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Lectio Divina Wednesday, January 1, 2020

Visit of the Shepherds to Jesus and His Mother
The marginalized are God's favorites
Luke 2:16-21

1. Opening prayer

Lord Jesus, send Your Spirit to help us read the Scriptures the same way 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, and 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 a 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.

2. Reading

a) 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.

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 put our text (Lk 2:16-21) into the wider context of the visit of the shepherds (Lk 2:8-21). As we read, let us try to pay attention to the surprises we find and the contrasts that appear in this text.

b) 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

c) Text:

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.

3. A moment of prayerful silence

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

4. Some questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

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

5. For those who wish to go deeper into the theme

a) 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 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?

b) A commentary on the text:

Luke 2:8-9: The first invited people.

The shepherds were marginalized people and not 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. This is why the Angel of the Lord appears to pass on the great news of the birth of Jesus to them. 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 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 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 means word or talk. The word of God is a creative force. It fulfills 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 and pondered them in her heart". These are two ways of hearing 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 reflect on them in the light of the Word of God, to understand their full significance.

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 this occasion each child received his name (cf. Lk 1:59-63). He 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, as “He is the one who is to save His people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). The name of Jesus is the transliteration of the name “Yeshua”, or Joshua, and means Yahweh saves. 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).

c) Further information:

Mary in Luke’s Gospel

i) The role of the first two chapters of Luke’s Gospel:

These are two rather well known but less 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 comes to fulfill His promises. Luke shows us how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament and begins the New Testament. And He does so in favor of the poor, the anawim, 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 give to history today. They were more like a mirror for the Christians converted from paganism. They could discover who Jesus was and how He had come to fulfill 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 from 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 reaction, Luke presents a model of how the communities could react to and persevere in the New.

ii) A key to the reading:

In these two chapters Luke presents Mary as a 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 better 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 texts of chapters 1 and 2 of Luke’s Gospel, which speak of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

iii) An application of the key to the texts:

1. 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.

2. Luke 1:39-45: The Visitation: "Blessed is she who believed!"
Recognizing the Word of God in the events of life.

3. Luke 1:46-56: The Magnificat: “The Almighty has done great things for me!”

A resistance hymn of hope.

4. Luke 2:1-20: The Birth: "She treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart."

The marginalized welcome the Word.

5. Luke 2:21-32: The Presentation: "My eyes have seen the salvation!"
God's promise is fulfilled.

6. Luke 2:33-38: Simeon and Anna: "A sword will pierce your soul"
Being a Christian means being a sign of contradiction.

7. 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!

iv) The contrasts that stand out in our text:

1. In the darkness of the night a light shines (2:8-9).

2. The world up there, heaven, seems to embrace our world here below (2:13).

3. The greatness of God manifests itself in the weakness of a child (2:7).

4. The glory of God is made present in a manger, close to animals (2:16).

5. Fear generated by the sudden apparition of an angel is changed into joy (2:9-10).

6. Those completely marginalized are the first to be invited (2:8).

7. The shepherds recognize God present in a child (2:20).

6. 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.

7. 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 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.

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 (Greek) 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 fulfill the promises made by God to His people. This means that the newly born child, who lies in a manger, has come to fulfill 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? If an 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!

Lectio Divina Thursday, January 2, 2020

Christmas Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - John 1:19-28

This is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask him, "Who are you?" He admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, "I am not the Christ." So they asked him, "What are you then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?" He said: "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said." Some Pharisees were also sent. They asked him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

3) 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 people to control the activity of Jesus (Mk 3:22). There is a resemblance between the response of the people regarding Jesus and the questions which authorities address 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 authorities address 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. Why do 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. After his death, the memory 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 without prophets. Many considered him the Messiah. In the year 50 Paul passed through Ephesus, in Asia Minor, and found a group of people 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 proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. 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 John's response is another affirmation in which he shows 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”. Further ahead (Jn 1:33) John refers to the prophecies which announced the coming 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).

4) Personal questions

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

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Friday, January 3, 2020

Christmas Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - John 1:29-34

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, 'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.' I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel." John testified further, saying, "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him. I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God."

3) Reflection

- In the Gospel of John, history and symbol join together. In today's text, the symbolism consists in recalling texts of the Old Testament which reveal hints to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. In these few verses (Jn 1:29-34) we find the following expressions which contain a symbolical description: 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 brings to mind the Exodus and the night of the first Passover. The blood of the Paschal Lamb, with which the doors of the houses were signed, was a sign of liberation (Ex 12:13-14). 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 God's Wisdom, which existed before all the other creatures and which was with God, 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 denotes 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 is

thanks to the action of Jesus.

- **Son of God.** This is the title which summarizes all the others. The best comment on this title is the explanation from 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 the word 'gods' refers to 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).

4) Personal questions

- Jesus offered himself completely for the whole of humanity. 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?

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Saturday, January 4, 2020

The call of the first disciples

1) PRAYER

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

2) READING

From the Gospel of John (1:35-42)

John was standing 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 Christ. 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.

3) MEDITATION

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

Our scene is 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 Jesus speaks as he is looking, to the person of Peter (v. 42).

The evangelist uses different verbs, but all are full of nuances. Not casual looks, but life changing looks instead. 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" which means in this manner, "to look inside".

Jesus is walking along the sea, along the shores of our lives, and John acts as a photographer. He records it. He uses verbs which tell us that today, Jesus still is passing by us, and our lives can be visited and intersected by Him. Our world can welcome the imprints of His footsteps.

The center of the passage is centered on the movement of Jesus. He walks first, then turns and stops. His eyes and His heart change the life of the two disciples. Here Jesus is revealed as God incarnate, God came among us. 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 meeting the Lord and His presence puts us in motion. It makes us get up from our old positions and makes us run. Collecting all the verbs referring to the disciples in this passage, we have: "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 come into His house and stay with Him. This is the path of salvation, of true happiness, which is offered to us 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. Because, when there is Jesus, the Lord, and you are invited by Him, nothing is missing.

4) QUESTIONS

The time passage of this part of the Gospel, with its "day after" shows us that the Lord is not distant, but He enters our days and years in our concrete existence. Am I willing to open myself to Him, to share my life with Him? I am ready to deliver into His hands my present and my future so that He can drive my "day after"?

The disciples make a wonderful spiritual journey, highlighted by the verbs "heard,

followed, went, saw, and stayed." Do I want to start this beautiful adventure with Jesus too? Do I open my ears to hear, to listen deeply, so I can give my positive response to the love of the Father who wants to join me? Do I feel born in me the joy of starting a new journey and walking behind Jesus? Are my heart and eyes wide open 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 that today, giving to the Father my name, my life and my whole person, so that He might give me a new birth as His son or daughter, calling me by name in His infinite love?

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Sunday, January 5, 2020

The Magi's journey of faith
The adoration of the child Jesus as King and Lord
Matthew 2:1-12

1. 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.

2. Reading

a) 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. 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 choice about the people 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 and 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, and the conversion of their hearts, are facts that speak of us, facts already written on the scroll of our own sacred story.

b) An aid to the reading of the passage:

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

Mt 2:1-2: The passage begins with 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, coming from afar, and arriving 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 joining Him, they seek to eliminate Him. Herod calls the authorities of the Jewish people and the experts in scripture. It is they, with the help of ancient prophecies, who 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 recognize 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

c) The text:

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw His star at its rising and have come to do Him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel." Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child.

When you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may go and do Him homage." After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary His mother. They prostrated themselves and did Him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

3. 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?"

4. A few questions

- a) 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 and my comfort, to undertake a journey of faith in search of Jesus?
- b) "*We have come to adore Him*". Here the Word of the Lord tests me and 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?
- c) "*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 real presence, even though He remains invisible?
- d) "*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. Am I 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?

5. 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 given the 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 with the 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 which calls and attracts us with His own power. It is He who gets us to stand up and sets us in motion and 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. God said to Abraham: “Leave your country, your family and your father’s house, for the land I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Jacob was also a pilgrim of faith and conversion. It is written about him: “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 was also a man on a journey. God Himself showed him the way, the exodus, in his heart, and made 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). As the new people of God, we are the children of the promise and of the new covenant and are called to go out, setting out on a journey in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus. The exodus never ceased. The liberation that comes from faith is 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, enlightening their nights along the journey, indicating precisely the place of the presence of the Lord, and giving great joy to their hearts. Throughout the Bible, stars appear as signs of blessing and glory, almost as a personification of God, who does not abandon His people, and at the same time, is a personification of the people that does not forget its God and praises and blesses Him (cf. Ps 148:3; Bar 3:34). The word *star* appears for the first time in Scripture in Genesis 1:16. 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 kaf, which signify “hand” and which enclose the letter waw which means man. Thus, within the stars there are two hands, kaf and kaf, 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 of our journey towards our house, our constant migration, from 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 is also a star, the star that takes its rise from Jacob (Num 24:17), which rises from on high and is the radiant morning star as the Apocalypse says (22:16). By taking on flesh the infinite love of God, which bends itself down towards us, His children, 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 and 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 divine has been accompanied by this demand of

love, humility, and 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. It involves 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 which shows us the way to walk so that we may again and again come to the truth and therefore 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 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, which 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, and our whole being, to the wings of the Holy Spirit and into the arms of Jesus which are 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 Pet 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, transforming the whole of our person to make of us new men and women.

6. 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, YHWH 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, YHWH 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 water-hole,
and -- a further blessing -- early rain fills it.
They make their way from height to height,
God shows himself to them in Zion.
YHWH 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.
YHWH Sabaoth,
blessed is he who trusts in You.

7. 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 learned 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!

Lectio Divina Monday, January 6, 2020

Christmas Time

1) Opening prayer

Lord, let the light of Your glory shine within us,
and lead us through the darkness of this world
to the radiant joy of our eternal home.
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.

2) Gospel Reading - Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what had been said through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled: Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen. From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." He went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people. His fame spread to all of Syria, and they brought to him all who were sick with various diseases and racked with pain, those who were possessed, lunatics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan followed him.

3) Reflection

- Some brief information on the objective of the Gospel of Matthew: The Gospel of Matthew was written during the second half of the first century in order to encourage the small and fragile community of converted Jews who lived in the region of Galilee and Syria. They suffered persecution and threats on the part of the Jewish brothers because they had accepted Jesus as the Messiah and for having received the pagans. In order to strengthen them in their faith, the Gospel of Matthew insists on saying that Jesus is really the Messiah and that the salvation which Jesus comes to bring is not only for the Jews, but for all of humanity. At the beginning of his Gospel, in the genealogy, Matthew already indicates this universal vocation of Jesus, because being "son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1, 17) He will be a source of blessings for all the nations of the world" (cf. Gen 12:3). In the visit of the Magi, who came from the East, he suggests once again that salvation is addressed to the pagans (Mt 2:1-12). In the text of today's Gospel, he shows that the light which shines in the "Galilee of the Gentiles" shines also outside the frontiers of Israel, in the Decapolis and beyond the Jordan (Mt 4:12-25). Further on, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will say that the vocation of the Christian community is that of being "salt of the earth and light of the world" (Mt 5:13-14) and He asks people to love their enemies (Mt 5:43-48). Jesus is the servant of God who announces the rights of the nations (Mt 12:18). Helped by the Canaanite woman, Jesus Himself overcomes the barriers of race (Mt 15:21-28). He also overcomes the laws of purity which prevented the Gospel from being opened to the pagans (Mt 15:1-20). And finally, when Jesus sends His disciples to all nations, the universality of salvation is even clearer (Mt 28:19-20). In the same way, the communities are called to open themselves to all, without excluding anyone, because all are called to live as sons and daughters of God.

- Today's Gospel describes how this universal mission is an initiative. The news of the imprisonment of John the Baptist impels Jesus to begin His preaching. John had said, "Repent, because the Kingdom of God is at hand!" (Mt 3:2). This was the reason why he was imprisoned by Herod. When Jesus knew that John had been imprisoned, He returned to Galilee proclaiming the same message: "Repent, because the Kingdom of God is at hand!" (Mt 4:17). In other words, from the beginning, the preaching of the

Gospel involved risks, but Jesus did not allow Himself to be frightened. In this way, Matthew encourages the communities which were running the same risks of persecution. He quotes from Isaiah: “The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light!” Like Jesus, the communities are also called to be “the light of nations!”

- Jesus began the announcement of the Good News by going through the whole of Galilee. He does not stop, waiting for the people to arrive, but He goes to the people. He Himself participates in the meetings, and in the synagogues, to announce His message. The people bring the sick and the possessed, and Jesus accepts all and cures them. This service to the sick forms part of the Good News and reveals to the people the presence of the Kingdom.

- Thus, the fame of Jesus is spread throughout all the region, going beyond the frontier of Galilee, penetrates Judah, reaches Jerusalem, goes beyond the Jordan and reaches Syria and the Decapolis. In this region there are also some communities for whom Matthew was writing his Gospel. Now they know that in spite of all the difficulties and the risks, there is already the light which shines in the darkness.

4) Personal questions

- Are you also light for others?
- Today many close themselves up in the Catholic religion. How can we live the universality of salvation?
- “Repent” is a common phrase heard in Christian discussions. What does this really mean? Take some time to examine the meaning of “repent” and its forms, and what it means personally.

5) Concluding prayer

I will proclaim the decree of Yahweh:
He said to me, "You are My son,
today have I fathered you." (Ps 2:7)

Lectio Divina Tuesday, January 7, 2020

Christmas Time

1) Opening prayer

Father, Your Son became like us
when He revealed Himself in our nature;
help us to become more like Him,
who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 6:34-44

When Jesus saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. By now it was already late and his disciples approached him and said, "This is a deserted place and it is already very late. Dismiss them so that they can go to the surrounding farms and villages and buy themselves something to eat." He said to them in reply, "Give them some food yourselves." But they said to him, "Are we to buy two hundred days' wages worth of food and give it to them to eat?" He asked them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out they said, "Five loaves and two fish." So he gave orders to have them sit down in groups on the green grass. The people took their places in rows by hundreds and by fifties. Then, taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; he also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied. And they picked up twelve wicker baskets full of fragments and what was left of the fish. Those who ate of the loaves were five thousand men.

3) Reflection

- It is always good to look at the context in which the text of the Gospel is found because it enlightens us to discover the meaning more fully. A bit before (Mk 6:17-19), Mark narrates the banquet of death, organized by Herod with the great people of Galilee, in the palace of the capital city, during which John the Baptist was killed. In today's text, he describes the banquet of life promoted by Jesus with the hungry crowds of Galilee there in the desert. The contrast of this context is great and enlightens the text.
- In Mark's Gospel, the multiplication of the loaves is very important. It is mentioned twice: here and in Mk 8:1-9. And Jesus Himself questions the disciples on the multiplication of the loaves (Mk 8:14-21). This is why it is worthwhile to observe and to reflect, so as to discover what exactly is the importance of the multiplication of the loaves.
- Jesus had invited the disciples to rest a bit in a place in the desert (Mk 6:31). The crowds noticed that Jesus had gone to the other side of the lake, and they followed Him and arrived there before He did (Mk 6:33). When Jesus, getting down from the boat, sees that large crowd waiting for Him, He becomes sad "because they were like sheep without a shepherd". This phrase recalls the psalm of the Good Shepherd (Ps 23). Faced with these people without a shepherd, Jesus forgets to rest and begins to teach. He begins to be a shepherd. With His words, He guides the crowds in the desert of life; and in this way the crowd could sing, "The Lord is my Shepherd! There is nothing I shall want!" (Ps 23:1).
- Time went by and it began to be late and dark. The disciples were concerned and asked Jesus to send the people away. They affirm that there in the desert it is not possible to find anything to eat for so many people. Jesus says, "Give them some food yourselves." But they were afraid: "Do you want us to go and buy bread for 200 denarii?" (that is, the salary of 200 days!). The disciples seek a solution outside the crowds, for the crowds. Jesus does not seek the solution outside, but rather within the crowd and for the crowd and He asks, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." The answer is, "Five loaves and two fish!" It is very little for so many people! Jesus orders the crowd to sit

down in groups and asks the disciples to distribute the bread and the fish. Everybody ate enough to be satisfied!

- It is important to observe how Mark describes this fact: Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish, raised His eyes to Heaven, pronounced the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to the disciples to distribute it. This way of speaking makes the communities think about what? No doubt, this made them think about the Eucharist. Because these same words will be used (even now) in the celebration of the Supper of the Lord. Thus Mark suggests that the Eucharist has to lead us to share. It is the Bread of Life which gives us courage and leads us to face the problems of people in a different way, not from outside, but from inside.

- In the way of describing the facts, Mark recalls the bible in order to illuminate the meaning of the facts. To feed the hungry crowds in the desert, Moses was the first one to do it (cf. Ex 16:1-36). And to ask the people to organize themselves and sit down in groups of 50 or 100 reminds us of the census of the people in the desert after they left Egypt (cf. Num 1-4). In this way, Mark suggests that Jesus is the new Messiah. The people of the communities knew the Old Testament, and for one who understands well, a few words suffice. In this way they discovered the mystery which surrounded the person of Jesus.

Thoughts to put into practice

When we think of feeding the world, or of all the need in the world, it can be overwhelming and might either give us a reason to put it off until we have a solution, or throw up our hands in the face of such an enormous task. Mother Teresa (St Teresa of Calcutta) offered advice throughout her life on this. It is necessary to first love those in your family. Love begins at home.

Some families have someone who is suffering or lonely, yet we don't even have time to smile at them. "If you really want to be God's love in the world of today, begin to be God's love in your own home first." You must be hope of eternal happiness to your husband, your wife, your child, your grandparents, parents, and whoever is connected to you. Even among co-workers in the office or at the job, can they see Jesus in you? So many people go to their office meetings to defend their interests, rather than serve for instance.

She once visited what would be a care home for the elderly. It had everything they needed and was quite beautiful, yet she noticed everybody was sad and looking towards the door. When she asked a sister why, she was told they spend their time expecting, hoping, that a son or daughter will come to visit them. They hurt because they are forgotten.

Another time, a rich man visited from another country and asked her if she wanted him to give up his big house and nice car. She said "no" - but go back and see some of the lonely people where you live. Take them in your nice car and invite them in and entertain them in your big house for a short time. Make your house a center for love! "And when you buy some clothes, buy one for a little less and use the extra money to buy something for someone else."

These are ways to start.

4) Personal questions

- Jesus forgets to rest in order to serve the people. What example does this set for myself?
- If we shared what we have today, there would be no hunger in the world. What can I do?
- Am I personally involved in serving and loving others, or is my effort just symbolic gesture from me?

5) Concluding prayer

In His days uprightness shall flourish,
and peace in plenty till the moon is no more.
His empire shall stretch from sea to sea,
from the river to the limits of the earth. (Ps 72:7-8)

Lectio Divina Wednesday, January 8, 2020

Christmas Time

1) Opening prayer

God, light of all nations,
give us the joy of lasting peace,
and fill us with Your radiance
as You filled the hearts of our fathers.
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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 6:45-52

After the five thousand had eaten and were satisfied, Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side toward Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And when he had taken leave of them, he went off to the mountain to pray. When it was evening, the boat was far out on the sea and he was alone on shore. Then he saw that they were tossed about while rowing, for the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out. They had all seen him and were terrified. But at once he spoke with them, "Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid!" He got into the boat with them and the wind died down. They were completely astounded. They had not understood the incident of the loaves. On the contrary, their hearts were hardened.

3) Reflection

- After the multiplication of the loaves (yesterday's Gospel), Jesus ordered the disciples to go into the boat. Why? Mark does not explain this. The Gospel of John says the following. According to the hope people had at that time, the Messiah would repeat the gesture of Moses and would feed the multitude in the desert. This is why, before the multiplication of the loaves, the people concluded that Jesus must be the expected Messiah, announced by Moses (cf. Dt 18:15-18) and they wanted to make Him a King (cf. Jn 6:14-15). This decision of the people was a temptation for Jesus as well as for the disciples. For this reason, Jesus obliged the disciples to take the boat and leave. He wanted to avoid the risk of them being contaminated with the dominant ideology, because the "leaven of Herod and of the Pharisees" was very strong (Mk 8:15). Jesus Himself faces the temptation through prayer.
- Mark describes the events with great art. On one side, Jesus goes up to the mountain to pray. On the other, the disciples go toward the sea and get into the boat. It almost seems like a symbolical picture which foreshadows the future: it is as if Jesus went up to Heaven, leaving the disciples alone in the midst of the contradictions of life, in the fragile boat of the community. It was night. They are in the high seas, all together in the small boat, trying to advance, rowing, but the wind was strong and against them. They were tired. It was night, between three and six o'clock in the morning. The communities of the time of Mark were like the disciples. In the night! Contrary wind! They caught no fish, in spite of the efforts made! Jesus seemed to be absent! This is very symbolic of the times. But He was present and came close to them, and they, like the disciples on the way to Emmaus, did not recognize Him (Lk 24:16).
- At the time of Mark, around the year 70, the small boat of the communities had to face the contrary wind on the part of some converted Jews who wished to reduce the mystery of Jesus to the prophecies and figures of the Old Testament, as well as some converted pagans who thought it was possible to have a certain alliance between faith in Jesus and the empire. Mark tries to help the Christians to respect the mystery of Jesus and not to want to reduce Jesus to their own desires and ideas.
- Jesus arrives walking on the water of the sea of life. They scream, taken up by fear, because they think that it is a ghost. As it happens in the passage of the disciples on the way to Emmaus, Jesus pretends that He wants to continue to walk (Lk 24:28). But they cry out and this causes Him to change the way. He gets close to them and says, "Courage, it is I, do not be afraid!" Here, once again, for one who knows the story of the Old Testament, this recalls some very important facts: (a) Remember that the people, protected by God, crossed the Red Sea without fear; (b) Remember that God, calling Moses, declared his name several times, saying, "I am He who is!" (cf. Ex 3:15); (c) Remember also the Book of Isaiah which represents the return from the exile as a new Exodus, where God appears, repeating numerous times, "I am He who is!" (cf. Is 42:8; 43:5,11,13; 44:6,25; 45:5-7). This way of recalling the Old Testament, of using the bible, helped the communities to recognize the presence of God in Jesus and in the facts of life. Do not be afraid!
- Jesus got into the boat and the wind ceased. But the disciples' fear, instead of disappearing, increases. Mark the Evangelist criticizes them and says, "They had not understood what the miracle of the loaves meant, and their minds were closed" (6:52). The affirmation that their minds were closed reminds us of the heart of Pharaoh which

was hardened (Ex 7:3,13,22) and of the people in the desert (Ps 95:8) who did not want to listen to Moses and thought only of returning to Egypt (Num 20:2-10), where there was plenty of bread and meat to satisfy them (Ex 16:3).

4) Personal questions

- Night, stormy sea, contrary wind... Have you ever felt like this? What have you done to overcome it?
- Have you been afraid so many times because you have not known how to recognize Jesus present and acting in your life?
- How does this passage apply to me personally and to the Church today, with all the world problems and challenges?

5) Concluding prayer

He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the needy from death.
From oppression and violence He redeems their lives,
their blood is precious in His sight. (Ps 72:13-14)

Lectio Divina Thursday, January 9, 2020

1) Opening prayer

God our Father,
through Christ Your Son
the hope of eternal life dawned on our world.
Give to us the light of faith
that we may always acknowledge Him as our Redeemer
and come to the glory of His kingdom,
where He lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2) Gospel Reading - Luke 4:14-22a

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news of him spread throughout the whole region. He taught in their synagogues and was praised by all. He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

3) Reflection

- Animated by the Spirit, Jesus returns toward Galilee and begins to announce the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Being in the community and teaching in the synagogues, He reaches Nazareth where He grew up. He was returning to the community where, since the time He was small, had participated in the celebration - for thirty years. The following Saturday, according to His custom, He went to the synagogue to be with the people and to participate in the celebrations.
- Jesus rises to read. He chooses a text from Isaiah which speaks about the poor, of prisoners, of the blind and the oppressed. The text reflects the situation of the people of Galilee in the time of Jesus. In the name of God, Jesus takes a stand to defend the life of His people, and with the words of Isaiah, He defines His mission: to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to proclaim freedom to prisoners, to restore sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. Going back to the ancient tradition of the prophets, He proclaims “a year of grace of the Lord”. He proclaims a jubilee year. Jesus wants to reconstruct the community, the clan, in such a way that once again it may be the expression of their faith in God! And then, as God is Father of all, we should all be brothers and sisters of one another.
- In ancient Israel, the great family, the clan or **community**, was the basis of living together. It was the protection of families and of the people, the guarantee of the possession of the land, the principal channel of tradition, and the defense of the people. It was a concrete way of embodying the love of God in the love for neighbor. To defend the clan, the community, was the same as defending the Covenant with God. In Galilee at the time of Jesus, there was a two-fold segregation, that of the politics of Herod Antipas (4 BC to 39 AD) and the segregation of the official religion. This became the system of exploitation and of repression of the politics of Herod Antipas supported by the Roman Empire. Many people were homeless, excluded, and without work (Lk 14:21; Mt 20:3, 5-6). The result was that the clan, the **community**, was weakened. The families and the people remained without any help, without any defense. The official religion maintained by the religious authorities of the time, instead of strengthening the community in a way in which it could receive and accept the excluded, strengthened this segregation even more. The law of God was used to legitimize the exclusion of many people: women, children, Samaritans, foreigners, lepers, the possessed, publicans, the sick, the mutilated, the handicapped. It was all the opposite of the fraternity which God had dreamt for all! This was the political and economic situation, as well as the religious ideology. Everything conspired to weaken the local community and hinder the manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ program, based on the prophecy of Isaiah, offered an alternative.
- After finishing the reading, Jesus updated the text applying it to the life of the people, saying, “*Today*, this reading, which you have heard with your own ears, has been fulfilled!” His way of joining the bible to the life of the people produced a two-fold reaction. Some remained surprised and amazed. Others had a negative reaction. Some were scandalized and wanted to have nothing more to do with Him. They said, “Is He not the son of Joseph?” (Lk 4:22). Why were they scandalized? They were because Jesus says to accept and receive the poor, the blind, the oppressed. But they did not accept His proposal. And thus, when He presented His project to accept the excluded, He Himself was excluded!

4) Personal questions

- Jesus joined faith in God with the social situation of His people. How do I live my faith in God?
- Where I live, are there any blind, prisoners, or oppressed? How do I treat them?
- How do I treat immigrants and foreigners? Is it with inclusion and love, or not? Do I also use “the law” to segregate people?

5) Concluding prayer

May His name be blessed for ever,
and endure in the sight of the sun.
In Him shall be blessed every race in the world,
and all nations call Him blessed. (Ps 72:17)

Lectio Divina Friday, January 10, 2020

1) Opening prayer

All-powerful Father,
You have made known the birth of the Savior
by the light of a star.
May He continue to guide us with the light,
for He lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2) Gospel Reading - Luke 5:12-16

It happened that there was a man full of leprosy in one of the towns where Jesus was; and when he saw Jesus, he fell prostrate, pleaded with him, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean." Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do will it. Be made clean." And the leprosy left him immediately. Then he ordered him not to tell anyone, but "Go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." The report about him spread all the more, and great crowds assembled to listen to him and to be cured of their ailments, but he would withdraw to deserted places to pray.

3) Reflection

- A leper came close to Jesus. He had to live far away from others, because whoever touched him remained impure! But that leper had great courage. He transgressed the norms of religion so as to be able to get close to Jesus. He said, “*Sir, if You want, You can heal me!*” That is to say, “It is not necessary for You to touch me.” It is sufficient for the Lord to want it, and He cured him! The sentence reveals two evils: a) the *evil* of leprosy which renders him impure; b) the evil of isolation, to which he was condemned by society and by religion. This also reveals the man’s great faith in the power of Jesus. Jesus, profoundly moved, heals him from both evils! In the first place, to cure the isolation, He touches the leper. It is as if He said, “For Me you are not excluded. I accept

you as a brother!” And then He cures the leper saying, *"I do will it. Be made clean."*

- The leper, in order to be able to enter in contact with Jesus, had transgressed the norms of the law. Jesus also, in order to be able to help that excluded man and reveal to him 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 the time.
- Jesus, not only cures, but also wants the cured person to be able to live with others. He once again inserts the person in society so that he can live together with others. At that time for a leper to be accepted again in the community, he needed a certificate from a priest, that he had been cured. It is the same today. The sick person leaves the hospital having a document signed by the doctor. Jesus obliges the person to go and look for the document, so that he can live normally with the others. He obliges the authority to recognize that this man has been cured.
- Jesus forbids the leper to speak about the healing. The Gospel of Mark informs us that this prohibition was not effective and went unheeded. The leper 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 (Mk 1:45) Why? Jesus had touched a leper. For this reason, according to the opinion of the religion of the time, now He Himself was impure and should be far away from everybody. He could no longer enter into the cities. Mark says that the people did not care at all about these official norms, in fact, *people came to Him from all parts* (Mk 1:45).
- The two-fold message which Luke and Mark give the community of their time and to all of us is the following: a) to announce the Good News means to give witness of the concrete experience that one has of Jesus. What does the leper announce? He tells the others the good that Jesus has done to him. That is all! All this! This is the witness which impels others to accept the Good News of God, that brought by Jesus. b) In order to take the Good News to people, it is necessary to not be afraid to transgress the religious norms which are contrary to God's project and which render communication, dialogue and the lived experience of love difficult, even if this implies difficulty for the people, as happened with Jesus.

4) Personal questions

- In order to help the neighbor, Jesus transgresses the law of purity. In the Church today, are there any laws which render difficult or prevent the practice of love toward neighbor?
- In order to be cured, the leper had the courage to challenge the public opinion of his time. Do I have such courage?
- Do I treat the homeless on the street as a leper? Think of all the times. Do I reach out and hold a hand, or give a hug, or do I cross the street or pretend they aren't there?
- Jesus gave what the leper needed, not a donation or some money. When I am asked for help, do I take the time to give the help that is needed to “cure” the problem, or do I offer some token donation (if at all) and just keep walking?

5) Concluding prayer

Praise Yahweh, Jerusalem, Zion, praise your God.
For He gives strength to the bars of your gates,
He blesses your children within you. (Ps 147:12-13)

Lectio Divina Saturday, January 11, 2020

1) Opening prayer

God our Father,
through Your Son You made us a new creation.
He shared our nature and became one of us;
with His help, may we become more like Him,
who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2) Gospel Reading - John 3:22-30

Jesus and his disciples went into the region of Judea, where he spent some time with them baptizing. John was also baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was an abundance of water there, and people came to be baptized, for John had not yet been imprisoned. Now a dispute arose between the disciples of John and a Jew about ceremonial washings. So they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing and everyone is coming to him." John answered and said, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said that I am not the Christ, but that I was sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease."

3) Reflection

- Both John the Baptist and Jesus indicated a new way to the crowds. But Jesus, after having adhered to the movement of John the Baptist, and after having been baptized by him, advanced a step ahead and created His own movement. He baptized people in the Jordan River when John the Baptist was also doing it. Both of them attracted the poor and abandoned people of Palestine by announcing the Good News of the Kingdom of God.
- Jesus, the new preacher, had a certain advantage over John the Baptist. He baptized more people and attracted more disciples. Thus, a tension arose between the disciples of John and those of Jesus, concerning the "purification," that is, concerning the value of baptism. The disciples of John the Baptist experienced a certain envy and went to John to speak to him and informed him about the movement of Jesus.
- John's response to his disciples is a beautiful response, which reveals his great spirit. John helps his disciples to see things more objectively. He uses three arguments: a) Nobody receives anything which is not given by God. If Jesus does such beautiful

things, it is because he receives them from God (Jn 3:27). Instead of having envy, the disciples should feel joy. b) John reaffirms once again that he, John, is not the Messiah but only the precursor (Jn 3:28). c) In the end, he uses a comparison taken from the wedding feast. At that time, in Palestine, on the day of the wedding, in the house of the bride, the so called “friends of the bridegroom” waited for the arrival of the bridegroom to present him to the bride. In this case, Jesus is the bridegroom, the crowd is the bride, John the friend of the bridegroom. John the Baptist says that, in the voice of Jesus, he recognizes the voice of the bridegroom and can present him to the bride, to the crowds. At this moment, the bridegroom, the people, leave the friend of the bridegroom and follow Jesus, because they recognize in Him the voice of their bridegroom! And for this reason the joy of John is great, “complete joy”. John wants nothing for himself! His mission is to present the bridegroom to the bride! The last sentence summarizes everything: “He must increase, I must decrease!” This statement is also the program for anyone who follows Jesus.

- At the end of the first century, in Palestine as well as in Asia Minor, where there were some communities of Jews, there were also people who had been in contact with John the Baptist or who had been baptized by him (Acts 19:3). Seen from outside, the movement of John the Baptist and that of Jesus were very similar to one another. Both of them announced the coming of the Kingdom (cf. Mt 3:1-2; 4:17). There must have been some confusion between the followers of John and those of Jesus. And because of this, the witness of John about Jesus was very important. The four Gospels are concerned about transmitting the words of John the Baptist saying that he is not the Messiah. For the Christian communities, the Christian response, John’s response, “*He must increase but I must decrease*” was valid not only for the disciples of John at the time of Jesus, but also for the disciples of the Baptist or Cambric community of the end of the first century.

4) Personal questions

- “He must increase, I must decrease”. This is John’s agenda. Is this also my agenda?
- What is important is that the bride finds the bridegroom. We are only spokespersons, nothing more. Am I this?
- Here John shows the essence of humility, which has many forms. In what ways do I exemplify humility?

5) Concluding prayer

They shall dance in praise of His name,
play to Him on tambourines and harp!
For Yahweh loves His people,
He will crown the humble with salvation. (Ps 149:3-4)

Lectio Divina Sunday, January 12, 2020

The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan

Matthew 3:13-17

1. 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)

2. Reading

a) 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.

b) A division of the text as an aid to its reading:

Matthew 3:13 setting

Matthew 3:14-15 dialogue John-Jesus

Matthew 3:16-17 epiphany/theophany

c) The text:

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.'

3. A moment of silent prayer

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

4. Some questions

to help us in our meditation and prayer.

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



5. Meditation

a) 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.

b) A commentary on the text:

Mt 13: 13 The adult Jesus

After John “appears” on the scene (13:1), Jesus of Nazareth, the town 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 baptize 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 Elizabeth (Lk 1:42-43), of the angels (Lk 2:13-14) of the shepherds (Lk 2:20), and of the aged 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 are we to wait for someone else?" (Mt 11:3).

6. For those who wish to go 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 Nazianzen 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 (Gen 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 (Josh 3), the waters of the Jordan heal Naaman the leper (2 Kings 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 (Isa 35:1-10), come to the water all you who are thirsty (Isa 55: 1-13), draw water joyfully (Isa 12:3-6).

7. 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.

8. 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")

Lectio Divina Monday, January 13, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 1:14-20

After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel." As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." Then they left their nets and followed him. He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

3) Reflection

- After John had been arrested, Jesus went to Galilee. There He proclaimed the Gospel of God. John was arrested by King Herod for having denounced the immoral behavior of the King (Lk 3:18-20). The imprisonment of John the Baptist did not frighten Jesus! On the contrary, in that event He saw a symbol of the coming of the Kingdom. Today, would we know how to read the facts of politics and of urban violence to announce or proclaim the Good News of God?

- Jesus proclaimed the Good News of God. The Good News is of God not only because it comes from God, but also and, above all, because God is its content. God Himself is the greatest Good News for human life. He responds to the deepest aspiration of our heart. In Jesus, we see what happens when a human person allows God to enter and to reign. This Good News of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus has four different aspects:

a) The time is fulfilled and has arrived. For the other Jews the time was not as yet fulfilled, had not arrived. There was still much missing for the coming of the Kingdom. For the Pharisees, for example, the Kingdom could be attained only when the observance of the law would be perfect. Jesus had another way of reading the facts. He says that the time is fulfilled; it has arrived.

b) The Kingdom of God is close at hand! For the Pharisees the coming of the Kingdom depended on their efforts. It would have arrived only after they had observed the law. Jesus says the contrary: "The Kingdom is close at hand." It is already here! When Jesus says, "The Kingdom is close at hand", He does not mean to say that the Kingdom has been reached only at that moment, but rather that it was already there. What everybody was expecting was already present in their life, but they did not know it. They did not perceive it (cf. Lk 17:21). Jesus saw it! He saw and read reality from a different perspective. It is in this hidden presence of the Kingdom in the midst of the people that Jesus reveals Himself to the poor of His land. And this is the seed of the Kingdom which will receive the rain of His Word and the warmth of His love.

c) Convert yourselves! The exact meaning is "change your way of thinking and of living." In order to be able to perceive the presence of the Kingdom in life, a person should begin to think and live in a different way. The person should change his or her

way of life and find another way of living together with others! He/she should leave aside all of the legalism of the teaching of the Pharisees and allow the new experience of God to invade his/her life and give him/her a new way of looking so as to read and understand the facts in a new way.

d) To believe in the Good News! It was not easy to accept this message. It is not easy for us to begin to think in a different way from all that we have learned since we were small children. This is possible only through an act of faith. When someone gives a different piece of news, it is difficult to accept it, and it is accepted only if we trust the person who delivers the news. And thus, you will say to others, “You can accept! I know this person! This person does not deceive! You can trust him/her!” We can trust Jesus!

- The first objective of the proclamation of the Good News is to form a community. Jesus goes by; He sees and He calls. The first four who were called - Simon, Andrew, John and James - listen, abandon everything, and follow Jesus in order to form a community with Him. It seems to be love at first sight! According to Mark’s account, everything takes place in the first encounter with Jesus. Comparing with the other Gospels, people perceive that the four already knew Jesus (Jn 1:39; Lk 5:1-11). They had already had the opportunity to live with Him, to see Him help the people and to listen to Him in the synagogue. They knew how He lived and what He thought. The call was not something from one moment, but a progression of repeated calls and invitations, of progressing and retreating. The call begins and begins again always anew! In practice, it coincided with living together with Jesus for two or three years, since the time of the Baptism until the moment when Jesus ascended to Heaven (Acts 1:21-22). And then, why does Mark present this as something sudden, an act of love at first sight? Mark thinks of the ideal: the encounter with Jesus should bring about a radical change in our life!

4) Personal questions

- A political fact, the imprisonment of John, led Jesus to begin the proclamation of the Good News of God. Today, does the political situation exercise any influence in the proclamation of the Good News that we present to people today?
- “Repent! Believe in the Good News!” How is this taking place in my own life?

5) Concluding prayer

For You are Yahweh,
Most High over all the earth,
far transcending all gods. (Ps 97:9)

Lectio Divina Tuesday, January 14, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 1:21-28

Jesus came to Capernaum with his followers, and on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit; he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" Jesus rebuked him and said, "Quiet! Come out of him!" The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him. All were amazed and asked one another, "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him." His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee.

3) Reflection

- Sequence of the Gospels of the days of this week. Yesterday's Gospel informed us about the first activity of Jesus. He called four people to form a community with them (Mk 1:16-10). Today's Gospel describes admiration for 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 people (Mk 1:32-34) and the prayer of Jesus in an isolated place (Mk 1:35-39). Mark gathers all of these episodes which had been transmitted orally in the communities, joining them together like bricks of a wall. In the years 70's, the year in which he writes, the communities needed orientation. By describing how Jesus began His activity, Mark tells of what they should do to announce the Good News. Mark gives them a catechesis by telling the communities about the events in 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 compare and say: He teaches with authority, in a way different from the way the scribes do. The scribes of that time taught quoting the authority. Jesus does not quote any authority. He speaks 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 that takes possession of people and alienates 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", as a High Priest, or like a King, Judge, Doctor or General. Even today, many people live alienated from themselves, deceived by the power of mass media, mass communication, and the advertising of business. They repeat what they hear others say. They live as slaves of consumerism, oppressed by the

power of money, and threatened by debtors. Many think that their life is not as it should be if they cannot buy what the advertising 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). It was not easy then, it was not easy yesterday, and it is not easy today to do this in such a way that a person begins to think and act in a way which diverges 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 for people to 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 people who were considered impure and far from God. Now, purified by the contact with Jesus, people could present themselves before God. This was a great Good News!

4) Personal questions

- Can 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, do not think, but rather are driven by mass media. They do not have a critical mind or way of thinking. They allow other masters into their lives. How can this “devil” be expelled?

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Wednesday, January 15, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 1:29-39

On leaving the synagogue Jesus entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her. He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them. When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. The whole town was gathered at the door. He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him. Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed. Simon and those who were with him pursued him and on finding him said, "Everyone is looking for you." He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come." So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.

3) 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, with her health restored and having recovered her dignity, and she begins to serve. 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 people of that time. They had nobody to whom they had 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, the Good News of God consists of what 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 the awareness of His mission.
- To maintain the awareness of the mission and not to close oneself up in what is 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 themselves up in the results already obtained. They should not look back. But, like Jesus, they should maintain conscious 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 difference. Later on, in the Gospel of Mark, this misunderstanding will grow and will practically become a break between Jesus and the disciples (cf. Mk 8:14-21,32-33; 9:32; 14:27). Today, there are some misunderstandings along the way in the proclaiming the Good News. Mark helps one to be attentive to the differences.

4) Personal questions

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

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Thursday, January 16, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to him and kneeling down begged him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched the leper, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. Then he said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

3) Reflection

- Accepting and curing the leper, Jesus reveals a new face of God. A leper came near Jesus. He was an excluded, 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 in order to be able to get near Jesus. 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; and 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. Jesus is profoundly moved and 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, in order to enter into contact with Jesus, had transgressed the norms of the Law. Jesus, in order 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 the excluded person into 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 in some places. 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 authorities 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 tells us that this prohibition does not survive. The leper, walking away, began to spread the news to the point that Jesus could no longer publicly enter 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, He himself was now impure and should live far away from all others. He could no longer enter the city. Mark says that people did not care about these official norms, in fact, people came to Him from everywhere (Mk 1:45).
- Summarizing. In the year 70, when Mark wrote, as well as today, the time in which we live, it was and is important to have models of how to live and how to proclaim the Good News of God. 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

Jesus calls His first disciples

To form the community

Mark 1:21-22

The people were admired at His teaching

Mark 1:23-28
 Jesus expels a devil
 To create a critical conscience
 To overcome the force of evil

Mark 1:29-31
 He cures Peter's mother-in-law
 To give life back so as to serve

Mark 1:32-34
 He cures the sick and the possessed
 To accept the marginalized

Mark 1:35
 Jesus rises early to pray
 To remain united with the Father

Mark 1:36-39
 Jesus continues the announcement
 Not to stop at the results

Mark 1:40-45
 He cures a leper
 To integrate anew the excluded

4) Personal questions

- To proclaim the Good News means to give witness to the experience of Jesus that one has. What does the leper announce? He tells others the good that Jesus has done to him. This witness leads others to accept the Good News of God which Jesus brings to us. What is the witness that you give?
- To take the Good News to the people, it is not necessary to be afraid of transgressing the religious norms which are contrary to God's plan 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?

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Friday, January 17, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 2,1-12

When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it became known that he was at home. Many gathered together so that there was no longer room for them, not even around the door, and he preached the word to them. They came bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. Unable to get near Jesus because of the crowd, they opened up the roof above him. After they had broken through, they let down the mat on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to him, "Child, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there asking themselves, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming. Who but God alone can forgive sins?" Jesus immediately knew in his mind what they were thinking to themselves, so he said, "Why are you thinking such things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth" –he said to the paralytic, "I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home." He rose, picked up his mat at once, and went away in the sight of everyone. They were all astounded and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this."

3) 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 describes the objective of the Good News and the mission of the community. Now, in Mk 2:1 to 3, 6 there is the effect of the proclamation of the Good News. A community faithful to the Gospel lives values which can be in contradiction to the interests of the unjust 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 the unjust 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 to 3, 6 served as a guide to the communities, those of the past as well as those of today. Conflict is not an incident along the road, 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

Adversaries of Jesus:

The scribes
The scribes of the Pharisees
The disciples of John and the Pharisees
The Pharisees
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 of the paralytic obtains 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 friends, arrived. Jesus is their only hope. They do not doubt about going up and they make an opening in the roof over the place where Jesus was. It must have been a poor house, with the roof being just mud covered with leaves. They lowered the stretcher with the man to Jesus. Jesus, 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 a sign 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 people forgiven and purified of their sins? 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 the sins have truly been forgiven or not. But if I tell him: “Get up and walk!”, there, all can see if I have or don't have the power to heal. 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! The leaders were confronted with a dilemma. Either their teaching was wrong and sickness is not related to sin, or Jesus had the power to forgive sins, proven by their own teaching! 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: a) The sicknesses of people are not a punishment for sins. b) Jesus opens a new way to reach God. What the system called impurity was no more an obstacle for people to get close to God. 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!”.

4) 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?

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Saturday, January 18, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 2:13-17

Jesus went out along the sea. All the crowd came to him and he taught them. As he passed by, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the customs post. Jesus said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed Jesus. While he was at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners sat with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many who followed him. Some scribes who were Pharisees saw that Jesus was eating with sinners and tax collectors and said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus heard this and said to them, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

3) Reflection

- In yesterday's Gospel, we saw 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, there was a conflict in the communities between Christians who had been converted from paganism and those from Judaism. Those from Judaism found it difficult to enter into the house of converted pagans and sit with them around the same table (cf. Acts 10:28; 11:3). In describing how Jesus faces this conflict, Mark directs 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 teaching and by acceptance on the part of the people (Mk 1:14,21,38-39; 2:2,13) in spite of the conflict 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. He spoke from His experience, of the experience which He himself had of God and life. Jesus lived in God. 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 afar with punishment and hell, becomes a friendly presence and 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 disciples. 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), it is the conscience of His mission which helps Jesus to find the response and to point the way for the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus.

4) Personal questions

- Jesus calls a sinner, a tax collector, a person hated by the people, to be His disciple. What is the message for us in this act of Jesus?
- Jesus says that He has come to call sinners. He provides a path to forgiveness. How do we act once we have His forgiveness? Do we consciously try to avoid sin?

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Sunday, January 19, 2020

*John the Baptist announces Jesus
as the Lamb of God
John 1:29-34*

1. Opening prayer

In this prayerful reading of the Gospel of John, we recall the words of Saint 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 shine 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*).

2. The text

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.'

3. A prayerful silent pause

The Word of God demands that we want and welcome it through a meditation of silence. Quiet 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.

4. 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.

a) 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 = Isa 53:4; Heb 9:28 = Isa 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 which 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 (chapters 42 and 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 = Isa 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" (Rev 13:8), the One whose wounds healed us (1 Pet 2:25; Isa 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 (Ex 12:22). Then in John 19:36 the fulfillment 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 Book of Revelation: 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 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.

b) 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).

5. The message

a) 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 hearts.

“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)

b) 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 what the dove is among birds: innocence, sweetness and simplicity”.

c) 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 all people.

6. 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.

7. 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*)

Lectio Divina Monday, January 20, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 2:18-22

The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were accustomed to fast. People came to Jesus and objected, "Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. If he does, its fullness pulls away, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins are ruined. Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins."

3) 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). The day after tomorrow is 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 new cloth on an old cloak and the new wine into fresh skins (Mk 2:21-22) should be understood in the light which also radiates clearly 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 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 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, pour 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 concepts 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 impose itself on the new, and thus, He begins to manifest it.

4) Personal questions

- Beginning with the profound experience of God which encouraged Him interiorly, Jesus had liberty concerning the norms and religious practices. Today, do we have this same liberty and 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?

5) Concluding prayer

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

Lectio Divina Tuesday, January 21, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 2:23-28

As Jesus was passing through a field of grain on the sabbath, his disciples began to make a path while picking the heads of grain. At this the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the sabbath?" He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions were hungry? How he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of offering that only the priests could lawfully eat, and shared it with his companions?" Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath. That is why the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

3) Reflection

- The Law exists for the good of people. 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 to indicate that the arguments of the others have no meaning. 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 (I Sam 21:2-7). 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, from 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 by using arms to defend their own life. For this, one thousand people 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 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 gives Jesus, the Son of Man, the key to discovering 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. It 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, hand written, 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. By comparison, we are still lacking very much in familiarity with the Bible and participation in the community!

4) Personal questions

- The Sabbath is for the human being and not vice-versa. How do I interpret this?
- Even without having the Bible at home, Jesus knew it by heart. Do I?

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Wednesday, January 22, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 3:1-6

Jesus entered the synagogue. There was a man there who had a withered hand. They watched Jesus closely to see if he would cure him on the sabbath so that they might accuse him. He said to the man with the withered hand, "Come up here before us." Then he said to the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?" But they remained silent. Looking around at them with anger and grieved at their hardness of heart, Jesus said to the man, "Stretch out

your hand." He stretched it out and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him to put him to death.

3) 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 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, perpetrated 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 direction so as not to be discouraged along the journey.

- Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus enters 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 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 people. Jesus was an uncomfortable person for them, because He placed the well-being of people above the norms and laws. The concern of the Pharisees and of the Herodians was not zeal for the Law, but rather the will and 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 "rise", to get up, to live in the middle and to take his place in the center of the community! The marginalized, the excluded, must 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.

- Jesus' question 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 His 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 do not know 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 Jesus' action, 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.

4) 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, yourself, ever been confronted by people such as the Herodians and the Pharisees, who place the law above the well-being of people? What did you feel at that moment? Did you agree with them or did you challenge them?

5) Concluding prayer

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

Lectio Divina Thursday, January 23, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 3:7-12

Jesus withdrew toward the sea with his disciples. A large number of people followed from Galilee and from Judea. Hearing what he was doing, a large number of people came to him also from Jerusalem, from Idumea, from beyond the Jordan, and from the neighborhood of Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him. He had cured many and, as a result, those who had diseases were pressing upon him to touch him. And whenever

unclean spirits saw him they would fall down before him and shout, "You are the Son of God." He warned them sternly not to make him known.

3) Reflection

- The conclusion reached at the end of this fifth conflict (Mk 3: 2 to 6) is that the Good News as it was announced by Jesus said exactly the opposite of the teaching of the religious authority of the time. This is why, 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 on the horizon. They decide to make Him die (Mk 3:6). Without sincere conversion it is not possible for people to reach 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 highlight an enormous contrast. Earlier, in Mk 2:1 to 3:6, only conflicts were spoken of, including the conflict of life and death between Jesus and the civil and religious authority of Galilee (Mk 3:1-6). Now, 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 Judea, 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 a 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. Especially the excluded and the marginalized who came to Him with their ailments: the sick and those possessed. Those who were not accepted 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), and on the other side there was 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 Jesus' clash with the s 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 demons (Mk 16:17). What does it mean in Mark's Gospel to drive out or expel 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 to help people 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 Satan those 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 similar words, Mark 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 always using 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 overcame him, dominated him, conquered 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 this: “Christians are forbidden to be afraid of Satan!” After Jesus rose from the dead, it is madness and a lack of faith to invoke Satan at every moment, as if he still had any power over us. To insist on the power of the devil in order to persuade people to return to Church means to ignore the Good News of the Kingdom. It is a lack of faith in the Resurrection of Jesus!

4) Personal questions

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

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Friday, January 24, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel reading - Mark 3:13-19

Jesus went up the mountain and summoned those whom he wanted and they came to him. He appointed Twelve, whom he also named Apostles, that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach and to have authority to drive out demons: He appointed the Twelve: Simon, whom he named Peter; James, son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James, whom he named Boanerges, that is, sons of thunder; Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus; Thaddeus, Simon the Cananean, and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.

3) Reflection

- The Gospel today describes the acceptance and mission of the twelve apostles. Jesus begins with two disciples to whom He adds two others (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 center; (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 people. 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 the mountain recalls the mountain that Moses climbed when he 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 people in order to give more consistency to the mission and 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, 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 as the mission is developing, extending into the towns and villages of Galilee. There is a time when they do not even have the time to eat or to rest (Mk 3:2). This is why Jesus was concerned with 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 the apostles, each one of us is called by God by our name.

4) Personal questions

- To be with Jesus and to go on mission is the two-fold purpose of the Christian community. How do you take on this commitment in the community to which you

belong?

- Jesus called the twelve disciples by their names. You, I, we, all of us exist because God calls us by our name. Think about this!

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Saturday, January 25, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 16:15-18

Jesus appeared to the Eleven and said to them: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

3) Reflection

- *The signs which accompany the proclamation or announcement of the Good News.* Jesus appears to the eleven disciples and reproaches them because they had not believed the people 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 had an experience of the resurrection of Jesus. Why would this be? Probably to teach two things. *In the first place*, that faith in Jesus goes through the faith of people who give witness. *Second*, that nobody should get discouraged when incredulity comes from the heart. Even the eleven disciples had doubts!

- Then Jesus gives them the mission of announcing the Good News to all creatures. The requirement which He gives is the following: *to believe and to be baptized*. To those who have the courage to believe in the Good News and who are baptized, He promises 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,

and they will lay their hands on the sick who will recover. This happens even in our own day.

- *To cast out devils* is to fight against the force of evil which destroys life. The life of many people 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 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, e.g. gossip, which destroys the relationship between people. The one who lives in the presence of God goes beyond this and succeeds in not being bothered by this terrible poison.

- *To cure the sick*: wherever there is a clearer consciousness of the presence of God, there is also a special attention toward oppressed and marginalized people, especially the sick. What helps the person 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, revealed the love of the Father, this same Jesus continues alive in our midst, in the same way in our communities. Through us He continues His mission, revealing the Good News of the Love of God for the poor. Even 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 can counteract the force which comes from faith in the Resurrection (Rm 8: 35-39). A community which wants to witness to the Resurrection has to be a sign of life, should fight against the forces of death in a way that the world will 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 the fear of being happy!

4) Personal questions

- To cast out devils, to have the gift of new tongues, to be unharmed by deadly poison and by 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 fulfill this mission in our community? In what way?

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Sunday, January 26, 2020

*The beginning of the proclamation of the Good News
and the call of the first disciples*

Matthew 4:12-23

1. 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.

2. READING

a) The text:

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 fulfill 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 around 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.

b) A moment of silence:

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

3. MEDITATION

a) 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 have 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 and followed Him?

b) 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 sea-shore. 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 people. 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 market places 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.

4. PRAYER (Isa 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 Savior 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.

5. 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.

Lectio Divina Monday, January 27, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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 the human race 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 3:22-30

The scribes who had come from Jerusalem said of Jesus, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "By the prince of demons he drives out demons." Summoning them, he began to speak to them in parables, "How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand; that is the end of him. But no one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can plunder his house. Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have

forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin." For they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

3) Reflection

- *The conflict grows.* In the Gospel of Mark there is a progressive sequence. By the measure in which the Good News advances and people accept it, in the same measure it grows resistance on the part of the religious authority. The conflict began to grow and to influence all groups of people. 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 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 away, to keep an eye on Jesus' behavior. They wanted to defend tradition against the new ideas that Jesus taught to the people (Mk 7:1). They thought that His teaching was against 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 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 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 on behalf of the people. They were afraid to lose their power.

- *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 in entering the house and in dominating and overcoming the strong man. He succeeds in driving out the devils. Jesus wins over the strong man and robs his house. He liberates the people 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 the evidence 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 of receiving 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!

4) Personal questions

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

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Tuesday, January 28, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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 the human race 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 3:31-35

The mother of Jesus and his brothers arrived at the house. Standing outside, they sent word to Jesus and called him. A crowd seated around him told him, "Your mother and your brothers and your sisters are outside asking for you." But he said to them in reply, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

3) Reflection

- The family of Jesus. The relatives reached the house where Jesus was. They have probably come from Nazareth. From there to Capernaum there is a distance of forty kilometers. His mother also comes 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 by turning to look toward the crowd who is there around Him: "Here are My mother and My brothers! Anyone who does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother!" To understand the meaning of this response it is necessary to look at the situation of the family at the time of Jesus.
- In old Israel, the clan (the large family, the community), was the basis of living together. It was protection for families and people, the guarantee of possession of the land, the principle vehicle of tradition, and 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 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 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 Hellenism, the frequent threats of violent repression on the part of the Romans and the obligation to accept the soldiers and give them hospitality, and the ever growing problem of survival, impelled families to close themselves in on themselves and to think only of their own needs. This closing up was strengthened by the religion of the time. For example, 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). The observance of the norms of purity was a factor in the marginalization of many people too, such as women, children, Samaritans, foreigners, lepers, possessed people, tax collectors or publicans, the sick, mutilated people and paraplegics.

- The concern over the problems of one's own family prevented people from meeting in community. Now, in order that the Kingdom of God could manifest itself in community living, people had to overcome the narrow limits of the small family and open themselves to the larger family, and the community. Jesus gave the example. When His own family tried to take control 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 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 should not close themselves in on themselves. The excluded and the marginalized had to be accepted in life with others and feel accepted by God (Lk 14:12-14). This was the path to attaining 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, the family, and the community as an expression of the incarnation of the love toward God and toward neighbor.

4) Personal questions

- What place and what influence does the community have in my way of living the faith?
- Today, in the large city, overcrowding promotes individualism which is at odds with life in community. What am I doing to counteract this? How does one reconcile personal physical safety with community involvement in these urban areas?

5) 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)

Lectio Divina Wednesday, January 29, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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 the human race 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 4:1-20

On another occasion, Jesus began to teach by the sea. A very large crowd gathered around him so that he got into a boat on the sea and sat down. And the whole crowd was beside the sea on land. And he taught them at length in parables, and in the course of his instruction he said to them, "Hear this! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep. And when the sun rose, it was scorched and it withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it and it produced no grain. And some seed fell on rich soil and produced fruit. It came up and grew and yielded thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." He added, "Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear." And when he was alone, those present along with the Twelve questioned him about the parables. He answered them, "The mystery of the Kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables, so that they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand, in order that they may not be converted and be forgiven." Jesus said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand any of the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown. As soon as they hear, Satan comes at once and takes away the word sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground who, when they hear the word, receive it at once with joy. But they have no roots; they last only for a time. Then when tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Those sown among thorns are another sort. They are the people who hear the word, but worldly anxiety, the lure of riches, and the craving for other things intrude and choke the word, and it bears no fruit. But those sown on rich soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

3) Reflection

- Sitting in the boat, Jesus taught the crowds. In these verses, Mark describes the way in which Jesus teaches the crowd: on the seaside, sitting in the boat, with many people around listening to Him. Jesus was not a cultured person (Jn 7:15). He had not frequented the superior school of Jerusalem. He had come from the country side, from Nazareth. He was someone who was unknown. He was a craftsman and a country man.

Without asking permission from the authorities, He began to teach the people. He spoke in a very different way. People liked to listen to Him.

- Jesus helped people perceive the mysterious presence of the Kingdom in the things of life by means of parables. A parable is a comparison. He uses the known and visible things of life to explain the invisible and unknown things of the Kingdom of God. For example, the people from Galilee understood when He spoke of seeds, soil, rain, the sun, salt, flowers, fish, harvest, etc. His parable uses these things which were known to the people to explain the mysteries of the Kingdom.
- The parable of the sower is a picture of the life of the farmer. At that time it was not easy to get a livelihood from agriculture. The land was full of stones. There were many bushes, little rain and much sun. Many times people, in order to take a shortcut, passed through the fields and stepped on the plants. (Mk 2:23). But in spite of that, every year, the farmer sowed and planted, trusting in the force of the seed, in the generosity of nature.
- He who has ears to listen, let him listen! Jesus begins the parable saying, "Listen!" (Mk 4:3). Now, at the end, He says, "He who has ears to listen, let him listen!" The way to understand the parable is by listening and thinking, "trying to understand!" The parable does not give us everything ready made, but induces those who listen to think and discover, based on the lived experience that they have of the seed. It induces creativity and participation. It is not a doctrine that arrives ready made to be taught and decorated. The parable does not give bottled water, but rather, leads one to the fountain or source. The farmer who listens, says, "Seed in the ground, I know what that is!" But Jesus says that this has something to do with the Kingdom of God. What would this be? One can already guess the long conversations of the crowd. The parable affects the people and moves them to listen to nature and to think about life.
- Jesus explains the parable to His disciples. At home, alone with Jesus, the disciples want to know the meaning of the parable. They do not understand it. Jesus is surprised at their ignorance (Mk 4:13) and responds with a difficult and mysterious phrase. He tells His disciples, "To you is granted the secret of the Kingdom of God; but to those who are outside everything comes in parables, so that they may look and not perceive, listen but not understand, to avoid changing their ways and being healed!" This phrase leads people to ask themselves "then what good is the parable? To clarify or to hide?" Perhaps Jesus uses parables in order for people to continue to live in ignorance and not reach conversion? Certainly not! Because at another point Mark says that Jesus used parables "according to what they could understand" (Mk 4:33).
- The parable reveals and hides at the same time! It reveals to "those who are inside," who accept Jesus, the Messiah, the Servant. It hides for those who insist on considering Him the glorious king. They understand the images of the parable, but they do not grasp the significance.
- The explanation of the parable in its different parts. One after another, Jesus explains the parts of the parable, seed and soil, up to the harvest time. Some scholars hold that this explanation was added later and would have been given to some communities. This is quite possible, because in the bud of the parable there is already the flower of the explanation. Bud and flower, both have the same origin which is Jesus. For this reason, we can continue to reflect and discover other beautiful things in the parable. Once a person asked in community, "Jesus has said that we should be salt. For what does salt

serve?" This was discussed and at the end more than ten different purposes for salt were discovered! These meanings were applied to the life of the community and it was discovered that to be salt is something difficult and demanding. The parable functioned! Salt not only has uses, but in Jesus' time it had high value. The Romans used it as money and in the difficult hot climate it was needed by the human body to survive. Salt was valuable and gave life! The same for the seed. Everybody has some experience of the seed.

4) Personal questions

- What experience do you have with seeds? How does this help you understand the Good News better?
- What type of soil are you?

5) Concluding prayer

Fix your gaze on Yahweh
and your face will grow bright,
you will never hang your head in shame. (Ps 34:5)

Lectio Divina Thursday, January 30, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 4:21-25

Jesus said to his disciples, "Is a lamp brought in to be placed under a bushel basket or under a bed, and not to be placed on a lampstand? For there is nothing hidden except to be made visible; nothing is secret except to come to light. Anyone who has ears to hear ought to hear." He also told them, "Take care what you hear. The measure with which you measure will be measured out to you, and still more will be given to you. To the one who has, more will be given; from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

3) 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,

lights it and places it 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 hidden 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 He offers. We should be attentive to the ideas which we have when we look at Jesus! If the lenses over the eyes are green, everything seems to be green. If they are blue, everything will be blue! If the idea with which we look at Jesus is mistaken, everything which I think about Jesus will be subject to 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 conclude that everything is mistaken.
- Parable: a new way of teaching and 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.
- Jesus' teaching was different from the teaching of the scribes. It was 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).

4) 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?
- What is the image of Jesus that I have within me? Who is Jesus for me and who am I for Jesus?
- What can I do, on a regular basis, to further learn the context of the bible and His teaching, to reduce my preconceptions, so I too won't have on colored lenses and will be able to see and act clearly?

5) Concluding prayer

Taste and see that Yahweh is good.

How blessed are those who take refuge in Him. (Ps 34:8)

Lectio Divina Friday, January 31, 2020

Ordinary Time

1) 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 the human race 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.

2) Gospel Reading - Mark 4:26-34

Jesus said to the crowds: “This is how it is with the Kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.” He said, “To what shall we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.” With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.

3) Reflection

- It is always beautiful to see Jesus, who sought in life and in events new elements and images which could help people to see 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 just the right 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 the pagans, who will not be able to enter

the community and participate in the Kingdom.

- Because Jesus teaches by means of parables. Jesus tells many parables. All are taken from the life of the people! In this way He helped people discover the things of God in daily life, a life which becomes transparent because what is extraordinary from 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 them and to find the signs of God in them.

4) Personal questions

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

5) Concluding Prayer

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