- Mark 1: 16-20
 - o Jesus calls his first disciples
 - o To form the community
- Mark 1: 21-22
 - o The people were admired at his teaching
 - o To create a critical conscience
- Mark 1: 23-28
 - o Jesus expels a devil
- Mark 1: 29-31
 - o To overcome the force of evil
 - o He cures Peter's mother-in-law
 - o To give life back so as to serve
- Mark 1: 32-34
 - o He cures the sick and the possessed
 - o To accept the marginalized
- Mark 1: 35
 - o Jesus rises early to pray
 - o To remain united with the Father
- Mark 1: 36-39
 - o Jesus continues the announcement
 - o Not to stop at the results
- Mark 1: 40-45

- o He cures a leper

Personal Questions

To integrate anew the excluded

- To proclaim the Good News means to give witness of the concrete experience of Jesus that one has. What does the leper announce? He tells others the good that Jesus has done to him. Only this! And this witness leads others to accept the Good News of God which Jesus brings to us. Which is the witness that you give?
- To take the Good News to the people, it is not necessary to be afraid to transgress the religious norms which are contrary to God's project and which make communication, dialogue and the living out of love difficult. Even if this causes difficulty for the people, as it caused difficulty for Jesus. Do I have this courage?

Concluding Prayer

Come, let us bow low and do reverence; kneel before Yahweh who made us!
For he is our God,
and we the people of his sheepfold, the flock of his hand. (Ps 95: 6-7)

Friday, January 13, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of love, hear our prayers.
Help us to know your will
and to do it with courage and faith.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 2: 1-12

When he returned to Capernaum, sometime later word went round that he was in the house; and so many people collected that there was no room left, even in front of the door. He was preaching the word to them when some people came bringing him a paralytic carried by four men, but as they could not get the man to him through the crowd, they stripped the roof over the place where Jesus was; and when they had made an opening, they lowered the stretcher on which the paralytic lay. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'My child, your sins are forgiven.'
Now some scribes were sitting there, and they thought to themselves, 'How can this man talk like that? He is being blasphemous. Who but God can forgive sins?'
And at once, Jesus, inwardly aware that this is what they were thinking, said to them, 'Why do you have these thoughts in your hearts? Which of these is easier: to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven" or to say, "Get up, pick up your stretcher and walk"? But to prove to you that the Son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth' - he said to the paralytic - 'I order you: get up, pick up your stretcher, and go off home.'

And the man got up, and at once picked up his stretcher and walked out in front of everyone, so that they were all astonished and praised God saying, 'We have never seen anything like this.'

Reflection

- In Mark 1: 1-15, Mark shows how the Good News of God should be prepared and spread. In Mark 1: 16-45, he indicates which is the objective of the Good News and which is the mission of the community. Now, in Mk 2: 1-3, 6 there is the effect of the proclamation of the Good News. A community faithful to the Gospel lives values which are in contrast with the interests of the society which surrounds it. This is why one of the effects of the proclamation of the Good News, is the conflict with those who defend the interests of society. Mark gathers together five conflicts which the proclamation of the Good News brought to Jesus.
- In the year 70, the time when he wrote his Gospel, there were many conflicts in the life of the communities, but they did not always know how to behave before the accusations which they received from the Roman authorities and from the Jewish leaders. This series of five conflicts found in Mk 2: 1-3, 6 served as a guide to orientate the communities, those of the past as well as those of today. Because the conflict is not an incident of the road, even if it forms part of the journey.
- The following is the outline of the five conflicts which Mark presents in his Gospel:
Texts conflict:
 - 1st conflict: Mk 2: 1-12
 - 2nd conflict: Mk 2: 13-17
 - 3rd conflict: Mk 2: 18-22
 - 4th conflict: Mk 2: 23-28
 - 5th conflict: Mk 3: 1-6
- The Pharisees and the Herodians Cause of the conflict:
 - Forgiveness of sins
 - To eat with sinners
 - The practice of fasting
 - Observance of Saturday
 - To cure on Saturday
- The solidarity of the friends obtains for the paralytic the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is returning to Capernaum. Many people gather before the door of the house. He accepts everybody and begins to teach them. To teach, to speak of God, was what Jesus did the most. A paralytic, carried by four persons, arrived. Jesus is their only hope. They do not doubt to go up and make an opening in the roof over the place where Jesus was. It must have been a poor house, the roof, mud covered with leaves. They lowered the stretcher with the man, before Jesus. Jesus, seeing their faith, says to the paralytic: seeing their faith, says to the paralytic: your sins are forgiven you. At that time people thought that physical defects (paralytic) were a punishment from God for any sin that had been committed. The Doctors of the Law taught that the person remained impure and therefore, incapable of getting close to God. For this reason, the sick, the poor, the paralytics, felt that they were rejected by God! But Jesus did not think this way. Such a great faith was an evident sign of the fact that the

paralytic was accepted by God. And for this reason, he declares: "Your sins are forgiven you!" With this affirmation Jesus denies that the paralysis was a punishment due to the sin of the man.

- Jesus is accused of blasphemy by those who held power. The affirmation of Jesus was contrary to the catechism of the time. It was not in accordance with the idea that they had of God. And because of this they react against and accuse Jesus: he blasphemes! According to them only God could forgive sins. And only the priest could declare someone forgiven and purified. How could it be that Jesus, a man without studies, a lay person, a simple carpenter, could declare persons forgiven and purified of their sins? And there was also another reason which pushed them to criticize Jesus. They had thought: "If it is true what Jesus says, we will lose our power! We will lose our source of income."
- By curing, Jesus shows that he also has the power to forgive sins. Jesus perceives the criticism. This is why he asks: "Which of these is easier to say to the paralytic: Your sins are forgiven you, or to say, Get up, pick up your stretcher and walk!? It is easier to say: "Your sins are forgiven you". Because nobody can verify if truly the sins have been forgiven or not. But if I tell him: "Get up and walk!" there, all can see if I have or not the power to heal. And in order to show that he had the power to forgive sins, in the name of God, Jesus says to the paralytic: Get up, take up your stretcher and go off home! He cures the man! And thus, through a miracle he taught that the paralysis of the man was not a punishment from God, and he showed that the faith of the poor is a proof that God accepts them in his love.
- The message of the miracle and the reaction of people. The paralytic gets up, he takes his stretcher, and begins to walk, and all say: "We have never seen anything like this!" This miracle reveals three very important things:
 - o a) The sicknesses of persons are not a punishment for sins.
 - o b) Jesus opens a new way to reach God. What the system called impurity was no more an obstacle for persons to get close to God.
 - o c) The face of God revealed through the attitude of Jesus was different from the severe face of God revealed by the attitude of the Doctors.
- This reminds us of what a drug addict said once he had recovered and who is now a member of a community in Curitiba, Brazil: "I grew up in the Catholic religion. I abandoned it. My parents were good practicing Catholics and wanted us, their children to be like them. People were obliged always to go to Church, every Sunday and every feast day. And when one did not go, they would say: "God will punish you." I went because this was imposed upon me, and when I became an adult, I no longer went to Mass. I did not like the God of my parents. I could not understand that God, the Creator of the world, could extend over me, a small child, threatening me with the punishment of hell. I liked much more the God of my uncle who never went to Church, but who every day, and I repeat, every day, bought twice as much bread than what he ate, in order to give to the poor!"

Personal Questions

- Do you like the God of the uncle or the God of the parents of the ex-drug addict?
- Which is the face of God that others discover in my behavior?

Concluding Prayer

What we have heard and know, what our ancestors have told us we shall not conceal from their descendants, but will tell to a generation still to come: the praises of Yahweh, his power, the wonderful deeds he has done. (Ps 78: 3-4)

Saturday, January 14, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of love, hear our prayers.

Help us to know your will

and to do it with courage and faith.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 2: 13-17

He went out again to the shore of the lake; and all the people came to him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

When Jesus was at dinner in his house, a number of tax collectors and sinners were also sitting at table with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many of them among his followers. When the scribes of the Pharisee party saw him eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this he said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I came to call not the upright, but sinners.'

Reflection

- In yesterday's Gospel, we have seen the first conflict which arose concerning the forgiveness of sins (Mk 2: 1-12). In today's Gospel we meditate on the second conflict which arose when Jesus sat at table with the sinners (Mk 2: 13-17). In the years 70's, the time when Mark wrote, in the communities there was a conflict between Christians who had been converted from Paganism and those from Judaism. Those from Judaism found great difficult to enter into the house of converted Pagans and to sit with them around the same table (cf. Acts 10: 28; 11: 3). In describing how Jesus faces this conflict, Mark orientates the community to solve the problem.
- Jesus taught, and the people were happy to listen to him. Jesus goes out again to go near the sea. People arrive and he begins to teach them. He transmits the Word of God. In Mark's Gospel, the beginning of the activity of Jesus is characterized by much teaching and much acceptance on the part of the people (Mk 1: 14, 21, 38-39; 2: 2, 13), in spite of the conflicts with religious authority. What did Jesus teach? Jesus proclaimed the Good News of God (Mk 1, 14). He spoke about God, but he spoke in a new way, different. He spoke starting from his experience, of the experience which he himself had of God and of Life. Jesus lived in God. And surely he had touched the heart of the people who liked to listen to him (Mk 1: 22, 27). God, instead of being a severe Jew who threatens from far, at a distance, with punishment and hell, becomes once again, a friendly presence, a Good News for the people.

- Jesus calls a sinner to be a disciple and invites him to eat in his house. Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, and he, immediately, leaves everything and follows Jesus. He begins to be part of the group of the disciples. Immediately, the text says literally: While Jesus was at table in his house. Some think that in his house means the house of Levi. But the most probable translation is that it was a question of the house of Jesus. It is Jesus who invites all to eat in his house: sinners and tax collectors, together with the disciples.
- Jesus has come not for the just, but for sinners. This gesture or act of Jesus causes the religious authority to get very angry. It was forbidden to sit at table with tax collectors and sinners, because to sit at table with someone meant that he was considered a brother! Instead of speaking directly with Jesus, the Scribes of the Pharisees speak with the disciples: How is it that he eats and drinks together with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus responds: "It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I came to call not the upright, but sinners! As before with the disciples (Mk 1: 38), now also, it is the conscience of his mission which helps Jesus to find the response and to indicate the way for the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus.

Personal Questions

- Jesus calls a sinner, a tax collector, a person hated by the people, to be his disciple. Which is the message for us in this act of Jesus, of the Catholic Church?
- Jesus says that he has come to call sinners. Are there laws and customs in our Church which prevent sinners to have access to Jesus? What can we do to change these laws and these customs?

Concluding Prayer

May the words of my mouth always find favor, and the whispering of my heart, in your presence, Yahweh, my rock, my redeemer. (Ps 19: 14)

Sunday, January 15, 2023

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

In this prayerful reading of the Gospel of John, we recall the words of John Henry Newman to accompany and stimulate us, words that he liked to use in prayer to the Lord: Stay with me, and I shall begin to shine as you shine; to shine so as to be light for others. Jesus, the light will all come from you: nothing will be because of me. It will be you who shines on others through me. Grant that I may praise you thus, in the way that you like most, shining on all those who are around me. Give them and me your light; enlighten them together with me, through me. Teach me to spread your praise, your truth, your will. Grant that I may make you known not through words but by example, that influence of solidarity that comes from what I do, visibly resembling your saints, and clearly full of the love that grows in my heart for you» (*Meditations and Devotions*).

Gospel Text - John 1: 29-34

29 The next day, he saw Jesus coming towards him and said, 'Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. 30 It was of him that I said, "Behind me comes one who has passed ahead of me because he existed before me." 31 I did not know him myself, and yet my purpose in coming to baptize with water was so that he might be revealed to Israel.' 32 And John declared, 'I saw the Spirit come down on him like a dove from heaven and rest on him. 33 I did not know him myself, but he who sent me to baptize with water had said to me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and rest is the one who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit." 34 I have seen, and I testify that he is the Chosen One of God.'

A Prayerful Silent Pause

The Word of God demands that we want and welcome it through a meditation of silence. Quieten yourself, allow yourself to welcome the presence of God in his Word; a silence that makes room in your heart so that God may come and talk to you.

A Symbolical Reading

This Gospel passage speaks of two animals of great spiritual value in the Bible: the lamb and the dove. The first alludes to significant texts in the Bible: the paschal meal of the exodus (cc. 12-13); the glory of the Christ-Lamb in the Apocalypse.

The Symbol of the Lamb:

Let us turn our attention to the symbol of the «Lamb (*amnos*) of God», and to its meaning.

- A first biblical allusion for an understanding of this expression used by John the Baptist to point out the person of Jesus, is the figure of the **victorious Lamb** in the book of the Apocalypse: in 7: 17 the Lamb is the shepherd of the nations; in 17:14 the Lamb squashes the evil powers on earth. In Jesus' time, people imagined that at the end of time a victorious lamb or one that would destroy the powers of sin, injustice and evil would appear. This idea conforms to the eschatological preaching of John the Baptist who warned that God's anger was imminent (Lk 3: 7), that the axe was already laid at the roots of the trees, and that God was ready to cut down and throw on the fire every tree that did not bear good fruit (Lk 3: 9). Mt 3: 12 and Lk 3: 17.

Another very powerful expression with which the Baptist introduces Jesus is in Matthew 3: 12: «His winnowing-fan is in his hand; he will clear his threshing-floor and gather his wheat into the barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out». It is not wrong to think that John the Baptist could describe Jesus as the lamb of God who destroys the sin of the world. In fact, in 1 John 3: 5 it is written: «Now you know that he appeared in order to abolish sin»; and in 3: 8: «It was to undo all that the devil has done that the Son of God appeared». It is possible that John the Baptist greeted Jesus as the victorious lamb who, by God's command, was to destroy evil in the world.

- A second biblical allusion is to **the Lamb as the suffering servant**. This figure of the suffering servant or of Jhwh is the subject of four canticles in Deutero-Isaiah: 42: 1-4, 7, 9; 49: 1-6, 9, 13; 50: 4-9, 11); 52: 13-53, 12. We need to ask ourselves whether the use of «Lamb of God» in John 1: 29 is not colored by the use of "lamb" to allude to the suffering Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 53. Did John really consider Jesus the lamb as the suffering Servant?

There certainly are no clear proofs that the Baptist made such a connection, nor are there proofs that exclude such a possibility. Indeed, in Isaiah 53: 7 it is written that the Servant:

«never opened his mouth, like a sheep that is dumb before its shearers, never opening its mouth». This description is applied to Jesus in Acts 8: 32, and so this likeness between the Suffering Servant and Jesus was made by the early Christians (see Mt 8: 17 = Is 53: 4; Heb 9: 28 = Is 53: 12).

Besides, in John the Baptist's description of Jesus in 1: 32-34, there are two aspects that recall the figure of the Servant: in v. 32 John the Baptist says that he saw the Spirit coming down on Jesus and resting on him; in 34 he identifies Jesus as the chosen of God. Thus also in Isaiah 42: 1 (a passage the synoptics also connect with the baptism of Jesus) we read: «Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights (see Mk 1: 11). I have endowed him with my spirit».

Again in Isaiah 61: 1: «The Spirit of the Lord Yahweh has been given to me». These biblical allusions strengthen the possibility that the Evangelist made a connection between the Servant of Isaiah 42; 53 and the Lamb of God.

In other parts of John's Gospel, we also find Jesus described with the traits of the suffering Servant (12: 38 = Is 53: 1).

One interesting aspect to be noticed is that the Lamb of God is said to take away the sin of the world. In Isaiah 53: 4, 12, it is said that the Servant bears or takes on himself the sins of many. By his death, Jesus takes away sin or takes it on himself.

Thus according to the second interpretation, the Lamb as suffering Servant, is Christ who offers himself freely to eliminate sin from the world and restore his brothers and sisters in the flesh back to God.

We find a modern confirmation of this interpretation of Jesus as "Lamb of God" in a document of the Italian bishops: «The Apocalypse of John, going even to the ultimate depths of the mystery of the One sent by the Father, recognizes in him the Lamb who is sacrificed "since the foundation of the world" (Apc 13: 8), the One whose wounds healed us (1 Pt 2: 25; Is 53: 5)» (*Communicating the Gospel in a changing world*, 15).

- A third biblical allusion is **the Lamb as the paschal lamb**. John's Gospel is full of Paschal symbolism especially in relation to the death of Jesus. For the Christian community for whom John is writing his Gospel, the Lamb takes away the sin of the world by his death. In fact, in John 19: 14 it is written that Jesus was sentenced to death at midday on the eve of the Pasch, that is at the time when priests began to sacrifice paschal lambs in the Temple for Easter. Another connection of the paschal symbolism with the death of Jesus is that while Jesus was on the cross, a sponge soaked in vinegar was raised up to him on a stick (19: 29), and it was the stick or hyssop that was dipped into the blood of the paschal lamb to sprinkle the doorposts of the Israelites (Es 12: 22). Then in John 19: 36 the fulfilment of Scripture that not one bone of Jesus would be broken, is clearly a reference to the text in Exodus 12: 46 where it is written that not one bone of the paschal lamb must be broken. The description of Jesus as the Lamb is found in another of John's works, namely the Apocalypse: in 5: 6 mention is made of the sacrificed lamb; in 7: 17 and 22: 1 the Lamb is the one from whom flows the spring of living water and this aspect is also an allusion to Moses who made water to flow from the rock; finally, in 5: 9 reference is made to the redeeming blood of the Lamb, another paschal motif that recalls the salvation of the houses of the Israelites from the danger of death.

There is a parallel between the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the doorposts as a sign of liberation and the blood of the lamb offered in a sacrifice of liberation. Soon Christians began to compare Jesus to the paschal lamb and, in doing so, they did not hesitate to use sacrificial language: «Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed» (1 Cor 5: 7), including Jesus' task of taking away the sin of the world.

The Symbol of the Dove:

This second symbol also has several aspects to it. First of all, the expression “like a dove” was common to express the affective connection with the nest. In our context it says that the Spirit has found its nest, its natural habitat of love in Jesus. Moreover, the dove symbolizes the love of the Father that rests on Jesus as in a permanent dwelling place (see Mt 3: 16; Mk 1: 10; Lk 3: 22).

Then the expression «like a dove» is used in connection with the verb to descend to express that it is not a question of the physical aspect of a dove but the way the Spirit descends (like the flight of a dove), in the sense that it does not strike terror but rather inspires trust. Such biblical symbolism of the dove does not have parallel symbolisms in the Bible; however, an old rabbinical exegesis compares the hovering of the Spirit of God over the primordial waters to the fluttering of the dove over its nest. It is not impossible that in using this symbol, John wanted to say that the descent of the Spirit in the shape of a dove was a clear reference to the beginning of creation: the incarnation of God’s plan in Jesus is the summit and aim of God’s creative activity.

The love of God for Jesus (corresponding to the movement of the dove returning to its nest) urges him to pass on the fullness of his divine essence (the Spirit is love and loyalty).

The Message

- **Christ is our salvation:** The Baptist had the task of pointing out in Jesus «the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world». The proclamation of the Gospel, the word of Jesus Christ, is as essential and indispensable today as it was yesterday. We never cease to need liberation and salvation. Proclaiming the Gospel does not mean communicating theoretical truths nor is it a collection of moral teachings. Rather, it means allowing people to experience Jesus Christ, who came into the world – according to John’s witness – to save humankind from sin, evil and death. So we cannot transmit the Gospel and at the same time not pay attention to the daily needs and expectations of people. To speak of faith in Jesus, lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, means to speak to people of our time, first asking ourselves what do they seek in the depths of their heart.
- “If we wish to hold on to an appropriate criterion..., we shall need to nurture two complementary focal points... Jesus Christ is witness to both. The first consists of our effort to listen to the culture of our world so as to discern the seeds of the Word already present there, even beyond the visible borders of the Church. To listen to the most intimate expectations of our contemporaries, consider seriously their wishes and desires, seek to understand that which burns in their hearts and what makes them afraid and diffident”. Besides, paying attention to the needs and expectations of people «does not mean renouncing what is different in Christianity, or the transcendence of the Gospel... the Christian message points to a fully human way of life but does not limit itself to presenting mere humanism. Jesus Christ came so that we may partake of the divine life, of that life which has been called “the humanity of God.” (*Communicating the Gospel in a changing world* n. 34)
- **The Spirit does not come only to rest on Jesus**, but to possess him permanently so that he may share himself with others in baptism. Finally, the lamb who pardons sins and “the dove of the Church, meet in Christ”. Here is a quotation from St. Bernard where he brings together the two symbols: “The lamb is among animals that which the dove is among birds: innocence, sweetness and simplicity.”

Some practical suggestions:

- Renew our availability to collaborate with the mission of Christ in communion with the Church by helping people to be free of evil and of sin.

- To stand by men and women on their journey that they may live in hope in Jesus who liberates and saves.
- To give witness to one's joy in experiencing the efficacy of the word of Jesus in one's life.
- To live by communicating faith giving witness to Jesus, savior of every person.

Psalm 40

This psalm speaks of the situation of a person who, freed from some oppression, finds no more authentic attitude in reply to God than an existential and total availability to his word.

I waited, I waited for Yahweh,
 then he stooped to me and heard my cry for help. He put a fresh song in my mouth,
 praise of our God. You wanted no sacrifice or cereal offering,
 but you gave me an open ear,
 you did not ask for burnt offering or sacrifice for sin; then I said, 'Here I am, I am coming.'
 In the scroll of the book it is written of me, my delight is to do your will;
 your law, my God, is deep in my heart.
 I proclaimed the saving justice of Yahweh in the great assembly. See, I will not hold my
 tongue, as you well know.

Closing Prayer

Father, who on the day of the Lord gather your people to celebrate
 the One who is First and Last,
 the Living One who has conquered death,
 grant us the strength of your Spirit so that, having broken the chains of evil, we may
 render you the free service
 of our obedience and love,
 so that we may reign with Christ in glory.
 For He is God, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, for ever and
 ever. (From the *Liturgy*)

Monday, January 16, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of heaven and earth, hear our prayers,
 and show us the way to your peace in the world.
 We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and
 the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 2: 18-22

John's disciples and the Pharisees were keeping a fast, when some people came to him
 and said to him, 'Why is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but
 your disciples do not?'

Jesus replied, 'Surely the bridegroom's attendants cannot fast while the bridegroom is still with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the time will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then, on that day, they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. And nobody puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins too. No! New wine into fresh skins!'

Reflection

- The five conflicts between Jesus and the Religious authority. In Mark 2: 1-12 we have seen the first conflict. It was about the forgiveness of sins. In Mark 2: 13-17, the second conflict is on communion around the same table, with sinners. Today's Gospel presents the third conflict concerning fasting. Tomorrow, we have the fourth conflict, concerning the observance of the Sabbath (Mk 2: 13-28). Day after tomorrow, the last conflict concerning the cure on the Sabbath (Mk 3: 1-6). The conflict concerning fasting has a central place. For this reason, the words on sewing a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak and the new wine into fresh skins (Mk 2: 21-22) should be understood in the light which radiates clearly also on the other conflicts, two before and two after.
- Jesus does not insist on the practice of fasting. Fasting is a very ancient practice, practiced by practically all religions. Jesus himself practiced it during forty days (Mt 4: 2). But he does not insist with his disciples so that they do the same thing. He leaves them free. This is why the disciples of John the Baptist and those of the Pharisees, who were obliged to fast, want to know why Jesus does not insist on fasting.
- When the bridegroom is with them, they do not have to fast. Jesus responds with a comparison. When the bridegroom is with the friends of the bridegroom, that is, during the wedding feast, they do not need to fast. Jesus considers himself as the bridegroom. The disciples are the friends of the bridegroom. During the time in which Jesus is with the disciples, there is the wedding feast. A day will come in which the bridegroom will be absent and then, if they wish they can fast. Jesus refers to his death. He knows and feels that if he wishes to continue on this path of freedom, the religious authority will want to kill him.
- To sew a new piece of cloth on an old cloak, new wine in new skins. These two affirmations of Jesus, which Mark places here, clarify the critical attitude of Jesus before religious authority. One does not sew a piece of new cloth on an old cloak. When the cloak is washed, the new piece of cloth tears the cloak and the tear becomes bigger. Nobody puts new wine in old skins, because the fermentation of the new wine will tear the old skins. New wine in new skins! The religion defended by the authority was like an old cloak, like an old skin. It is not necessary to want to change what is new and brought by Jesus, for old customs. The novelty brought by Jesus cannot be reduced to fit the measure of Judaism. Either one or the other! The wine which Jesus brings tears the old skins. It is necessary to know how to separate things. Jesus is not against what is "old." What he wants to avoid is that the old imposes itself on the new and, thus he begins to manifest it. It would be the same as reducing the message of the Vatican Council II to the catechism of the time before the Council, as some are wanting to do.

Personal Questions

- Beginning with the profound experience of God which encouraged him interiorly, Jesus had great freedom concerning the relationship to the norms and religious practices. And today, do we have this same liberty or do we lack the freedom of the mystics?
- A new piece of cloth on an old cloak, new wine in old skins. Does this exist in my life?

Concluding Prayer

We have recognized for ourselves,
and put our faith in, the love God has for us. (1 Jn 4: 16)

Tuesday, January 17, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of heaven and earth, hear our prayers,
and show us the way to your peace in the world.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 2: 23-28

It happened that on Sabbath day he was taking a walk through the cornfields, and his disciples began to make a path by plucking ears of corn.
And the Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing something on the Sabbath day that is forbidden?' And he replied, 'Have you never read what David did in his time of need when he and his followers were hungry—how he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the loaves of the offering which only the priests are allowed to eat, and how he also gave some to the men with him?'
And he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; so the Son of man is master even of the Sabbath.'

Reflection

- The Law exists for the good of persons. One day on the Sabbath, the disciples passed by a cornfield, and they opened a path by plucking ears of corn. In Matthew 12: 1 it is said that they were hungry. Quoting the Bible, the Pharisees criticized the attitude of the disciples. It would be a transgression of the law of the Sabbath (cf. Ex 20: 8-11). Jesus responded quoting the Bible also to indicate that the arguments of the others have no meaning, no reason for being. He recalls that David himself did something which was prohibited, because he took the sacred bread of the temple and gave it to the soldiers to eat because they were hungry (1 Sam 21: 2-7). And Jesus ends with two important phrases:
 - (a) the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath,
 - (b) The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath!

- The Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath. For more than five-hundred years, since the time of the Babylonian captivity to the time of Jesus, the Jews had observed the law of the Sabbath. This secular observance became for them a strong sign of identity. The Sabbath was rigorously observed. At the time of the Maccabees, toward the end of the second century before Christ, this observance had reached a critical point. Attacked by the Greeks on Sabbath, the rebellious Maccabees preferred to allow themselves to be killed rather than to transgress the law of the Sabbath using arms to defend their own life. For this, one thousand persons died (I Mac 2: 32-38). Reflecting on the massacre the Maccabee leaders concluded that they should resist and defend their own life, even on the Sabbath (I Mac 2: 39-41) Jesus used the same attitude: to consider the law of the Sabbath in a relative way in favor of the human life, because the law exists for the good of human life, and not vice-versa!
- The Son of Man is also the Lord of the Sabbath! The new experience of God as Father/Mother makes Jesus, the Son of Man, to have the key to discover the intention of God who is at the origin of the Law of the Old Testament. For this reason, the Son of Man is also the Lord of the Sabbath. Living with the people of Galilee during thirty years and feeling in his own person the oppression and the exclusion to which so many brothers and sisters were condemned in the name of the Law of God, Jesus perceives that this could not be the significance of that law. If God is Father, then he accepts all as sons and daughters. If God is Father, then we should be brothers and sisters to others.
- And this is what Jesus lived and preached, from the beginning to the end. The Law of the Sabbath must be at the service of life and of fraternity. If was precisely because of his fidelity to this message that Jesus was condemned to death. He disturbed the system, he was uncomfortable for them, and the system defended itself, using force against Jesus, because he wanted the Law itself to be at the service of life and not vice-versa.
- Jesus and the Bible. The Pharisees criticized Jesus in the name of the Bible. Jesus responds and criticizes the Pharisees using the Bible. He knew the Bible by heart. At that time, there were no printed Bibles as we have today! In every community there was only one Bible, handwritten which remained in the Synagogue. If Jesus knew the Bible so well, it means that during 30 years of his life in Nazareth, he participated intensely in the life of the community, where the Scripture was read every Saturday. We still lack very much in order to have the same familiarity with the Bible and the same participation in the community!

Personal Questions

- Saturday is for the human being and not vice-versa. Which are the points in my life which I have to change?
- Even without having the Bible at home, Jesus knew it by heart. And I?

Concluding Prayer

I give thanks to Yahweh with all my heart,
 in the meeting-place of honest people, in the assembly. Great are the deeds of Yahweh,
 to be pondered by all who delight in them. (Ps 111: 1-2)

Wednesday, January 18, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of heaven and earth, hear our prayers,
and show us the way to your peace in the world.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 1-6

Another time he went into the synagogue, and there was a man present whose hand was withered. And they were watching him to see if he would cure him on the Sabbath day, hoping for something to charge him with. He said to the man with the withered hand, 'Get up and stand in the middle!' Then he said to them, 'Is it permitted on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do evil; to save life, or to kill?' But they said nothing.

Then he looked angrily round at them, grieved to find them so obstinate, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and began at once to plot with the Herodians against him, discussing how to destroy him.

Reflection

In today's Gospel we meditate on the last of the five conflicts which Mark presents at the beginning of his Gospel (Mk 2: 1 to 3: 6). The four previous conflicts were provoked by the enemies of Jesus. This last one is provoked by Jesus himself and reveals the seriousness of the conflict between him and the religious authority of his time. It is a conflict of life or death. It is important to note the category of enemies which has arisen in this conflict. It is a question of the Pharisees and the Herodians, that is of the religious and the civil authority. When Mark wrote his Gospel in the year 70, many of them still remembered very well the terrible persecution of the 60's, perpetuated by Nero against the Christian communities. In hearing that Jesus himself had been threatened to death and how he behaved in the midst of these dangerous conflicts, the Christians found a source of courage and orientation so as not to be discouraged along the journey.

- Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus enters into the Synagogue. He had the habit of participating in the celebrations of the people. A man was there who had a withered hand. A physically disabled person who could not participate fully, because he was considered to be impure. Even if he was present in the community, he was marginalized. He had to remain far away from the rest.
- The concern of the enemies of Jesus. The enemies were observing him to see if Jesus would cure on Saturday. They wanted to accuse him. The second commandment of the Law of God ordered to "sanctify the Sabbath." It was prohibited to work on that day (Ex 20, 8-20). The Pharisees said that to cure a sick person was the same as working. And for this reason they taught: "It is prohibited to cure on the Sabbath!" They placed the law above the well-being of persons. Jesus was an uncomfortable person for them, because he placed the well-being of persons above the norms and the laws. The concern of the Pharisees and of the Herodians was not the zeal for the Law, but rather the will, the desire to accuse and get rid of Jesus.

- Get up and stand in the middle! Jesus asks two things of the physically disabled person: Get up and stand in the middle! The word “get up” is the same one which the communities of Mark also used to say “rise, resurrect.” The disabled person has to “resurrect,” to get up, to live in the middle and to take his place in the centre of the community! The marginalized, the excluded, have to live in the middle! They cannot be excluded. They must be together with the others! Jesus calls the excluded one to stand in the middle.
- The question of Jesus leaves the others without knowing what to say. Jesus asks: Is it permitted on the Sabbath to do good or to do bad? To save life or to kill? He could have asked: “On the Sabbath is it permitted to cure: yes or no?! And in this way all would have answered: “No, it is not permitted!” But Jesus changed the question. For him, in that concrete case, “to cure” was the same as “to do good” or “to save a life,” and not “to kill!” With his question Jesus put the finger on the wound. He denounced the prohibition of curing on the Sabbath considering this to be a system of death. A wise question! The enemies remain without knowing what to answer.
- Jesus looked angrily around at them, grieved to find them so obstinate. Jesus reacts with indignation and sadness before the attitude of the Pharisees and the Herodians. He orders the man to stretch out his hand, and he cures him. By curing the disabled man, Jesus shows that he does not agree with the system which places the law above life. In response to the action of Jesus, the Pharisees and the Herodians decide to kill him. With this decision they confirm that, in fact, they are defenders of a system of death! They are not afraid to kill in order to defend the system against Jesus who attacks and criticizes it in the name of life.

Personal Questions

- The disabled man was called to stand in the center of the community. In our community, do the poor and the excluded have a privileged place?
- Have you already confronted yourself, sometimes, with persons such as the Herodians and the Pharisees who place the law above the well-being of persons? What did you feel at that moment? Have you agreed with them or have you criticized them?

Concluding Prayer

Yet you are merciful to all,
and nothing that you have made disgusts you, Lord, lover of life! (Wis 11: 23-26)

Thursday, January 19, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of heaven and earth, hear our prayers,
and show us the way to your peace in the world.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 7-12

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lakeside, and great crowds from Galilee followed him. From Judaea, and from Jerusalem, and from Idumaea and Transjordan and the region of Tyre and Sidon, great numbers who had heard of all he was doing came to him.

And he asked his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, to keep him from being crushed. For he had cured so many that all who were afflicted in any way were crowding forward to touch him.

And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw him, would fall down before him and shout, 'You are the Son of God!' But he warned them strongly not to make him known.

Reflection

The conclusion reached at the end of this fifth conflict (Mk 2-3, 6), is that the Good News as it was announced by Jesus, said exactly the contrary of the teaching of the religious authority of the time. This is why, that at the end of the last conflict, it is foreseen that Jesus will not have an easy life and will be put to death. Death is already appearing in the horizon. They decide to make him die (Mk 3: 6). Without a sincere conversion it is not possible for persons to attain a correct understanding of the Good News.

- A summary of the evangelizing action of Jesus. The verses of today's Gospel (Mk 3:7-12) are a summary of the activity of Jesus and they stress an enormous contrast. Earlier, in Mk 2: 1-3: 6, it was spoken only of conflicts, including the conflict of the life and death between Jesus and the civil and religious authority of Galilee (Mk 3: 1- 6). And here, in the summary, we have the contrary: an immense popular movement, greater than the movement of John the Baptist, because people come not only from Galilee, but also from Judaea, from Jerusalem, from Idumaea, from Transjordan, and even from the pagan region of Tyre and Sidon to encounter Jesus! (Mk 3: 7-12). All want to see him and to touch him. The people are so numerous, that Jesus himself is concerned. There is the danger of being crushed by the multitude. This is why he asks the disciples to have a boat ready for him so that the crowd would not crush him. And from the boat he spoke to the crowds. There were especially the excluded and the marginalized who came to him with their ailments: the sick and those possessed. Those who were not accepted to live in the society of the time were accepted by Jesus. Here is the contrast: on the one side the religious and civil leaders decided to put Jesus to death (Mk 3: 6); on the other side, an immense popular movement seeking salvation in Jesus. Who will win?
- The unclean spirits and Jesus. Mark insists very much on the expulsion of the unclean spirits. The first miracle of Jesus is the expulsion of the unclean spirits (Mk 1: 25). The first impact caused by Jesus is due to the expulsion of the devil (Mk 1: 27). One of the principal causes of the clash of Jesus with the Scribes is the expulsion of the unclean spirits. (Mk 3: 22). The first power which the Apostles received when they were sent out on mission was the power to expel the demons (Mk 16: 17). What does it mean in Mark's Gospel to drive out or expel the evil spirits?
- At the time of Mark the fear of the devil was increasing. Some religions instead of liberating the people, increased fear and anguish. One of the objectives of the Good News of Jesus is precisely to help people to liberate themselves from this fear. The coming of the Kingdom means the coming of a stronger power. Jesus is "the stronger man" who has come to conquer and overcome Satan, the power of evil, and to take away from him, to rob humanity imprisoned by fear (Mk 3: 27). This is why Mark insists very much on the victory of Jesus over the power of evil, over the devil, over Satan, sin and death. From the beginning to the end, with almost similar words, he repeats the same message: "And Jesus drove out, expelled the impure spirits!" (Mk 1: 26, 27, 34, 39; 3: 11- 12, 15, 22, 30; 5: 1-20; 6: 7, 13; 7: 25-29; 9: 25-27, 38; 16: 9,17). It seems

almost a refrain which is repeated! Today, instead of using always the same words, we prefer to use diverse words. We would say: "The power of evil, Satan, which causes so much fear to people, Jesus overcomes him, dominates him, conquers him, threw him off the throne, drove him out or expelled him, eliminated him, annihilated him, knocked him down, destroyed him and killed him!" What Mark wants to tell us is the following: "Christians are forbidden to be afraid of Satan!" After Jesus rose from the dead, it is a mania and a lack of faith to call in cause Satan, at every moment, as if he still had any power on us. To insist on the danger of the devil in order that people may return to Church, means to ignore the Good News of the Kingdom. It is a lack of faith in the Resurrection of Jesus!

Personal Questions

- How do you live your faith in the Resurrection of Jesus? Does it help in some way to help you overcome fear?
- To drive away or expel the devil! What do you do in order to neutralize this power in your life?

Concluding Prayer

Joy and happiness in you to all who seek you! Let them ceaselessly cry, 'Great is Yahweh' who love your saving power. (Ps 40)

Friday, January 20, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,
ruler of all things in heaven and on earth, listen favorably to the prayer of your people, and grant us your peace in our day.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 13-19

Jesus went up onto the mountain and summoned those he wanted. So they came to him and he appointed twelve; they were to be his companions and to be sent out to proclaim the message, with power to drive out devils. And so he appointed the Twelve, Simon to whom he gave the name Peter, James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, to whom he gave the name Boanerges or 'Sons of Thunder'; Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, the man who was to betray him.

Reflection

The Gospel today describes the acceptance and mission of the twelve apostles. Jesus begins with two disciples to whom he adds other two (Mk 1: 16-20). Gradually, the number

increased. Luke tells us that he called the 72 disciples so as to go on mission with him (Lk 10: 1).

- Mark 3, 13-15: The call for a two-fold mission. Jesus calls whom he wants and they go with him, they follow him. Then, "He appointed Twelve, to be his companions and to be sent out to proclaim the message, with power to drive out devils". Jesus calls them for a double purpose, for a two-fold mission: (a) To be with Him, that is, to form the community of which He, Jesus, is the centre. (b) To pray and to have power to drive out devils, that is, to announce the Good News and to fight against the power of evil that ruins the life of people and alienates persons. Mark says that Jesus went up to the mountain and while he was there, he called the disciples. The call means climbing up. In the Bible to climb up the mountain recalls the mountain that Moses climbed and had the encounter with God (Ex 24, 12). Luke says that Jesus went up to the mountain, prayed all night and, the following day, he called the disciples. He prayed to God so as to know whom to choose (Lk 6, 12-13). After having called them, Jesus makes the election official and creates a more stable group of twelve persons in order to give more consistency to the mission; and also to signify the continuity of God's project. The twelve Apostles of the New Testament are the successors of the twelve Tribes of Israel.
- Thus, the first community of the New Testament comes into being, is born, a model community, which gradually grows around Jesus during the three years of his public activity. At the beginning they are only four (Mk 1: 16-20). Shortly afterwards the community increases in the measure in which the mission is developing, extending in the towns and villages of Galilee. There is a time in which they do not even have the time to eat or to rest (Mk 3: 2). This is why Jesus was concerned about giving the disciples some rest (Mk 6: 31) and to increase the number of missionaries (Lk 10: 1). In this way, Jesus tries to maintain the two-fold objective of the call: to be with Him and to go on mission. The community which is formed in this way around Jesus has three characteristics which belong to his nature: it is a forming, missionary community, and is inserted among the poor of Galilee.
- Mark 3: 16-19: The list of names of the twelve apostles. Immediately after, Mark gives the names of the twelve: Simon to whom he gave the name of Peter; James and John the sons of Zebedee, to whom he gave the name of Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus,
- Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, the man who was to betray him. The majority of these names come from the Old Testament. For example, Simon is the name of one of the sons of the Patriarch Jacob (Gn 29: 33). James is the same as Jacob (Gn 25: 26). Judas is the name of the other son of Jacob (Gn 35: 23). Matthew also bore the name of Levi (Mk 2: 14), who was the other son of Jacob (Gn 35: 23). Of the twelve Apostles, seven have a name that comes from the time of the Patriarchs. Two have the name of Simon; two are called James; Two Judas; one Levi. There is only one who has a Greek name: Philip. It would be like in a family where all have names of ancient times and only one has a modern name. This reveals the desire that people have to remake history, from the beginning! It is worthwhile to think about the names which we give our children today. Like them, each one of us is called by God by our name.

Personal Questions

- To be with Jesus and to go on Mission is the two-fold purpose of the Christian community. How do you assume this commitment in the community to which you belong?
- Jesus called the twelve disciples by their name. You, I, we, all of us exist because God calls us by our name. Think about this!

Concluding Prayer

Show us, Lord, your faithful love, grant us your saving help.
His saving help is near for those who fear him, his glory will dwell in our land. (Ps 85: 7, 9)

Saturday, January 21, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,
ruler of all things in heaven and on earth, listen favourably to the prayer of your people,
and grant us your peace in our day.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and
the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 20-21

Jesus went home again, and once more such a crowd collected that they could not even have a meal. 21 When his relations heard of this, they set out to take charge of him; they said, 'He is out of his mind.'

Reflection

The Gospel today is very short. There are only two verses. It speaks about two things:

- about the great activity of Jesus up to the point of not even having time to eat, and
- the contrary reaction of the family of Jesus up to the point of thinking that he was out of his mind. Jesus had problems with his family. Sometimes, the family helps, and other times it constitutes an obstacle. This is what happened with Jesus, and this is what happens with us also.
- Mark 3: 20: The activity of Jesus. Jesus returned home. His home is now in Capernaum (Mk 2: 1). He is no longer living with his family in Nazareth. People knowing that Jesus was in the house, they went there. Such a crowd of people gathered there that He and his disciples did not even have time to eat calmly (Mk 6: 31)
- Mark 3: 20: Conflict with his family. When Jesus' relatives knew this, they said: "He has lost his mind!" Perhaps, this was so because Jesus did not seem to be behaving normally. Perhaps, because they thought that with this he jeopardized the name of the family. Whatever it was, the relatives decided to take him back to Nazareth. This is a sign that the relationship of Jesus with his family was suffering. This must have been a source of suffering, for him as well as for Mary, his Mother. Later on (Mk 3: 31-

35) Mark tells how the encounter of Jesus with his relatives was. They arrived to the house where Jesus was staying. Probably they had gone there from Nazareth. There is a distance of about 40 km. from there to Capernaum. His mother was with them. They could not enter the house because there were many people there at the entrance. This is the reason why they sent him a message: "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you!" The reaction of Jesus was firm and he asked: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And he himself answers pointing out to the crowd gather there around him: "Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother". He extended the family! Jesus does not allow the family to draw him away from the mission.

The situation of the family at the time of Jesus. In the ancient Israel, the clan, that is, the large family (the community) was the basis of social living together. This was the protection of the small families and of the persons, the guarantee of the possession of the land, the principal channel of tradition, the defense of identity. That was the concrete way in which the people of that time had to incarnate the love of God in the love toward neighbor. To defend the clan, the community it was the same as to defend the Covenant. In Galilee at the time of Jesus, because of the Roman system, introduced and imposed during the long years of government of Herod the Great (37 BC to 4 BC) and of his son Herod Antipas (4 BC to 39 AD), all this had ceased to exist, or existed every day less. The clan (community) was becoming weaker. The taxes that had to be paid to the government and to the Temple, the increasing getting into debt, the individualist mentality of the Hellenistic ideology, the frequent threats of the violent repression on the part of the Romans, the obligation to accept the soldiers and to give them lodging, the always greater problems for survival, all this led the families to close up in themselves and in their own needs. Hospitality was no longer practiced; neither was sharing, nor communion around the table, the acceptance of the excluded. This closing up was strengthened by the religion of the time. The observance of the norms of purity was a factor of marginalization for many people: women, children Samaritans, foreigners, lepers, possessed, publicans or tax collectors, the sick, mutilated persons, the paraplegics. These norms, instead of helping and favoring acceptance, sharing and communion, favored separation and exclusion.

- Thus, the political, social and economic situation as well as the religious ideology of the time, everything was against and contributed to weaken the central values of the clan, of the community. Therefore, in order that the Kingdom of God could manifest itself, once again, in the community living of the people, persons had to overcome the narrow limits of the small family and open themselves up once again to the large family, the Community.
- Jesus gives the example. When his relatives get to Capernaum and try to take hold of him to take him back home, he reacts. Instead of remaining closed up in his small family, he extends the family (Mk 3: 33-35). He creates the community. He asks the same thing to those who want to follow him. Families cannot close up in themselves. The excluded and the marginalized should be accepted, once again, into the community, and in this way feel accepted by God (cf. Lk 14: 12-14). This is the path to be followed in order to attain the objective of the Law which said: "Let there be no poor among you" (Dt 15: 4). Just like the great prophets, Jesus tries to strengthen and affirm community life in the villages of Galilee. He takes the profound sense or significance of the clan, of the family, of the community, like an expression of the incarnation of the love of God in the love toward neighbor.

Personal Questions

- Does the family help participation in the Christian community or does it make it difficult? How do you assume your commitment in the Christian community?
- What can all this tell us concerning our relationships in the family and in the community?

Concluding Prayer

Clap your hands, all peoples, acclaim God with shouts of joy.
For Yahweh, the Most High, is glorious, the great king over all the earth. (Ps 47: 1-2)

Sunday, January 22, 2023

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

In the darkness of a starless night, a night of no sense,
you, the Word of life,

like lightning in the storm of forgetfulness, entered within the bounds of doubt
under cover of the limits of precariousness to hide the light.

Words made of silence and of the ordinary,

your human words, heralds of the secrets of the Most High:

like hooks cast into the waters of death

to find man once more, immersed in his anxious follies, and reclaim him, plundered,
through the attractive radiance of forgiveness.

To you, Ocean of Peace and shadow of eternal Glory,

I render thanks:

Calm waters on my shore that awaits the wave, I wish to seek you!

And may the friendship of the brothers protect me when night falls on my desire for you.
Amen.

The Gospel Text - Matthew 4: 12-23

12 Hearing that John had been arrested he withdrew to Galilee, 13 and leaving Nazareth he went and settled in Capernaum, beside the lake, on the borders of Zebulon and Naphtali. 14 This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: 15 Land of Zebulon! Land of Naphtali! Way of the sea beyond Jordan. Galilee of the nations! 16 The people that lived in darkness have seen a great light; on those who lived in a country of shadow dark as death a light has dawned. 17 From then onwards Jesus began his proclamation with the message, 'Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.' 18 As he was walking by the Lake of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and his brother Andrew; they were making a cast into the lake with their net, for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, 'Come after me and I will make you fishers of people.' 20 And at once they left their nets and followed him. 21 Going on from there he saw another pair of brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they were in their boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 And at once, leaving the boat and their father, they followed him. 23 He went round the whole of Galilee teaching in

their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing all kinds of disease and illness among the people.

A Moment of Silence:

Let us allow the voice of the Word to resonate within us.

Questions for reflection:

- Jesus settled by the sea: the Son of God settled beside human beings. The sea, this mysterious and boundless world, as immense in its horizon as the heavens are; the one reflected in the other, bordering on each other, distinct, a mutual reflection of calm and peace. Jesus, land of God, comes to live by the sea and becomes land of humankind. Shall we go and live beside God as the Word was before he came to us? Or is our fragile life in the flesh sufficient for us?
- The people that lived in darkness has seen a great light: immersed in darkness, men and women live their days in resigned pain and without the hope of anything changing for them. The world where faith is denied is a world immersed in darkness until light comes into it. Christ, the light of nations, has come into the world and darkness has dissipated so that the light might shine. Has the darkness within us dissipated?
- They left their nets at once and followed him. At once. Left. Followed. Difficult words for our way of life. To respond to God: yes, but calmly. To leave whatever we are doing for the Lord: yes, but first we must think well. How would it be if we did as the Apostles did: at once, left everything, followed Him?

A Key to the Reading:

The God of the universe who created heaven and earth with his Word alone, leaves his dwelling place and comes to live beside the sea in a foreign land, to speak the language of earth so that heaven may be made known. The Son of man, too, the master from Nazareth, leaves the home of his youth to go to the Galilee of the peoples beyond the Jordan. The darkness of ignorance that flickers across the centuries is pierced by a great light. The shadows of death hear words that open new ways and new life: *«Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.»* To change itinerary, to come close to the light is not something strange for those who are familiar with the presence of the Most High. Because the eyes get used to the presence and the human heart easily forgets the past darkness when it is enjoying splendor. Repent. How? Human relationship becomes the new way along the seashore. There are brothers along the shore, pairs of brothers: Simon and Andrew, James, and John. God does not come to break these relationships but takes them up so as to fish in a new more shining life, in his life and his sea.

As he was walking... The way is a great secret of the spiritual life. We are not called to stand still, but for us also to go by the sea, the sea of the world where people are the fish, immersed in bitter, salty and inhuman waters. Fishers of men. One cannot fish without the net of love, without a father who guards the boat, without a boat to launch into the deep. The net of human relationships is the only possible weapon of evangelizers, because with love we can go on a great fishing expedition, and love must not only be proclaimed but brought. To be called in pairs means precisely this bringing of a visible, concrete love, the love of brothers who enjoy the same parents, the love in whose veins flows the same blood, the same life.

Follow me... to call others to walk, fish and witness. The nets break, but every fisherman is capable of repairing a broken net. Love is not a knick-knack that is broken with use! The art of accommodation makes precious every possible relationship among people. What matters is going, trusting in that new name, always and still called LIFE.

Those called, go and follow Jesus. But where does Jesus go? He walks all over Galilee, teaches in the synagogues, preaches the good news of the kingdom, heals all kinds of diseases and infirmities of the people. Every sea person, apostle of the Kingdom, will act like Jesus: will walk the ways of the world and stop in the marketplaces of people, will tell the good news of God and will take care of the sick and infirm, will make visible the concern of the Father for each one of his sons and daughters.

PRAYER (Is 43: 1-21)

Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by your name, you are mine.

Should you pass through the waters, I shall be with you; or through rivers, they will not swallow you up.

Should you walk through fire, you will not suffer, and the flame will not burn you.

For I am Yahweh, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Since I regard you as precious,

since you are honored and I love you,

I therefore give people in exchange for you, and nations in return for your life.

Do not be afraid, for I am with you. You yourselves are my witnesses, declares Yahweh, and the servant whom I have chosen,

so that you may know and believe me and understand that it is I. I, I am Yahweh, and there is no other Saviour but me.

Thus says Yahweh, who made a way through the sea, a path in the raging waters,

No need to remember past events,

no need to think about what was done before. Look, I am doing something new, now it emerges; can you not see it?

Yes, I am making a road in the desert and rivers in wastelands. The people I have shaped for myself will broadcast my praises.

Contemplation

The waters of the sea that cover the earth, tell me of the flow of your life, Lord. When sky and sea blend at the horizon, it seems as if I am seeing all that you are being reloaded into our being. A flow that is a soft wave of presence and an unspeakable story of love, made up of names, events, ages, secrets, placid emotions and unforeseen troubles, a story made up of lights and grey times, of enthusiasms and calm drowsiness. This sea that is humanity invaded by your peace, contains words without end, the words of your Word who wanted profoundly to take on the vest of the sand of time. How many words on the shores and ocean beds that are silently gathered, if only I am disposed to listen, your words that the waves of life bring to shore and that are roads for navigators, ancient and new words, words never forgotten and words wrapped in mystery. Lord, may the waves of humanity not sweep me away, but may they become trails of communion for the fragile boat of my journey. May I learn from you to launch into the deep to fish in the dark nights of the human story, when the fish are more prone to allow themselves to be caught. At your word, my God, I will cast the nets, and when I bring the boats to shore, I will go on following the footsteps you have left on the shore of history, when you chose to clothe yourself with our muddy clothes.

Monday, January 23, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, direct your love that is within us, that our efforts in the name of your Son may bring mankind to unity and peace. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 22-30

The scribes who had come down from Jerusalem were saying, 'Beelzebul is in him,' and, 'It is through the prince of devils that he drives devils out.'

So he called them to him and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot last. And if a household is divided against itself, that household can never last. Now if Satan has rebelled against himself and is divided, he cannot last either -- it is the end of him. But no one can make his way into a strong man's house and plunder his property unless he has first tied up the strong man. Only then can he plunder his house. 'In truth I tell you, all human sins will be forgiven, and all the blasphemies ever uttered; but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven but is guilty of an eternal sin.' This was because they were saying, 'There is an unclean spirit in him.'

Reflection

- *The conflict grows.* In the Gospel of Mark there is a progressive sequence. In the measure in which the Good News advances and people accept it, in the same measure grows also the resistance on the part of the religious authority. The conflict began to grow and to influence all the groups of persons. For example, the relatives of Jesus thought that he was out of his mind. (Mk 3: 20-21), and the Scribes who had come from Jerusalem thought that he was possessed, that Beelzebul was in him (Mk 3: 22).
- *The conflict with the authority.* The Scribes slandered against him. They said that Beelzebul was in him and that it was through the prince of devils that he drove out the devils. They had come from Jerusalem, about 120 kilometers distance, to keep an eye on or watch Jesus' behavior. They wanted to defend tradition against the novelty that Jesus taught to the people (Mk 7, 1). They thought that his teaching was against the good doctrine. The response given by Jesus had three parts.
- *First Part: The comparison with a divided family.* Jesus uses the comparison of the divided family and of the divided kingdom to denounce the absurdity of the slander. To say that Jesus casts out or drives out the devils with the help of the prince of the devils is to deny the evidence, what is evident. It is like saying that water is dry, and that the sun is darkness. The doctors of Jerusalem slandered, because they did not know how to explain the benefits worked by Jesus in behalf of the people. They were afraid to lose their leadership.
- *Second Part: The comparison of the strong man.* Jesus compares the devil to a strong man. Nobody, unless he is a strong person, will be able to take away the house from a strong man, to rob it. Jesus is the strongest of all. And this is why he succeeds to

enter the house and to dominate and overcome the strong man. He succeeds in driving out the devils. Jesus wins over the strong man and robs his house, that is, he liberates the persons who were under the power of the evil one. The Prophet Isaiah had already used the same comparison to describe the coming of the Messiah (Is 49: 24-25). Luke adds that the expulsion of the devil is an evident sign of the coming of the Kingdom (Lk 11: 20).

- *Third part: The sin against the Holy Spirit.* All sins are forgiven, except the sin against the Holy Spirit. Which is the sin against the Holy Spirit? It is to say: "The spirit which impels Jesus to cast out or drive out the devil, comes precisely from the devil!" The one who speaks in this way is incapable to receive pardon. Why? Can the one who covers his eyes guess? He cannot! The one who closes his mouth, can he eat? He cannot. The one who does not close the umbrella of slander, can he receive the rain of pardon? He cannot! Pardon would pass by his side but would not reach him. It is not that God does not want to forgive. God always wants to forgive. But it is the sinner who refuses to receive pardon!

Personal Questions

- The religious authorities close themselves up in themselves and deny the evidence. Has this ever happened to me, that I close myself in self before the evidence of facts?
- Slander is the arm or weapon of the weak. Have you had experience on this point?

Concluding Prayer

The whole wide world has seen the saving power of our God. Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth,
burst into shouts of joy! (Ps 98: 3-4)

Tuesday, January 24, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, direct your love that is within us,
that our efforts in the name of your Son may bring mankind to unity and peace.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 31-35

Now his mother and his brothers arrived and, standing outside, sent in a message asking for him. A crowd was sitting round him at the time the message was passed to him, 'Look, your mother and brothers and sisters are outside asking for you.'
He replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those sitting in a circle round him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother.'

Reflection

- The family of Jesus. The relatives reached the house where Jesus was. Probably they have come from Nazareth. From there up to Capernaum there is a distance of forty kilometers. His mother also comes together with them. They do not enter, but they send a messenger: "Look, your mother and brothers and sisters are outside asking for you! Jesus' reaction is clear: Who are my mother and my brothers? And he himself responds turning to look toward the crowd who is there around: Here are my mother and my brothers! Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother! To understand well the sense of this response it is convenient to look at the situation of the family in the time of Jesus.
- In the Old Israel, the clan, that is, the large family (the community), was the basis for social living together. It was the protection of the families and of the persons, the guarantee of the possession of the land, the principle vehicle of the tradition, the defense of identity. It was the concrete way on the part of the people of that time to incarnate the love of God and the love toward neighbor. To defend the clan was the same as to defend the Covenant.
- In the Galilee at the time of Jesus, because of the system established during the long periods of government of Herod the Great (37 BC to 4 BC) and of his son Herod Antipas (4 BC to 39 AD), the clan, (the community) was becoming weaker. The taxes to be paid, both to the Government and to the Temple, the debts which were increasing, the individualistic mentality of the Hellenistic ideology, the frequent threats of violent repression on the part of the Romans and the obligation to accept the soldiers and give them hospitality, the ever-growing problem of survival, all this impelled the families to close themselves in self and to think only of their own needs. This closing up was strengthened by the religion of the time. For example: the one who gave his inheritance to the Temple, could leave his parents without any help. This weakened the fourth commandment which was the backbone of the clan (Mk 7: 8-13). Besides this, the observance of the Norms of purity was a factor of marginalization for many persons: women, children, Samaritans, foreigners, lepers, possessed persons, tax collectors or Publicans, the sick, mutilated persons and paraplegic persons.
- And thus, the concern with the problems of one's own family prevented the persons to meet in community. Now, in order that the Kingdom of God could manifest itself in community living of the people, the persons had to overcome the narrow limits of the small family and open themselves again to the large family, to the Community. Jesus gave the example. When his own family tries to take possession of him, he reacted and extended the family: "Who are my mother and my brothers?". And he himself gave the answer, turning his look toward the crowd: Here are my mother and my brothers!
- Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother, sister and mother! (Mk 3: 33-35). He created a community.
- Jesus asked the same thing from all those who wanted to follow him. Families could not close themselves up in self. The excluded and the marginalized had to be accepted in the life with others, and in this way feel accepted by God (Lk 14: 12-14) This was the path to attain the objective of the Law which said "There must, then, be no poor among you" (Dt 15: 4). Like the great Prophets of the past, Jesus tries to consolidate community life in the villages of Galilee. He takes back the profound sense of the clan, of the family, of the community, as an expression of the incarnation of the love toward God and toward neighbor.

Personal Questions

- To live faith in the community. What place and what influence does the community have in my way of living faith?
- Today, in the large city, overcrowding promotes individualism which is contrary to life in community. What am I doing to counteract this evil?

Concluding Prayer

I waited, I waited for Yahweh, then he stooped to me
and heard my cry for help.
He put a fresh song in my mouth, praise of our God. (Ps 40: 1, 3)

Wednesday, January 25, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of heaven and earth, hear our prayers,
and show us the way to your peace in the world.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and
the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 16: 15-18

And he said to them, 'Go out to the whole world; proclaim the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. These are the signs that will be associated with believers: in my name they will cast out devils; they will have the gift of tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison; they will lay their hands on the sick, who will recover.'

Reflection

- *The signs which accompany the proclamation or announcement of the Good News.* And finally Jesus appears to the eleven disciples and reproached them because they had not believed the persons who had seen him Risen. Once again, Mark refers to the resistance of the disciples to believe in the witness of those, men and women, who had made an experience of the Resurrection of Jesus. Why would this be so? Probably, in order to teach two things. *In the first place*, that faith in Jesus goes through the faith in persons who give witness. *Second*, that nobody should get discouraged, when incredulity comes from the heart. Finally, the eleven disciples had doubts!
- Then Jesus gives them the mission of announcing the Good News to all creatures. The requirement which he indicates is the following: *to believe and to be baptized*. To those who had the courage to believe in the Good News and who are baptized, he promises them the followings signs: they will cast out devils, they will have the gift of tongues, they will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison, they will lay their hands on the sick who will recover. This happens up until now:

- *To cast out devils;* is to fight against the force of evil which destroys life. The life of many persons has improved for having entered a community and for having begun to live the Good News of the presence of God in their life.
- *To have the gift of tongues:* is to begin to communicate with the others in a new form. Sometimes, we find a person whom we never have seen before, but it seems to us that we have known her for a long time. This happens because we speak the same language, the language of love.
- *They will be unharmed if they take deadly poison:* there are many things which poison living together. Much gossip which destroys the relationship between persons. The one who lives in the presence of God goes beyond this and succeeds in not being bothered by this terrible poison.
- *Cures the sick:* wherever there is a clearer and more dynamic conscience of the presence of God, there is also a special attention toward oppressed and marginalized persons, especially sick persons. What helps the person more to heal, is to feel accepted and loved.
- *Through the community, Jesus continues his mission:* Jesus himself who lived in Palestine, where he accepted the poor of his time, revealing in this way, the love of the Father, this same Jesus continues alive in our midst, in our communities. And through us he continues his mission, revealing the Good News of the Love of God for the poor. Up until today, the Resurrection takes place, which urges us to sing: "Who will separate us, who will separate us from the love of Christ, who will separate us?" (cf. Rm 8, 38- 39). No power of this world is capable to counteract the force which comes from faith in the Resurrection (Rm 8: 35-39). A community which wants to be witness of the Resurrection has to be a sign of life, should fight against the forces of death, in a way that the world may be a favorable place for life, and should believe that a different world is possible. Above all in Latin America, where the life of the people is in danger because of the system of death which has been imposed; the communities have to be a living proof of the hope which overcomes the world, without fear of being happy!

Personal Questions

- To cast out devils, to have the gift of new tongues, to be unharmed by deadly poison and by the snakes, to impose the hands on the sick: Have you fulfilled any of these signs?
- Does Jesus continue his mission through us and through our community? Is he able to fulfil this mission in our community? How and in which way?

Concluding Prayer

Praise Yahweh, all nations, extol him, all peoples,
for his faithful love is strong
and his constancy never-ending. (Ps 117: 1-2)

Thursday, January 26, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, direct your love that is within us, that our efforts in the name of your Son may bring mankind to unity and peace. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 4: 21-25

He also said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under a tub or under the bed? Surely to be put on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, but it must be disclosed, nothing kept secret except to be brought to light. Anyone who has ears for listening should listen!'

He also said to them, 'Take notice of what you are hearing. The standard you use will be used for you -- and you will receive more besides; anyone who has, will be given more; anyone who has not, will be deprived even of what he has.'

Reflection

- The lamp which gives light. At that time, there was no electric light. Imagine all that follows. The family is at home. It begins to get dark. The father lifts up the small lamp, he lights it and places under the tub or under the bed. What will the others say? They will begin to scream: "Father, place it on the table!" This is the story that Jesus tells. He does not explain. He only says: Anyone who has ears to listen, should listen! The Word of God is the lamp which should be lit in the darkness of the night. If it remains closed up in the closed Book of the Bible, it is like a small lamp under the tub. When it is united to the life in community, there it is placed on the table and it gives light!
- Be attentive to preconceptions. Jesus asks the disciples to become aware of the preconceptions with which they listen to the teaching which he offers. We should be attentive to the ideas which we have when we look at Jesus! If the colour of the eyes is green, everything seems to be green. If they are blue, everything will be blue! If the idea with which we look at Jesus were mistaken, everything which I think about Jesus will be threatened of being an error. If I think that the Messiah has to be a glorious King, I will understand nothing of what the Lord teaches and I will see that everything is mistaken.
- Parable: a new way of teaching and of speaking of Jesus. Jesus used parables, above all, to teach: this was his way. He had an enormous capacity to find very simple images to compare the things of God with the things of the life which people knew and experienced in the daily struggle to survive. This presupposes two things: to be inside, involved in the things of life, and to be inside, involved in the things of the Kingdom of God.
- The teaching of Jesus was diverse from the teaching of the Scribes. It was a Good News for the poor, because Jesus revealed a new face of God, in which people could recognize themselves and rejoice. "I bless you, Father, Lord of Heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children. Yes, Father, for that is what it pleased you to do!" (Mt 11: 25-28).

Personal Questions

- The Word of God, a lamp which gives light. What place does the Bible have in my life? What light do I receive?
- Which is the image of Jesus that I have within me? Who is Jesus for me and who am I for Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

Taste and see that Yahweh is good.
How blessed are those who take refuge in him. (Ps 34: 8)

Friday, January 27, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, direct your love that is within us, that our efforts in the name of your Son may bring mankind to unity and peace. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 4: 26-34

Jesus said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready, at once he starts to reap because the harvest has come.'

He also said, 'What can we say that the kingdom is like? What parable can we find for it? It is like a mustard seed which, at the time of its sowing, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all and puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade.' Using many parables like these, he spoke the word to them, so far as they were capable of understanding it. He would not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything to his disciples when they were by themselves.

Reflection

- It is always beautiful to see Jesus, who sought in life and in events, new elements and images which could help people to perceive and experience the presence of the Kingdom. In today's Gospel, once again, he narrates two brief stories which take place every day in the life of all of us: "The story of the seed that grows by itself" and "the story of the small mustard seed which grows into the biggest shrub."
- The story of the seed which grows alone. The farmer who plants knows the process: seed, the green sprout, leaf, spike, grain. The farmer knows how to wait, he does not cut down the grain before it is time. But he does not know how the soil, the rain, the sun and the seed have this force or strength to make the plant grow from nothing until it bears fruit. This is how the Kingdom of God is. It is a process, there are stages and moments of growth. It takes place in time. It produces fruit at the just moment,

but nobody knows how to explain its mysterious force. Nobody, not even the landlord. Only God!

- The story of the small mustard seed which grows and becomes big. The mustard seed is small, but it grows and at the end, the birds make their nests in its branches. This is how the Kingdom is. It begins very small, it grows, and it extends its branches. The parable leaves an open question which will receive a response later on in the Gospel: Who are the birds? The text suggests that it is a question of the Pagans who will not be able to enter into the community and participate in the Kingdom.
- Because Jesus teaches by means of the Parables. Jesus tells many parables. All are taken from the life of the people! In this way he helped persons to discover the things of God in daily life, a life which becomes transparent. Because what is extraordinary of God is hidden in the ordinary and common things of daily life. People understood the things of life. In the parables they received the key to open it and to find in it the signs of God.

Personal Questions

- Jesus does not explain the Parables. He tells the stories and awakens in others the imagination and the reflection of the discovery. What have you discovered in these two Parables?
- The objective of the words is to render life transparent. Has your life become more transparent throughout the years, or has the contrary taken place?

Concluding Prayer

Have mercy on me, O God, in your faithful love, in your great tenderness wipe away my offences; wash me clean from my guilt, purify me from my sin. (Ps 51: 1-2)

Saturday, January 28, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, direct your love that is within us, that our efforts in the name of your Son may bring mankind to unity and peace. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 4: 35-41

With the coming of evening that same day, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let us cross over to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind they took him, just as he was, in the boat; and there were other boats with him. Then it began to blow a great gale and the waves were breaking into the boat so that it was almost swamped. But he was in the stern, his head on the cushion, asleep. They woke him and said to him, 'Master, do you not care? We are lost!' And he woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Quiet now! Be calm!' And the wind dropped, and there followed a great calm. Then he said to them,

'Why are you so frightened? Have you still no faith?' They were overcome with awe and said to one another, 'Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him.'

Reflection

The Gospel today describes the storm in the lake and Jesus who sleeps in the boat. Sometimes our communities feel like a small boat lost in the sea of life, without much hope of arriving to the port. Jesus seems to be sleeping in our boat, since no divine power seems to appear to save us from the difficulties and the persecution. In view of this desperate situation, Mark puts together several episodes which reveal how Jesus is present in the midst of the community. In the parables the mystery of the Kingdom is revealed which is present in the things of daily life (Mk 4: 1-34). Now he begins to reveal the Mystery of the Kingdom present in the power which Jesus exercises in favor of the disciples, in favor of the people and, above all, in favor of the excluded and marginalized. Jesus overcomes, dominates the sea, a symbol of chaos (Mk 4: 35-41).

A creating power acts in him! Jesus conquers and drives out the devil (Mk 5: 1-20). The power of life acts in him! He is the victorious Jesus! There is no reason for the communities to be afraid (Mk 5: 21-43). This is the reason for this passage of the storm calmed by Jesus on which we are meditating today in the Gospel.

- Mark 4: 35-36: The starting point: "Let us cross over to the other side." It had been a heavy day, with much work. Once the discourse on the parables was finished (Mk 4, 1- 34), Jesus said: "Let us cross over to the other side!" They take him on the boat just as he was, the boat from which he had made the discourse of the Parables. Because he was extremely tired, he went to sleep on the stern, his head on the cushion! This is the first picture or image which Mark presents. A beautiful painting, but very human!
- Mark 4: 37-38: The desperate situation: "Do you not care? We are lost!" The Lake of Galilee is surrounded by mountains. Sometimes, through the cracks in the rocks, the wind blows on top of the lake and provokes sudden storms. A very strong wind, the agitated sea, the boat full of water! The disciples were experienced fishermen. If they think that they are going to sink then the situation is really dangerous. Jesus does not even wake up, he continues to sleep. This profound sleep is not only a sign of great fatigue; it is also the expression of a calm peaceful trust which he has in God. The contrast between the attitude of Jesus and that of the disciples is very great!
- Mark 4: 39-40: The reaction of Jesus: "Have you still no faith?" Jesus wakes up, not because of the waves, but because of the desperate cry of the disciples. First, he addresses himself to the sea and says: "Quiet now!" And the wind dropped and there followed great calm. Then he spoke to the disciples and said: "Why are you so frightened? Have you still no faith?" The impression that one has is that it is not necessary to calm down the sea, since there was no danger. It is like when you go to a house and the dog, at the side of his master, begins to bark. One should not be afraid because the dog is with the master who controls the situation. The episode of the storm which was calmed recalls Exodus, when the people, without fear, passed through the water of the sea (Ex 14: 22). It recalls the Prophet Isaiah who told the people: "If you go across the water I will be with you!" (Is 43: 2) Jesus does the exodus again and carries out the prophecy announced by Psalm 107 (106): 25-30.
- Mark 4: 41: The disciples did not know: "Who can this be?" Jesus calms the sea and says: "Have you still no faith?" The disciples did not know what to respond and they ask themselves: "Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him". Jesus appears as a stranger to them! In spite of the fact of having been with him for such a long time, they do not know well who he is. Who can this be? With this question in

mid, the communities follow the reading of the Gospel. Y even today, this is the same question which leads us to continue reading the Gospel. It is the desire to know always better the significance of Jesus for our life.

- Who is Jesus? Mark begins his Gospel saying: “The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1: 1). At the end, at the moment of his death, the soldier declared: “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mk 15: 39). At the beginning and at the end of the Gospel, Jesus is called the Son of God. Between the beginning and the end, there are many other names of Jesus which appear. The following is the list: Messiah or Christ (Mk 1: 1; 8: 29; 14: 61; 15: 32); Lord (Mk 1: 3; 5: 19; 11: 3); Beloved Son (Mk 1: 11; 9: 7); the Holy one of God (Mk 1: 24); Nazarene (Mk 1: 24; 10: 47; 14: 67; 16: 6); Son of Man (Mk 2: 10, 28; 8: 31, 38; 9: 9, 12, 31; 10: 33, 45; 13: 26; 14: 21, 21, 41, 62); Bridegroom (Mk 2: 19); Son of God (Mk 3: 11); Son of the Highest God (Mk 5: 7); Carpenter (Mc 6: 3); Son of Mary (Mk 6: 3); Prophet (Mk 6: 4.15; 8: 28); Teacher (frequent); Son of David (Mk 10: 47, 48; 12: 35-37); Blessed (Mk 11: 9); Son (Mc 13: 32); Shepherd (Mk 14: 27); Son of the Blessed One (Mk 14: 61); King of the Jews (Mk 15: 2, 9, 18, 26); King of Israel (Mk 15: 32).

Each name, title or attribute is an attempt to express what Jesus signifies for persons. But a name, no matter how beautiful it is, never reveals the mystery of a person, much less of the person of Jesus. Besides this, some of these names given to Jesus, including the more important ones and the more traditional, are questioned, doubted by Mark the Evangelist.

Thus, as we advance in the reading of the Gospel, Mark obliges us to revise our ideas and to ask ourselves, once again: “In last instance, who is Jesus for me, for us?” The more we advance in the reading of the Gospel of Mark, the more these titles and criteria fall. Jesus does not fit into anyone of these names, in no schema, in no title. He is the greatest! Little by little, the reader gives up and ceases to want to frame up Jesus in a known concept or in an idea made up beforehand and accepts him as he is presented. Love seduces, but not the head, NO!

Personal Questions

- The waters of the sea of life, have they threatened you sometimes? Who saved you?
- Which was the agitated sea at the time of Jesus? Which was the agitated sea at the time when Mark wrote his Gospel? Which is, today, the agitated sea for us?

Concluding Prayer

God, create in me a clean heart, renew within me a resolute spirit,
do not thrust me away from your presence,
do not take away from me your spirit of holiness. (Ps 51: 10-11)

Sunday, January 29, 2023

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind that you read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, you helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to your voice in Creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the force of your resurrection and witness to others that you are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice and peace. We ask this of you, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us your Spirit. Amen.

Reading

Key for Reading the Text on the Beatitudes:

On this Sunday, the Church invites us to meditate on the eight Beatitudes. Once, seeing the immense crowd who followed him, Jesus went up on the mountain near the Lake of Galilee. Sitting on the top, and looking at the crowds, he made this solemn proclamation: "Blessed are the poor, the afflicted, the humble, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who struggle in behalf of peace, those who are concerned for the poor, the pure in heart, the persecuted for the cause of justice!" Words of fire which, even today, resound in the world! Throughout two thousand years, they have struck thousands of persons, and they make us think and ask ourselves: "What is happiness? Who is truly happy?" Some advise: After the reading of the Beatitudes, it is good not to begin immediately to *study and to analyze* the words of Jesus. In the first place, it is good to keep silence in our heart for a moment and believe that we are in the midst of the people gathered together at the foot of the mountain, near the lake, watching Jesus and listening to his words.

A Division of the Text to Help the Reading:

- Matthew 5: 1: The solemn proclamation of the new Law
- Matthew 5: 2-10: The eight doors which permit one to enter the Kingdom of God
- Matthew 5: 11-12: Jesus declares Blessed those who are persecuted

Gospel Text - Matthew 5: 1-12

1 Seeing the crowds, he went onto the mountain. And when he was seated his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak. This is what he taught them: 3 How blessed are the poor in spirit: the kingdom of Heaven is theirs. 4 Blessed are the gentle: they shall have the earth as inheritance. 5 Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness: they shall have their fill. 7 Blessed are the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers: they shall be recognised as children of God. 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness: the kingdom of Heaven is theirs. 11 'Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how they persecuted the prophets before you.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- Which part of the text struck you the most? Why?
- Where, when and for whom does Jesus pronounce this discourse?
- Which are the groups of persons whom Jesus declares blessed? Which is the promise for each group?
- Do these groups which Jesus speaks about exist today? Who are they and where are they found?
- How can it be understood that a person can be poor and happy at the same time?
- Try to remember two moments in which you truly felt happy in life. Is your opinion of happiness the same as that of Jesus?
- What type of happiness do people seek today?

A Key for Reading

For those who wish to deepen into this theme.

Context of the Discourse of Jesus:

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus appears as the new Legislator, the new Moses. Being the Son he knows the Father. He knows what the Father had in mind when, in the past, he gave the Law to the people through Moses. It is because of this that Jesus is able to offer us a new version of God's Law. The solemn announcement of this New Law begins here, in the Sermon on the Mountain. In the Old Testament the Law of Moses is represented in five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Imitating the old model, Matthew presents the New Law in five great discourses distributed throughout his Gospel: the Discourse (Sermon) on the Mountain (Mt 5 to 7), The Discourse on the Missions (Mt 10), the Discourse on the Mystery of the Kingdom present in life (Mt 13), the Discourse on the Community (Mt 18), the Discourse on the future of the Kingdom (Mt 24 and 25). But for Matthew the study of the Law alone is not sufficient. It is necessary to observe well the practice of Jesus, because in it the Spirit of God acts, he is who animates the letter of the Law from within. The description of the practice of Jesus occupies the narrative part intermingled among the five Discourses and has the purpose of showing how Jesus observes the Law and incarnates it in his life.

Commentary on the Text:

- Matthew 5, 1: The solemn announcement of the New Law
- In the Old Testament, Moses went up to Mount Sinai to receive the Law from God. Jesus also, the new Moses, goes up on the mountain and looking at the crowd who followed him, proclaims the New Law. Up until this moment, there were only four disciples with Jesus (Mt 4, 18-22). But in fact, an immense crowd followed him. Surrounded by disciples, Jesus begins to teach them, proclaiming the Beatitudes.
- Matthew 5, 3-10: The eight doors to enter into the Kingdom

- The Beatitudes constitute the solemn opening of the Sermon on the Mountain. In it Jesus defines who can enter into the Kingdom. There are eight categories of persons. Eight entrance doors. There is no other door to enter into the Kingdom, in the Community! Those who desire to form part of the Kingdom must identify themselves with one of these categories or groups.
- Blessed are the poor in spirit
- It is neither the rich nor the poor who has the mentality of the rich. **But it is** the one who like Jesus lives poor (Mt 8, 18), believes the poor (Mt 11, 25-26) and sees in them the first recipients of the Good News (Lk 4, 18). It is the poor who has the Spirit of Jesus!
- Blessed are the peacemakers
- It is not the passive person who loses the will and no longer reacts. But they are those who have been “pacified” and now, like Mary, live in “humiliation” (Lk 1, 48). They have lost the land that they possessed, but they will regain it (Ps 37, 7.10-11.22. 29. 34). Like Jesus, they try to be “meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11, 19).
- Blessed are those who mourn
- It is not a question of just any kind of sadness, but of a sadness in the face of injustice and the lack of humanity which exists in the world (Tb 13, 16; Ps 119, 136; Ez 9, 4; 2 P 2,7). They are sad because they do not accept the situation in which humanity is.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice
- It is not only a question of the justice sought for in tribunals and which many times is the legalization of injustice. But it is, above all, the Justice of God, which is sought, doing in such a way that things and persons can occupy the place that belongs to them in the plan of the Creator.
- Blessed are the merciful
- It is not only philanthropy which distributes alms, but it is a question of imitating God who has entrails of mercy for those who suffer (Es 34, 6-7) Mercy means to have the heart in the misery of others to diminish their pain. It means to do in such a way that the suffering of others is not foreign to us.
- Blessed are the pure in heart
- It is not a question of legal purity which only sees the exterior, but it is a question of having a purified gaze to accept the Law of God in the heart which becomes transparent, and allows persons to recognize the calls from God in the events of life and of nature.
- Blessed are the peacemakers
- It is not only the absence of war. The peace which God wants on earth is the total and radical reconstruction of life, of nature and of communal life or living together. It is the Shalôm, the Peace announced by the prophets and given by Jesus to his disciples (Jn 20, 21).
- Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of justice
- In the world constructed and organized according to the egoism of persons and groups of persons (like the Neo-liberal system which dominates the world today) the one who desires to live the disinterested love will be persecuted and will die on the cross.

The 1st and the 8th categories (the poor and the persecuted in the cause of justice) receive the same promise of the Kingdom of God. and they receive it now, because Jesus says “the Kingdom of Heaven **is** theirs!” Between the 1st and 8th categories, there are other six who receive a promise which will be fulfilled in the future. In these

six promises there is a new project. It is the project of the Kingdom, which wants to reconstruct life in its totality: in the relation with the **material goods**, with the **persons**, and with **God**.

The Christian Community, poor and persecuted, is already a sign of the Kingdom! It is its seed!

- The first pair **Meek and those who Mourn**, refers to the relation to material goods. For the future they expect an equitable sharing of the goods of this world among all.
- The second pair **Hunger and Thirst for justice and Merciful**, refers to the relation between persons and community. For the future they expect the fraternal reconstruction of human living together.
- A third pair, **Pure in heart and Peacemakers**, refers to the relation with God: to see God and to be sons of God. For the future they expect the reconstruction of the relation with God.

The Eight Categories | The Eight Promises | The Project of the Kingdom

- The poor in spirit -
The Kingdom is theirs
The seed of the Kingdom
- The meek -
- Those who mourn -
Will possess the earth
Will be consoled
Just sharing of goods
Eliminates inequality
- Hunger and thirst for justice -
- The merciful -
Shall have their fill Will receive mercy
Reconstructs the fraternal and just relationship
- The pure in heart -
- The peacemakers -
Will see God
Will be sons of God God is present,
Friendly and faithful Presence
- Persecuted in the cause of justice -
The Kingdom is theirs
The seed is crucified

Matthew 5: 11-12: Jesus declares that the persecuted are blessed

He pronounces a word of consolation to the persecuted. At the time of Matthew, around the years 80's after Christ, this project of reconstruction of life and of living together or community living was about to be assumed by the Christian community, all of them poor and without the sense of expression. This is why they are persecuted. This last word of Jesus confirms the community in the resistance out of love for the Gospel.

Broadening Our Vision on the Beatitudes

- The community which receives the Beatitudes

Matthew mentions eight Beatitudes. Luke only has four and four curses (Lk 6: 20-26). The four mentioned by Luke are: "You who are poor, you who are hungry, you who weep, you who are hated and persecuted" (Lk 6: 20-23). Luke writes for the community of converted pagans. They live in the hostile context of the Roman Empire.

Matthew writes for the community of converted Jews, who live in the context of breaking away from the Synagogue. Before breaking away, they enjoyed a certain social acceptance. But now, after the breaking away, the community entered in crisis and in it they began to appear different tendencies and struggles among them. Some belonging to the line of Pharisees wanted to maintain the same rigor in the observance of the Law, to which they were accustomed before their conversion to Jesus. But in doing this, they excluded the little ones and the poor. The new Law introduced by Jesus asks that all be accepted in the community as brothers and sisters. For this, the solemn beginning of the New Law presents eight Beatitudes which define the categories of persons who should be accepted in the community: the poor, the meek, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted.

- **The poor in spirit?**

Jesus recognizes richness and the value of the poor (Mt 11: 25-26). His mission was "to announce the Good News to the poor" (Lk 4: 18). He himself lived as a poor person. He possessed nothing himself, he had nowhere to lay his head (Mt 8: 18). And to those who want to follow Jesus he asks that they choose between God and money (Mt 6: 24). *Poor in spirit* is the person who before the poor has the spirit of Jesus.

Every time that in the story of the People of God they seek to renew the Covenant, it is begun by re-establishing the rights of the poor and of the excluded. Without this, it is not possible to renew the Covenant! This is what the prophets did, this is what Jesus does. He denounces the system which excludes the poor and those who are persecuted, those who fight for justice. In the name of God, Jesus announces a new Project which accepts the excluded. The community around Jesus has to be an example where this future Kingdom begins to be shaped. It should be characterized by a new type of relation to material goods, to persons and to God himself. It should be the seed of a new nation! Behold, a very important task for us Christians, especially for the young. Because this is the only way to merit credibility and to give a very concrete example of the Kingdom, an alternative of life which is really Good News of God for the poor and the excluded.

- **Be blessed, happy today**

The Gospel says exactly the contrary to that which the civil society in which we live affirms. In society the poor is considered an unhappy person, and happy the one who possess money and is able to spend as he wills. In our society, happy is the one who has fame and power. The unhappy ones are the poor, those who mourn and weep! On Television, the romances, shown in episodes diffuse the myth of the happy and fulfilled persons, and without being aware, the romances shown in episodes become the examples of life for many of us. These words of Jesus still keep their sense in our society: "Blessed are the poor! Blessed are those who mourn!" And for me, being a Christian, who in fact is Blessed?

Prayer: Psalm 117

God Deserves to be Praised.

Alleluia! Praise Yahweh,
all nations, extol him, all peoples, for his faithful love is strong

and his constancy never-ending.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice that which your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, your mother, not only listen to but also practise the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Monday, January 30, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,
help us to love you with all our hearts and to love all men as you love them.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 5: 1-20

They reached the territory of the Gerasenes on the other side of the lake, and when he disembarked, a man with an unclean spirit at once came out from the tombs towards him. The man lived in the tombs and no one could secure him anymore, even with a chain, because he had often been secured with fetters and chains but had snapped the chains and broken the fetters, and no one had the strength to control him. All night and all day, among the tombs and in the mountains, he would howl and gash himself with stones.

Catching sight of Jesus from a distance, he ran up and fell at his feet and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What do you want with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? In God's name do not torture me!' For Jesus had been saying to him, 'Come out of the man, unclean spirit.' Then he asked, 'What is your name?' He answered, 'My name is Legion, for there are many of us.' And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the district. Now on the mountainside there was a great herd of pigs feeding, and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us to the pigs, let us go into them.' So he gave them leave. With that, the unclean spirits came out and went into the pigs, and the herd of about two thousand pigs charged down the cliff into the lake, and there they were drowned.

The men looking after them ran off and told their story in the city and in the country round about; and the people came to see what had really happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there -- the man who had had the legion in him -- properly dressed and in his full senses, and they were afraid. And those who had witnessed it reported what had happened to the demoniac and what had become of the pigs. Then they began to implore Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed begged to be allowed to stay with him. Jesus would not let him but said to him, 'Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you.' So the man went off and proceeded to proclaim in the Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him. And everyone was amazed.

Reflection

In today's Gospel, we meditate on a long text on the expulsion of a devil which was called *Legion* and which oppressed and tortured a person. Today there are many people who use the texts of the Gospel which speak of the expulsion of the devils or impure spirits in order to frighten others. This is a sin! Mark does the opposite.

As we will see, he associates the action of power of evil to four things:

- a) With the *cemetery*, the place of the dead. Death which kills life!
- b) With the *pork* which was considered an unclean animal. The impurity which separates from God!
- c) With the *sea*, which was considered as a symbol of the chaos which existed before creation. Chaos which destroys nature.
- d) with the word *Legion*, a name given to the army of the Roman Empire. The empire which oppresses and exploits people.

Well, Jesus overcomes the power of evil in these four points. The victory of Jesus had a very great outreach for the community of the years 70's, the time in which Mark wrote his Gospel. These communities lived being persecuted by the *Roman Legions*, the ideology of which manipulated the popular beliefs concerning the devils in order to frighten people and to obtain submission from them.

- *The power of evil oppresses, ill-treats and alienates persons.* The initial verses describe the situation of the people before the arrival of Jesus. In the way of describing the behaviour of the possessed person, Mark associates the power of evil to the cemetery and to death. It is a power without any purpose, threatening, without control and destructor which makes everybody afraid. It deprives the person of conscience, of self control and of autonomy.
- *In the presence of Jesus the power of evil disintegrates itself, and breaks into fragments.* In the way of describing the first contact between Jesus and the possessed man, Mark stresses the total lack of proportion that exists! The power which at the beginning seemed to be very strong, melts and is broken, fragmented before Jesus. The man falls on his knees, asks not to be expelled from that district and finally says its name is *Legion*. With this name, Mark associates the power of evil with the political and military power of the Roman Empire which dominated the world through its *Legions*.
- *The power of evil is impure and has no autonomy nor consistency.* The devil has no power in its movements. He only manages to enter into the pigs with the permission of Jesus! Once he has entered into the pigs, they charged down the cliff into the sea. There were 2000! According to the people the pig was a symbol of impurity, the impurity which prevented the human being to enter into relationship with God and to feel accepted by Him. The sea was the symbol of chaos which existed before creation and which according to the belief of the time, threatened life. This episode of the pigs which threw themselves into the sea is strange and difficult to understand, but the message is sufficiently clear: before Jesus the power of evil has no autonomy nor consistency. The one who believes in Jesus has already overcome the power of evil and should not be afraid, should have no fear!
- *The reaction of the people of the place.* On the advice of the herdsmen who took care of the pigs, the people of the place ran to see the man who had been liberated from the power of evil, now "*in his full senses*". But the Legion entered the pigs! And for this reason they ask Jesus to leave. For them, in fact, the pigs were more important than the human person who had just returned to be himself. The same thing happens today: the neo-liberal system gives very little importance to persons. What is important for it is gain!

- *To announce the Good News means to announce “what the Lord has done for you!”.* The man who was liberated wanted to “follow Jesus”, but Jesus tells him: “Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you”. Mark addressed this phrase of Jesus to the communities and to all of us. For the majority of us “to follow Jesus” means: “Go to your house, to your people, announce to them what the Lord has done for you!”

Personal Questions

- Which point of this text pleased or struck you the most? Why?
- The man who was cured wanted to follow Jesus. But he should remain at home and tell everybody what Jesus has done for him. What has Jesus done for you which can be told to others?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh, what quantities of good things you have in store for those who fear you, and bestow on those who make you their refuge, for all humanity to see. (Ps 31: 19)

Tuesday, January 31, 2023

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,
 help us to love you with all our hearts and to love all men as you love them.
 We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 5: 21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered around him and he stayed by the lake. Then the president of the synagogue came up, named Jairus, and seeing him, fell at his feet and begged him earnestly, saying, 'My little daughter is desperately sick. Do come and lay your hands on her that she may be saved and may live.' Jesus went with him, and a large crowd followed him; they were pressing all round him.

Now there was a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years; after long and painful treatment under various doctors, she had spent all she had without being any the better for it; in fact, she was getting worse. She had heard about Jesus, and she came up through the crowd and touched his cloak from behind, thinking, 'If I can just touch his clothes, I shall be saved.'

And at once the source of the bleeding dried up, and she felt in herself that she was cured of her complaint. And at once aware of the power that had gone out from him, Jesus turned round in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' His disciples said to him, 'You see how the crowd is pressing round you; how can you ask, "Who touched me?"' But he continued to look all round to see who had done it. Then the woman came forward, frightened and trembling because she knew what had happened to her, and she

fell at his feet and told him the whole truth. 'My daughter,' he said, 'your faith has restored you to health; go in peace and be free of your complaint.'

While he was still speaking some people arrived from the house of the president of the synagogue to say, 'Your daughter is dead; why put the Master to any further trouble?' But Jesus overheard what they said and he said to the president of the synagogue, 'Do not be afraid; only have faith.' And he allowed no one to go with him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. So they came to the house of the president of the synagogue, and Jesus noticed all the commotion, with people weeping and wailing unrestrainedly. He went in and said to them, 'Why all this commotion and crying? The child is not dead, but asleep.' But they ridiculed him. So he turned them all out and, taking with him the child's father and mother and his own companions, he went into the place where the child lay. And taking the child by the hand he said to her, '*Talitha kum!*' which means, 'Little girl, I tell you to get up.' The little girl got up at once and began to walk about, for she was twelve years old. At once they were overcome with astonishment, and he gave them strict orders not to let anyone know about it, and told them to give her something to eat.

Reflection

In today's Gospel, we meditate on two miracles which Jesus worked in favor of two women. The first one for a woman who was considered impure because of the haemorrhage which she was suffering from for the past 12 years. The other one, for a girl, twelve years old, who had expired a short time before. According to the mentality of the time, anybody who would touch the blood or a corpse was considered impure. Blood and death were factors of exclusion! Because of this, those two women were marginalized persons, excluded from the participation in the community.

- *The starting point. Jesus arrives in the boat.* The people join him. Jairus, the head of the Synagogue, asks help for his daughter who is dying. Jesus goes with him and the people accompany him, pushing on all sides. This is the starting point of the two cases of healing which follow: the cure of the woman and the resurrection of the 12-year-old girl.
- *The situation of the woman.* Twelve years suffering from hemorrhage! For this reason she lived excluded, because at that time, blood rendered persons impure, and the one who touched them became impure also. Mark says that the woman had spent all she had with doctors. And instead of becoming better, she got worse. A situation without a solution!
- *The attitude of the woman.* She heard people speak about Jesus. Hope sprang in her. She told herself: "If I can just touch his clothes, I will be saved". The catechism of the time said: "If I touch his cloak, he will become impure". The woman thinks exactly the contrary! This is a sign that women did not agree with all this that religious authority taught. The woman gets in through the crowd, in the midst of the people, and without being noticed, she touches Jesus, because everybody touched him and pushed him. At that same moment she noticed in her body that she had been cured.
- *The reaction of Jesus and that of the disciples.* Jesus also aware of the power that had gone out from him asked: "*Who touched my clothes?*". The disciples said to him: "You see how the crowd is pressing round you; how can you ask, who touched me?" So here appears the clash between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus had a sensibility which the disciples did not perceive. The disciples reacted like everybody else and they did not understand the different reaction of Jesus. But Jesus did not pay attention and continued to investigate, to inquire.

- *Healing through faith.* The woman became aware that she had been discovered. It was a difficult and dangerous moment for her. Because according to the belief of the time, an impure person, who like herself got in among the people, contaminated everyone who touched her. And all would become impure before God (Lv) (Lk 15: 19-30). For this reason the punishment was the possible stoning. But the woman had the courage to assume the consequences of what she had done. But the woman *"frightened and trembling"* fell at Jesus' feet and told him the whole truth.
- Jesus says the last word: *"My daughter, your faith has restored you to health, go in peace and be free of your complaint"*.
 - (a) "Daughter", with this word Jesus accepts the woman into the new family, into the community, which was gathering together around him.
 - (b) What she thought became a reality.
 - (c) Jesus acknowledges that without the faith of that woman, he would not have been able to work the miracle.
- *The news of the death of the little girl.* At that moment some people arrived from the house of Jairus to inform him that his daughter had died. It was no longer necessary to disturb Jesus. For them, death was the great barrier. Jesus will not be able to overcome death! Jesus listens, looks at Jairus, and applies what he had just seen, that is, that faith is capable to realize what the person believes. And he says: *"Do not be afraid, only have faith!"*
- *In Jairus' house.* Jesus allows only three of his disciples to go with him. Seeing the commotion of the people weeping and wailing because of the death of the child, he said: "The child is not dead, she sleeps!" People around laughed. People know how to distinguish when a person is sleeping and when the person is dead. It is the same laughter of Abraham and of Sarah, that is of those who are unable to believe that nothing is impossible for God (Gn 17: 17; 18: 12-14; Lk 1: 37). For them also, death was a barrier which nobody could overcome, go beyond! The words of Jesus had a very profound meaning. The situation of the persecuted communities at the time of Mark seemed to be a situation of death. They had to hear: "She is not dead! You are sleeping!
- Wake up!" Jesus does not pay attention to the laughter and enters into the room where the child is, alone, with the three disciples and the parents of the child.
- *The resurrection of the child.* Jesus takes the child by the hand and says: "Talita kum!" She rises. Great commotion! Jesus keeps calm and asks that they give her something to eat. Two women are cured! One is twelve years old, of life, the other one twelve years of hemorrhage, twelve years of exclusion! The exclusion of the child begins at twelve years of age, because her menstruation begins, she begins to die! Jesus has the greatest power and resurrects: "Get up!"

Personal Questions

- Which is the point in this text which pleased you or struck you the most? Why?
- One of the women was cured and once again integrated so that she could live in the community. A child was raised from her death bed. What does this action of Jesus teach us for our life in the family and for our community today?

Concluding Prayer

Of you is my praise in the thronged assembly,
 I will perform my vows before all who fear him. The poor will eat and be filled,
 those who seek Yahweh will praise him, 'May your heart live forever.' (Ps 22: 25-26)