

María & José Ignacio Lopez Vigil

A certain Jesus

The good news for the people of Latin America



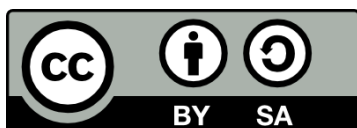
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María & José Ignacio López Vigil

Translated by Trinidad Ongtangco-Regala

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A CERTAIN JESUS - VOLUME 1

A CERTAIN JESUS

A Glimpse of the Three Volumes:

Volume I (Chapters 1-51) - Jesus goes to the Jordan to listen to John the Baptist. There he meets Peter, John and Andrew.... The news of John's imprisonment kindles his desire to do something for his people. Thus the spark: He must take over, and with a group of friends, he must awaken the spirit of the poor, telling them that God is on their side, fighting shoulder to shoulder with them. He forms his group in Capernaum, and through words and signs, presents God's plan for humankind. Jesus gradually finds himself at the helm of a people hungry and thirsty for justice, who in turn, see in God, a Father, a Liberator and a Friend.

Volume II (Chapters 52-99) - Jesus' activities in Capernaum and in the towns of Galilee, including his journeys to Jerusalem in the company of his twelve friends, where people meet them and follow them, prove that Jesus is a true leader of the people, a great prophet. His word becomes more and more intense as he criticizes the ambition and egoism of the rulers, while proclaiming the liberation of the poor. It is a liberation that will find realization in a new society that is communitarian and fraternal, where everyone is equal, where no one has more and others less. The conflicts among the ruling class - the priests, landowners and officials - become more accentuated, day by day. Jesus and his friends are fully aware of the calumny, the threats, persecution and the clandestine activities against them.

Volume III (Chapters 100-144) - Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem culminates in his arrest and death. The Romans as well as the religious authorities of the capital join hands to silence the threatening voice of the prophet. Jesus became prisoner, was tortured and in his death, experienced the weakness and helplessness of those who have fought for justice against the seemingly powerful and invincible rulers of this world. The God of life who does not allow the unjust to have the last word, resurrected Jesus from the dead: this is the experience that Jesus' friends transmit to us. The first Christian community is built on this faith.

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Suggestions for Using this Book

A Certain Jesus can be used in many ways. It is ideal for catechetical and liturgical dramatization. We indicate in these pages the liturgical and biblical references.

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 Volume 2, Chapters 52-99
 Volume 3, Chapters 100-144

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INTRODUCTIONS

I

Dorothy Day was the co-founder of the Catholic Worker. This was a house of hospitality in the poor area of New York City which was a haven for the outcasts of society. On any given day, one could find alcoholics, drug addicts, prostitutes and petty thieves gathered around the table to share a big pot of soup and day old bread. Adding water to the soup when unexpected visitors arrived (nearly every day) was a common occurrence. Dorothy herself had been arrested more times than anyone could remember. She was already in her 70's when she refused to take shelter in a mock nuclear attack and walked around the virtually abandoned streets to make a statement with her life - that nuclear safety was an illusion, and the production of nuclear war material, sheer madness. Once she was introduced on a Catholic campus where she was to give a talk as "a living saint", to which she retorted, "you don't get rid of me that easily." A point well taken. There's something about elevating a person or a message to the spiritual that removes its bite. Peter Maurin, co-founder with Dorothy of the Catholic Worker, used to say that the Gospels were dynamite - but that the Church kept the dynamite wet so that it would never explode.

Every Good Friday within recent memory, in the City of Manila, the urban poor enact their own version of the suffering and death of Jesus. Carrying a large cross, banners and cardboard similes of their own shanties, the urban poor do their own stations of the cross in front of government, business and even church offices with the message that Jesus continues being crucified today in the urban poor, whose shanties are brutally demolished, they themselves seriously injured and often left "without a place to lay their head." Often enough, they meet a procession emanating from the church replete with members of mandated organizations and regular church goers. Though externally not radically different in appearance, they represent quite different messages: one, transcendent (Christ died for our sins); the other emphasizing the imminent (Christ has made a preference for the poor and continues to suffer when they are oppressed, beaten down, despised...).

On Good Friday of 1980, Alex Garsales and Herman Moleta, two active lay leaders in Basic Christian Communities took the parts of Jesus and an apostle in the Passion Play of Kabankalan, Negros Occidental. Very much aware of the part that Jesus was exercising in the life of the community, Alex stated that it was more than a historical event which was being commemorated in that celebration. As if to underline the truth of their statements, their bullet-riddled bodies were found in the cogon grass on Easter Monday.

What other country in the world has the number of martyrs that this country has offered in the past twenty-five years, proving that the Gospel has lost nothing of its bite, which caused the death of God among us two thousand years ago? A few years ago, I decided to make a calendar and recorded on the calendar all the men and women of faith who died because of what they believed in, that God continues to act in this world among the poor to bring about a kingdom of justice for all... (only those

who **died** for justice, not persecuted); and there were more than enough names for every day of the year.

This book then is for you, who believe that the Gospel has lost nothing of its bite and that it continues to disrupt and disturb our comfortable, foam rubber Christianity. The Jesus presented here enters our lives as the great disturber, confronting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. May he continue to do so....

EDWARD M. GERLOCK *

A *Certain Jesus* is a work of art, at the same time a theological undertaking and a pastoral effort. One must insist on its worth, without looking at it as if it were just another book. This text is of great literary and dramatic quality, a proof of the seriousness and capability of the authors.

The content proves to be even more interesting. The theological backdrop presents relevant questions to us. This is not a new children's story about Jesus, nor it is written for entertainment; rather, it is a profound theological exposition.

We are accustomed to see the figure of Jesus from this side of his resurrection and ascension to heaven, we are used to seeing him in liturgical rituals, mythicized by painters, musicians and other artists. *A Certain Jesus* focuses on him from another angle, prior to the resurrection, showing him as the historical Jesus, a human figure as seen by his contemporaries, his friends as well as his adversaries (and this may be judged as more debatable) just as Jesus saw himself from his human conscience.

This dual perspective, however complementary, is radically different. To project onto Jesus of Palestine all we believe him to be, all we have thought of him as the risen Jesus, is an error in historical perspective, confusing levels and bringing false and tragic consequences in understanding the entire phenomenon which is Jesus. If we reduce the total Jesus to the Palestinian Jesus, we cut off a very important part of that totality. Likewise, if we reduce the total Jesus to the risen Jesus we also amputate an important part of that same totality. The first amputation may discredit Jesus' divinity; the second, his humanity. Both are equally heretical and dangerous.

For those who totally believe in the risen Christ, the text of this book may seem not enough in telling who Jesus is. The good thing is that this book will force them to go to the Palestinian Jesus, the historical Jesus, which is the real form Jesus adopted to preach the Kingdom and to bring people to the Father. What might be disturbing to them is the tremendous demand of this earthly Jesus who emptied his divinity in a concrete and historical way. These believers hide themselves not so much in the risen Jesus, but in the ritualized and mythicized Jesus.

This book gets us totally into the scandal of Jesus – scandal according to his enemies since Jesus being a man, claims to be the son of God, the Messiah, greater than Moses, etc. The risen Jesus turns out to be less scandalous and more fitting, if the intrinsic unity between the living risen Jesus and the crucified one is broken. For these people, reading *A Certain Jesus* could be of much help if they try to better understand this scandal more than looking for reasons for their faith.

For those who do not quite know who this certain Jesus is, those who know him only through ideological manipulation passed down through the centuries, this book will also be very good. It will bring them back to a necessary initial experience faithfully situating them side by side with the Palestinian Jesus in whom it was indeed difficult to see God in person. Will they remain there, on the purely human aspect of the complex reality of Jesus? Is it not necessary to proclaim Jesus of Nazareth as the Risen One, as the God-chosen One? Does not the text underscore the difference between Jesus and his disciples?

This brings us back to what the gospels are meant to be. *A Certain Jesus* is written from the accounts of the gospels and, obviously, situated before the gospels. It is a fact that the gospels are not purely historical narratives; they are the expression of the memory and faith of the first communities, many of whom witnessed the experience of the Risen Christ more intensely than the memory of the Crucified. The gospels are narratives where the expression "Jesus is Lord" is very explicit, yet at the same time the concrete experience of what had been Jesus' historical life is not clearly stated.

A Certain Jesus is situated in the tangible experience of the historical life of Jesus. For this reason, an attempt must be made at a literary re-creation, just as the gospel stories strive at a theological re-creation. Both are based on historical data, used for example by Josephus (though he ignored many of the details transmitted more or less elaborately by the gospels). It is obvious that the theological re-creation

proves to be more authoritative than the literary reconstruction this book presents. *A Certain Jesus* does not try to replace the gospels, but shows how these should be read, deepened and lived.

An important point is the pastoral relevance of this book. It is, indeed, a pastoral work even if some theological problems may arise on account of the option taken by the authors in their approach to Jesus. It is certainly not a novelistic narrative of Jesus' life; it is a tool for evangelization; a proclamation of the good news not only for the poor but also for those who have heard it but need to be reimmersed in it. The book is certainly shocking, as it jolts the readers and recovers the vitality of the evangelical message, which had become somewhat mummified in their translation. This might likewise be disconcerting to simple believers for whom the uncovering of faith – and not necessarily faith itself – has a very different character from that of the presentation of *A Certain Jesus*.

For those very much steeped in traditional religiosity (with traditional and popular not being necessarily synonymous) the shock may be a bit violent. It could be a positive and necessary element to help place their faith on the level of Christian praxis. This should be done with care and vigor. For better assimilation the book may require a well-planned system of pedagogy and a sharing in community.

It is understood that the style, the mood and contents of *A Certain Jesus* are derived and lived from the theology of liberation and from the preferential option for the poor. This is where some may stumble, not so much simple folks who may disagree with the form perhaps, but more so the educated and the Sacerdotes who question more its content. They tend to see in *A Certain Jesus* a politicalization of the faith and a revolutionary radicalism, a form of class struggle, the same way some view the theology of liberation. They confuse “class struggle” with the prophetic struggle against sin. I am aware, though, that neither in the theology of liberation nor in this book is everything prophetic struggle, even though the consoling call is addressed mainly to the poor.

In conclusion, *A Certain Jesus* is a great challenge and can be of practical benefit to a great number of people. Sometimes a direct reading of the Bible in ecclesial communities is a sufficient venue to recapture the living Word of God and to stimulate people to action. However, this is not always possible. A greater catechesis is needed which can be done through a discussion in community of books like *A Certain Jesus*.

IGNACIO ELLACURÍA, SJ

Extract from the Preface to the Spanish edition

NOTE: Ignacio Ellacuría, sj, along with three other Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter, were assassinated at their residence in El Salvador on November 16, 1989.

III

For a number of years I had been toying with the idea of writing a life of Christ.

About ten years ago, a Jesuit friend of mine who has been working as a missionary in the mountain villages of Honduras urged me to get my hands on a copy of a book entitled *Un Tal Jesús*¹, a creative retelling of the gospel story developed for the people of Latin America. My friend's enthusiasm proved to be more than justified. *Un Tal Jesús* blended together Christology, contemporary New Testament studies and liberation theology in a way that highlighted, skillfully yet simply, both the immensely attractive humanness of Jesus and the overarching divine commitment to liberating human beings from every form of oppression.

This was the book, I soon realized, which I had secretly been wanting to write all along. "That's the way it actually was!" I kept exclaiming to myself as I made my way, chapter by chapter, through this version of the gospel story. For reasons I cannot altogether account for, I had the queer yet firm recollection of having been "there" before, as if, after two thousand years of lapsed memory, I had somehow awakened to the startling realization that I had been present to these scenes and events centuries ago. The work so excited me that it was all I could think or talk about for several months afterwards. The first time I devoted a seminar to *Un Tal Jesús* the students did not want to see the course come to an end.

The theology of *Un Tal Jesús* arises out of the experience of men and women fighting to surmount enormous poverty, economic exploitation and political violence. The story "works" by drawing a parallel between the situation of injustice in many parts of Central and South America today and the life and time of Jesus. Jesus becomes a *campesino* whose awareness of himself as a prophet grows and develops, whose basic message is about the kingdom of God being a kingdom of justice, whose humanity is never eclipsed by divinity, and whose good news is as much the attractiveness of his own personality and humanity as it is the message about God's kingdom. He tells jokes and stories. He sings and dances. His hands are calloused from hard work, and, like so many in South America, he even has a nickname, "**Moreno**," "the dark one," because of the color of his skin.

There were two things which my students enjoyed about the book. First, they fell in love with the figure of Jesus. From week to week, they would remark about how human Jesus appeared there, so unlike the portrait of him they had grown up with. His story assumed a kind of naturalness, indeed, a believability, which drew them into the gospel. They would never again be able to read or hear many gospel passages the same way as before. *Un Tal Jesús* had made the gospel story come alive without reducing it to the genre of religious fantasy. Jesus had feelings and emotions, as did his companions, and his mother. He lived and breathed in this world. However prophetically he would react to the things he witnessed, Jesus never came across as mysterious, other-worldly, or serenely ascetical. Even the Jesus who was raised from the dead still remained the companion and friend; he had not suddenly become a distant, elevated supernatural being. The book helped some of them to relate to Jesus, really and earnestly, for the first time. For the first time, they heard a Jesus who laughed.

The second thing the students liked about the book was the way it deployed the theme of justice and God's "preferential love for the poor" throughout Jesus' ministry. For, just as the figure of Jesus as they knew it had seemed remote and unreal, so too his mission and work seemed unconnected with the pressing concerns of ordinary men and women. The Jesus they had been raised with was completely divorced from history, more a citizen of heaven than of the earth. He was a model of moral behavior, a teacher of high spiritual ideals and values, their point of contact with the unseen God, and the one who had rescued them in some inexplicable fashion from their sins. In fact, their understanding of salvation and redemption was so focused on the remission of sin and eternal life that the good news about Jesus himself amounted to little more than a pious curiosity or a soothing tale for worldly-weary souls; it had as much relevance as a statue of the Infant of Prague.

To put the matter bluntly, *Un Tal Jesús* had given the story of Jesus back its guts. There really was something worth proclaiming and worth laboring to help men and women understand. There really was a

“divine cause” which Jesus had taken upon his shoulders after being baptized at the Jordan. The gospel, fully lived, could make a difference to history, not merely in the private space of the individual’s own spiritual development but in the public space of communities, politics and society, and culture. The matter of human sinfulness, which ultimately came to account theologically for why Jesus was crucified, was absolutely inseparable from the concrete misery, powerlessness and injustice that had caused the prophetic voices of old to blaze out against the rich and powerful of the land; the same evils would have stirred the soul of Jesus.

Many people find it difficult to comprehend why the church, in talking about Jesus, makes so much of sin when forgiveness comes so easily. And the reason for their bewilderment is that the forgiveness of sins is not so much a matter of sacrament and ritual as it is a matter of doing justice and promoting reconciliation among men and women. The real work of redemption, in other words, involves throwing oneself, heart and soul, into confronting and transforming all the forces, structures, relationships and institutions which rob human beings of their freedom and suck away their life. This task is something to which we can devote our lives, too, just as Jesus did. His story has compelling reason for being retold.

The reader comes away from *Un Tal Jesús*, then, with two graces which have worked one over intellectually and morally. One discovers a new way of relating to “a certain person named Jesus” and one senses that the real purpose of Jesus’ life was both more complex and more exciting than the claim that he came to take away the sins of the world generally sounds. Furthermore, these graces suggest two focal points for talking about Jesus today. Jesus was fully and attractively human, more so, perhaps, than any of us might ever hope to be; and God had chosen the side of those who counted as nothing in the eyes of the world; those chronically hungry, those who thirst for righteousness and justice, those whose basic rights had been violated, those burdened by poverty, guilt and sin. What is there left for us to do, except to want to be with Jesus and to continue doing what he has begun?

WILLIAM REISER, SJ *

An excerpt from the introduction of the book “Talking About Jesus Today: An Introduction to the Story Behind Our Faith” (Paulist Press)

IT ALL STARTED IN GALILEE

I'd like to tell you of what I saw with my now-failing eyes, what I heard, what my calloused fisherman's hands did along with That One who lived with us... I am John. From Patmos, a little verdant island lost somewhere in the Greek Sea. I'm always reminded of the son of Mary, Jesus of Nazareth, a very close friend of mine. I spent the best years of my soon-ending life by his side. Today, I will relate to you the good news he brought us so that we will all be united in one single effort and be happy in one single hope. You know, everything started in Galilee....

Galilee is the northern province of Palestine. Jews from the south despised us. They would say that we Galileans were a gossiping, dirty and boisterous people. They could be right. But they would also say that out of envy, because our land was the most beautiful in the whole country. Galilee is a vast garden, especially during spring, when the flowers cover the valley of Esdrelon; when wheat and grapes grow and olive groves and date palms bloom; when the blue and round Tiberiades lake is teeming with fish. There are important cities in Galilee: Seforis, Capernaum, Magdala... But everything began in one small village called The Flower... Well, in our Aramaic language, The Flower is what "Nazareth" means.

Susana: Mary, have you heard that Rachel's son already left?

Mary: Yes, Susana, I heard...

Susana: When a palm tree comes out crooked, not even God can straighten it. That boy had a bad start.

Mary: And he will end up worse, Susana.

Susana: I guess, the mother is to blame. A child reared well lives well. But think about Rachel's bad example...

Mary: No, not the bad example, Susana. The thing is, young people today just don't know what they want. Look at my son: no permanent job, no... no future.

Susana: Don't talk like that about Jesus. That bronze-skinned son of yours is one treasure of a young man...

Mary: What treasure? Look at him: thirty years old and... nothing... All his friends are already married and they have kids...

Susana: My dear Mary, the thing is, your son is not so easily swayed. For sure, he's looking for a girlfriend somewhere outside Nazareth. Well, tell me, what future does Jesus have in this little town?

Mary: Yes, that's true...

Susana: Hey, little girl, it's now my turn with the water!

Girl: Then quit talking and hurry!

Susana: Don't push me, girl! What a monster!... Hey, Mary, before I forget, tell your son to pass by the house because the wall is breaking down again. Don't forget, Mary!

Mary: Yes, I'll tell him!

Nazareth was just like that: a small rural town lost in some obscure corner of Galilee. It could only boast of twenty houses and a small synagogue. No one from that small community ever became famous. "Nothing good comes out of Nazareth", people from Canaan would say. People in Nazareth were very poor. They walked barefoot and nobody seemed to know how to read and write. They made their houses from the caves formed into the hillsides. In one of those houses lived a widowed, but still young, country woman: her name was Mary. She lived with her only son, a burly and ruggedly handsome man, with bronze-colored face burnt by the sun, and wearing a black beard. His name was Jesus.

Mary: Lay that hammer down and come; the food is gettin' cold... Jesus!

Jesus: Yes, mother?

Mary: Didn't you hear me? Quit pounding; come and eat. Come on...

Jesus: Alright... Oh no!... Who ever made me think I could make these useless tools? I told that Roman I knew how to make tools... But now, this one is longer than the other.

Mary: Oh, Jesus, my son, you always poke your nose into everything! If there's a wheat harvest, you are there... If an animal is gonna be butchered, you're there too... Then, putting tiles and hammering at doors. Now, you even try to make tools!

Jesus: Don't worry. We're gonna have lentils on the table because of those tools. The Roman paid me a denarius in advance.

Mary: Poor Roman. Poor horse, especially...

Jesus: Didn't you say the food was gettin' cold? Come on, let's eat! Ah... this smells good...

Mary: Come now son, say grace. And make it short.

Jesus: Short?

Mary: Because it will also take a short while to finish the food. Bread and lentils, nothing more. Go on, say grace, I'm hungry.

Jesus: Well... Bless, Oh Lord, this bread and these lentils. Amen... Now, Mom, please pour me some wine because my throat is as parched as the desert.

Mary: There's no more wine, son. Why don't you just be content with fresh water...

Jesus: I'll end up like a frog with a lot of fresh water...

Mary: You know, son? Nepthali's wife is sick. She has fever again. This afternoon I'm gonna make her some soup... Poor woman, and with so many kids... Don't you wanna eat, Jesus? Are you sick?

Jesus: Me, sick? Why do you say so?

Mary: You're not eating anything... I find you a little strange these past few days... Come now, tell me what's wrong.

Jesus: Nothing's wrong with me, honest.

Mary: You're holding something back.

Jesus: Well, I have those tools which are driving me crazy!

Mary: Don't lie. Look, I know something's wrong because that Benjamin went to Jordan to see the prophet. And you are rarin' to go too, am I right?

Jesus: You guessed right. I didn't wanna tell you so that you wouldn't get sad.

Mary: No, I won't be sad. But I'm just worried. There's lot of bandits along the way.

Jesus: Well, there isn't much they can get out of me, if you're worried about that...

Mary: Look, Jesus, before I forget: Susana wanted me to tell you to drop by her house because the wall in her house is falling apart....

Life in Nazareth was routinary: eat, work and sleep. The women enjoyed chatting and gossiping among themselves as they fetched water from the well. The children were used to running away from the classes that the old and blind rabbi would organize for them and they would go instead stealing fruits nearby. The menfolk would rather be at the small square adjoining the synagogue, waiting, as usual, for stingy Ananias to hire them for a planting or harvesting job. When there was no work available, they preferred to pass the time playing dice and placing bets they didn't have money for. Or they would think of some way to earn a living, just like Jesus would do...

Jesus: Hey, Susana, this wall is now stronger than the walls of Jerusalem.

Susana: You're finished? Oh, you're wonderful... Come, bring this hen to your mother...

Jesus: Thanks, Susana. Bye!

Susana: Bye, Jesus. Say hello to Mary for me!

In the evening, everyone would retire into their respective homes, warm themselves by the stone furnaces, drink some soup and lie down atop the straw mats that served as their bed...

Jesus: Susana paid me with this hen. Now we've got something for tomorrow.

Mary: Tie it to this pole. Then, let's have dinner. It's getting late... Say grace, my son...

Jesus: But mother, these are the same lentils left over from lunch!

Mary: And so?

Jesus: Well, they've already been blessed!

Mary: How long will you be away...?

Jesus: I dunno...

Mary: But my son, why do you have to go to a place so far away? What good would you get over there?

Jesus: Nothing... But everybody wants to see and listen to John the prophet. I also wanna go... Besides, didn't you tell me that he was a close kin of yours?

Mary: Yes, Isabel was my aunt. But in Galilee, you know that we are all related to each other.

Jesus: Well, I wanna meet that cousin! He is already a somebody now. I heard that people travel all the way from Jerusalem just to be baptized by him. They also say that John talks, shouts and spits fire from his mouth.

Mary: Careful or you'll get burned... That is dangerous.

Jesus: What is dangerous?

Mary: What John is doing, agitating the people. Let him keep on talking and he'll end up with his head chopped off like anyone claiming to be a prophet.

Jesus: I wish there were a thousand men like John, a thousand gutsy men who would tell people the truth.

Mary: Then there would be a thousand heads chopped off and a thousand mothers grieving for their sons. Remember the massacre in Sephoris. We almost suffered something similar.

Jesus: Age seems to have made a chicken out of you.

Mary: First, I'm no chicken. And second... neither am I that old... Come now, eat... Seriously Jesus... why do you really wanna go there?

Jesus: I'll be back soon, promise.

Mary: I don't think so. You get there, you start kiddin' around, you become a friend of all those crazy people you meet and you don't wanna leave them.

Jesus: Mother, I wanna go... I don't know how to say it to you, but I just don't like the way things are goin' here. Fix a door today, install three bricks tomorrow, earn four dinari crushing grapes... Then afterwards, what?

Mary: I was heading in that direction. Then, what? That was what I wanted to say. What is it that you want, Jesus? A year passes by, another year ends and you haven't yet decided what to do.

Jesus: I also want to do something so that things might change. Or don't you see it? The Romans are oppressing us, people are getting hungrier all the time, the taxes are higher each time... And to top it all, the priests in Jerusalem are condoning all these abuses... Then, what? Shouldn't we young Israelites join hands?

Mary: Yes, my son, I understand it now. But what can we poor people do? Listen: Forget those dreams and face reality. You're already thirty. Now is the time to put your feet on the ground. I'm already alone... How I wish your father were still around... Oh, my good Joseph, may he rest in peace. Jesus, my son, where would I end up if something happens to you?

Jesus: Precisely just as I said. You have become a coward with the passing of time. Well then, weren't you the one who always said: God will put down the proud and lift the humble ones; God will feed the hungry and leave the rich ones with empty hands.

Mary: Yes, Jesus, I know I said that, and I believe in that. Everyday I pray to the Lord to enable us poor people to get rid of this misery.

Jesus: Mother, praying isn't enough. One has to take risks. One has to do something like John is doing.

Mary: So, you've really made up your mind. You wanna go to Jordan and join those revolutionary radicals. I won't be surprised if one day they will tell me: Mary, your son has become a prophet. He's roamin' around and preaching too.

Jesus: Me, a prophet? Don't worry about that. Words more useless than these tools would come out of me. No, I'm not cut out for that... Now, let's finish these lentils because tomorrow, we will have chicken...

A few days later, Jesus rose early, folded his old tunic, grabbed a dry branch to serve as a cane and went on his way to the Jordan River where John the prophet was.

Jesus' origins were as humble, poor and rustic as Nazareth was then, an unknown speck in the land of Israel, a land mentioned not even once in the Old Testament. "It" started there (Acts 10:37). From there came the one who announced that good news which was excitedly heard by the poor in Israel.

The narrative begins with the same words which John, Jesus' friend, begins his first letter to the Christian communities: "What I saw with my eyes..." They were the apostles, witnesses to the life and Passion of Jesus that they brought forth to our time through their writings and through the communities that created the Good News. Two thousand years ago, it echoed all over Israel.

During Jesus' time, Nazareth – "flower" in Hebrew – was a small village in the interior of Galilee where some twenty families lived. It being a village founded on a hill, the people used the openings on the slopes to build their dwellings. There was extreme poverty. "Properties" of those families were not more than a pair of straw mats, some clay containers where they could store grain and oil, as well as food for some animals.

The Galileans (who lived up north) were considered by the Israelites of the south (Judea) as a quarrelsome people, with little respect for religious laws and traditions. The region was a lair of activist guerillas who regularly organized revolts against the Romans. Nazareth did not boast of anything, and being a notorious village, it was an unlikely place for the Messiah to come from (Jn 1:46).

In modern times, owing to Christian history, Nazareth has become the capital of Galilee, where some 30,000 people live, most of them Christian Arabs. The biggest building in modern Nazareth is the Basilica of the Annunciation which Paul VI inaugurated in 1964. What used to be the "walls" (rear part of the cave) of the house where the family of Mary, mother of Jesus, dwelt are preserved inside. An inscription dating back to the beginning of the second century was discovered there. It reads: "Xe Maria" (God save you, Mary!). It gives credence to the historical authenticity of the place. The well, to which Mary and her neighbors would daily go to fetch water, and which has always supplied water to the village, has been preserved. The source is located inside a small Greek Christian Orthodox church. Moreover, one can see the remains of what was once the cemetery in Nazareth during Jesus' time and where, no doubt, his ancestors were buried.

Mary was around forty-five-years old when Jesus began to announce the Good News. Like all rural women, she would be, at that age, a woman spent by hard work, yet full of common wisdom regarding the usual sorrows and joys in life. Her hands would have been calloused, she would have been modestly-dressed, and like all women of her class in Israel, she would have been illiterate. She was a poor woman who, like the faithful people belonging to "Yahweh's poor," had placed all her faith in God. Like all mothers, she worried about her son running into danger, "entering politics."

It was a tradition in Israel that men and women alike married young. That Jesus was still unmarried at thirty, was somewhat shocking to his neighbors as well as to his own mother. Singlehood, virginity or celibacy, the way they are understood these days by those who practice them, were not values esteemed in the society Jesus lived in.

Susana, Mary's friend, is one person whose name is recorded by the Gospel of Luke when it talks about the women who accompanied Jesus when he preached in the villages and towns of his country (Lk 8:3). Community relationships in a small town were marked with strong bonds and everyone was practically a member of the family, or at least, people knew everyone's life and problems quite well.

Jesus' profession, like Joseph's, has been limited traditionally to being a carpenter. However, the original word used by Mark means more like a "handy man" (Mk 6:3). Jesus would work on wood as he would make tools and fix doors. He would also plant and harvest as a daily wage earner. For our culture, his social condition would be more like that of an underemployed.

"Moreno" (bronze-skinned) is the fond nickname given to Jesus in this narrative. Jesus' semitic origins suggest a dark brown complexion, and some features which, like those of Arab extraction, would

have little to do with the images that make him appear as a fair-complexioned, blond-haired and blue-eyed person.

Mary is a widow at this point in Jesus' life. There are no data to prove this, but Christian tradition has assumed her widowhood. Her being a widow makes her more cautious, more "cowardly." Likewise, she would be closer to her son.

Jesus went hungry and sweated by working. He had friends, he cried, laughed and got tired like all of us. Not different from us, he also sought his place under the sun and entertained doubts regarding his own destiny, surrounded as he then was by weakness (Heb 5:3). John's prophetic preaching was a calling for him, a decisive moment during his search for a place in the sun. He slowly discovered his vocation, the same way as it happens to many individuals who, in their giving up everything to God and to their brothers and sisters, deepen their commitment and become what God wants them to be.

2

ON THE WAY TO THE JORDAN

At that time, many went to the Jordan to see John the Baptist. The prophet's powerful voice drew a lot of people to fill the dry and dusty roads of Judea. The same happened on the roads of Galilee, though to a lesser degree. In springtime, these roads were filled with flowers, with new blossoms and very tall green grass that was at times waist-high.

Philip: I'm dyin' to see that prophet! Some people told me that he's the straightest guy who's walked on earth in a long time. Others say, though, that they couldn't hack his terrible temper!

Nathanael: Oh! Philip, I'm worn to the bones... What I wanna do now is fall dead on the hay and snore the time away... We got up so early today.

Philip: Don't you sleep, Nathanael, we gotta reach Magdala before lunch. We barely have enough time. Jason, the tavern owner, offers the nicest fish in town during the first hour... If we get there late, he's gonna treat us with rotting fish... He always does that, and I'm pretty well used to that. I was there last week and I had to eat the leftovers of those who had come in early.

Philip and Nathanael were old pals. They knew each other from way back. They had played together, and at times, had also worked together. Years ago they had gone into separate trades. Philip hopped from town to town selling a little of everything: amulets, combs, scissors, fish hooks, pots and pans... everything. While, Nathanael had a shop in Canaan, Galilee. There he worked with wool, and from time to time, fashioned things made out of leather.

Nathanael: Well then, cheer up, man!

Philip: I'm cheerful, Nathanael, I really am. That is what I'm saying: if John the Baptist is, as they say, a prophet, the time of hope for us empty-bellied folks, has come... I've already taken note of that. I've never sold so many things before. You hit the road, you meet people on the way to Jordan and, without your noticing it, you sell them something for the trip. See what I mean?... That's why I say John is a prophet. He's brought me luck...

Nathanael: Quit foolin' around, Philip. I still don't understand how many stupid thoughts slip out of that big head... But do you seriously think he's a prophet?

Philip: It ain't no stupid idea, Nathanael. Don't you think the Messiah will start a world far better than this one? Will he not bring justice? Well, justice is my being able to drop coins into my bag... I've suffered much hunger. God's time should also be my time... Look, Nathanael, I brought these to see if I can sell them... I'm grabbing opportunities opening up during the trip, don't you see?

Nathanael: Well, what do you have there? Necklaces?

Philip: What do you think? Aren't they beautiful? Look at this one!

Nathanael: Philip, to whom will you sell these necklaces?

Philip: Oh, they say Jordan is full of women... he - he - he... You know! The very stupid ones are easy to fool. I'm gonna be doing them a real favor by offering them this beautiful stuff... I'm gonna help them improve their business...

Nathanael: Do many prostitutes come to see the prophet?

Philip: A lot!... That's according to those who have been there...

Nathanael: Blessed be the Most High!... What ever made me come with you? I already told you that that prophet is...

Philip: What? What about that prophet? He's a prophet of the poor. He announces great changes for the earth, Nathanael. We gotta listen to him. We should always listen to the voice of God...

Philip and Nathanael arrived at Magdala by noon. Magdala was a city whose air was thick with the smell of wine, women and fish. It lies on the banks of the great Tiberiades Lake. From the hills up north, many travelling caravans and camels enter the city. They stop at Magdala and continue their trip into Galilean territory...

Jason: Hello, Philip!... It's been a long time since we bumped into each other in this tavern, you shameless fellow!... What?... What are you going to sell us today? I tell you, when the full moon begins, and it started yesterday, it is a bad time to do business...!

Philip: I didn't come to sell, Jason. My friend and I, we're just passing through.

Jason: And who is your friend? I've never seen him here before.

Philip: Well, he seldom comes this way. He's busy with his wife, his children, his mother-in-law, and his shop. He's from Canaan and he hardly goes out from there... You know, he has lots of work...

Jason: What brings you to Magdala, friend...? Are you fed up with your wife...? He - he - ... here in this city, there are women who can heal all sorrows... Hey, you seem to be a serious man. What's your name?

Nathanael: Nathanael.

Jason: Nathanael. Very well. And what do Philip and Nathanael want? Are they going to spend the night here? I can find two nice beds for both of you...

Philip: We won't be spending the night, Jason. We gotta get goin'.

Nathanael: I'm so sleepy but... well, we'll just sleep for a while under some tree...

Jason: And where are these friends headin' to that they are in such a hurry?

Philip: We're going to Jordan to see the prophet.

Jason: By Moses' beard!... Two more guests who've also been fooled! Even you, Philip? Oh, the prophet!... Now come, did you lose something at the bottom of the river that you are now going to put your head into that murky water?... Well, surely, this little bald guy with a little-boy face has really put the craziness in you!... Hike more than a hundred miles just to see that long-haired man!

Philip: Look, Jason, let's quit arguing. We're hungry.

Jason: You'll get more hungry when you get to where the prophet is! They say John is flesh and bones,... that he only eats locusts and he makes people fast and do penance... I'll whip you up something that will load your stomachs for a week!

Philip: Hey, Jason, make it fresh fish, will you?

People began to fill Jason's tavern. The smell of fish and grape wine was getting stronger. People were eating on the floor and some, on top of rocks. The first ones to arrive grabbed the few available wooden stools. Philip and Nathanael went into a corner with their freshly-broiled fish, olives and hot sauce. After a while, when only fish bones remained on the plate, they saw someone enter. It was someone they knew....

Philip: Guess who's here!

Nathanael: Who's that?

Philip: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary!... What could he be doing here? Hey, Jesus!... Jesus! Come over here!

Jumping over plates and taking care not to topple a wine jar, Jesus approached the corner where Philip and Nathanael were.

Jesus: What's up, Philip? How are you, Nathanael?... I didn't expect I would meet somebody I knew here.

Philip: And so? Do you have work here in Magdala?

Jesus: No, I'm going to Jordan.

Philip: You're going to Jordan?... You, too?

Jesus: Aren't you two going to see John the prophet?

Philip: That idea entered his head and it took hold of me also...

Jesus: What have you done, Nathanael? Have you closed your shop?

Nathanael: No, but I have little work these days. I left my wife to take care of it in case something crops up. I think it won't be long till we get to the Jordan...

Philip: Hey, Jason, bring over another serving of fish and a glass of wine! Now, it's gonna be the three of us who will go and see the prophet!

Nathanael: Don't yell, Philip!... Must everybody know where we are going?... They'll be laughing at us...

Philip: Let them laugh... Probably some of them are also going to the Jordan... Hey, my friends, is there anyone among you who's going to the Jordan?

Nathanael: Shut up, Philip, please...! What a jerk you are!

Philip: This prophet has shaken the entire nation of Israel. I've seen it because I travel north and south. To be able to move so many people is a sign that one comes from God... Don't you think so, Jesus?

Jesus: I think so. That's why I'm going there, too.

Jason: Oh boy! So you are also going to the river? Where are you from?

Jesus: Nazareth.

Jason: Nazareth? I don't think many from that God-forsaken place have gone to the Jordan... There are more rats than people in that village!

Jesus: A few days ago, Benjamin, the son of Rachel, left for the Jordan. He's a friend of mine.

Jason: And where are you going now? What kind of people are these! Just like sheep, all go where one goes! What crazy people! One can dream of prophets and divine signs while staying here and having a great time! You, Nazarene, don't you like that? I have very good wine and a few women... There is nothing like that in your town. Why don't you hang around a few days and leave these two south-bound nuts?

Jesus: Look, I wanna meet the prophet. I'll be hangin' around Magdala some other time, promise.

Jason: What thick illusion-filled skulls! Hey, Nazarene, munch those dorados and chat with me later...! Let's see if you don't change your mind! I gotta go now because I got a lot of things to do!

Philip: The fish is very good, Jesus, they are the best in the lake.

Jesus: I can see that, Philip... you're swallowing them, head, tail and bones!

Philip: Jason's wife is a whiz when it comes to cooking.

Nathanael: But Jason is a rascal. He makes fun of prophets. That's very bad, it's the worst thing to do in the world.

Philip: Hey, Jesus, you believe that John will be the Savior of Israel? Many people say so... and there are those who disagree.

Jesus: I don't know, Philip. One has to see him and hear what he says first...

Nathanael: Israel's Savior oughtta clean this nation of all stupidity. They say John immerses people's heads in the river and one becomes a new person when he pulls you out.

Philip: Hey, I like that! It's been seven months since I had my last bath!

Jesus: I'm sure that John is a prophet. It's been a long time since a man who said so many truths appeared in this country!

Nathanael: I'm not sure of anything. I've never seen a prophet. Prophets belonged in another time when God remembered his people and ruled them....

Jesus: Well, Nathanael, I think God has remembered us again and has sent us John.

Philip: It's all the same to me whether it be God or the devil! What I only wanna see is that baptizer shouting the word...

Nathanael: What word, Philip?

Philip: That which is needed here, my goodness! That we the down-trodden poor need someone to come and tell us: "wake up, slumbering people the time has come!"

Nathanael: Shut up, Philip!

Philip: Girdle your loins... This time, it's for real!

Nathanael: Philip, by God...!

Philip: Everyone united... march onward as one!

Nathanael: Hush, Philip! Instead of going to Jordan, we might end up in jail! Hey, Jesus, finish those bones and let's get going...!

Jesus: Yes, Philip, let's get going! Leave those speeches for another time. We still have two more days of travel before getting to see John the Baptist!

John was baptizing people in Betabara, in Perea, south of the old city of Jericho, near the Dead Sea. Many people then came to listen to his words, seeking to find Israel's Savior in his person.

John the Baptist's preaching of justice aroused the nation of Israel's hopes in the coming of the Messiah. It launched a true people's movement. People from all of Judea and also from the neighboring province of Galilee in the North travelled to Jordan to hear John and prepare themselves – for baptism in the river – to receive the hoped-for redeemer.

"Messiah" is an Aramaic word which means "anointed." The Greek word is equivalent to "Christ." In Israel, kings, when they ascend to the throne, were anointed with oil as a sign of sanctification and blessing from God (I S 10:1). Throughout its history – a history filled with failures, defeats and slavery – Israel hoped for a redeemer from God who would bring lasting peace. Some hundred years before Christ's birth, this hoped-for savior began to be called "Messiah," in the belief that he would be a powerful king who would make Israel a great nation and drive away foreign masters from its land and give justice to the poor. When the first Christian communities recognized the Messiah in Jesus, they also began to call him "Christ," meaning, God's Anointed, his Envoy, his Blessed One. Among the four gospels, Matthew's is the one that marks Jesus' messianic character the strongest, it being a text especially written for Jewish readers. The coming of the Messiah, what this person would do, how to recognize him, where he would come from – some thought he would be an angel, while others thought he would be a great priest – were topics of conversation among the people during Jesus' time.

For the people of Israel, prophets were people of God who spoke in his Name. They interpreted events, denounced injustice, and announced God's plans. They were feared by kings and rulers. After years of not having a prophet in the country, the people saw in John a prophet. Some even came to the point of seeing the hoped-for Messiah in him. This explains the mobilization of the masses who were aroused by the words of the Baptist.

In this episode, we see two of Jesus' disciples: Philip and Nathanael. Little is known about Philip: he was from Bethsaida and he is mentioned only five times in the Gospel texts. Much less is known about Nathanael: John only mentions him twice. In the lists of the twelve apostles, Nathanael has always been identified with Bartholomew. Philip, the itinerant vendor, happy, ingenious, and always preoccupied with his retail business, and Nathanael, the tanner, the older one, disillusioned and indecisive, were poor men who lived the insecurity that marked their social class. John the Baptist's message of salvation caught the imagination of the lower class.

Magdala was a city located on the banks of the Tiberiades lake, along the caravan route which entered Galilee from the mountains of Syria. As a transient point, taverns and brothels made money there,

like the ports in our own country. There are few archeological remains dating back to the Magdala of Gospel times.

(Mt 3:5-6; Mk 1:5; Lk 3:7)

3

A VOICE IN THE DESERT

In the 15th year of Emperor Tiberius' reign, while Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea, Herod, the viceroy of Galilee, his brother Philip, the viceroy of Iturrea and Trachonitis, and Lisanius, the viceroy of Abilene, under the administration of the high priests, Annas and Caiphas, God spoke to John, the son of Zechariah, in the desert. John had spent many years in the monastery of the Dead Sea. When he felt that he was called by God, he left the monastery to preach along the banks of the river Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of conversion...

Baptist: The prophet Isaiah said it and I am repeating it! Make way for the Lord!.... The Liberator of Israel is coming soon!... Don't you hear his footsteps?... Prepare the way, make his paths straight that he may come to us!

John's voice echoed throughout Betabara and the neighboring city of Jericho, extending to Jerusalem and spreading like wildfire in the whole country of Israel. We were anxious to hear that voice proclaiming justice and freedom from the Roman yoke. All of us came from the north and south to see the prophet from the desert...

My brother James and I travelled from Capernaum. We came with our constant companions, brothers Peter and Andrew, who were also fishermen from the Lake of Tiberias. Like us, they supported the zealot movement....

James: He's the man we need, Peter! Hell, this prophet minces no words and speaks out the truth as brutally as he can!

Peter: Then what are we waiting for, James? Call your brother and let's go approach him. Come on, Andrew, let's go and I don't care if we have to elbow our way through, in order to get near him!

Long live the movement!

For seventy years, our country had been a colony of the Roman empire. Consequently, the people became desperate because there was hunger everywhere and they were made to pay taxes. That is why many of us sympathized with the zealot movement, as it aimed to overthrow the Romans. Besides, there were guerrillas scattered all over the country.

Peter: Long live the movement!

All: Long live the movement!

James: Death to the Romans!

All: Death to the Romans!

The zealots were well organized, especially in Galilee, our province. Peter and Andrew, my brother James and I formed a small support group in Capernaum. We talked to the people about the movement, and yes, we joined in every protest and rally in the place.

Well, some of the protests we initiated... I remember it was because of this that we decided to see the prophet, John. Then, having heard him speak, we realized that we were of the same cause...

Baptist: Those who are in power shout: "Peace, peace, let there be peace!" Tell me, how can there be peace without justice?... Can peace exist between the lion and the lamb, between the rich and the poor?...

On the other hand, the people below shout: “Violence, violence!”... But they say it out of ambition, because they also desire to go up and commit abuses against those who are left behind. They are lions too, hiding under the skin of a lamb... Thus, the Lord says: “All must change their ways! Everyone must be converted!”....

The heat was exhausting. The mosquitoes were hovering like a cloud above our heads... People came from all walks of life — peasants, artisans from the towns, wool traders, tax collectors, beggars, the sick people, prostitutes and soldiers. Vendors too, were present, pushing their carts through the people, selling their wares of cookies and dried fruits...

Baptist: Repent, before it is too late!...Those who want to be free from the wrath of God, be baptized in this river as it cleanses the body and purifies the soul!... Do it now or the Fire will convert you into ashes!

Piles of sandals and sheets were seen on the gray sand along the riverbank. John, whose back was supported by a rock, the water reaching up to his waist, baptized the people, holding them by the head. He immersed them into the water until they almost drowned, then pulled them out toward the shore... There were hundreds of us who received this baptism of purification.

Peter: Andrew, did you notice how his eyes glow, like two burning coals?

Andrew: This prophet is the same Elijah who came down from heaven in his chariot of fire. He is Elijah in person!

Peter: This is the end of the world!

James: Out of my way, you dupes! Let me see the prophet!

The prophet was a big man, whose skin was burned by the desert sun. He was clothed in camel’s hair and wore a black belt around his waist. He had never had his hair cut which reached down to his waist. When the wind blew, his mane seemed that of a wild beast. It was the prophet Elijah talking through his mouth. Well, actually, John was not talking: he was bellowing, and his words bounced like stones hurled at our heads.

Baptist: Make way, make his paths straight, so that the Liberator will not delay! Fill up the holes that he may not stumble! Level the mountains if necessary, that he may not have to turn around and be delayed!.. No, he will not delay, for he is coming!.. Don’t you hear his footsteps?.. Don’t you feel his scent in the air? The Messiah is coming, the Liberator of Israel!

Peter: Pff!... All I can smell here is the stink of urine. I’m going to faint...

Andrew: You’re a pig, Peter! You shut up and listen to the prophet!

Peter: But it is true, Andrew. I don’t understand why I am here. People get immersed in the river and they do whatever underneath. They become even dirtier when they come out of it. And the prophet claims that the water cleanses and purifies! Pff!

James: You are right, Peter. The water seems like soup to me already, and the people’s heads are like chick peas...

Peter: Let’s go to the other side, fellows. I can’t stand all this filth....

Andrew: Now look who is talking... Peter, you are the one who stinks!..

Peter: Go to hell, Andrew! Better take back your words!...

John: Come on, that’s enough, Peter! Let’s get away from here, the heat is sickening!

We stayed away a little to be able to breathe some air. Peter was mad at Andrew, who was mad at me. James was angry at everyone. The four of us were good friends, in spite of the fact that we were always quarreling...

James: So, what do you think? On whose side is the prophet? You heard him say that all – those who are up and those who are down – must be converted.

John: That’s nothing but sweet talk, James. He should tell exactly who he is. Is he supporting the zealots

or not? That is what he should tell us.

Peter: Very well said, John. Long live the movement!

Andrew: Shut up, will you, Peter? You are like a parrot!

Peter: The baptizer seemed to have dumbfounded you, Andrew.

Andrew: I am for the prophet. Whatever you say, whoever you support, I am for him.

John: But is he supporting the movement or not? This is what I want to know, Andrew.

Andrew: Why don't you ask him, John. Go, immerse yourself into the water and ask him on whose side is he. You are his namesake, perhaps he will answer you.

John : Well, yes. I am not afraid of this prophet, nor of anyone. If he sides with the zealots, well and good, but if he is for the Romans, may he drown himself in this stinking river!

Andrew: Not so loud, John. It is not that easy.

James: Oh, yeah, it's easy, Andrew. You just have to kick all the Romans in the ass. That's all.

Peter: Anyone who hears you speak, James, will think that you are one of the seven leaders. Tell me, redhead, what have you done for the movement? Surely, you made noise in some four towns?

James: Likewise, what have you done, Peter? Hurl stones from the rooftop? Don't you flaunt again how you spat at the Roman Captain, because here, even the children can spit on the soldiers!

Peter: You're a braggart. I better shut you up...

John: Stop the argument, damn it!.. Now let us see who among us will dare ask John whose side he is on...

Peter: Why don't we all go a little further away from here? I could smell the stench from here and it makes me dizzy. Come on, let's go...

The four of us left and we ate some olives. We got a big surprise along the way...

Peter: Isn't that big head coming over, our friend, Philip, the vendor? Philip!... Blazes! Now we're headed for trouble!

Philip: Peter, Peter, the stone thrower!... How's life treating you? Hey, James, the big mouth! And here is John, the troublemaker!...What are you up to, this time, sons of Zebedee?!... And look who's here too, the skinny Andrew... I swear, I am so delighted to see you!

John: And so are we, Philip, the greatest chatterbox in the entire Galilee!

James: Hey, Philip, don't be rude... Why don't you introduce your pals?

Philip: Yeah, that's right. Nat and Jesus, I want you to meet these four rascals. They are fishermen from Capernaum, while these two scoundrels are even worse than you! Nathanael is a true-blooded Israelite, who lives in Cana. He is a wool maker, and is more cunning than a fox. He's got a wife who is unbelievably unbearable. The other fellow, this nice hick from Nazareth, is called Jesus. He can repair doors, just as he can make horseshoes. He is a jack-of-all-trades. Ah, and when he lends you money, he never charges interest...! The problem is he is always penniless and you end up lending him some money instead!

Peter: Well, it seems like we have known each other for a long time. But now, let us fill our stomach, as it is getting late!

All seven of us ate and had a chat amid the huge crowd. When night fell, we dispersed and headed for the riverbank. Every one gathered some dried twigs and started to build a bonfire. Some cut down palm leaves to make into tents so they would not sleep in the open air. The river Jordan was teeming with people who came in search of the prophet John, who in turn, continued to look for the Messiah, the Liberator whom he was proclaiming.

The entire gospel of Mark, as well as John's, starts with accounts of Jesus' life, as preached by John, the Baptist, along the banks of the river Jordan. This is one way of highlighting the link between the prophet's message of justice and the Good News of Jesus.

The Baptist's preachings, which are contained in the gospel accounts, are searing indictments of injustice and the corrupt situation in the country, starting with Herod himself, the king of Galilee, who was publicly criticized by John. On the other hand, John considered his mission as preparatory for the coming

of the Messiah, who was to found a new world based on the equality of all people and the sovereignty of God.

In order to prepare this new world, notwithstanding his preachings and proclamations, John employed a ritual which became very popular: baptism. People came to listen to him and confess their sins. Afterwards, John submerged them into the waters of the river Jordan. It was a symbol of purgation. Water cleanses the unclean. It was likewise a symbol of rebirth, of starting all over again, leaving behind the ancient world of fatalism and injustice: From the water springs life, which begins in the water. The baptism of John was not a magic ritual. It was nothing without a real transformation in the attitude of those who were baptized. It was a mass baptism. The masses – particularly the poor Israelites – took to heart John’s message and got into the water in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

John preached and baptized in the desert, along the banks of the river Jordan, in a valley commonly called Beth-barah. This place is presently a border zone between Israel and Jordan. The Jordan (“that which descends”) is practically the only river that waters the land of Israel. It comes from the north, near Mount Hermon, and flows into the saline waters of the Dead Sea, the lowest place in the planet, a depth of about 400 meters below sea level.

John the Baptist’s simplicity, as reflected in his food and clothing, made him popular among the people who saw in this sun-burned and uncouth man, the prophet Elijah, who came back to defend his people. John’s long and dishevelled hair was typical of those who committed themselves to a total service to God: The Vow of the Nazirites, Jdg 13:5; 1 S 1:11.

For about seventy years, Palestine was a Roman colony. Rome was then the most powerful empire on earth, as the United States is today. Most of the nations during that period were under the Roman empire. For the occupied provinces, this meant occupation by foreign armies and exploitation of the people on whom heavy taxes were imposed, and who were denied participation in decision-making. Rome, the empire’s capital, was destroyed about five hundred years after the birth of Jesus. There was great discontent with the Roman domination in Galilee, as well as in Judea. The zealots were known to be one of the oppositionist groups. They were engaged in clandestine activities; some were into the guerrilla movement especially in the northern region of Galilee, where the movement was strongest. The zealots were nationalists, preaching about God as the only king. Furthermore, they were opposed to any foreign power, which was why they refused to pay taxes and to submit themselves to a census ordered by the empire. Weighed down by the burden of paying taxes, the peasants and the poor people of Israel sympathized with the movement and protected their members. Similarly, the zealots had their own agrarian reform program: They declared that property should be distributed equitably, as the social gap was extremely wide. Debts must be written off, in accordance with Mosaic law of the Year of Grace. The zealots’ group was said to have been founded by a certain Jude of Galilee, shortly after the birth of Jesus, when the people began to refuse to pay their taxes. The people’s rebellion was suppressed by the Romans at the cost of blood and fire. The word “zealot” comes from “zeal.” They were zealous of God’s honor, passionate and fanatic. The “sicarios” were an active group within the zealots’ movement. These were terrorists who always carried daggers (sicas) under their robe, which they used to murder the Romans.

It was probable that among Jesus’ disciples many belonged to the zealot movement. The gospel very clearly expresses this when referring to “Simon, the zealot” (Lk 6:15). Judas’ nickname implies his affiliation “sicaria.” On the other hand, the monicker given by Jesus to the brothers James and John, “boanerges” (sons of thunder), and that of Simon Peter, “barjona,” is attributed by some as referring to the zealots. The word may also refer to the theme of the zealots, and the struggle engaged in by the disciples.

(Mt 3:16; Mk 1:1-8; Lk 3:1-6)

GOD'S JUSTICE

People from the land of Judea and the city of Jerusalem, even those from faraway Galilee came to listen to John the Baptist. When they repented and confessed their sins, the prophet baptized them in the waters of the river Jordan. My brother James and I, Peter and his brother Andrew, Philip, Jesus and Nathanael were also there...

Baptist: It is the Lord who said to me: "Raise your voice like a trumpet and denounce the sins and rebelliousness of my people. Shout out the injustices committed against the poor throughout the countryside and the cities!"... Go back to the Lord! Be sorry from the bottom of your hearts and the gift of life shall be given back to you!

Philip: This prophet keeps on saying the same thing. I wonder if he doesn't tire himself. We have been here for two hours and he sings nothing but the same song...

Nathanael: Shsss! Quiet, Philip; I'm listening...

Philip: But Nathan, don't you see I'm bored?...

James: Don't be silly, Philip. You gotta shout out these things to the people so they get it into their heads.

Philip: Be converted, be converted...blah-blah-blah.... But what the hell is to be converted? I don't understand it.

John: It means "to change." And to change means to topple the Romans and kick them out of our land...

Andrew: Come on, Philip, ask the prophet what oughtta be done in order to be converted. He'll tell you. John wants people to ask him questions.

Philip: You think so, Andrew?

Andrew: Why, of course, man. Come on, ask him anything.

Philip: Eh, prophet of God! Prophet John!

Nathaniel: Hey Philip, for your Mom's sake in Bethsaida, shut up.! Don't make trouble....

Philip: But I gotta ask the prophet... "Hey, prophet John!!"

Nathanael: You'll make a boo-boo, as always.

Baptist: Who called my name?

Peter: This big head over here wants to ask you somethin'!... Here!

Baptist: What do you want to know, brother?

Philip: John, you keep on talking of conversion, of changing one's ways, of preparing the way, for the one who is to come... Tell me, how should I prepare myself? We who are hungry, how can we do this? What are we gonna do?

Baptist: First of all, there must be justice. You hear me? There must be justice!

Philip: Better explain that further, prophet. You see I'm a stupid man and...

Baptist: How many blankets have you got?

Philip: Well, I feel embarrassed to say this, but... I only got one at home, plus this other one on me....

Baptist: So you have two. You have an extra blanket. Give it to the one who has none. In Israel, there are a number of naked people with not even a rag to cover themselves!... You want me to be more specific?... You, the one on the side... yes, do not hide yourself.... how many pairs of sandals do you have?... Two?... Three?... What you are not wearing are the extra pairs. In Israel, so many walk barefooted, with not even a pair of sandals to wear. Share what you have with them. Have you got two pieces of bread? Share it with the hungry. Let no one have anything in excess so that no one will be in need. This is what the Lord wants. This is the meaning of conversion: sharing. Justice, brothers and sisters, justice! I am preparing the way for the Lord, and the Lord speaks through my lips: that every one may eat, that everyone be clothed, that everyone may live... Oh, he who turns his back on another, turns his back on the Lord!.. Woe to him who closes his door to the traveler, who turns out to be the Messiah, who comes knocking at your door!

James: Very well said! This is exactly what we zealots are asking for! Justice!

Philip: Well, Peter, you may now hand me that blanket you have on... The prophet tells us to share what

one has... I say you must begin with your friends. Charity begins at home, don't you think so, Andrew?

Andrew: This man is indeed a prophet. All prophets before spoke of justice. The message of the prophets is always the same.

Nathanael: Well, speaking of giving half of what you have... For example, I have a shop, with four tools, but... this does not mean I am rich. I simply have enough to.....

James: Don't worry, Nathanael. The rich are something else. Look at those people coming... They are traitors!

Amid the crowd, two men with silken turbans passed and headed for the shore. The tall one had pockmarks on his face. We knew little about this man, and more about the other. His name was Matthew and he collected taxes in our city, in Capernaum. He was slightly limping and had a short gray beard full of bare patches. As always, he must have been drinking... We all hated Matthew because he was helping the Romans...

James: Traitor to the country! Get outta here! Out!

All: Out! Down with the traitors! Outta this place. Leeches!

Jesus: This man looks drunk.

John: Of course, otherwise he wouldn't have dared come here. We know him very well, Jesus. Believe me, in this country you won't find a man more cowardly than Matthew.

Philip: Hey, James, my ears are already buzzing. For heaven's sake, quit yelling! As far as I know, this is a place for sinners, right? Matthew must be the greatest bandit of them all, but he too, has the right to see the prophet.

James: The only right he has is to be hanged!

Matthew and his companion were able to reach the shore. At that time, John was baptizing a few heavily made-up prostitutes. Matthew waited a while for them to get out of the water...

Matthew: Prophet of the most high! We have heard that Galilean ask you what he had to do...!

All: Stay away from here! You traitor to the country. Traitors!

Baptist: Quiet! I want to hear what this man has to say. God wants to listen to him too. Speak up!

Matthew: Prophet of the most high! What must we do?

Matthew: We are Jews, but... we collect taxes for the Romans. What must we do?

Baptist: Let not your hands be stained by collecting more than what is prescribed by law! The Romans have laid a heavy burden on our people. Do not compound this burden by robbing the people of the little that they have. The Romans have trampled on our lands. Don't make the yoke heavier, nor the hand of the foreigner more oppressive.

Matthew: Will there be salvation for us?

Baptist: Salvation is for the one who seeks it. The one who will come after me will separate the grain from the chaff. He will keep the grain in his barn while he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. But there is still time to repent! Get converted and be cleansed with purifying water!

The two tax collectors went near the water. Matthew was staggering due to fear and, perhaps, for being drunk. Then John the prophet held them by the hair and submerged them in the warm and dirty water of the Jordan, where the sins of the prostitutes, the poor and the usurers were floating in disarray; big sins and small sins, all the faults of our people...

One Soldier: Master! John! Speak to us!

Baptist: What do you want?

Soldier: You have spoken before the Romans. We are Roman soldiers. We have come to see you because your word has also reached us. We wear the uniform of those who have made themselves masters of this land, but we wish to be baptized too. What must we do in order to save ourselves from evil?

Baptist: The only owner of this land and of all the countries of the world is God! You may be the strong ones now and you punish the weak. Tomorrow, the stronger ones will come and they will beat you. Today,

the kings and the rulers of this earth are like a herb which is green, but it will dry up tomorrow and get burned. God is the only king! The only law is that of the Lord! And God's law is justice!

Peter: Beware, prophet! If you keep on talking like that, you'll soon be brought to Pilate!

Baptist: God is the master of all lives. It is not Pilate, nor Herod, nor the Roman army! Soldiers, you must not threaten the people, nor accuse anyone of things they haven't done. Don't tell lies in court, nor abuse your power. Be content with your wages and don't rob the poor of their shelter nor their food. All these, you must observe, you, Roman soldiers....!

Philip: I am beginning to like this prophet. He yells at me, and also at the Romans. This John is one helluva brave man...

Philip: Come on, let's go.... Today, we have had enough of the yellings of this John, the baptizer...

Jesus: Just a moment, Peter... I would like to ask the prophet something....

Peter: Did you say you were going to ask him something?.... But you know fully well what his reply will be "justice, justice, and justice...." I'm leaving now....

Jesus: Just a minute, Peter.... John! I want to ask you something!

Baptist: Speak up, Galilean. I'm listening to you!

Jesus: Prophet John.... I... I do not know if I am meddling in something I am not aware of, but....

Philip: Speak louder, or he won't hear you!

Jesus: I was saying that.... Oh well, you were saying: Feed the hungry. You also say: Don't cheat in your taxes. Likewise, do not use violence. All this is good, but... these are only the branches..... What about the trunk?

Baptist: What do you mean?

Jesus: I believe that if the branches yielding bad fruits are pruned every time, they will continuously bear bad fruits, because the trunk is bad, and the roots are rotten.... Prophet John, what must we do in order to pull out these roots so that no one will ever starve, no soldier will ever use force, no ruler will ever collect taxes?

Baptist: Who are you?

Jesus: My name is Jesus. I came yesterday, with my two friends from the north. I have heard you speak, that is why I'm asking you.

Baptist: I cannot answer what you are asking me. Somebody else will. I baptize with water, but after me will come someone who will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. I only trim the branches. He uproots the tree, burns the bad roots and rids the garden of all weeds.

Jesus: And who is this one that is to come? Whom are you talking about?

But John did not reply anymore. The wind began to blow along the River Jordan. The bamboo trees swayed and the waters formed into small and giant whirlpools. John stayed on top of a rock, looking afar. His eyes were burning on account of the sun and blazing with hope as they gazed through the horizon, in anticipation of the One who was to come.

Justice is an essential topic in all Scripture. That God is just, as the prophets have said again and again, means that he is a liberator who takes up the cause of the poor and demands that the rights of the oppressed be respected. He is upright, and does not allow himself to be corrupted by any deceitful word nor any meaningless cult. The Kingdom of God that is to come and is announced to the people is a Kingdom of Justice. A Kingdom where there is equality, where the hopes of the people will be realized. Knowing God which, in biblical language, is the same as loving him, is doing what is just (Jer 22:13-16). True religion consists of recognizing the rights of the poor and maintaining just relations among people: (Is 1:10-18; Jer 7:1-11.)

In proclaiming justice, John the Baptist demanded "conversion" from the people who were listening to him. The biblical meaning of this word is not "to confess, to repent, to have remorse of conscience." Rather, it refers to a change of ways, a return to the Lord who is just, and like him, doing what is just. There is no conversion before God without any conversion before others, and especially before the poor.

Conversion means sharing. He who does not share is not within the justice of God.

With regard to the Roman soldiers, John concretizes conversion in terms of non-abuse of power. The soldiers, foreigners as they were, were recruited from the masses. As servants of imperialism, afflicted with the system's corruption and emboldened by the arms provided them, they continued to oppress the people. The tax collectors like Matthew, officials of the empire or local officials, because of their position extorted money from the poor. John denounces cheating in the collection of funds. Conversion has to pass through one's pockets. It always involves rejection of power. Good intentions are not enough.

The question that Jesus asks John concerns the matter of structural sin and personal offense. One can trim the old branches of a tree, only when the roots are rotten... Sin and injustice are not only an individual transgression which can be amended by way of individual conversion. There are situations of sin: An economic regime that is profit-oriented, benefiting only a small few, where, in the process of competition, the poor become poorer, and the rich become richer. This is the structure of sin. A political regime that allows no participation of the people on the matter of decision-making, utilizing torture, crime, fraud and corruption for its survival, is likewise an institutional sin. An integral liberation, more than individual change, is needed in order to defeat sin. The Gospel is a transformation of society.

(Lk 3:7-18)

5

THE BROKEN BAMBOO

The voice of the prophet shook the desert of Judah and echoed in the hearts of the crowd that gathered to listen to him along the banks of the River Jordan. John was announcing a new world that we were all dreaming of...

Baptist: The fire of the Lord shall wash away all crime and abuses that afflict this earth like leprosy! And God will then do marvelous things that are unheard of. He will create new heavens and a new earth, where justice will finally reign. There shall be no more tears nor moanings....

While John was speaking, Jesus moved away from us and started to walk. He was going far from the crowded River Jordan, heading toward a place where there were less people.... Andrew and I glanced at each other and started to follow him.... I remember it was four o'clock in the afternoon....

John: Where do you think this man is going, Andrew?

Andrew: What do I know? Perhaps he wants to take a breather... One can hardly breathe down there, John... Hey, what did Philip say his job was?

John: Bah, he said he could "fix anything." Just imagine, he would not have to work hard in the neighborhood of Nazareth... because there, even rats die of hunger.... Ah...ah... achoo!!!

After I sneezed, Jesus looked behind and saw Andrew and me following him....

Jesus: Oh, I did not notice you...

John: Achoo!.... Damn it! I got this cold when I had myself baptized in the river... Ah... Ah... When I got out, there was this cold draft that.... Achoo!... Damn!

Jesus: Where are you going, by the way?

Andrew: Where are you going?

Jesus: Nowhere. It is too warm over there... and the mosquitoes are all around. I decided I should take a walk....

Andrew: Well, same here...

John: Andrew is right... The stench from the river is nauseating. At least here, one can still breathe...

Andrew: That's right. The truth is, it is getting warm....

John: I would say it's like a furnace in Babylon...

Andrew: Let's say it's a kind of heat that.... ehrrmm...

Jesus: Say, why don't we all sit down for a while, under those palm trees?

John: That's a good idea, Jesus, because... oh, well, let's go.... this heat is...

The two of us wanted to have a chat with Jesus, but certainly not about the weather. I don't know, but this tanned man from Nazareth had caught our fancy, ever since we saw him with Nathaniel and Philip. We wished to know more about him...

John: Philip claims that you are a "jack of all trades"... Are you a mason, or something?

Jesus: No... well, yes, and an ironsmith, and a carpenter. I also patch holes; well, I do anything. In Nazareth, it is difficult to have a fixed job.... Have you been there? It's a small town. You must always be ready to do anything that comes up.

Andrew: With whom do you live? Are you married?

Jesus: No, I live with my mother.

Andrew: And your father?

Jesus: He passed away when I was about eighteen years old...

John: So, don't you plan to get married?

Jesus: You see, I met a girl before... How shall I put it... I wasn't sure.

John: I can just imagine. In Nazareth, with four ugly ladies in your midst, it must be difficult to find someone deserving. You should go to Capernaum where jobs are good and life is more interesting.

Jesus: You're all fishermen, aren't you?

Andrew: We do business with Zebedee, the father of this guy, who has a very bad temper. He's doomed, you know!

John: Hey, you, skeleton! Why don't you leave my father alone?

Andrew: Okay, okay. So, you work as a blacksmith, is that all that you do, Jesus, nothing more?

Jesus: No less, I would say. Hey, do you know what it means to be goin' out everyday in search of a job?... It's never easy.

Andrew: Certainly not. I don't say that... well, you know... about the movement... is it functioning in Nazareth?

Jesus: Are you zealots?

John: No, we're not... Well, yes... I mean... The movement is our only hope to get rid of these damned Romans! Don't you think so, Jesus?

Jesus: I really don't know.... Honestly.

John: How come you don't? You should know!

Jesus: That's true, John, but...

John: There's no excuse. You should know.

Jesus: Okay. But you must also know which animal has its legs on one's head, and yet, you do not know.

John: How's that?

Jesus: I am asking you which animal has its legs on one's head.

John: I don't know. Which is it?

Jesus: The louse!

John: What! Oh, yeah, it's legs are on my head! Now, that's a good one, eh?

Jesus: Tell me, Andrew, in what way is a louse similar to a Roman?

John: A louse being likened to a Roman?

Jesus: Why not? Even the Romans have their feet on our heads!

John: Right! And they are considered animals too! That is really a good one! Give us another, Jesus....

I remember that day like it was today. As I close my eyes, I still imagine Jesus smiling, with many friends around him. He told us four jokes, a few stories, and with much ease shared his worries with us. We

seemed to have known each other all along. Funny, but this tan-skinned man was one of those you come across, and never forget all your life.

John: Wait till I share these jokes with Peter....!

Andrew: Where do you get all your stories, Jesus?

Jesus: Since the nights are very long in Nazareth, my friends and I often get together. One cooks up a story, another a legend... our way of killing time, you see.

Andrew: What do you intend to do now? Are you going back to Nazareth just to kill time?

Jesus: Well, that's what I don't know. On one hand, I like it there; besides I must look after my mother who is alone... but sometimes, I don't understand why I feel the urge to run away... to escape...

Andrew: To escape from whom?

Jesus: Not really to escape.... I don't know, maybe to travel, go to Jerusalem, see the world. Get what I mean?

John: Why don't you do what Philip has done? Buy yourself a cart and a horn and start selling amulets and other knickknacks around the whole city.

Jesus: Don't you think that's too heavy? I would like to do something else.... Whenever I hear the prophet John I tell myself: This is something worth doing. This man is helping the people... But I... what do I do for others?

John: And so do I?... and so does this skinny man?... We are all hopeless cases here. But listen, since you have a gift of words, you can buy yourself a camel skin and you can also begin baptizing on the other side of the river... That's it. Be a prophet!

Jesus: Stop that foolishness, John. Can you imagine me as a prophet?... a peasant like me, who has never studied the Scriptures and whose knees tremble every time he is asked to read in the synagogue?

John: Bah, that is only true at the start. One gets used to everything. Before, I was scared of the sea. And now, for thirteen years, I have been casting nets into the sea!

Andrew: How would you like to be a fisherman like us, Jesus?

Jesus: Sure, but I cannot swim. I would drown!

John: Come to Capernaum. There, only the cats are scared of the water.

Jesus: Well, if you only knew... that last night, I dreamt of the sea...

Andrew: Really? Come on, tell us about your dream, Jesus.

Jesus: It was a strange dream, and it worries me. Look, I was facing the sea, just like now. Then from the water I saw the prophet John. He looked at me, and pointed out some bamboo to me along the bank of the river and then headed for the desert. After that, I saw him no more.

Andrew: What happened afterwards?

Jesus: Then a strong wind came, jostling the bamboo along the shore, and knocking them down.... Then a whirlwind came and I felt that the wind was grabbing me by the hair, just like when John holds those who are going to be baptized, lifting me and taking me to the site of the broken bamboo...

John: So what did you do?

Jesus: I leaned over to straighten them up... There were a number of them... I raised them one by one. It was a difficult thing to do, but I enjoyed doing it and I was happy. Then I woke up.

John: There, there, but why does it bother you, man? It is just a dream, and a lousy one, at that.... Your jokes are a lot better..

Jesus: But I was happy fixing the broken bamboo. I have never felt that way before...

John: Well, of course, each one of us finds enjoyment in whatever way he can...

Jesus: No, it's just that when the prophet John was talking a while ago, about the new heaven and earth, I felt the same joy.... That is why I remembered the dream...

John: I guess after listening to John the Baptist about the Messiah and liberation, we all dream of the same thing. And with his long hair, this Liberator will certainly be a character! Surely it is this type that will create a new earth... Do you know how I envision the new world of the Messiah? Without the Romans. No more taxes and abuses. Out with Herod and his cohorts... They are all rotten leeches! They have to be

crushed! Out with the treacherous Publicans too....!

Jesus: Say, in the new world, there will have to be room for many, but you keep throwing out so many people....

John: That was what the prophet said: that the Messiah would burn all trash and uproot the old branches...

Jesus: What about the bent bamboo, almost broken bamboo?

John: Of what use is a broken bamboo? I don't think the Messiah will straighten them up, like you did in your dream...

Andrew: Say, Jesus, how do you imagine yourself to be in this new world?

Peter: Where are they? Where could they have gone?

Andrew: It's my brother Peter. I can hear his voice from here...

Peter: Hey, where are the Capernaum people?

John: Over here, Peter!

Peter: But where have you been all this time?

Andrew: Talking to Jesus....

John: Look, big nose, this tan-skinned man called Jesus knows some jokes...!

Peter: What the heck! Jokes! Time is never wasted here. We went down the river and discovered a site full of crabs. Nathaniel made soup that tasted... Hmmm.

Don't you feel hungry? Come on, let's go.

Jesus: Hey, Peter, you're called Peter, aren't you? I was thinking about it yesterday. I had never heard of that name...

John: But of course, his name is Simon!

Jesus: Then, why do they call you Peter?

Peter: Ah, that's another story to tell.... Have you told Jesus about the movement?

John: Well, you know this guy. He gets himself into all sorts of trouble. All he does is yell and throw stones... That is why we gave him the name of Peter (Pedro): pedro-piedra, piedra-pedro, (Peter-stone, stone-Peter), see?

Jesus: So, your name is Simon, but they call you Peter....

Peter: Oh well, why don't you just stop talking about me and join the others so we can eat the crab soup... I can even smell its delicious aroma from here! Hmmm. Come on, guys!

Night fell on Betabara. The riverbank was glowing with bonfires and the whole countryside smelled of recently-cooked food. The truth was that Andrew and I could not fully comprehend then the impact of Jesus' dream. Now that I am old, I recall that day when Jesus became my friend, and as I found myself far from that place where I met the tan-skinned man, everything just became clear to me.

The ancient writings of Isaiah announced it: he straightened the broken bamboo and extinguished not a single wick emitting a spark of light.

Jesus, like any of us, was a searcher. He searched for an answer to questions about life and reality. He looked for basic answers, such as relating one's service to God and people in circumstances of conflict experienced by others. Jesus realized this quest through reflection and prayer, and at the same time, sharing his preoccupations and questions with his friends. To pursue one's own vocation is an individual process. Our brothers and sisters and the community help in our discernment, and their solidarity is the source of our strength that helps us undertake decisions that God expects of us by being part of this reality. Jesus' manner of expressing himself, as the gospel has shown us, gives us a picture of a man who was amiable and witty. A man never wanting in anecdotes and stories to tell, jokes and other puns to share.

People of the ancient times as well as today gave a lot of importance to dreams. It is the belief that dreams enable people to get in touch with God, and by way of dreams one can look into the future. In Israel, certain dreams were given special meanings. Some of these dreams even figure in the Scriptures, as well as in the Old and the New Testaments, as revealers of the future or God's plans for his people (Gen

27:5-10; Dan 7:1-28; Mt 1:18-25). Short of superstition, these beliefs lead us to a profound truth: God is near us in our wakeful moments or in our dreams, by way of our psychological make-up and the complexities of our mind. A believer ought to discover Him by way of any of these experiences.

Jesus' dream, as told to John and Andrew, captures one of the most beautiful messianic prophecies of Isaiah (42:1-4), where the prophet describes the Messiah as a harbinger of the infinite patience and mercy of God, a just but not intolerant man, a fighter but not a subduer.

(Jn 1:35-39)

6

AN AXE IS LAID TO THE ROOTS

At that time, Joseph Caiphas was the high priest in Israel, the religious head of the country. Caiphas lived in a sumptuous palace in Jerusalem. Everybody hated him because we were aware of his dirty dealings and we knew that he was a pawn of the Romans who were then occupying our land....

A Priest: We are here to consult you about a matter of importance....

Caiphas: Yes, I know. It's about the new taxes. That's all right. I am giving my approval. After all, I am not the one to pay. On my behalf, please tell Governor Pilate to do everything he can to maintain peace and order in our country. Ah, and tell him too, that I have not forgotten his invitation; that I shall be at the Antonia Towers to savor that famous wine he ordered from Rome.

Another Priest: We will tell him, your Excellency, but we came here for another purpose....

Caiphas: Listen carefully. If you were sent by my Father-in-law to collect payment for the lambs on the feast of the Passover, tell him I can't pay him even a single denarius. I incurred a lot of expenses in constructing my palace in the countryside. Besides, I see no reason why he is in such a hurry; after all, the whole family has benefitted from it.

Priest: We did not come to collect anything, your Excellency. It is about John, the son of Zechariah....

Caiphas: So, it was about something else....

Priest: By this time you must have heard about the disturbance caused by this fool along the River Jordan....

Caiphas: Unfortunately, I am well-informed about it...

Priest: People go in droves to listen to his ravings. They say he is a prophet of God. Others claim he is no other than the Messiah, the Liberator that our people have been waiting for....

Caiphas: What? This shaggy man is the Messiah...! or the Prophet!... A filthy, stinking man; that's what he is, just like any gang of galley slaves.

Priest: You ought to do something, your Honor. It might spread like wildfire...

Caiphas: Well then, go see for yourselves. That's right, you go to the Jordan, and find out what is behind all this. Ask this guy the reason for all the uproar and all these baptisms, and by what authority is he agitating the people. And tell him to be very careful with his actions. This is my warning to him....

The eyes of Caiphas, big and watchful as those of an owl, remained fixed on the wooden door of his palace as he watched the two priests leave. Then, slowly he sat down on the silk-covered armchair. In a few days, he would be receiving news about this prophet, a troublemaker and a rebel, giving him the high priest of Jerusalem a lot of problems....

Everyday, more and more people headed for the Jordan River to listen to John and be baptized. That morning, before the priests sent by Caiphas from Jerusalem arrived at the Jordan, there came to Betabara four Pharisees. These Pharisees thought of themselves as pure and holy, because they prayed three times a day in the temple, and fasted in accordance with Moses' law. They despised us, but we simply laughed at

them....

Pharisee: Deliver me, Lord from evil men, keep me from infidels, whose tongues are deceitful and whose hearts are sinful. Do not corrupt me like them, Oh Lord of Israel, nor stain my cloak with the impurities of these lawless men, who know not your commandments nor respect the sanctity of your temple. Deliver me, Oh Lord...

Four Pharisees, all wrapped in their black and white striped cloaks, made their way among the people. With their heads bowed down, they were praying ceaselessly. They did not want to stain their reputation by mingling with us....

James: And why are the Pharisees here? These wicked men can all go to hell!

Philip: Leave them alone, James, and let us see what they want.... Here, everyone is free....

James: They are here to spy on what the prophet John is saying... What a disgusting sight! They think they are saints!..

One Pharisee: John, son of Zechariah, we came all the way from Bethel in order to know you and to receive the baptism of purification...

Another Pharisee: We are followers of the Law, prophet John. We observe the Sabbath. We give alms in the temple, pray daily and fast.

Pharisee: We are obedient to God. What more do you ask of us?

Baptist: Nothing. It is the Lord who asks for justice.

Pharisee: Prophet John, you must know that we have always been just. Our hands are clean.

Pharisee: We too, want to prepare the way for the Messiah.

Baptist: Nobody ever prepares the way for the Liberator of Israel by proclaiming that he is clean. Your hands shall always remain clean due to constant washing, but not your hearts! For they are proud and pretentious! Hypocrites! You are no better than the peasants gathered here, nor the prostitutes weeping for their sins and asking forgiveness from the Lord!

Pharisee: With whom are you trying to liken us? We are Abraham's sons!

Baptist: No! You are all sons of a viper. You are like serpents: hiding your venom in your belly!... Stop claiming that you are Abraham's sons.... The sons of Abraham are just and do not dominate others. You blind Pharisees: cleanse your heart not your hands! Be upright with your work and don't recite so many prayers! Heed me well, or else you will not escape the fire that is soon to come....

James: Very good, John! Be hard on them... *This man calls them like he sees them!* Damn these Pharisees! Why do they have to poke their noses into everything!

Philip: Listen, guys, I know of a Pharisee, the youngest of them, who is a very good man. He helps me and...

James: Come on, Philip, you don't have to defend them now before these people!

Philip: But all I wanted to say was that the Jacobite...

James: Don't push, you creep. There is room for everyone here!

A Priest: Give way, Galilean!

James: Hey, what brings you here, anyway?

Another Priest: Clear the way, for we have to go back to Jerusalem!

While John was denouncing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees on top of a rock, the priests sent by Caiphas arrived from Jerusalem. They were wearing yellow robes and they smelled like incense or sandalwood.

Baptist: God says he will catch all of you like fish in the river and no one will escape the day of Cholera!

Priest: John, son of Zechariah!.... Who gave you the authority to speak those things?

Priest: Who do you think you are, anyway?

Baptist: And who are you?

Priest: We were sent by Caiphas, the high priest from Jerusalem, and keeper of God's laws, to ask you this question: By what authority do you speak in this manner? Who do you think you are? Why don't you speak

up? Eh?... You have caused a stir among these people with your cries, and now you are speechless.

Priest: What do you think of yourself?... The Liberator of Israel?

Baptist: I am not the Liberator of Israel.

Priest: Then, who gave you the permission to be talking to these people about the fire of God that will come down to purify *them*? Do you think you are the prophet Elijah who seared the earth with his burning words?

Baptist: I am not Elijah! He was the greatest of the prophets! I am not he! I only announce and make way for the one who is to come.

Priest: And how do you make way for him? By baptizing these wretched ones and feeding them with stories?... And who are you to baptize them? We are already purified as it is written in the Law, whose custodian is the high priest. Who are you to introduce a new way of life? Are you like Moses who can introduce new laws to these people?

Baptist: I am not Moses!

Priest: What are we to tell Caiphas, the high priest? In whose name shall we tell him, are you doing this?

Baptist: Tell this to Caiphas: "In whose name are you doing what you are actually doing? In the name of God you stain your hands in the dirty business of your father-in-law, Annas! And in God's name, you sit at the same table with the oppressive Romans!"

Priest: Shut up! You are offending the high priest! You are insulting God!

Baptist: No, it is the high priest who has offended the Lord with his crimes and other acts of injustice! I am not going to shut up! I cannot be silenced! I am the voice that cries in the desert: Make the path straight for the Lord! Go tell Caiphas that his throne is wobbling. A Galilean who was with you yesterday already said it: It is not the branch that is rotten, but the trunk, and therefore, the entire tree. And when the tree is rotten, you have to uproot it... Look at what I have in my hand...

Philip: It's a cane. I see it from here!

Baptist: You may be seeing a cane, but look at it very well!... It is the axe of the Messiah! Look very well and tell Caiphas what you have seen. The Lord laid an axe in my hands and I must put it in the hands of the one who is to come after me. I only lay the axe to the root of the tree, so that he who is to come after me shall finish the job. When he comes, he will raise the axe and with only one thrust, cut the rotten tree. The day of the Lord's fury has come! The axe is ready and sharpened! It is just awaiting the one who is to come. He will not delay, for he is already in our midst... Where are you, Messiah?... Where do you hide, Oh Liberator of Israel?... My hand gets weary holding the axe... Let me know if you are not coming, so that I can give the first blow.... Come, Liberator, and make haste!... Let the earth be opened and spring forth the Liberator! Let the heavens break loose and may we be showered with the salvation of the Lord!

A few days later, the priests returned to Jerusalem....

A Priest: Your reverend highness, dear Caiphas,... that man is a crazy fool!

Caiphas: If he is a furious madman, then he is not dangerous. His madness will pass.

Another Priest: He goes down the river surrounded by all this crowd, shouting and screaming. In his hand is a cane which he claims to be the axe of the Messiah, for cutting the rotten roots of the tree....

Caiphas: I'd rather cut his long hair with that!

Priest: And not only that; he is also an agitator. He has spoken very harshly against your Excellency.

Caiphas: Really? What did he say about me?

Priest: That the throne of your Excellency is about to fall, for the day of the Lord's fury is near. He says he is the voice that cries in the wilderness.

Caiphas: Let him scream as much as he wants. Agitators don't last in this country... Leave him alone in his preaching. John has very little time left...

John wasted no time baptizing the people who went to the River Jordan. More than anyone, he knew fully well that his days were numbered. He was in great haste, but feared no one. He had the inner strength of the prophets, from Elijah, the greatest of all, to Zechariah, who was killed before the altar, inside the

temple.

John the Baptist's activity bothered the political as well as religious authorities, who were all fearful of any popular movement. That is why the central authority, represented by the high priest, Caiphas, sent an investigating commission to Jordan.

The high priest was the greatest religious authority of Israel. From the temple of Jerusalem, he controlled the whole theocratic system through which the religious and political questions passed. On him depended the temple personnel, composed primarily of priests and Levites.

Annas was the high priest then, a few years after the birth of Jesus. The man, of the powerful priestly family of Bete (Beto), was very influential, politically and economically. He was succeeded in his post as high priest by his five sons, and finally, by his son-in-law, Joseph Caiphas, who sentenced Jesus to death. If at one historical time, the high priests represented the religious sentiments of the people, in the years narrated to us by the gospel, this institution was a totally corrupt one. The high priest was no less than a collaborator of Roman imperialism, the major symbol of a religious system that was oppressive to the people through their laws, and through a policy of fear. The high priest likewise enjoyed great economic benefits from this post. John the Baptist, possessing an authentic, courageous and truly religious character, made everyone tremble within the whole system.

To any institution – be it religious, political or cultural – the voice of the prophets is always a threat. A prophet is born outside the institution, or, precisely by being so, situates himself or herself along its borderline. The institution represents the law, the norm, security and power. The prophet, on the other hand, personifies risk, audacity, freedom and imagination. Through all times, the conflict between the institution and the prophet has always existed, even in the church.

A group of Pharisees also approached John. In the gospel narrations, they are always presented as the most determined enemies of Jesus. The word “pharisee” means “separated.” The Pharisees were not priests. They constituted a lay movement led by the learned and the scribes. Their religious practice centered on the strict observance of the Law and, therefore, they despised the people and “isolated” themselves from those who did not share nor observe the same scruples.

This mentality of the Pharisees still persists in people who think of God as a “banker,” who takes into account our good and bad deeds, whom we can “buy” through meritorious works (sacrifices, promises, vows...). It is present especially among individuals who consider themselves the best and look down on others. One of the greatest changes in the message of Jesus is to proclaim that the self-righteous shall be the last, and that the last, the “sinners” (prostitutes, drunkards, cheaters) shall be the first before God.

John explains to the investigating commission the coming of the Day of the Lord. God's Fury, his Wrath, is a biblical issue taken up by the majority of the prophets. It is not the sort of anger which is capricious, nor arbitrary. Neither is it a form of God's passionate revenge against those who have offended Him “personally.” The Fury that the prophets speak of, refers particularly to the Day when God exhausts his patience before the oppressors and intervenes, with all His power, in favor of the oppressed. One must not think, however, that the God of the Old Testament was a vindictive God, surpassed by the God of Jesus, all loving and merciful. The texts of the New Testament, as found in the gospels as well as in other books, have adopted the theme of Wrath (Rom 2:5-8; Rev 6:12-17), just as the ancient prophets likewise spoke of the endless mercy of God (Ex 34:6-7; Is 49:13-16).

(Mt 3:7-12; Lk 3:7-20; Jn 1:19-28)

7

BAPTISM IN RIVER JORDAN

Tt was dawn that morning in Betabara, where John was baptizing. The sky was clear, with no trace of clouds, and the desert wind was blowing intensely above our heads, agitating the waters from the Jordan River. Although there was no sign of it, that morning proved to be very significant. We would recall this a few years later....

Baptist: I am just one voice, a voice that cries in the wilderness!.... Make way, clear the road for the Lord is coming soon! He is coming, He will not delay! Be converted! Cleanse yourselves, change your hearts of stone to hearts of flesh, new hearts prepared to accept the Messiah of Israel!

On that day, Philip, Nathanael and Jesus decided, finally, to get baptized. The three fell in line, jammed among the crowd of pilgrims, and waded through the muddy waters of the river...

Baptist: Come on, you better decide now. Do you want to be baptized or not?

Philip: Well, I...

Baptist: Do you want to promote the Kingdom of God, so that justice will prevail on earth?

Philip: Of course, but the trouble is....

Baptist: What is the matter with you, Galilean?

Philip: Nothing. It's just that I am not very fond of the water, you know... It's been months since....wa..wait! Gulp....!

Baptist: May the God of Israel remove the filth from your body and soul, that you may see with your own eyes the great day of the Lord! And now, let me see; Who are you? What is your name?

Nathanael: My name is Nathanael, from Cana of Galilee.

Baptist: Do you want to be baptized? Do you want to be clean for the coming of the Messiah?

Nathanael: Yes, John, I want to... I also want to prepare the way for Him and... assist the Liberator of Israel....

Baptist: Well, you said yes. This word will hang over your head. When the Messiah comes, follow Him.

Don't betray Him, as God will betray you for the words that you have just uttered. Are you decided now?

Nathanael: Yes, prophet, I... I am....

Baptist: Come closer, and be sorry for your sins....

Baptist: Even if your sins are as red as blood, they will be as white as snow; even if they are as dark as charcoal, they will remain as clear as rain water....

The prophet submerged the hairless head of Nathanael in the river, just as he did to our friend Philip and the others. Jesus' turn came...

Baptist: You, where are you from?

Jesus: I am a Galilean, like the two. I live in Nazareth.

Baptist: In Nazareth? In the neighborhood between Naim and Cana?

Jesus: Exactly. Do you know the place?

Baptist: I have some relatives there.... What did you say your name was?

Jesus: Jesus.

Baptist: You're not the son of Joseph and Mary, are you?

Jesus: Exactly. My mother said we were distant cousins.

Baptist: That's it. It's indeed a small world! Will you stay here at the Jordan for some time?

Jesus: Yes, a couple of days...

Baptist: Will you be baptized?

Jesus: Yes, John. That's why I came. You are preaching justice. I also wish to comply with God's justice.

Baptist: Have you repented of your sins? Truly and with all your heart?

Jesus: Yes, John. I am sorry for everything.... especially for this fear....

Baptist: What fear? Do you fear anyone?

Jesus: I'll be frank with you, John. I am afraid of God, because he is exacting. At times he wants to harvest where nothing has been sown. He scares me every time he demands what I am not capable of giving him.

Baptist: If you get baptized, will you promise to prepare the way for the Messiah? Think about it first.

God accepts no excuses. If you say yes, then that's it. If you say no, so be it. Make up your mind.

Baptist: Do you want to be baptized?

Jesus: Yes, John, I want you to baptize me.

Baptist: Very well. You will be one of those who will assist the Liberator of Israel.

Jesus: You always talk of this Liberator, John. But, where is he? Who is he? You told the emissaries from Jerusalem that you are not the Messiah that we are waiting for.

Baptist: Of course I am not the Messiah. He comes after me, a lot stronger than I. He comes after me, but he is before me. This I assure you, Jesus: If he came ahead of me, I would not even dare untie his sandals.

Jesus: But who is he, John? When is he coming?

Baptist: He has come. My heart tells me that he is already in our midst, the Redeemer of Israel, although I have not seen him yet.

Jesus: How do we recognize him when he comes?

Baptist: The Holy Spirit will rest upon him, like a dove, quietly. The Spirit of God never makes noise.

The Messiah will come like a light breeze. He will not cut the almost broken bamboo, nor will he extinguish the flickering wick.... Have you not read what the prophet Isaiah says: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am pleased"? This is the Messiah, the chosen son of God...

Baptist: What is wrong with you, Jesus?... You are trembling.

Jesus: Nothing.... I'm okay.

Baptist: You tremble like the boats in the river when the desert wind blows over them.

Jesus: I'm just feeling cold. That's all.

Baptist: But it is not cold... and how is that possible when you look flushed?

Jesus: I am nervous, John..., so please baptize me now, while fear has not taken over me, or I might change my mind. Please do baptize me now....

The prophet John, that sun-burnt giant, vigorously raised his arm, held Jesus by the hair and submerged him in the rushing waters of the Jordan River...

Baptist: Lord, give us our freedom; send us the Liberator. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Shortly afterwards, Jesus was taken out of the water....

Jesus: Thank you, John. I feel more relaxed now. I feel... happy, I don't know why, but I'm happy!... Hey, John, what's the matter with you? You're trembling... John, do you hear me?...

But the prophet was not listening. His eyes were fixed on the sky, as if he were looking for something, scrutinizing the clouds, and examining the flight of birds....

Baptist: I hear the voice of the Lord above the waters!

The God of glory is coming like thunder!... His forceful voice is calling...

Jesus: What are you saying, John?

Baptist: Nothing, nothing... For a moment, I thought I heard... The birds in the desert speak a mysterious language and they are like a mirage on the horizon... It's nothing, don't worry...

A Man: Hey, let's get this over with! What's this big talk just to soak one's head!

A Woman: Shut up, you dope! You should be ashamed of yourself to be talking that way!...

Another Man: Hey, stop pushing, woman, it's my turn now!

Jesus: John, I would like to talk to you when there is less confusion here. I need to talk to you.

Baptist: It is I who need to talk to you, Jesus. Now, go back to the shore. The people are getting impatient with this heat....

In a short while, Jesus returned to the shore...

Peter: What happened Jesus? What took you so long?

Jesus: I took the opportunity to ask him some questions...

Philip: I thought you drowned in the river, ha, ha, ha! Look at my hair. It is still dripping. What the heck, this prophet has arms like a pair of pliers; he gets hold of you, pushes you and submerges you in the water, and presto! You are baptized.

Peter: What did you ask him, Jesus?

Jesus: How's that again, Peter?

Peter: I said, what did you ask the prophet, John?

Jesus: What every one wants to know, like, who the Messiah is, and when the Liberator of Israel is coming.

James: And what did he tell you? Did he say something new?

Jesus: No James, his answer is the same...

Nathanael: There is a certain glow in your eyes...

Peter: Come on, Jesus, tell us. What did the prophet tell you...? You were chatting with him for a long time....

Jesus: He said nothing to me, Peter. Well, he said that the Holy Spirit comes quietly, like a soft breeze; you will feel it in your face, without knowing where it comes from and where it is going.

James: And where does that lead to? Isn't it John who was talking about the fire, the axe, and the fury of God...? The Messiah cannot be a soft breeze!

He will be a hurricane, and will come as flashes of lightning!

Jesus: I am not sure about that, James. Look at the bamboo. A hurricane would destroy the broken bamboo and extinguish the flickering wicks... All of us here are not like that.... What would become of us if God came like a hurricane? Who among us would survive before him?

Nathanael: Hey, what's the matter with you, Jesus? You're talking strange.... What else did the prophet tell you?

Jesus: That the Liberator has already come. That he is in our midst.

Peter: Then let him come out in the open! Did he tell you where he is hiding? Let us look for him, and carry him on our shoulders.

James: Friends, the only thing that is clear to me is that in this stinking river, the Messiah will not find anything. Look at those people by the riverbank... What has the Messiah got to do with them? To form an army of scoundrels and prostitutes?

Philip: Now look who's talking. The son of Zebedee, who is found to have more lice than hair in his beard!

James: Go ahead and laugh, Philip. When the Messiah comes and finds you with your mouth wide open, he will shut it with a big punch! Look at the group we have here – people who stink, prostitutes and foolish men! A very good group to welcome the Messiah!

Jesus: They are like broken bamboo, James. The Messiah is coming to straighten them, not to give them punches.

James: Look, Nazarene, that sounds pretty good, but what is needed here is....

Philip: Enough of these bickerings, guys! I have just been baptized and I will not allow my lips to be tarnished by cursing. Why don't you just go and eat some round biscuits. It is already getting late, damn – and somehow we have to feed our stomachs.

Peter: Yeah, that's better. First, let's have lunch, and continue with the discussion later. Hey, Andrew, John, Nathanael! Come on, guys. Are you coming too, Jesus?

Jesus: Of course, Peter. Let's go.

The sun was at its peak, enveloping the parched land with its scorching heat. That morning the river, the wind and the desert birds became witnesses of how God made his presence felt in the River Jordan. The

Lord sought Jesus, who in turn listened to his voice. Something marvellous happened to us, but then, we were not aware of it.

The baptismal rite made popular by John signified a public acknowledgement that marked the beginning of a way to justice while awaiting the coming of the Messiah. Jesus, who was one of the many, joined the people's movement by adhering to John's message. His baptism would be the starting point of his life of service to the people.

Since then, Jesus, as a true human, began to understand what God expected of him, by way of his contact with his people, and his various experiences. He grew in age, according to the biological process that we all undergo. He grew in wisdom: by opening up to the Lord and to others, and he came to realize his mission. He grew in grace: Remaining faithful to God strengthened his commitment to service, to the point of giving up his own life. This whole process is, in a way, highlighted in the gospel narration at the time of Jesus' baptism during which he, having been aware of the character and message of John, would undergo a decisive inner experience of faith.

Sometimes, during intense moments of our lives, we ask ourselves, in a very special way, what we ought to do, what our vocation and responsibility is. These are moments when we are touched by the pain and injustice around us; and with our strength, we share something in the hope; that things may change. This is the time when we certainly experience the guiding hand of God leading this world toward a future full of hope, making us realize that all men and women in our midst are brothers and sisters. This is the moment when reality "speaks" to us, and we become so enlightened as to understand its meaning. It is not easy to explain or translate these experiences into words. And this was how Jesus felt when he was baptized in the River Jordan.

In order to describe this inner experience and appreciate the significance of this moment in Jesus' life, the writers of the gospel had to resort to external symbolism. The heavens open: this means that God is near Jesus.

A dove descends: something new is going to happen, and like the Spirit hovering over the waters on the first day of creation, now it is flapping its wings over Jesus, the new human. Then God's voice is heard, choosing Jesus as his beloved Son... All this notwithstanding, we are not to forget that Jesus' commitment, all through his life, was marked by simplicity and humility, without grandeur. It is through humility that the Lord wished to reveal Himself.

Baptism among Christians is not intended for salvation; it is rather an initiation similar to what Jesus underwent. The Christian baptism is a rite in which one breaks away from sin, (rejecting Satan and his works) as witnessed by the community, and it adheres to the Good News of Jesus by means of the baptized person's commitment to put into life the new values taught in the gospel.

The early Christians who lived in Israel were baptized by submerging themselves in the waters of the Jordan river. In other places, the people would take a bath in the river or in the pond. Through the centuries, this custom has vanished and nowadays, only a small amount of water is poured on the head of the new Christian. The Orthodox Christians and other groups still practice baptism by immersion.

(Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-11; Lk 3:21-22; Jn 1:29-34)

8

THE LAST NIGHT IN BETABARA

Andrew and Peter, James and I, Philip, Nathanael and Jesus were baptized by the prophet, John. We felt we were ready for the coming of the Liberator of Israel. We had to return to our province. I remember that night, the last that we spent along the bend of Betabara, when we were all gathered in a tent to say our

farewell...

Peter: This jug is for Philip, who hasn't had a bath for three years!

Philip: And mine goes for Nata who, after that plunge into the water is now beginning to grow hair! See for yourselves, folks, how this is happening to a bald man, thanks to the waters of the River Jordan!

Nathanael: Leave me in peace, Philip. Don't be such a bore...

James: Seriously now, fellows, didn't you notice how the prophet John, was behaving?... He was restless, going to and fro like a bloodhound smelling his prey, but knew not where to catch him...

John: That's right. The prophet was behaving strangely since yesterday. His eyes are fixed on something that is to come that we are not yet aware of....

James: Not – something but somebody. They heard him say that the Messiah is closely following us...

Nathanael: He's always said that, and yet, not even a shadow appears.

Philip: Couldn't he be the Messiah himself? Come on, tell me, who in this country possesses more guts than the baptizer, to reveal what is true? I think John is the man!

Peter: I don't think so. He must be somebody stronger than John. He hasn't spoken yet, but when he does, even the gods will tremble!

John: The only quiet person here is the Nazarene. Hey, Jesus, what's the matter with you? Move closer, man....

Jesus: I gotta make an errand for a townmate who's right now waiting for me.... I'll be back soon....

Philip: Don't be long. The skinny Andrew has just left to get some wine...

The townmate whom Jesus wanted to see that night was the prophet John. Jesus knew where he was sleeping: inside a hollow rock whose tip touched the river. He went to talk to him...

Baptist: That's how it is, Jesus. We are distant cousins. My mother always remembered your mother with great affection and the time she spent with her in Ain Karem, before I was born... boy, how time flies! Later, I left home to enter the monastery and heard nothing about them. While in the monastery, I was informed of the death of my father, Zechariah. He was never in favor of my entering the monastery. Of course, he was a priest and you know, the priests of the temple of Jerusalem were archenemies of the Essenes in the desert.

Jesus: How is your mother Elizabeth?

Baptist: She died the following year. Uncle Joseph and Aunt Mary were there for the funeral. You must have been a little boy then.

Jesus: O yeah. I remember I was left alone in our house in Nazareth. Upon their return, there was trouble in Sepphoris. The city got burned, and so many were crucified... It was terrible.

Baptist: That was the time your father, Uncle Joseph, died, wasn't it?

Jesus: No, that was a few years later. In Sepphoris there was always trouble, and since we lived very near... they punished him for having helped those who had escaped. They beat him up so that... well, he didn't last long. Such a crime.

Baptist: Yes, these Romans are ruthless... They are to be feared...

Jesus: But you are not afraid of them. You can shout at their face anytime.

Baptist: But should I fear them? What can they get from me? Nothing. I have nothing to lose. I have neither money, nor a home, nor a family. I left nothing behind. Look, the only thing that they can take away from me is my voice. But I've already said what I wanted to say.... Now, we better talk about yourself. Tell me about your life. What do you do? Rather, what do you want to do?

Jesus: That's why I wanted to talk to you, John. I need your help. I'm confused.

Baptist: So you do not know what to do. You have this feeling that God is hovering above your head like a mosquito but doesn't tell you what to do. Is that it?

Jesus: Yes, sort of. I've been restless for several months now. As I see you now, I say to myself: Hell, this John's really hittin' the nail on the head. He opens the eyes of the people; he helps them... He really does something... On the other hand, what am I doing?

Baptist: Very well. You wanna work? Stay with me. You can assist me when I baptize people. As you've seen, there's work for two, even for three hundred. Every day more and more caravans come, and I end up losing my voice because I talk and shout a lot. I tell you, I'm tired. Stay with me, Jesus. I think you got what it takes to be a preacher, is that right?

Jesus: I, become a preacher? No way. I'm just gonna stay in Nazareth with my tools and my bricks. I'm not good at talkin' to people.

Baptist: Moses stammered; and Jeremiah was a little boy when God called them. They said exactly the same thing as you did. I also trembled when I opened my mouth for the first time... Now, it doesn't really matter whether I face a thousand or ten thousand people. Come on, man, make up your mind. Stay with me, the two of us will manage.

Jesus: But... I have a lot work in Nazareth.... and I...

Baptist: That's alright. You don't wanna be a preacher because you're scared of the people. Then go to the monastery. I spent more than ten years there. Do you see those rocks over there... and those mountains?... Behind them is the Dead Sea. The fishes that are carried away by the current from the Jordan die as they reach the salty waters. It is a place where there are no animals, nor trees... There you will find the monastery, away from the world but closer to God.

Jesus: And who said that in order to be close to God, one should stay away from the world?

Baptist: That's what the monks of the desert have been saying. That's why they've hidden themselves in the monastery.

Jesus: That's why you left; you wanted to be with the people.

Baptist: Yes, you're right. God and the people are right here inside me. I don't have to get rid of one to accommodate the other.

Jesus: So don't talk to me about monks and solitude. I don't wanna stay away from the people. I love to have friends, I like parties, and I love life. Isn't God in all of these, in joy and happiness?

Baptist: I believe so, Jesus.

Jesus: So?

Baptist: And so, what else are you looking for? Get married, raise a family of ten children and who knows, one of them might be the Messiah. Then, you may live the rest of your life in peace.

Jesus: Right, that is what my mother always tells me, I don't know, I'm really confused.

Baptist: You don't wanna join the monks in the desert. Neither do you wanna live a normal life like the majority of the people, nor wish to stay with me, as there is much work to do...What is it that you want?... Fight? Then, join the guerrilla movement of the zealots. These groups are well organized in Galilee.

Jesus: I... don't know. With the way things are, and knowing how powerful the Romans are, don't you think it's crazy to fight them? Is it really worth the bloodshed? Tell me.

Baptist: I see your point. I also ask myself the same questions...

Jesus: So?

Baptist: So you're not joining the zealots, either.

Jesus: Help me, John, I'm confused. I don't wanna be stingy with God. But He shouldn't be stingy with me either. What does He want from me?

Baptist: Then, do what those who searched for the Lord have done: Go to the desert; go to the sandy mountain alone and there, between the heaven and the earth, shout to the Lord. He will respond to you.

Jesus: You can also hear other voices in the desert, not only God's, but the voice of temptation.

Baptist: Yes, but the Spirit, who is more powerful, will be upon you and.... Jesus, who are you?

Jesus: What is it, John?

Baptist: Nothing, excuse me. For a moment, I thought.... Are you really the Nazarene whom I baptized this morning?

Jesus: Why, of course.... What's the matter with you, John?

Baptist: Nothing, forget it... At times, I spend the whole night imagining how the Messiah would look like... Is he gonna be blond? Is he gonna have black hair? Is he gonna have a thick or thin beard? How is

he gonna look at me? I have been waiting for him for a long time. At times, I feel he's not coming anymore. I'm gonna die without seeing him.

Jesus: Don't say that, John. You're tired, that's all. Well, I'm going back to my companions in the tent. I'll heed your advice. Tomorrow I'm gonna go to the desert... Am I gonna see you again, someday?

Baptist: I hope so. Say "hello" to your Mom. Good luck, Jesus... Have courage.

Jesus: Thank you, John. Goodbye!

Jesus got back to our tent a little late. We were all gathered laughing, playing dice, and most of all, we were pouring wine into our mouths....

John: At last you're back!.... Come on, Jesus, tell us some good jokes...

Philip: We were celebrating the coming of the Messiah... Hik!! and here you come at the right moment... Hik!... You must be our Messiah!... Hik!

Jesus: How many liters of wine are needed to get such a big head drunk, Philip?

Peter: Well, if I were the Messiah... I'd squeeze all the Romans into a net, including their capes and shields, tie them up and throw them in the middle of the lake for the fishes to feast on them....

James: You're too good for nothing to become the Messiah, Peter. But if I were to become the Messiah, I'd transfer the capital to our province, and with the help of five hundred elephants, I'd pull out the Temple of Jerusalem, and likewise sow in Galilee. I'd be better off there than here in the south.

Peter: Hey, Jesus, what would you do if you were the Messiah?... Do you hear me? What would you do if you were the Messiah?...

Jesus: Knock it off, Peter. Stop kidding..

Peter: But I'm serious, Jesus.... Each one of us can be the Messiah. And why not? John says he is among us. He may be the bald one, or that skinny man or.... it could be you, Jesus. This is the Lord's thing. If He says: "...this" then he is. If God says: "that," then that is it. Any one can be the Messiah. You might even be the Liberator of Israel, Jesus!....

John: Hurray! Tomorrow I can go back to Galilee and dance with the plainest looking dame... tra, la, la, la..

Nathanael: Let's have a toast, for tomorrow I'm gonna go back to my shop... Jesus, my dear brother, I'm so happy...

James: Hey, Jesus, we've decided to go back to Galilee tomorrow.

Jesus: That's wonderful. I'm going back a little later.

John: You're not coming with us tomorrow?

Jesus: No, first I gotta go to Jericho....

Peter: In that case, I'm going with you to Jericho and we will join these scoundrels on the road...

Jesus: No, Peter... I mean... I'm not really going to Jericho, but to the desert.

Peter: To the desert? What for? Do you intend to go there alone?

Jesus: Yes.

Peter: Are you out of your mind?

Jesus: Well, yes, a little.

Philip: I drink to this hick who is a little crazy, and for all the silly men gathered here!

To tell you the truth, since we had too much wine in our heads, I can hardly remember what else transpired that night, our last in Betabara.

John the Baptist's character had a great impact on those who listened to him and even among those who knew him through the news about him reaching all the nooks and crannies of the country. He ought to have had a great influence on Jesus, who, later on would say that John was the greatest among those ever born of a woman (Mt 11:11). At the height of the movement spurred by the Baptist, Jesus discovered his calling, and upon John's death, he would succeed him as the prophet. The relationship between John and Jesus, specifically referred to in the gospel of Luke, must be understood basically as a way to show the

intimate link between the message by the previous prophet and that of Jesus.

It is very possible that John the Baptist lived in the monastery of the ascetics for some time, along the banks of the Dead Sea, near the place where he later on baptized the people. The Essenes belonged to a religious congregation formed about one hundred thirty years before the birth of Christ. They lived in community and practiced celibacy – although some of them belonged to married groups. They uttered special prayers, but did not offer animals as sacrifice. They also had a vow of poverty and shared common property. One of their concerns was to copy the holy scriptures. Some of these copies have even reached us following the discovery in Qumran in 1947. They are the oldest manuscripts of some books of the Bible. The most important is the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. At present, one can still see the ruins of this monastery. Parts have been preserved, like its walls, stairs, the purification pools, etc. Many objects found in these ruins are preserved in the Book Museum in Jerusalem, such as pots, sandals, coins, tables, etc. The ascetics isolated themselves from the world in order to avoid sin and considered themselves perfect and favored by God. This made them proud and even intolerant. One would think that John may have left this group because of their elitist tendencies.

John the Baptist showed Jesus various ways to carry out his desire to serve: through a monastic life, through family life, and by joining an armed movement. Jesus however, saw some obstacles in each. Not seeing himself in any of them, he did not become a monk nor anything of the sort. Instead, he mingled with his own people, and participated in all their concerns, their problems, their joys. Nor did he get married, nor compromise himself with the zealots or any other political groups of his time. He did not end up as a priest or levite. He was a lay man and never was part of any religious structure of his era. He was not even a part of the secular movement of the Pharisees. Living independently up to the end of his life, he did not isolate himself from the social class into which he was born.

In this episode are recorded some details about the death of Joseph, Mary's spouse. There is no historical reference about the time and the manner by which Joseph died. What is historically known is the siege and destruction of the city of Sephoris during the youth of Jesus. Sephoris was located near Nazareth and was then the capital of Galilee. The Romans burned the city as a retaliation for the rebellion waged by the zealots.

9

BENEATH THE DESERT SUN

Early that morning, I saw Jesus coming out of the tent where we, the Galileans, spent the night. He took his walking stick and began to walk alone, away from the river toward the desert of Judah. Then, he suddenly disappeared...

Jesus: Lord, what do you want from me? What do you expect of me? Speak to me, that I may overcome this fear and respond to you!... Speak to me, Lord!...

But he heard other voices inside him....

Mary's Voice: What is it that you want, Jesus? One year has passed, and another year, yet, you haven't decided on anything. Listen to me, son. Forget about your dreams and be realistic. You are thirty, and it is high time you put your feet on the ground....

Innkeeper's Voice: Ah, some crazy men! They dream of prophets and signs from God when they can stay and enjoy the good life! Cheer up, Nazarene! I have very good wine for you, and some women....! There is none of this stuff in your town.

Peter's Voice: I'm serious, Jesus. Anyone can be the Messiah. Why not? John says he is in our midst. It could be this bald man, or that skinny one, or... or, you, Jesus. You can be the Liberator of Israel!...

Jesus continued walking through the desert. He climbed the hills, descended through them, and passed through the mountainside. When evening came he lay flat on the sand, his face looking up to the sky, as if waiting for an answer...

Jesus: Lord, what do you want from me?.... What can I do for my people?.. John is a prophet, and he can speak.... but I....I.....

How many days have passed?... How long could someone, stricken by hunger and thirst, survive? Nothing. Not even a sign of life, nor a drop of water could be seen anywhere... Jesus, his lips parched and bluish, sat on a rock. He felt the blazing sun above his head, and became dizzy. Then he remembered nothing. He rolled over on the sand and was lost in deep sleep....

Devil: Tsssk.... tsssk..... Poor guy! Why did you come here without any food at all? You don't even have a camel! Do you know that only beetles and lizards inhabit this desert?

Jesus: Who are you?

Devil: It doesn't really matter. Let us say that I'm a dream...

Jesus: Bah, then I don't see any need of you...

Devil: Don't say that... Sometimes, dreams can be more real than reality itself... You poor guy! You fainted because of hunger and exhaustion... I will help you. But first, you gotta tell me clearly... Why did you come here?

Jesus: I am looking for God. I need Him to speak to me and show me the road I ought to follow...

Devil: There are no roads in the desert. Not even in life. One makes a road with a bit of luck and a little ambition. I can be of help to you, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus: How did you know my name?

Devil: Only a few come here, so it's easy to know who is who.

Jesus: And what's your name?

Devil: Don't worry about that... Listen to me... I can give you good advice. Listen: Do you know that cats have seven lives, while crocodiles have four? How many lives have you got, poor man?

Jesus: Only one..., of course.

Devil: Then, enjoy it, my friend!... Why go look for a road? This is what most men and women take, and they like it.

Jesus: What must I do in order to enjoy life?

Devil: First, you must not think a lot. Thinking makes you sad.

Jesus: That's easier said than done... What about our country? There's so much injustice to correct. How can I stop thinking of these things?

Devil: They are nothing but the idealism of youth. With or without you, life will go on. Two thousand years will pass and the poor will continue to be poor, and the rich will become richer. The same abuses of the past will be committed again tomorrow.

Jesus: Perhaps you are right, but...

Devil: Listen to me, Jesus of Nazareth. Look at this rock.... Imagine this rock to be a piece of bread, a recently baked piece of bread... Oh, my good friend: to eat it is the first rule to enjoy life...

Jesus: Man does not live by bread alone...

Devil: Of course not! You need good food for the stomach, good wine to drink and nice women to go to bed with!

Jesus: What about the word of God? People live by the word of the Lord too.

Devil: Uff, forget about God. God has his own problems in heaven, while you have yours on earth. Do you know what you really need? Money!.... Money, my friend, is the key to happiness. You can buy everything with money. Listen to me: If you have a lot of money, then you'll enjoy a comfortable life and be happy.

Jesus: But, where am I gonna get such an abundance of money? It's not easy to be rich.

Devil: For you, it is. You have a knack for business. I'm sure that if you transfer to Jerusalem and start business there, like putting up a small lending shop, or textile trading.... You will progress, young man.

You can convert stones into bread, and bread into money, and money can give you anything! Enjoy life and don't think of.... So, you decide... what else are you waiting for?

Jesus: I don't know, but... I am looking for... If I have money, life's luxury and security... then what?

Devil: Now, I realize, young man, that you're not like the rest who simply want to make money and be happy. You want something more than this. You want to dominate the world be at the helm of the ship!... Am I right?

Jesus: I don't understand you.

Devil: Give me your hand and come with me.....

Jesus: Where will you take me?

Devil: Look, I want you to observe from this mountain. From here, you can choose well. Take a look at all the kingdoms and governments in this world: Jerusalem, Egypt, Babylon... Athens... Rome... Which do you like most?

Jesus: What are you talking about?

Devil: You can be the lord of any of these empires, if you wish.... Or, if you are more ambitious, like Alexander the Great, you can rule the entire world.

Jesus: That's impossible. I'm only a peasant who wears a pair of broken sandals... I don't even have a piece of land to own, and here you are talking about my being the lord or master of....

Devil: Everything is a matter of wanting it. Little by little you'll be scaling the ladder of power.

Think about it, young man: politics is the art of stepping on the foot of someone at the lowest rung of the ladder.

Jesus: That is exactly where I am: at the lowest rung of the ladder. Whose foot am I gonna step on? What must I do to go up?

Devil: I will help you. Trust me.

Jesus: Tell me, please. Who are you?

Devil: I am the lust for power that is hiding in your soul, Jesus. You don't just aspire for money and other luxuries, because you want to rule and have power over others. That is natural. Look!... A person wages war against a neighbor, and will win, for sure, because of ambition. A person already has hundreds of thousands of people in subservience and will have more who will obey, and serve.

Jesus: I don't know, but... I prefer to serve than be served.

Devil: You are a dreamer, Jesus. Tell me, whom do you want to serve?

Jesus: The Lord... and my country, Israel...

Devil: Oh, I understand. I should have known that before. You are even prouder than I thought. Now, let's be clear on this, Jesus of Nazareth: you want to be the Messiah that all Jews have been waiting for, for many centuries... Hey, don't put on that face... You know damn well what I'm talking about. Money is easy. Power is likewise boring, I know, and you aspire for something special, like being the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the World. You want to be remembered through the centuries, written about by entire libraries, and you wish to have several followers, with a very powerful organization of course...

Jesus: How can you talk that way to me. I have never thought anything of that sort...

Devil: Come. You will need a good starter for your career, do you understand?.... Let us go to Jerusalem, to the Temple, to the pinnacle of the walls...

Jesus: Leave me alone, I don't wanna go with you. Let go!...

Devil: Look.... 400 cubits high!... Look down... and look at those people... Everyone has come to see the miracle.

Jesus: What miracle?

Devil: Yours! Close your eyes, and jump from here.

Jesus: Are you crazy? I would kill myself!

Devil: Of course not! I will stay down and see to it that you don't step on even one stone. Trust in me.

Jesus: What good will that do for me?

Devil: That would be the first miracle. Then people will come, and they will applaud you. And you will

ask: Whom are you looking for? Are you looking for the Messiah? for the Liberator?

I am he! And everyone shall kneel before you and you will be great. You will be known all over the world!

Jesus: But....

Devil: No more buts. Don't think anymore. Don't you hear the people waiting for you? Come on, jump! I will take care of the rest!

Jesus: Wait a minute... This is tempting God. You are not to tempt the Lord.

Devil: God! God! Will you let God out of this, you idiot!

Jesus: You leave me alone too! Go away! Go away!

Devil: I'm sorry for you, Jesus of Nazareth! You are taking the wrong road, fellow. Alright, you hardheaded one. You will regret having ignored me. Anyway, we shall still meet. So long!

Jesus: Tell me who you are.... Who are you? What is your name?

Cameleer: My name is Nasim and I am a Samaritan. I am taking this road to get me to Jericho...

An old cameleer was passing through the place, and when he saw Jesus lying down on the sand, he approached him and helped him.

Cameleer: Who are you? ...Did you lose your camel? Were you held up by bandits? ...You know, brother, this place is treacherous. Even the devil trembles when he crosses through. You were shouting and I came near to see what was happening... Come.... uff! that's alright now... You are almost dead, brother... Here, drink this goat's milk... and let us go, for it is still a long way from here to Jericho... Hoaa... Camel.... Let's go...!

For how many days did Jesus stay in that gray and barren mountain? I would not know. In the desert, God put his people to test for forty years. Even Elijah crossed the desert, and for forty days and forty nights he waited to see the face of God. John the Baptist learned how to shout in that desolate place, proclaiming the coming of the Liberator of Israel.

Galilee, the northern region of Israel, is always verdant and has fertile soil. In contrast, Judea, Israel's southern part, has a dry area and scarce vegetation. Some parts are even desert lands, which are uninhabited. In these lands where Jesus roamed, thorns and thistles hardly grow. Rain is very scarce and only caravans of camels are seen crossing. At present one can see in the desert of Judea, near the city of Jericho, the so-called Mount of Temptation which Christian tradition has claimed for centuries as the place where Jesus was tempted. Alongside this mountain there live some orthodox monks in an old monastery. The Israelites thought that the land was cursed by God, infertile, and that only wild animals and demons lived there. All these contributed to the belief that the place was extremely risky, where people were put to a test, but were able to resist temptation. The desert was not only considered a terrible place. The long pilgrimage of the Israelites through the desert, through a span of forty years until they reached the promised land, converted the place into a special venue to see God and to know better the peoples' plans during solitude and in times of trouble. It is between these two meanings, the confrontation with evil and God's revelation, that the text on the temptations of Jesus is centered, as expressed in the accounts of the evangelists.

The gospel account of the temptations of Jesus must not be read as a historical narration, but as a theological summary of the challenges that Jesus, as a Servant of Yahweh, had to overcome throughout his life in order to be faithful to the end: the temptation of security in a life without risk, of seeking one's advantage; the temptation of money-power with which to dominate others; the temptation of a Messiah who seeks to be served rather than serve. Jesus, like every human who takes commitment to heart, has to experience weakness and choose the one and only path of generosity. Unceasingly, he renewed his own vocation, and in so doing overcame temptations told to us in the gospel.

The key to understanding the account on the temptations is in the three phrases through which Jesus answered the devil. These three phases appear in the narration of the pilgrimage of the Hebrews through

the desert. (Deut 8:3; 16 and 6:13). What God asked his people in that march through the desert in order to test their faithfulness is renewed in Jesus. Jesus experienced the same temptations suffered by the people centuries ago. But Israel failed God and succumbed to a temptation of distrust, of accumulation and power hunger. Jesus, however, remained faithful. In this personal account, he redeems himself and his people, reaching the plenitude of collective history. The culture and literary style during the period of Jesus necessitated the use in these accounts of the figure of a Tempter, who was alien to the person being tempted. Thus, the figure of the demon appeared as the interlocutor of Jesus. The Bible often mentions the devil under different names: The Adversary, Lucifer, Satan, Beelzebub, etc. One must carefully discern in every occasion the narrator's intention in resorting to this character.
(Mt 4:1-11; Mk 1:12-13; Lk 4:1-13)

10

IN THE PRISON CELL OF MACHAERUS

The voice of the prophet John, clamoring for justice and proclaiming the coming of the Liberator of Israel, was becoming more intense and pressing each day. Those who came to listen to him felt he was in a great hurry, as if he knew that his days were numbered...

Baptist: Open your eyes wide! Be ready, so that when he comes (he-who-is-to-come is already here), all of you will know him and will meet him!... No one is to say: "I have been baptized. I have been purified in the river; it is enough!" Being baptized is not the end of the road, but the beginning! When the Messiah comes, he shall commence the liberation of Israel. All of us must follow him and be collaborators of the Messiah. That is, if he comes....

A Woman: Oh gosh, I hear the trumpets of the Messiah! Don't you hear that noise, my countrymen?

A Man: Lady, will you stop that silly talk and listen to what the prophet is saying....

A Woman: You listen, man! I am not deaf; I can hear. I'm telling you that the Messiah's caravan is coming here!

A Boy: Look there! The Messiah is coming!

All: The Messiah! Prophet John, the Messiah is coming!

On the road descending from Jericho, a long caravan of extravagantly decorated camels was seen coming, preceded by a group of slaves clothed in silk, and blowing their trumpets. But no, it was not the Messiah who was coming, but King Herod and his court. They were to move to the palace in Machaerus on the other side of the Jordan, beside the Dead Sea. They had to pass through Betabara in order to get there.

A Man: Lady, if this is the Liberator that we've been waiting for, then we can now die.... But no, it is Herod and his men!....

A Woman: Look how the carriage wobbles! How fat he is!

A Man: He is about to burst!

Herod Antipas, was the Governor of Galilee, the last of the sons of Herod the Great. We loathed his father for having imposed heavy taxes on us. A chip off the old block, the son was likewise an unscrupulous and unjust man, corrupted by vice, with utter disregard for the Lord and the sufferings of his people.

A Man: Hey, prophet John, King Herod is heading toward us!

A Woman: The nerve of this man! What does he want from us?...

A Man: Let him be, Lady. If he wants to be baptized, then we shall see how his weight will pull him down and drown him in the waters....

A Woman: That's right. Let us all drown him!

The prophet remained strangely quiet as he watched the approaching caravan. The carriage where Herod was riding did not go near for he was an extremely superstitious man. He was scared of the prophet with long hair, and with a tongue like a sword, about whom he had heard many things. The caravan followed the road leading to the palace in Machaerus. While it was still a little far, John broke his silence, and with the force of lightning, he faced the people who were milling around the riverbank.

Baptist: See how this man stinks! He smells rotten!... A decaying fish begins to reek a foul odor through the head. The acts of injustice committed in this country are so prevalent that the stench is unbearable. Who else but the leaders of this country are the rotten ones. Herod, as well as his administration, is corrupt. He lives by the blood of the innocent and the sweat of the poor... But his reign is not forever! The worms are eating him up! As I break this old walking stick, so will the Lord destroy his throne! Herod will fall, and he will be toppled amid joyful shouts, with the coming of the Liberator of Israel!... You are to witness this with your own eyes and there will be great rejoicing!

John exposed before the people all the crimes and abuses committed by the unjust king. Among those gathered, however, were followers of Herod who were spying on the people. And what was expected did happen.

Herod: So, he said all those things about me? Too bad, I would have wanted to hear it... Be that as it may, it is good that they talk about me...

Servant: He also said that...sss...sss

Herod: Really? What an insolent man!

Servant: That you can not live with....sss...sss...

Herod: How dare this hairy man say that of me!... And in front of the people, at that!...

Servant: That the queen is living in sin....

Herod: This man is conspiring against my government! He is dangerous...

Servant: They say he is a great prophet, the one sent by God, the Most High!

Herod: Silly! The time of the prophets ended a long time ago... If not, then, I'll finish him off now!... I want this John immediately, this son of Zechariah!

Servant: What if the people resist?...

Herod: The people! They only bark, they do not bite! Tell the men to be armed, in case...

Servant: When must they leave, King?

Herod: Right away. The sooner, the better. I'm anxious to see the face of this famous prophet of the desert.

And so it was. John was ordered arrested by Herod, was bound and brought to the prison cell of his palace in Machaerus. More and more people gathered along the riverbank, as they saw him being dragged by Herod's men. They wanted to prevent the soldiers, but were helpless. The women wept aloud and grieved: "Once again, the masters of power and might silenced the voice of the prophets."

In a few days, the riverbanks of the Jordan were abandoned and as silent as before John came with his powerful voice and filled them with hope and life.

John was shut up in the basement of the palace in Machaerus, in a dark and narrow cell where other prisoners perished while serving their sentence....

Herod: I have long wanted to see you, John, son of Zechariah.

Baptist: So have I, Herod Antipas, son of the wicked Herod, the Great.

Herod: See how ironic life can be.... Until yesterday, you were the "prophet" ...but now, you are no more than a mouse in my trap. What things have you been spreading about me? Come on... speak up!

Baptist: I only said what everybody already knew. That you are an unjust king, and that God will topple down your throne. The last thing I said was that you were living with your sister-in-law, your brother Philip's wife.

Herod: Herodias is my wife!!

John: Herodias, who is as brazen as you, is Philip's wife. You stole her away from him. You must give her back to him!

Herod: How dare you speak to me like that!

Baptist: And how dare you fiddle with God's laws!

King Herod started to bite his nails. He was too scared. The blazing eyes of the prophet terrified him...

Herod: John.... prophet John.... Who are you? Who taught you to speak to the people the way you do?... Are you the Messiah?... Speak up!

John: I am not the Messiah. I proclaim the coming of the Liberator of Israel. He is already coming, and he will strip you of your crown, leaving you naked before the people. He will also tell you to your face the acts of injustice you have committed, as well as your vices!

Herod: And where is this Messiah that you are talking about?... Who is this Liberator of Israel?... I want to meet him...!

Baptist: You will not see him. You are too sinful to see him.

Herod: I will see to it that they cut off your tongue to be thrown to the dogs!

Baptist: You are scared, Herod. You are carrying on your shoulders the burden of your abuses against the people. You are afraid, because you know that God takes into account your sins.

Herod: I'm not afraid! I'm not afraid! I'm not scared of anyone! Neither am I terrified of you, you liar!

Baptist: You're afraid of the truth!

Herod: No, my soldiers are here to defend me! I have the armies, I have palaces, and I have the power! And now, I also have you, the prophet! Ha... ha... ha...! Now, what have you got to say?

Baptist: I have already told you everything. First, you must return your brother's wife. Then, we shall talk.

Herod: But Herodias is my wife! I love her! She's mine!

Baptist: She isn't yours. You have no right to live with your brother's wife!

Herod: Neither do you have the right to raise your voice to me!... What makes you think you have the right to do so?. I am the king of Galilee and you ought to respect me!

Baptist: Respect you? Now, you are making me laugh. How do you expect me to respect a man who is full of vice, who earned his throne through intrigue and all sort of treachery and bribery, a man whose government wallows in a pool of blood?

Herod: I am the authority and you have to obey me!

Baptist: My authority comes from heaven. You were born of a woman, like everyone else, and you were born naked, like everyone else. The worms will eat you up like everybody else.

Herod: Shut up! You shut up..!

Baptist: The only king I have is the one from above; him I obey!

Herod: John, wouldn't you like to leave this place... and talk to the people again...? We can talk this over. Wouldn't you like to go back to the Jordan and be a prophet again? Do you know that your fate is in my hands, and if I will it, I can give you your freedom.

Baptist: No Herod. You are mistaken. My fate is not in your hands, but in God's. Yours are empty... and tarnished. Soon, they will be tied, and your power will be put to an end with the coming of the Liberator of Israel....

Herod: Give me a cup of wine, Herodias...

Herodias: You have drunk a lot today... Herod. Is anything the matter?

Herod: No, nothing. Nothing is wrong with me.

Herodias: I know you too well... You cannot deceive me... This "prophet" is worrying you. This John whom you have imprisoned in the basement.

Herod: Stop talking about prophets... You know nothing about them. The prophets are sacred people.

Herodias: Sacred people! Ha! You know what should be done to them? Have their throats cut to silence them. Say, Herod, why don't you have John's head cut off?

Herod: Shut up!

Herodias: If you really love me, you will do it for me. Do you love me?

Herod: You know I love you so much, Herodias... so much... hmmm.

Herodias: Are you afraid of him? Do not fear him. The moment you have him beheaded, you will be the same powerful man as before...

King Herod wanted to kill John, to get rid of that voice that bothered him unceasingly. But he was afraid of the people in Israel who knew that John was a prophet who spoke on behalf of God.

The gospels speak of two Herods, Herod the Great who, in alliance with the Romans, governed the country tyrannically from the year 37 before the birth of Christ. He was also known to be responsible for the killing of innocent people. When he died, four years before the birth of Christ, the country was divided among his three sons. Herod Antipas, the youngest of all, was the contemporary of John the Baptist and Jesus. He ruled Israel, Galilee, as well as the zone of Perea, along the eastern side of the Jordan. He was given the title "Tetrach," but the people called him "King Herod." Though married to a Moorish princess, Herod Antipas became the lover of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. This situation resulted in a war in which many innocent people were killed. The king was an ambitious man and without scruples. Historical accounts describe him as a squanderer, a tyrant ruthless to anyone opposing him (and there were many) and a very superstitious man. He also collaborated with the Romans, the lords and masters of the country, who had totally supported him in exchange for large monetary rewards: On behalf of the Romans, Herod Antipas collected taxes from the people in Galilee and Perea.

One of the many accusations hurled by John the Baptist against the corrupt system of his time was directed against Herod Antipas whom he publicly charged with living adulterously with his sister-in-law. John's accusation was not a mere question of "morality." The king's adultery was like the last fruit on a tree that was completely rotten. Herod's reign was corrupt because of acts of injustice, squandering, theft, crimes.... there was not even a minimum of political or social morality. This was what John vehemently condemned.

Herod, in compliance with the Jewish religious norms, would go to his palaces in Machaerus and Jerusalem, to attend festivals, and to go to the Temple to pray.

On one of these occasions, he ordered the imprisonment of John. Herod feared the people's movement instigated by the prophet and he wanted to retaliate against John's accusations of him in public.

Machaerus was a fortress built along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea in Perea. Herod the Great fortified it and built a magnificent palace about twenty years before the birth of Christ. His son Herod Antipas would celebrate his great feasts in the palace. It was here that John the Baptist was imprisoned and ordered beheaded by the king. In the year 70, the fortress was destroyed by the Roman armies. To this day only its ruins are preserved.

Herod feared John, even when he was imprisoned, because the prophet, sensing great freedom within him, and fearless even before death, confronted the king and told of the king's acts of injustice to his face. (Mt 14; Mk 6:14-20; Lk 9:7-9)

11

TOWARDS THE GALILEE OF THE GENTILES

When Jesus left the desert, his feet were swollen, his eyes dilated and his hair and beard full of sand. He was happy, in spite of exhaustion and hunger. But was in a hurry. He bade goodbye to the old Samaritan who took him on his camel, and went back to the Jordan...

Jesus: I must see John... I have to talk to him... I will say: "John, I have finally decided to serve my

people.” How do I begin?... What must I do? Do you want me to stay with you and baptize people too?... I am ready for everything.... I am not scared anymore... well, I am still afraid... but I am willing to do anything. God gave me the courage while I was in the desert...

When Jesus got to Betabara, at the bend of the river where John was baptizing, he saw no one on the riverbank of the Jordan. The place was deserted. There was no baptism, nor were there caravans of pilgrims. John was not around, either. From afar, Jesus saw two women and he rushed toward them....

Jesus: Hey, wait, the two of you!... Don't go away. I mean no harm... Wait!

Magdalene: You look like a crazy man or a leper! Who are you?

Jesus: I just came back from the desert, that explains my dirty appearance... Please, don't be afraid. Wait for me...

Old Woman: What do you want, young man? Are you also wanted by Herod's men?

Jesus: No, I came to look for the prophet, John and..... but what has happened here?

Old Woman: Now there are two of you asking the same question. She came when everything was over... Well, that is life.

Jesus: Tell me, what has happened here? Where is John?... Where are the people?

Magdalene: The prophet was taken away by Herod's men. That's why the Jordan is deserted.

Jesus: Was John arrested by Herod?

Old Woman: Don't you know? The news spread like wildfire all over the land. What a great misfortune, Oh Lord!

Jesus: But why?... What right did he have?

Magdalene: By force. He sent his soldiers, with whips and swords... The prophet was tied to a horse and they took him away.

Jesus: Where did they take him?

Old Woman: To the worst of all prison cells, to Machaerus, beyond the mountains of Moab....

Magdalene: May the worms consume Herod like his wicked father!

Jesus: And the people did not do anything to defend the prophet?

Old Woman: What could we do, young man? We all fled, running, that was what we did. Who would dare lift a finger against Herod? Who is brave enough to open his mouth in this country?

Magdalene: The only man who could do that was John. This man feared no one, not even Herod, nor the devil put before him!

Old Woman: They shut him up in prison, and one of these days, they will kill him. What a misfortune, Oh my God!

Well, what can we do? The prophet's life is over.

Magdalene: And that puts an end to your business of selling cookies, old Ruth, which hurts even more than the shackles of the baptizer.

Old Woman: Look who's talking. Listen to this, young man. I am a poor widow who earned a living by selling cookies to penitents who wanted to be baptized....

Magdalene: And they got out of the water feeling more starved than contrite.

Old Woman: Fine, but if I could sell my wares, thanks to the people who came to listen to John, then, what is wrong with that?

Jesus: You are right, old woman. The prophet helped some people by his preachings, and he has helped you by improving your trade.

Magdalene: He was not able to help me. I wasted this trip.

Jesus: Did you come to be baptized by John?

Magdalene: Well, yes..... yes..... that is.....

Old Woman: She is laughing because she.... well, you can see from the make-up she has on her cheeks... The men from Capernaum rushed here to see the prophet, while this woman ran after them, ha, ha.....

Magdalene: And what else did you expect? Each one lives in accordance to their means. Am I right,

countryman?

Old Woman: She must have frightened away the clients. This place is deserted. Such bad luck for you, Mary!

Jesus: Your name is Mary?

Magdalene: Yes, and yours?

Jesus: Jesus, and behind this dirty face of mine, I am a good man, I assure you.

Old Woman: You speak like the Galileans. Are you from there like this woman?

Jesus: Yes, I am from Nazareth, a small village inland.

Magdalene: I come from Magdala, by the lakeside.

Old Woman: There is no need to say so. All Magdalenes are known for their perfume.

Jesus: Did you not say you were from Capernaum?

Magdalene: Well, I was born in Magdala, but when my mother died, I was left alone... Now I live in Capernaum. I do anything for a living.

Old Woman: She works as a whore for all those filthy fishermen on the wharf!

Jesus: What a coincidence! Recently, I met a group of friends from your place... Maybe you know them...

Magdalene: I guess so. I know all the men from Capernaum... Tell me their names...

Jesus: They are Peter, James, John and Andrew...

Magdalene: Hell! I know them... Andrew is a little serious, but the two brothers, James and John.... well, I'd rather avoid them every time I see them. And I'd rather not talk about Peter.

Jesus: I find them to be nice people....

Magdalene: Well, they turned me off. They were always pestering me. To hell with all of them. And I told them to their face: "You go your own way, for I don't wanna have anything to do with you. And once and for all, be sure you have a mouthwash before talking to me!"

Old Woman: You talk like you were a decent woman!

Magdalene: No, I'm not. But this fellow is. Look, just between the two of us; avoid their kind. If you only knew what I know...!

Old Woman: Alas, the only decent person I knew was the prophet, John. Oh, the way he looked, and spoke! He was God sent, I would say. But now... this country is doomed. Israel has become an orphan. There is no prophet to lend her a hand, to guide her nor to lead the way. Now we are lost.

Jesus: Please don't talk that way, Grandma. John paved the way for us. We must continue what he started.

Old Woman: No, young man. It's all over. John was the voice of the poor, of all of us. You never heard him speak? He was shouting, and do you know why? Because he had in his throat a thousand voices: he was speaking for the thousands of poor, downtrodden people who never enjoyed the right to speak... Tell me, who is now going to fight for justice for us?

Jesus: We must do it ourselves. Yes, why not? We ought to have our own voices heard, and we must do it. God will be on our side to fight for us.

Old Woman: John always spoke to us of a great and powerful liberator who was to come after him.... Now, he is locked up in prison, but the liberator hasn't come.

Jesus: He'll come. The Messiah and the Kingdom of God will come. Let us not lose hope.

Old Woman: No, young man. What we need is someone who will take up the prophet's staff and talk to the people, like John did.

Magdalene: But who is brave enough to do this, huh? Damn, this country, it has no more men like John.

Jesus: On the contrary. I believe there are many who would be willing to die for justice. They are just waiting for a signal to start. They are waiting for someone to tell them: "Now is the time, brothers and sisters. The kingdom of God is near, and so is our liberation!" John is imprisoned, but the Messiah is not. He is coming. Don't you feel it in your hearts? ...Rejoice, grandma, and you too, Mary, for soon, we shall be free!

Magdalene: What are you talking about? Hmmm... I'm afraid the heat of the desert sun has got into your head.

Old Woman: Come here, young man. You must be very tired. My hut is not far from here. Mary and I will prepare you something to eat. Let's go....

Jesus: Thanks for everything. No, I must go. They are waiting for me in Galilee.

Old Woman: Did you like my doughnuts?

Jesus: They are really very good...

Old Woman: Then take some with you...

Old Woman: Take them to your mother. Tell her they come from an old woman who lives by the Jordan and who is very fond of her.

Jesus: But you haven't met my mother...!

Old Woman: It doesn't matter. I have met you and I am very fond of you, young man. Your mother must be like you.

Magdalene: Goodbye, Jesus. I shall be in Galilee next week. If you happen to pass by Capernaum.... well, come and visit me, if you don't mind going to my house.

Jesus: Of course, I will see you, Mary. Goodbye, Grandma!... When the Messiah comes, offer some of your honeyed doughnuts. He will be as delighted as I have been...

Old Woman: Goodbye, young man, goodbye... Enjoy your journey! Jesus undertook the long journey back home towards the north, in the Galilee of the Gentiles. He was exhausted, his sandals worn out, and his tunic half torn. Notwithstanding, he continued his journey, and walked faster than ever...

Jesus: Somebody must take the place of John... Someone must give hope to the people... Lord, send us our Liberator now!... Where is he, Lord? We can't do anything while we wait for him.... The fruit is already ripe and we must harvest... I am getting impatient... I ought to do something now.... I must follow the example of John...

Jesus walked for several hours through the river valley. On the second day, he reached the heights of Gadara before dusk. From there he could see the Lake of Tiberias.... He was on Galilean land!... Suddenly, it began to rain... The waters from the sky gave back to the earth its freshness and fertility. Jesus felt an immense joy in his heart, as if he were seeing his beloved homeland in the north for the first time. In his mind, Galilee, drenched by the rain, was secretly giving him a welcome that night.

Jesus: Galilee, here I am, back to you, my land!

Land of Zabulun, Land of Naphtali! On the way to the sea, by the other side of the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles! The people who walked in the dark, saw a light, on those who lived in the shadow of death, a great light shone. You made great joy and they delight in seeing you, like those who sing on the day of the harvest. Because you have broken the yoke that bound them and destroyed the tyrant's rod; and to the fire shall be cast the boots he wears with pride and his blood-stained cloak.

For a Liberator is born and endless is the peace he'll bring to us!

Mary Magdalene, as mentioned several times in the gospels, was a prostitute. The name of Mary was very common in Jesus' time. "Magdalene" gives reference to her probable birthplace, "Magdala." Therefore, prostitution was more a reflection of an economic problem than a moral concern, just as often happens in many places today.

In a male chauvinist society, a single woman who is jobless is constrained to sell herself in order to survive. Mary of Magdala was undoubtedly one of these women. She was probably very young then, since prostitution was rampant among girls thirteen or fourteen years of age. The stereotyped picture of a woman of the upper social class, well-attired, smelling of perfume and with some sentimental indiscretion, has no relation whatsoever with the vulgarity of a low class prostitute as was the case of Mary Magdalene.

When he learned about the imprisonment of John the Baptist, Jesus was given a new dimension to the realization of his own vocation. Israel was left orphaned without the prophet announcing her liberation by God. Jesus felt it was his obligation to take over where John had left off. He would take his message of

justice and bring it to his land, to Galilee. He would not baptize like John did nor expect people to seek him; rather, he would mingle with the people and be one with them. From the streets, the barrios and the plazas, he would announce to the people the liberation that God had promised them. From the banks of the Jordan, Jesus started his journey to the north. It was a long stretch by foot, consisting of about three or four stops, passing through the river valley by way of Perea and Decapolis or by taking the mountain route through the region of Samaria.

“The Galilee of the Gentiles” is an epithet given by the prophet Isaiah about seven hundred years before Christ describing the lands in the north. He indicated that the region, the hometown of Jesus which originally belonged to the sons of the old patriarch Jacob, appeared to have been forsaken by God and left to the “Gentiles” (pagans, foreigners). These were the times when the Galileans were made prisoners and were deported. In the midst of suffering, there seemed no future for them. The prophet told them of a light shining amid darkness. When Jesus began to preach the Kingdom of God in Galilean lands after his baptism in the Jordan, Matthew remembered this prophecy of Isaiah and included it in his gospel.

(Mt 4:12-17)

12

TODAY IS A JOYFUL DAY

Mary: Don't think I know everything... That is not true, dear neighbor.... Jesus was a bit bothered when he left; he was teeming with strange ideas.... But don't you ever think it was a matter of the heart... How I would have wanted it!... Ay, this son of mine.... I'm afraid you are wrong, my dear neighbor... I guess these are bad times... Please don't get up. Lie down.... that's it... this hot soup will do you good.... take it while it is hot... My mother used to prepare this concoction... it is very good...

Ever since Jesus left Nazareth to look for the prophet John by the river Jordan, the days seemed very long for Mary. She spent her afternoons in the company of her neighbor, the wife of Naphtali, who was then a bit indisposed.....

Mary: You know, I feel like I have aged seven years these days.... Imagine, I eat all by myself.... at night, there is silence all over this hut... Jesus snores a lot, alright, ...but it is this noise that keeps me company... and lulls me to sleep. Now, I wake up at night and get startled in the dark.... The other night, I heard a noise.... and I asked: “Who is there? Who is there?” ...I even lit a lamp to see who was there..... Oh, my dear neighbor, when our children are away, half of our life seems to have been taken away too..... Wait till I pour these mint leaves in the soup.... This will cure you as if you were cured by the heavens above... What if Jesus stays in the Jordan and leaves me here?... That idea has been here in my heart, pricking me like a needle.... Well, God knows each one of us, and has a purpose for everyone... He knows what road He wants Jesus to take.... All I pray is for God to protect him from all dangers, for my son is so stubborn.... He took after his father, don't you think so, my friend?... Oh, there you are, you have fallen asleep... I shall leave you now... Sleep well...

Mary left Naphtali's wife and walked to her house. Inside, she had a few bites of a piece of black bread because she didn't feel like eating. Then she lay down on a mat. She was so exhausted that day, and soon she fell asleep....

The sun was beginning to peep through the horizon, stripping the sky of the last of the stars that shone. The cool morning breeze greeted the plants on the farm and caused them to sway and dance. It was dawn in Nazareth. Jesus, though exhausted, was elated with what he had seen and heard in the Jordan and in the solitude of the desert. He was now on his way back home.

Jesus: Hey, what are you doing here so early in the morning, Tonin, my boy...?

Tonin: I'm gathering some shells. It rained yesterday, and so many of them came out. Look....

Jesus: You would like the lizards I saw in the desert! They were this big....

Tonin: You've been in the desert?

Jesus: That's right. I came from there.

Tonin: Why did you go there?

Jesus: Nothing. I just searched for something...

Tonin: Did you look for these lizards?

Jesus: Lizards, no, but something else.

Tonin: Did you find what you wanted?

Jesus: Of course. Goodbye, Tonin. Show me those shells later.

Tonin: See you around, Jesus!

Mary, as always, was already up very early in the morning. She was boiling water on the stove for the lentils. She sat on the floor to grind wheat to be made into bread flour.

Jesus: Madame, could you spare some milk to drink for a poor traveller...?

Mary: Why, yes.... but ...who are you?... Oh, Jesus, my son! It's you! You're back!

Jesus: Yes, I'm back, Mother!

Mary: Oh, thank you, Lord, thank you! I have been praying everyday for your well-being. Praise the Lord! I was so worried about you, Jesus!... Why, it took you so long and.... how is John? ...I heard he was taken prisoner. Were you there when this happened?

Jesus: No, I had already gone... Yes, they nabbed him... They finally silenced the prophet.

Mary: Just like I told you, Jesus. Do you think they will kill him?

Jesus: I don't think so. Herod won't dare. He will eventually set him free. In the meantime, someone will have to take his place. John has kindled the fire and we must keep it burning.

Mary: It is now up to God to bring us another prophet.... You must be hungry and thirsty. What do you want to eat?

Jesus: Whatever you have.

Mary: Look, son. When you left, I went to Cana and bought some good wine. I told myself we would have a drink when you get back. Here you are!... Here, take it... and some dates to go with it...

Jesus: Ah..... It smells very good.... Drink with me, Mother... Today is a joyful day.

Mary: I see you are very happy. You have lost weight, but you look good...

Jesus: You are right again.... There is nothing I can hide from you.!... Yes, I won't deny it, I'm happy... but worried about John... He's great, this cousin of ours... Mother, the truth is, God's hand was behind this whole trip...

Mary: You were so nervous. I was thinking about what you said, that you were confused, that you didn't know what to do.... All these, I kept in my heart.... now what, have you found what you wanted?

Jesus: John helped me see things clearly. Do you know something, Mother? I was baptized in the Jordan... It was... It was something great. I have lots of stories to tell you... I also stayed in the desert....

Mary: You were in the desert? But, what did you do there?... Oh, my dear son, that explains why you lost weight... They say that only beetles can stand the heat of the desert sun...

Jesus: Bah, that's not true. I found a place where I meditated a lot... Mother, can you imagine how it would be to tell the poor that God is offering us his Kingdom, to proclaim to the unfortunate ones who weep in our land that they shall all be comforted soon? Can you imagine what it would be to fight for justice, knowing that God is our leader and is side by side with us?

Mary: That would be great, Jesus, very great!... There wouldn't be enough wine in Cana with which to celebrate that day... Your joy is contagious... But, look, son, you must put your two feet on the ground... That day will come, but not for us to see.... It will take a long, long time...

Jesus: John says that the Liberator of Israel is coming soon.

Mary: Yes, and the zealots say so, too, and he will cut the necks of all the Romans. Watch your tongue,

son. There are more soldiers now in Galilee than you can imagine. With the prophet's imprisonment, they are afraid that people may retaliate, so everyone is being watched.

Jesus: Look who is coming... Your close pal, Susana.

Susana: Where is this moreno who just got back from the Jordan?... Hey, young man, I missed you! Your mother and I were scared to death when we learned about John. They say they dragged him out from the river like a wild beast.... Now, what is to become of this country?

Jesus: Take it easy, Susana. You don't have to be that scared.... No one, not even Herod, can silence the prophets. We must continue shouting, with the voice of John.

Susana: See what I told you, Mary. See what has become of him.... a revolutionary... he even challenges King Herod!

Jesus: Easy, Susana, easy. Why don't you try this wine a little, and see how it will make you happy...

Susana: Tell us, Jesus, what happened in the Jordan? Tell us what you saw there...

Jesus: Great things. It's been a long time since the truth has been spoken in Israel, a long, long time during which Israel has not looked up to heaven with much hope.

Susana: And what must come from heaven to make us look up to it? Young man, we must look on earth, for it is this land that Herod and Pilate are lording over. They are going to kill John, the prophet, and if you get involved with these troublemakers, they will kill you too.

Mary: Well, let us forget about it now, Susana... Today is a joyful day. Let us rejoice now and do not dampen this party with....

Susana: Now, now, Mary, don't get me wrong. Remember how you ate your heart out when you learned about John...Not for anything, young man. Why shouldn't we worry?... We remembered your father, Joseph... and how he was beaten, oh God!.... all because of having defended those who had escaped and gone into hiding...

Jesus: My father was a just man who did not run away when the time came. I am proud of him, and so is the Lord.... You know what it would mean, Susana to be announcing to the four corners of Galilee, that he and all those who died for the sake of justice are the very ones paving the way for the Kingdom of God?

Susana: Oh, my son, he who shouts gets killed! Also don't scream too much, Moreno. Don't poke your nose into other people's lives. Get to work and be calm... this is what God wants – peace and tranquility.

Jesus: Or better, this is what some people want, that we continue in our slumber, like Noah inside his tent, leaving us stark naked.

Susana: Don't talk that way, Jesus. Mary, you better advise this young man. He might give you trouble someday, what with having so much politics on his mind. Listen to me, Moreno, get rid of those strange ideas and concentrate peacefully on your hammer and nails. Learn from the example of your father Joseph.

Jesus: Not again. You don't seem to know my father. Do you remember when Boliche and he went to Nain to protest the price of flour? ...Who rose to his feet in the synagogue when this skunk, Ananias, wanted to claim all the lands of Balthazar?

Susana: But that happened a long, long time ago....

Jesus: That's right, but people have not forgotten....

Susana: I didn't say that people have forgotten...

Mary: Well, well, enough of these discussions. You're like cats and dogs.... Hey, where is the jug?...

Jesus: Come on, Susana, take some more wine and all your fears will be gone...

Susana: Say, Mary, is this the wine that you bought from Cana?

Mary: Exactly. They sell it very cheap there, and it is very good.

Jesus: If you wish, I can bring you some more liters of wine when I pass by the place....

Mary: Will you journey to Cana, Jesus?

Jesus: Yes. In a few days, I'd like to go to Capernaum. I will pass by Cana.

Mary: But there's work waiting for you here. I have three pending errands for you. Do you know that the Roman soldier came back and ordered more horseshoes?

Jesus: Do you mean to say that they liked my work?... Well, that means we shall have more dinars to buy

lentils and oil.

Mary: You must do them soon...

Jesus: Sure, I will. Say, I met some friends from Capernaum near the Jordan. These are fishermen from the lake and we got along very well. I would like to see them again.....

Susana: Could Simon be one of them, the one they call Peter?

Jesus: Yes, he is one of them. Do you know him, Susana?

Susana: Why, of course! He is the son of the old Jonas. I am even a distant relative of his mother, may she rest in peace. As a little boy, he was already quarrelsome!

Jesus: This Peter is okay, just like his brother.

Susana: They call him the skinny Andrew....

Jesus: That's right.

Mary: Were there many people by the Jordan, Jesus? Tell us more about it...

Jesus: The place was like an anthill. It was swarming with people. The river was filled with people, men and women who were full of hope, wishing for change in our land. I too, believe that there can be change in this country, but we should make it happen!

Mary: I am happy to see you so contented, Jesus. Don't you think he looks good, Susana?

Susana: I would say that the steam has got into his head, and...

Jesus: Come on, Susana, let's not talk about it. Sit down here for I have so many stories to tell about my trip....

Susana: Wait, Moreno, I'll go run and tell Simeon and old Sarah.... Naphtali too, and the children.

Jesus: Yes, tell everyone to come.

The whole neighborhood gathered in Mary's house to hear the news about the prophet, John... Jesus had lived in Nazareth for about thirty years in the company of his townmates, doing some carpentry, iron works, tilling the land, and everything. For him, the time had come to clear the furrows for the Kingdom of God in Capernaum, along the lake of Galilee. That spring morning, everything seemed new. The grain promised to yield bread, and the trees, fruit. A great hope was awaiting Israel.

One day, Jesus left Nazareth, his hometown, and lived in Capernaum, a city by the lake. During that time, it was a big and significant city. Although Capernaum was not too distant from Nazareth (about 45 kilometers), the decision entailed a gesture of farewell to his mother and his townmates. This moment, which was Jesus' initiation to "public life," is traditionally a topic of reflection for all Christians. Everyone making a decision must say goodbye and give up something. A vocation of service always signifies some form of sacrifice. It is the price of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus shared with his mother his experiences in the Jordan while listening to the Baptizer and being alone in the desert. Mary, like Jesus, was growing in her faith, her understanding of Jesus' vocation, and her acceptance of the mission that God destined for her son. For her, this process meant uncertainties, sufferings, fears, anxieties and insecurities, just as it has for many mothers who share with their sons' commitment to fight for justice at the risk of their own lives.

The gospel hardly mentions Joseph as a "just man" (Mt 1:19). On the basis of this very simple yet profound phrase, it is good to reconstruct Joseph's image that will serve as a model for Christians not only of honesty but also of commitment, courage, dissent, and in other words everything that would mean being a just man. This exemplary life was the best legacy of Joseph to Jesus. He witnessed how his father sided with the needy and participated when necessary. There is no historical nor theological basis for presenting to us an image of Mary's spouse as an old, passive man who was resigned and totally lacking in dynamism.

THE FISHERMEN'S VILLAGE

The great Lake of Galilee was bordered by hills and plains sown by fruit trees and wheat, vineyards and orchards. Along its banks were crammed several fishing villages: Tiberias, the cursed city, where King Herod had his palace; Magdala, known for its women; Bethsaida, which means “the house of fishes,” where we were all born; and Capernaum, the noisiest city, which means “the city of consolation,” where we were all residing and working now, upon orders of my father, Zebedee.

Zebedee: Blazes! Everything has gone well today. James, tell your mom to separate the big salmon for our soup.... It's been a long time since we've had such a good catch. This calls for a celebration!

James: Are you gonna let me try your soup, pop?

Zebedee: Why not? Invite your wife. Tell that rascal Peter to come too. What we catch, we all eat, yes sir!

My father, old Zebedee, learned to row even before he could walk. He had spent all his life fishing in the Lake of Galilee. He knew the depth of the water better than the palm of his hand. Sometimes, I would think that my old man had scales on his skin and fishbones instead of a backbone. He had formed some kind of a cooperative, together with Jonas, the father of Andrew and Peter, and two other fishermen. Zebedee was their head. We shared the boats and the nets. Everyone worked together, and at the end of each day we would divide what we had earned, which was not much.

Zebedee: The time will come and my eyes will witness this, when there will be enough fish soup for everyone, enough work for everyone and true justice for the poor! Come on, let's go home, John. I'm already hungry!

When the sun hid itself behind Mount Carmel, the lake remained still. The seagulls returned to their nests after fluttering over the waters during the day. The ferryboats, with their folded sails, squeezed by each other in the quay of Capernaum, anticipating another day of work the following morning. The stoves began to burn in all of the fishermen's houses, which were jammed along the riverbank....

Zebedee: How is the soup, lady?

Salome: It will soon be done, old man. Relax!

Zebedee: (with sarcasm) Don't forget to put in some spices for flavoring!

Salome: Will you stop pestering me and leave me alone with my cooking....

My mother, Salome, was a short, thin woman. Yet she was strong, like the roots of a tree, and her skin was sun-burned. She was advanced in age, but there wasn't a single white hair on her head, and that was her reason for vanity. She enjoyed her household chores, as well as having a long chat with her neighbors. She did all these with such great speed so as not to miss anything. I am always reminded of those flying fishes leaping about the lake – swift as lightning and clever. We never caught them.

Zebedee: Hey, Andrew, aren't you coming over? Where's your brother, Peter?

Andrew: He'll come later. He wouldn't miss Salome's cooking for anything. Peter is staying with the children, as the wife had to look for herbs for her sick mother. He is coming though....

While my mother was cooking, the smell of the fish permeated the house. Andrew, James and I played dice...

James: There goes number five!... It's your turn, Andrew....

Andrew: Four and two!

James: Your turn, John...

John: I win again! Hey, James, you owe me two turns. And so do you, Andrew.

Andrew: What bad luck! I'm left with nothing, not even a single cent.

John: James, I think you cheat.

James: Who, me? You gotta be kidding. I play clean!

John: You, redhead. You're a cheat.

Andrew: Don't mind him, John. He always does it.

James: Hey, what are you babbling about, toothpick? I'm honest, do you hear?

Zebedee: Hey guys, don't waste your energy fighting among yourselves. Reserve it for the Romans... By the way, it's been sometime that we haven't heard anything from the movement. It's strange. There is much quiet around here.

John: The people are scared ever since they apprehended John the Baptist.

Andrew: The zealots are waiting to see what they're gonna do to him....

James: What they're gonna do to him, what they're gonna do to him... Why don't we see what we can do! If no one does anything, then let's do something without our being told. We can't just be looking at the clouds all the time.

Zebedee: What can you do, young men?

John: Nothing, because the Romans are everywhere. The whole of Galilee is being surrounded.

James: So much the better.... The more birds on the loose, the more they're gonna fall into the trap. Why don't we act now and surprise them?

Andrew: Peter was thinking about it the other day... but....

James: Hey, you, toothpick, will you stop worrying?

Andrew: Don't forget that this is the best time for fishing in the lake. If we make trouble now, then we would have to go into hiding afterwards. Have you forgotten what happened during the feast of the Passover? What about our job?

John: Toothpick is right... We who are starving to death must always think of our stomachs first before anything else.

It was already night when Jesus arrived in Capernaum. He passed through the barrio of the artisans and walked toward the quay. There was the smell of cooked food coming from each house which later on fused with the smell of rotten fish in the streets. That was the noisiest and liveliest moment in Capernaum... After asking where our house was, he finally reached our place....

Jesus: May I come in?....

Zebedee: Certainly, my friend. Who are you?

John: Jesus! What are you doing here?

Jesus: As you can see, I came to visit you....

James: Oh, the moreno from Nazareth!

Jesus: I'm happy to see you again, James... Hello, Andrew!

Zebedee: I see that you know each other very well....

John: Hey, we didn't know what happened to you after you went to the desert. We thought you'd been devoured by the scorpions!

James: When did you find out about John? We gotta do something, Jesus!

Andrew: We were just talkin' 'bout it and....

Zebedee: Dammit! But who is this man? He comes sneaking into my house, and here I am like a fool...

James: Don't act like that, old man. He's a friend whom we met at the Jordan.

Andrew: He's from Nazareth and his name is Jesus.

Zebedee: From Nazareth? Bah.... a good-for-nothing man of that town... a farmer who wants to conquer the sea?

Jesus: Your sons invited me to come. They say I can find a job here in Capernaum. In Nazareth, things are not so easy.

John: Jesus, this is Zebedee, our father. If you can count the hairs in his beard then you will know the ordeals he has been through. Here he is: an old, experienced revolutionary...

Salome: I am the mother of these two rascals!

James: This is our mom, Salome.

Salome: Welcome, young man. You're just in time to try our special fish soup... You must be tired. Come, have a seat.

Peter arrived shortly, rowdier than the rest of the group. He was elated to see Jesus again. He was with his wife Rufina and little Simon, one of his four sons. They wanted to greet the man from Nazareth.... My mother had to add more water to the soup for everyone to have enough....

John: Do you remember that afternoon when toothpick and I were having a chat with you.... Come on, Jesus, tell them the joke about the flea. That's a good one..!

James: This is no time for jokes, John. You look silly. Weren't we talking about doing something....? Why don't we discuss it with Jesus?...

Peter: I was just thinking the same thing. Long live the movement!

Rufina: For heaven's sake, Peter. Don't get yourself into trouble. My mother is dying... Don't give me another problem... You crazy! Holy God!

Peter: But Rufi....

James: How is Nazareth, Jesus? Judas of Iscariot was there recently, and he told us that....

Little Simon: Say, you know that I'm gonna have a baby sister?

James: It seems that everyone in the whole valley is being watched.

Jesus: That's right. And that's because of John. In Cana, I saw a lotta soldiers too.

Little Simon: Say, you know that I'm gonna have a baby sister?

James: Now shut up, you little brat. Don't you see we're discussing something?

Rufina: Little Simon, come over here. Don't be nasty.

Little Simon: But I'm going to have a baby sister!

Jesus: Oh really? And how do you know it's gonna be a baby sister or brother? How'd you guess that?

Little Simon: 'Cause I can foretell everything!

Rufina: Shut up, young man, and come over here...

Jesus: So you can guess everything. Now tell me what this is: What is the only fish that wears a necklace?

Little Simon: The only fish...

John: That's it, a joke!

Zebedee: Quiet, John.... What was it you said?... Have you ever seen a fish wearing a necklace...?

Jesus: Yes, sir, there's one, and it even uses a scarf... and...

Peter: It must be a strange fish... What is it? Tell us.

Jesus: It is the neck. (Transl. note: In Spanish, it is read as pescuezo; pez, to mean fish in Spanish)

Jesus: What about this other one: "Everybody buys it 'cause he needs it for eating, but nobody eats it."

Andrew: He needs it for eating, but nobody eats it...

Jesus: The plate!

Todos: That's right.

John: This is getting to be exciting!

Zebedee: Quiet and listen. Come on, tell us some more.

Jesus: Listen to this: "There's a married couple: the wife leaves and the husband stays."

Salome: That must be you and I, Zebedee...!

Zebedee: Shut your big mouth, idiot... and let me think.... How is that again?a married couple.... the wife goes away and the husband stays behind.... pfff... I give up... What is it?

Jesus: The key, man, the key and the padlock!

All: One more, one more!

Little Simon: Hey, how d'you know so many riddles?

John: This moreno makes up one story after another.... Why don't you tell them a long story, about the camels, remember?... Pssst... silence now, everybody and listen....

Jesus: A man had three camels. One of them went to a well to drink. When he reached the well....

Jesus began to tell us stories.... one after the other. We had finished our soup and everyone felt sleepy but we continued listening to him. What a gift he had for telling stories! Everyone understood him, even grandmother Rufa and the little brat, Mingo... Then when he started to talk about the Kingdom of God, he did so by way of stories and parables... They all listened to him in Capernaum and in Jerusalem. His stories spread fast and we proclaimed his words in the streets and in the plazas, confident that what he started in a village of fishermen was good news for everyone in every nook and corner of the earth.

The Lake of Galilee is called “sea” of Galilee because of its great expanse. The Gospel likewise refers to it as the Lake of Tiberias or of Gennesaret, in relation to the two cities found along its shores. In the Old Testament it is called sea or lake of “Kinneret” (from “kinnor,” which in Hebrew means “harp”). Legend has it that the lake has this shape, and that the gentle sound of its waves reminds us of the sound of a harp. From north to south, the lake measures up to 21 kilometers. Its greatest width is 13 kilometers. Like the Dead Sea, it is situated below sea level (212 meters), with a depth of 48 meters. Its waters taste sweet. All kinds of fish abound in it, of which about 24 different species are known. In Jesus’ time and even at present, fishing is the principal activity in the cities along the banks.

Several cities have been established along the lake. During Jesus’ time, one of the most important cities was Capernaum (“city of consolation” or “city of Nahum”) which was never mentioned in the Old Testament. The city had a customs house since it was a frontier town between Galilee which was governed by Herod, and Iturrea and Trachonitis which belonged to Philip. Likewise, it was located beside the great Roman highway that joined Galilee and Syria (the so-called “via maris”). Because of its strategic importance, it also had a Roman garrison, under the command of a centurion. Here in Capernaum, many stories of the preachings of Jesus in Galilee were developed. It was here where he lived after he left Nazareth. Matthew referred to this as the “city of Jesus” (Mt 9:1).

During the gospel era, Capernaum had an expanse of a few kilometers and a few thousand inhabitants. Aside from fishing, the town was also engaged in the development of agricultural crops like olives, wheat and other grains. The houses were made of black basalt stone with roofs of straw and clay that shielded the residents from heat especially during summer, owing to the great depression by the Sea of Galilee. About four centuries after Christ, Capernaum was destroyed and its ruins were not found until the end of the last century. These ruins – consisting of a few house foundations, the lay-out of the town and streets of the old city – were one of the greatest archeological treasures of the gospel era. The present day Capernaum still preserves a great synagogue built over the old one as well as objects that existed during the period (oil lamps, printing press, stone mills, etc.) Undoubtedly, the most important of all these is the foundation of Peter’s house. The inscriptions found show that since the first century, the early Christians would gather here to celebrate the eucharist. The house was beside the quay and together with other small houses formed part of some kind of a common patio (or yard) for the neighborhood. The plan of these small houses clearly indicates the extreme poverty in which Jesus’ friends lived. It is probable that Peter’s family, Andrew’s family, and Zebedee together with his wife Salome and his two sons James and John lived together in one of these aggrupations of fishing villages in Capernaum.

Oral tradition was common in all peasant culture, such as the gathering of neighbors to listen to one of their townmates tell a story that has been repeated a thousand times; this was the way to transfer knowledge from one generation to another through stories told by a father to his children. The grandparents were the expert narrators.... Jesus, a peasant, was heir to this type of culture. On the other hand, the Orient has always been a fertile cradle of stories with moral themes, fables and parables, etc. To all of these, Jesus would incorporate personal mastery as conversationalist and narrator – and the gospels are proof of this. Practically all his parables sprang from his family and peasant environment. He expressed himself a lot better with imagery than with abstract ideas. It is wrong to believe that in order to do this, he had to “adapt himself” to his less intelligent listeners, so that he would be better understood. In his language, Jesus did not have to lower himself, because like his listeners, he was one of them, and he spoke like them.

The Good News of Jesus began to bloom in the fishermen's barrio of Capernaum, certainly a poor and mass-based territory but whose people were hard-working. It is necessary to preserve these origins of the Gospel because, more often than not, Jesus tended to be identified as an urban rather than a rural dweller with good manners – a condescending person, who was patient towards the rude and hardened people. No. Jesus belonged to the lower class of that small land. He mingled with the filthy children of the place, as well as with women with calloused hands and townmates who laughed and cursed while enjoying a pitcher of wine.

(Mt 4:13)

14

THE FIRST FIVE

All of us fishermen from Capernaum were already up even before the roosters could crow in the morning. One by one, we would leave the house still half asleep. With our nets we would all gather in the small wharf in the city where our fishing boats were moored and where the old men would divide the tasks among us everyday...

Zebedee: What early birds, young men!... Brrr.... It's damn cold!.... Come on, shake a leg, the mountain breeze will be good for fishing..... *Jonas,* my friend, join your own men.... Twins, you and I will go down that bend.... and you, young men, to the fishing boats!... Cheer up, everyone, for this is gonna be a lucky day!....

The rowmen were thrust in the calm waters of the lake as the north wind pushed the boats to sail. And there in the deep was cast a big net that would catch the best fish. Another group with their baskets and ropes remained on the shore in order to trap the small ones, the goldfish and the needlefish.

Jonas: Stretch out the net, you beast!.... Farther... Hold it, Peter! Over there! Over there! We have a school of "dorados" on the left!.... Come on, young men!...

Jesus was with us for one week in Capernaum. He looked for a job during the day; at night he went to the house to have a drink and to tell us stories. Jesus was a good friend. Soon he became close to the family and considered himself one of us... That morning, when he woke up, we were already battling with the wavy waters of the lake.... Jesus crossed the fishing village, passing through the palm trees that surrounded the wharf and walked toward the shore....

Jonas: Andrew, lend Peter a hand!... You too, frog face!... Come on, boys, all together now!.... One, two, three!.... Yaaa!

Men: Yaaa!

Jonas: One more time!

Men: Yaaa!

Jonas: Hurray for the fishermen!

Men: Yaaa!

Jonas: Cheers to the brave men of Tiberias!

Men: Yaaa!

Jonas: Cheers to the strong men of Bethsaida!

Men: Yaaa!

Jonas: Hurray to the real men of Capernaum!

Men: Yaaa!

Jonas: Ya, ya, ya, ya!

Men: Ya, ya, ya, ya!

Peter: Damn this net! Its knots are all rotten! Uff!

Andrew: Hey, Peter, isn't that man Jesus? Look....

Peter: Ah, yes, he is the one.... Finally, the moreno of Nazareth has shown up!... Obviously, these peasants from the inner land are not early birds. Hey, you, guy from Nazareth!.... Just wait for us there; we're comin' ashore!

Jonas: Where are you going, Peter?... Andrew, you dope, don't release the rope!

Andrew: The net is empty, there is nothing in it, not even "dorados" or slimy shells!

Peter: We have a visitor. Come, let's welcome him!

Jonas: To hell with all of you and the visitor! Ever since this fellow came, you do nothing but spend the time chatting! You charlatans!...

Jesus: Well, yes, I slept like a log. Right now, I'm going to see Rufina's "comadre," whose house is about to fall down. If I put up the wall and nail the roof in place, then I'll be earning a few dinars.

Peter: That can wait later. There's always time for work. Let's go look for Zebedee's sons down the bend, then we can roast some fresh "dorados." What do you think?

Jesus: But you have to work, Peter, and....

Peter: Don't worry about that, Jesus. I am sick and tired of casting nets into this cove.

Andrew: This is Jonas, our father. He is the most stubborn man in town.

Peter: One can always catch a school of "dorados" here, but then, he gets tired of casting the net, and so ends up catching nothing at all.

Jesus: I say that must be a difficult job. I've been watching all of you do it....

Andrew: Not really. It's a matter of getting used to it and knowing how to work with the group. As one pulls up the buoy, another tucks in the knots, while another attends to the baskets... like this....

Peter: Toothpick, first we gotta teach him how to swim. Peasants can't even swim, you know!

Jesus: You're right, Peter. Let's put it this way. I'm never at home in the water!

Andrew: Well, do you plan to stay in Capernaum for some more days?

Jesus: I'm not sure... It depends.

Peter: What do you mean?

Jesus: It all depends on you.

Peter: That's no problem with us, right Andrew? You can stay with the Zebedees or with us, for as long as you want. You are welcome any time.

Andrew: And, as you have seen, there's always work for you here....

Jesus: No, it's not because of that. That's not what I'm thinking of right now.

Peter: Then, what is it?

Jesus: Nothing, it's just that.... You see, when I was in the desert, after we parted ways in the Jordan, remember? I had a chance to reflect....

Peter: So...?

Jesus: Listen, Peter. The prophet John is still in prison, and no one is demanding justice. What have we been doing? We talk a lot, that's right, and that's all.

Peter: That was precisely what I was saying yesterday: we talk about a lotta things: many stories, baptism, it's all words... But when the moment of truth comes, we leave the prophet in solitude. Tell me, what is the movement planning to do? Aren't the zealots gonna save him?

Andrew: Machaerus is very much isolated by mountains. It would be very difficult to storm it...

Peter: Difficult or not.... We cannot allow the voice of John to be carried away by the wind... We must act now, and do something.... Good Lord!

Andrew: What is your plan, Jesus?

Jesus: Nothing special, Andrew, but... I don't know.... As I see you cast your nets.... it just occurred to me that.... Hey, why don't we do exactly what you're doing when fishing? I mean, you cast your nets and

together, you pull it. Why don't we do something together?

Peter: Exactly. Less talk but more work. We need stones and not words to smash the heads of the Romans. That's a good idea, Jesus. We do something on our own, let's not wait for orders from the movement. Let's take the law into our own hands!

Jesus: Forget about the stone throwing and the law, Peter. What's important is that we be united, as a group...

Peter: That's a good idea. I like it. One for all, all for one. Together we face all perils, and together we celebrate our victory. Well, then, we form a group, and we attack by surprise.

Andrew: Hold it, Peter. This isn't clear yet. Why are we forming a group, Jesus?

Jesus: Well, to continue the work started by the prophet John, to talk to the people and tell them: "The time of the Lord has come. He will cast his nets by the sea and all of you should be alert. God is not pleased with the state of things. The time has come when the big fish will no longer devour the small fish."

Peter: Very well said. When do we start?

Andrew: Take it easy, Peter. What Jesus has said is fine, but... but we must be very careful. It reeks of conspiracy around here. If we organize something, we gotta take some precautions.

Jesus: Are you afraid, Andrew?

Andrew: I'm not scared, Jesus. But neither do I want to be hunted like a criminal.

Jesus: And you, Peter, are you scared?

Peter: Who, me? Of course not. You do not know me yet, Moreno!

Jesus: Well, I am. While in the desert, I discovered that I was scared.... scared to risk my life, you know what I mean? But God's gonna give us the strength to move on, don't you think so?

Peter: Why, of course! There is no place for cowards in this world. Come, let us talk to James and John. Let us see what these bandits have to say!

Peter, Andrew and Jesus headed for the shore until they reached the bend, where Zebedee's boats were waiting. My brother and I were with our father, mending some old nets.....

Peter: There they are... The one who's half naked is James...

Jesus: Hey, James, yes, you... come over here, and hurry, redhead. We want to talk to you!

Peter: Where is this restless fellow, John?

Jesus: Come over here, John!.... Leave your nets and come here!

John: We'll be right there!

Zebedee: Hold it, young men, you're not leaving!... It is not mealtime yet! Damn these young people! I swear they will go to bed with an empty stomach, this pair of bums!

James: Fellows, today would be the right time to show our friend around. Since he came, all he did was nail and lay bricks. Today, we shall have a little fun. Look, Jesus, Capernaum is known for being a happy city, and that is true. Here, there is always dancing and drinking.... Plenty of women, also. In this village, a certain Mary of Magdala, where she comes from, has got us all hooked up!.... Ayayay!..

Andrew: Hey, redhead, forget about that for the meantime, as we have something more serious to talk about. Jesus has a plan. We were planning to organize a group independent of the movement...

The five of us walked toward the wharf as we discussed about the group and the plan of action we would take. At the wharf, we gathered wood, built a fire and cooked some fresh "dorados"....

James: I guess we need some weapons.

Jesus: What are the weapons for, James?

James: To kill the Romans with. You always say that the big fish devour the small fish, and this must be stopped. Then let's get rid of them!

Jesus: Hold it, James. You yourselves have said that a good fisherman does not make a lot of noise so as not to shoo away the fish. What has to be done at this moment is to begin gathering the small fishes, to make them strong, and not allow themselves be devoured by the big fish. What do you think? God also

began that way, when He told Moses to organize the dispersed Jews, so that together, they could defy the Pharaoh and flee from his anger.

Peter: Well said, Jesus. I believe many will unite, if we know how to cast our nets well.

Andrew: We can inform Philip, the vendor.

John: And Nathanael, too, from Cana.

Jesus: So, what now? Have we decided to do something? What do you think, James?

James: Well, then. I'm joining the group. We will see where we should begin. Let's work hand in hand.

Jesus: Do you agree, John, the troublemaker?

John: Sure, you can count on me.

Jesus: What do you say, Andrew, you toothpick?

Andrew: As I have said before... yes,but with open eyes. We must all work together with this.

Jesus: What does Peter, the stone-thrower say?

Peter: Are you asking me, Jesus? Three times will I say yes, yes, and yes! Give me that hand! And now, your turn, Moreno. What do you say? Are you joining the group?

Jesus: Yes, I also put my hand on this ground and there is no turning back for me. This is the time for us to work as one.

And so it was, that in the wharf of Capernaum, with everyone squatting by the bonfire waiting for the "dorados" to cook, we formed our group. We were only five.

Fishing was the main livelihood in all the cities and small villages surrounding the Lake of Tiberias. During those times, fishing belonged to the lower social class with hardly a culture of their own, who were not conscientious of their religious duties and were said to have fallen short of the social norms of "good education," so to speak. Together with the peasants and other poor, they formed part of the so-called "amhaares" (primitively known as "people of the land," "countrymen"; later known as "sinners," "lawbreakers"). The fishermen by the lakeside either worked for a patron who got the lion's share of the earnings, or constituted an independent group which, with the help of family members, formed small cooperatives that would help ease their enormous financial difficulties.

What is left of these small wharves of Jesus' time is still preserved in various points on the lake. Tabgha, for example, is about 30 kilometers from Capernaum, whose steps are about two thousand years old. The wharf of Capernaum is located in the reconstructed portion.

Jesus recruited his first disciples from among the fishermen who were his friends. With them he formed a group, a community, and gradually discovered his vocation, his mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God in a world where many changes were needed. The first five disciples and later on his twelve staunch followers became, in effect, the first ecclesial community.

At the start of any human endeavor, there is much groping, much immaturity as one continues with the search. Plans are never defined to perfection, neither are the objectives nor consequences clearly seen. Thus the risk and the trust that is placed in the Lord for the success of the undertaking. The same was true of Jesus and his group. The leadership of Jesus within the group was not imposed nor established right at the beginning. Rather, it was something that would gradually develop and be nurtured. Slowly, the first fishermen of Capernaum saw in Jesus a great companion, a great friend, a natural leader with a generous character and strong will, and finally a shepherd who would tend his flock and lead them as the liberator they were waiting for.

The task that Jesus and his friends are to face, which is to catch people, is communal and demanding. The Kingdom of God requires collective endeavor. As in fishing, it takes much of one's time and patience, a keen sense of observation, strategy and astuteness. Jesus likewise tells his friends that God, who is a fisher of people, will cast the nets in order to catch human beings. This is a scene that is found in the parable of the fishing net (Mt 13:47-50) which refers to God's judgment of the world. The good fish will be separated from the worthless ones (which at that time were understood to be the "bad fish" because they

lacked scales and fins, as in the case of conger eels, and therefore not fit for human consumption). Jesus tells his first disciples that the time for God's judgment has come. The symbol of the good fish and the bad fish is substituted by the big and the small fish.

(Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20; Lk 5:1-11)

15

THE JUNK DEALER

On the third day of the week, Capernaum Square was very colorful and raucous. It was market day. People from the neighboring towns came to trade their wares, like fruit, textiles, honey-flavored cakes....

Philip: Combs, rings, chokers for sale here! Necklaces and lozenges!!!... Wedding rings, earrings for married women, bracelets for widows!!!!.... Amulets!... Shoes, slippers, slippers, shoes! Buy now, 'cuz I'll be gone in a minute!....

Our friend Philip would always go to the market of Capernaum with his wares. He wore an old and worn-out yellow striped turban on his head and could be seen pushing a dilapidated cart full of utensils.... With the shrill sound of his horn, Philip was the noisiest man in the square. The women of Capernaum were his good clients. Although he always cheated them on prices, he managed to sell them new pieces of junk every week. He was always surrounded by women, haggling and rummaging through his wares...

Philip: Here, take a look at this mirror, Mam! You look a lot prettier here! No more than five cents! Small mirrors, big mirrors! I am willing to trade in one new mirror for two old ones...! Mary, Mary, I brought you some rouge. Here, young lady, take it! Okay, you may pay me next week! Hey, hey, give that back to me. Don't touch it, it's delicate! Herbs, I also have good herbs! ...a hot concoction of these herbs straight from the Orient!

Salome: Hey, Philip!

Philip: Yes, Mam Salome! What's up? Do you want a comb or some perfume? Come, take a sniff of this, it was brought from Arabia...

Salome: Spare me, please. I'm too old for that. Look, you can come to the house, if you care to have some hot soup.

Philip: Blazes, you never disappoint me, Mam Salome!... As a matter of fact, I am hungry!

Salome: Of course, you devil! After all this shouting and screaming, who wouldn't end up as famished as you are!

Philip: Why don't you take these needles with you, in exchange for the soup!

Salome: Young man, I'm doing this because I love to. You don't have to give me anything in return. I'm gonna tell you when I need something from you... So, this Mary Magdalene bought some rouge from you! What a girl!

Philip: Mam, I treat my customers equally. I must be of service to everyone....

Salome: Her presence in the village has caused quite a stir among the men. What with those swaggering hips!... and... what a scent! May a strong wind snatch her away from here!

Philip: The soup is really very good, Mam! Say, where are John and James?

Salome: Well, where else do you expect them to be? Sweating it out to earn a living... There's no market day for fishermen like them. Each day is just like any other for them: to be with their boats, sails, and nets... day in and day out...

Philip: So there's nothing new around here, Mam Salome?

Salome: Well, there's something new, alright. Do you know that somebody from Nazareth is in town? My children met him in the Jordan.... Weren't you there, too, to see the prophet, John? Probably you know

him....

Philip: From Nazareth?That must be Jesus, the Moreno, and the storyteller.

Salome: Exactly. He can tell very funny stories. For many nights, he fascinated everyone with his stories... He seems like a nice man. He's staying with us here.

Philip: Where's he now?

Salome: Right now, he must be repairing the roof of the house of Rufina's neighbor.

Philip: Good heavens! I would like to greet him. I'm going there now!

Salome: Finish your soup first. Here, take some olives and a piece of bread....

Philip: You are right, Mam Salome. I should fill up my stomach first. My friends can wait. Besides, I'm sure you'll like these necklaces that I'll show you. They are made of red stones. I'm giving them at a cheaper price!

Philip: Hey, Jesus!... Jesus!

Jesus: Oh, it's you, Philip!

Philip: Jesus, Moreno, how happy I am to see you!

Jesus: I've long wanted to see you, big head. I was told that you were coming to Capernaum today.

Philip: Today is market day, and I came to sell my wares, as always.

Jesus: Where did you leave your cart?

Philip: In Salome's house. She told me you were here. I haven't seen Zebedee's sons yet, neither have I seen Andrew and Peter.... Well, what are you doing here?

Jesus: As you can see, I'm doing some house repairs, so I earn a few dinars. Look how rotten these pieces of wood have become. They can fall off anytime.

Philip: Salome said that you were going to stay. Why? Are you bored in Nazareth? No, don't say it. I understand. Life is so quiet there. I will never go there to sell my wares. No one would ever buy them.

Jesus: There is little money there, you know.

Philip: So you have come to join us here. Welcome to Capernaum, Jesus! How happy I am. That means we shall be seeing each other more often. I come here every week...

Jesus: The truth is, I didn't come here because I was bored in Nazareth. I like it there, really. I like it here too..., but... I came because....

Philip: Because you fell in love with a girl from Capernaum! That's okay, I understand. You know, time is passing, and as one gets old, one thinks of having one's own home, a wife and children... Man, am I so happy! Really, I am...!

Jesus: No, Philip, it is not because of that. Now, you listen to what I'm gonna tell you.

Philip: Well, tell me, what is it?

Jesus: Yesterday, I had a good discussion with the sons of Zebedee, together with Andrew and Peter. You see, we'd like to do something. They have silenced John, the prophet, but we still have our tongues. We can continue talking to the people, like he used to do, proclaiming the Kingdom of God... To do this, we must all be united....

Philip: Hey, what are you talkin' about? John was capable of doin' it, what with his long hair and thunderous voice.... but, we, we cannot do it.... I think you've all gone crazy!

Jesus: No, Philip. We're not crazy, and we must do something. We must not wait for other people to do it. In a short time, there will be many of us. God is on our side.

Philip: Well, I'm happy about that. If you have come to introduce some changes, then, I'm happy to hear that, and I wish you good luck.

Jesus: The thing is, we're all counting on you....

Philip: What? You're counting on me? Me?....

Jesus: That's right. What's so strange about that?

Philip: But I'm no good at this, Jesus. The only thing I know is my trade. Of course, I'd like this country to have justice... But if I myself cannot move forward, how can I make others do the same...?

Jesus: We can do something, Philip, you will see....

Philip: I'm a stupid man, Jesus. I don't know anything.

John, the Baptizer had studied the Holy Scriptures and he knew what he was saying. But, how can we do the same? Well, I leave it to the rest. I don't interfere in whatever they say... You see, I don't read or write. I used to listen to the Scriptures in the synagogue when I was a little boy, but I was so bored and I didn't learn anything. I'm a good for nothing in this regard. Just leave me alone with the horn and my cart...

Jesus: But we are all the same bunch of ignorant men, Philip. Who is Peter, anyway, and James? And who am I?... I remember a psalm that says: "God makes great things with the most humble and with the little children."

Philip: Then you are better than I, because you remember something of the Scripture... Tell me, what do you mean to tell me by those words?

Jesus: That in the eyes of God, the people who are most worthy are the insignificant ones, like us, like you. We need you in our group, Philip.

Philip: Well, that's so nice to hear... but, please, leave me alone with my trade! I don't want any hassle! I tell you, I'm a good for nothing.

Jesus: What about Moses? Didn't he form our land with a bunch of filthy slaves who didn't even have a piece of land they could call their own?

Philip: Well, yes, that's true. Even if they had, I would say that...

Jesus: They were hopeful and they wanted to fight. That's all, Philip, and that's what we have now: hope and the will to fight.

Philip: You're right there.... but you haven't convinced me yet! I have such a big stubborn head!

Jesus: Who was King David, Philip? A shepherd, a poor guy. And who was Jeremiah, the prophet? A boy who could not even speak. What about the prophet Amos? A peasant tilling his land when he was called by God... God chooses the weak, the poor, so that the wise would not become proud... Listen, you stubborn one... we want you to be in our group. We are all a bunch of shabby and ignorant men, that is true, but together, we can accomplish something!

Philip: But, if I get involved in this, then, what will happen to my business? How will I go to the Jordan and baptize people in the river? What about my cart?

Jesus: We don't have to go that far, man. The people went to the Jordan to be baptized, in order to prepare the way for the Liberator of Israel. Now, we must do something else, I don't know what...

Philip: The only thing I can do is go from town to town advertising my merchandise... That's all...

Jesus: Then we can go from town to town proclaiming what the Lord has in store for us... Right, that's a very good idea of yours.

Philip: Man, in that case, then, take me in the group... I might even be able to advertise my wares... As we proclaim God's plans to the people... I might as well take advantage and sell some necklaces! Now you have convinced me, Moreno!

Jesus: I'm gonna leave this work for a while so that we can look for our other companions....

Philip: Would you know where they are now?

Jesus: They must be by the wharf. Come on, Philip, follow me...

In a short while, on the wharf...

Peter: So you're in this, too, Philip?

Philip: Jesus has sweet talked me into it, and I've taken the bait.

John: He must've spoken a lot to be able to fill up your enormous head with sweet words!

James: Listen very well, Philip. We're involved in a very serious matter. We must do this on our own, and we can't count on the help of the zealots, get me?... We have to be brave, do you hear me?

Philip: I will do the best I can, James. Don't scare me now. I just told Jesus that I enjoy going from town to town, and with my horn and cart, I can take the opportunity to....

James: What has your horn got to do with our plans?

John: It's alright, James. Philip's a little stupid, you know.

Philip: Oh, yeah? So I'm stupid, huh? I dare you say that again, come on.....

Peter: That's enough, Philip. You wanna join us or not?

Philip: I've already committed myself, Peter, and I am not leaving. If you kick me out, I'll give you each a nice punch.

Philip, who came from Bethsaida, of Galilee, joined our group. But then, we did not know where to begin, nor what to do. We were only six. We had only hope and the will to fight.

There is little information in the Gospel about Philip, the apostle. He was from Bethsaida, a village situated in the northern part of the lake, by the eastern shore of the Jordan, which was not part, politically speaking, of Galilee. "Bethsaida" means "house of fish." The brothers Andrew and Peter were born there too. According to the story, Philip was a hawker, an ambulant vendor of junk. This was a common occupation during the period and was classified as "despicable," together with several other popular occupations, as they were degrading to those who engaged in them. One of the reasons why being a hawker was humiliating or degrading was his association with women, on account of the nature of his work. As such, he was always suspected of committing immoral acts. Those whose manner of earning a living was considered as such were not given public positions.

The Gospel shows again and again that not even the laws of the land, its norms, traditions and the deeply-rooted customs of the people could stop Jesus, from excluding anyone; like God, who does not look at appearances (1 S 16:7). God reveals Himself once again in Jesus as the God who chooses the humble in order to shame the arrogant – who are actually nothing – in order to undermine the values of presumptuous people (1 Cor 1:26-29). God's chosen one, his son, Jesus of Nazareth, is a poor and an uncultured peasant. Those whom Jesus has chosen are the poor, of the lower social class, the "anawim" of Israel. The Church of Jesus is called to be a community of the poor, a place for freedom and unity where people do not worship money nor give importance to social titles or positions.

As Jesus reminded Philip, Israel was formed as a people, out of a small group of starving slaves, beaten down by hard work, who entrusted their hope in God and in Moses. When the poor awaken and organize themselves, when they begin to act without being humbled by their limitations, draw support from God and are strengthened by their unity, God places Himself in their midst. In the history of people's liberation, the Lord is an ally of the humble and stands up for them, because it is through action, commitment and hope of the people that the Lord transforms history.
(Jn 1:43-44)

16

BENEATH THE FIG TREE

During those days we asked Philip, the junk dealer, to speak with Nathanael, from Cana of Galilee, to persuade him to join our group. Without being told twice, Philip then headed for the road that passed through the valley of Esdraelon...

He arrived in Cana of Galilee about noon. The town smelled of wine and quince jelly. He pushed his cart of utensils toward the small shop of wool where Nathanael was working... but it was empty. There, in the yard, under the shade of a fig tree, he found Nathanael sleeping. He tiptoed toward his friend...

Philip: Nathanael.... Nat.... Psst.... Wake up, Nat, ...Nathanael!!

Nathanael: What's the matter?! Who are you?!.... Hell, it's you, Philip! What are you doin' here? How'd you get in?

Philip: How else would I get in? Through the door. I wanted to surprise you but I found you snoring like a pig.

Nathanael: What a fool you are, Philip! You just ruined everything, at the most inopportune time.

Philip: But... I...

Nathanael: I can never forgive you for this, do you hear me? Never. Now, beat it, and don't you come back here, ever!

Philip: Hey, what's wrong with you? Is business that bad? Come on, cheer up. Has a relative died? My condolences then. Were you beaten by your wife? Then beat her with a club, so she'll learn to respect you. Blazes, you should not allow her to...

Nathanael: Shut up, will you, Philip!... Uf, You're a bore, really, you are! No one could be worse!

Philip: Were you dreaming, Nat? When you were sleeping beneath the fig tree, I saw you smiling like an angel; like you had been gifted with the white horse of Solomon.

Nathanael: It was better than that, Philip... It was something more....

Philip: C'mon, Nathanael, go on! Tell me about this dream. I'm your friend, am I not?

Nathanael: I dreamt I was playing dice and won a fortune. Can you imagine that, Philip?

Philip: Oh, that's fine. You deserve it, my friend. After all, you never cheat. You lose every time.

Nathanael: In my dream I had plenty of money, a sack full of silver. Then I went to my wife and told her: "Old lady, we're moving to Jerusalem. We're rich, do you hear? We're rich! From now on, we won't be walking barefooted, nor will we be eating any more onions!" So, we went to Jerusalem, where I put up a big shop. My business prospered. I had mountains and mountains of wool, all kinds of leather, weeding hoes, weaving instruments, shuttles, a dozen looms, several textiles, multicolored tapestries... I had everything, Philip! I owned everything! Business kept on booming. Money flowed like honey. Every Saturday, my wife and I would walk slowly, hand in hand, to the Temple, imagine that! I was wearing a white, linen tunic, while she had several necklaces on, and a pair of gold bracelets... Everyone was green with envy and said: "There goes that very wealthy Nathanael!" And then..... then....!

Philip: Then what?

Nathanael: Then you came, you idiot. And everything was gone.

Philip: But that was marvellous. Your story just gave me goose pimples.... I congratulate you, my friend. Good fortune has just come into your house.

Nathanael: No, that was only a dream. As you can see, poor people like us can only dream.

Philip: On the contrary. It is for this reason that I come. To bring you good news.

Nathanael: C'mon, tell me soon, and let's see if it can make up for the damage you've done.

Philip: He has come.

Nathanael: Who?

Philip: Shsss! Don't shout... Nat, we have found the man!

Nathanael: Hey, what're you talkin' about?

Philip: We found the man we need, so that your dream will become a reality. You'll not only have a shop of wool, but a marble palace, bigger than that of Caiphaz!... You will be the wealthiest businessman in the city! So shall I, Nat. Do you see this cart of combs and amulets? Ha...ha..! Soon it's gonna be full of pearls, do you hear? A lot more than the pearl necklaces that the queen of Sheba wore! I'm gonna be selling the finest pearls, as big as my fist....!

Nathanael: Are you crazy, Philip?

Philip: No, I'm not, but with this man I'm telling you about, things are going to change. He's a smart guy, the type we have been waiting for all along.

Nathanael: We're waiting for the Messiah, Philip. You're not talking of the Messiah, are you?

Philip: Well, I don't know if he's the Messiah, or another baptizer like John, or whatever. I don't care who he is, but he has good ideas. He knows the Scripture to the letter; the psalms, like the palm of his hand. He speaks like Moses and the other prophets. I tell you, with him around, we're gonna move!

Nathanael: Once and for all, Philip, tell me, whom are you talking about?

Philip: I'm not going to tell you. Find out for yourself.

Nathanael: Are you makin' a fool out of me?

Philip: I'm serious, Nat. C'mon, guess who this guy is.

Nathanael: Okay, at least you should tell me where he comes from.... from Jerusalem, maybe.

Philip: You're wrong. He's not from Jerusalem.

Nathanael: He must be from.... I don't know.... from Caesaria?

Philip: Far from it. You've gone very far. Go up north.

Nathanael: Is he from here, from Galilee?

Philip: Yes, sir, he's from Galilee, but which part of Galilee? A comb for you, for the right answer.

Nathanael: What do I need a comb for, Philip?

Philip: Come on, guess. Where is he from?

Nathanael: From Tiberias.

Philip: No.

Nathanael: From Sepphoris.

Philip: No.

Nathanael: From Bethsaida.

Philip: I can't believe this, Nathanael. He's almost a neighbor of yours, and yet, you can't guess. He is a Nazarene!

Nathanael: From Nazareth?

Philip: Exactly.

Nathanael: Come on, Philip. Go, kid somebody else, will you? You're saying he comes from Nazareth! And since when have you seen any noteworthy person come from Nazareth? Only charlatans and bandits come from that good-for-nothing little town.

Philip: I tell you, this is the man we need.

Nathanael: But who is he?

Philip: Jesus! Remember?... He's Jesus, the son of Joseph, the Moreno, who was with us in the Jordan, who told us a lot of jokes!

Nathanael: Now, this is the height of your foolishness. Are you saying that he's to be our liberator? Only your big empty head could conceive of such a thing.

Philip: That's alright. Say whatever you want, but tomorrow you'll come with me.

Nathanael: Go with you? Where to?

Philip: To Capernaum. The man is there. We're forming a group, Nat, and you've got to join us.

Nathanael: No, no, I'm not joining, leave me alone, will you? I developed a lot of corns on my feet after that trip to the Jordan, and I'm not moving from here.

Philip: You'll come with me to see Jesus.

Nathanael: I tell you to leave me alone with my wife. Besides, I've got a lot of work to do....

Philip, as always, ended up winning and convincing Nathanael. Very early the next day, the two headed for the road to Capernaum. Nathanael helped Philip push the dilapidated cart full of kitchenware.

Philip: Uff...! Well, here we are... We can now see the palm trees of Capernaum. When we pass by Matthew's table, don't forget to spit on this filthy tax collector.

Nathanael: Damn, how did I get into this mess..? Philip, you, always get me into trouble....

Philip: Oh, c'mon. Let's go to Zebedee's house. I'm sure we'll find the Nazarene there.

Jesus: Hey, Nathanael! It's been a long time since we journeyed to the Jordan!

Nathanael: I'm happy to see you again, Jesus... How was everything with you after our last night in Betabara?

Jesus: Okay. And how was it with you? How's your shop?

Nathanael: So-so. One has to work hard in order to live.

Philip: I'm glad you came. We need you here, Nathanael.

Nathanael: How's that?

Jesus: We need you.

Nathanael: You need me?

Jesus: Yes. Didn't Philip tell you?

Nathanael: Well, I... I don't get this.

Jesus: We're forming a group... and we're counting on you. We need people like you, who don't care about money nor comfort, who are willing to forego everything for the cause.

Nathanael: Cause? What cause?

Jesus: For the cause of justice that John the prophet was talking about.

Nathanael: Er...I... But who ever told you I was any good for this?

Jesus: I can see it in your eyes, Nathanael. You are a good Israelite, and I bet, if you won a fortune by playing dice, you would share it with those who are more in need than you. If you owned a big wool store in Jerusalem, you'd help everyone, so that no one would walk naked in Israel. Am I right, Nathanael? You wouldn't allow your wife to go around wearing gold bracelets while there was great misery in the country....

Nathanael: Yes, yes, of course.... well, I don't know...

Jesus: Don't you every dream of becoming rich, Nathanael?

Philip: Come on, Nat, don't deny it. Remember when you were under the fig tree?

Nathanael: Shut up, Philip. You have no right to meddle in this.

Philip: Okay, okay, but....

Jesus: I'm sure you wanna be rich, so that you can share your wealth with the less fortunate ones. For how can one be happy when others are hungry and suffering?

Philip: Exactly. This cannot go on. God has to correct this situation.

Jesus: Everyone must get involved in this, Philip. We're God's hands, I mean, God is counting on us, don't you think so, Nathanael?

Nathanael: What for?

Jesus: So that things will change. So that you and I, the poor of this world can take a breather, that everyone will have enough, no one will ever be wanting. There will be equality in the Kingdom of God.

Philip: I told you, Nat. Those who are on top will go down, and those who are down will go up. That's how we'll progress.

Jesus: So, will you join our group now, Nathanael?

Nathanael: Let me think about it, some more... The truth is, I really cannot do much, but...

Jesus: We'll witness great things, Nathanael. I'm sure the Lord will not fail us.

Philip: Hey, Nat, cheer up. Didn't you say you wanted to win in the lottery? Well, bet on a number! Didn't you hear what he said? That God never fails!

Jesus: Yes, we'll see God's promise being fulfilled on this earth, and the dream of the poor will become a reality.

With Nathanael of Cana, Galilee, we became seven in the group.

Cana of Galilee was a small village, 6 kms. from Nazareth. There was a certain rivalry between the two places. Cana, at present, is a small but completely Arab city. There is one church which reminds us of the first miracle made by Jesus, when he changed water into wine. Another small church nearby is dedicated to the memory of the apostle, Nathanael, who was born in Cana, and who was referred to in other traditions, as Bartholomew.

Accounts tell us of Nathanael as a tanner of leather and a weaver. According to the government lists, these occupations were despicable, a social stigma, as calculated by those who considered themselves "pure" and involved in superior work. The job of a tanner was even more contemptible, because of the stink originating from the leather being cured. It was so repugnant; that it gave wives the right to divorce their husbands. The job of a weaver (in Galilee one worked more with linen or flax; in Judea, it was wool) was also despicable because it was considered an exclusively woman's occupation. In Jerusalem, for example, the weavers' barrio was completely marginal, being situated alongside the public garbage dump. Like many poor workers, Nathanael was smitten with ambition to make much money and attain social prestige. At first, he understood that the kingdom Jesus was telling him about was this, a form of personal upliftment, an individual liberation from his misery. Jesus disconcerted him: Liberation was for the whole

community. It was needed in order to be shared. The Good News that the poor would cease being poor demanded a concerted effort toward a solitary struggle.

Jesus' disciples underwent a process of growth, daily, in their understanding of the meaning of the Kingdom of God. This was realized in their contact with their countrymen, their practice of sharing money, plans and risks, and through the inspiring words of Jesus. There is no Christian community that is mature in its beginnings, whose members are spared ambition, egoism and failures. The heedful contact with reality, the reflection of the group on decisions, the specific work for each day, and the search for enlightenment in the evangelical word contribute to the growth of the Christian community.

The account of Nathanael's vocation in the Gospel of John is replete with theological symbols: the dream (with reference to the dream about Jacob's ladder, Gen 28:10-17), being under the fig tree (in relation to the prophecy of Hosea where the people's fidelity is symbolized, Hos 9:10), Jesus' prophetic look on Nathanael (a picture of God, choosing the remaining faithful of Israel for the Messianic community, Zep 3:12-13). Having in mind such symbolism, the evangelical episode should not be taken as a proof of the prophetic power of Jesus over the hidden thoughts of people. It is enough that we see in him an intuitive man, who perceives what is in the hearts of his friends, and who is capable of inspiring them with an ideal, which are the typical qualities of a popular leader.

(Jn 1:45-51)

17

THE BRIDE AND THE GROOM OF CANA

Three days after, there was a wedding at Cana of Galilee, the hometown of Nathanael. His neighbor, Sirim the woodcutter, was getting married to Lydia, a poor lass from a nearby village. Mary, Jesus' mother, was invited to the feast. We were also all invited....

Philip: Here comes the bride!

All: Here comes the bride! Here she comes!

The most significant moment of the celebration was the arrival of the bride. Her face was covered with a blue veil and on her head was a crown of orange blossoms. The groom went to welcome her and everyone proceeded to the garden of the house lighted by several crackling oil lamps...

Jesus: Mother, I didn't expect so many people would come to the party....

Mary: You're right. Sirim's parents have always been very poor, but generous. If they have two pieces of bread, they'd give you the other piece. See, we don't know them that much, and yet, they've invited us.

In Cana, Galilee, we met Mary, Jesus' mother. She was a peasant, short, with burned skin, and black hair. She was about forty-five years old. Her hands were big and calloused, due to hard work. She wasn't a pretty woman, but cheerful and charming. She had this Galilean accent when she spoke and when she smiled, she looked very much like Jesus....

Jesus: Well, mother, we're here to enjoy!... That's what parties are for! So have fun!

Peter: The fried dishes are ready! Let's go gang!

John: Hold it, Peter. Wait until they serve you.

Peter: But I'm hungry, John...

John: Now you've got to really stuff yourself, because when dancing time comes...

Peter: It's been a long time since I attended a wedding. Oh, this is great! Dance, food and wine! What more could you ask for?

For the wedding feast of Lydia and Sirim, his parents made great effort. They roasted some young goats and chickens and bought several types of fruit and olives. They also bought wine from Cana, which was famous in the whole of Galilee, because it went to one's head so quickly...

Jesus: A toast for the bride and groom!

Philip: May they live for many, many years!

Mary: For the bride!

A Woman: That she may give Sirim more sons than what Leah gave Jacob!

Peter: For the groom!

John: That, from his family, the Messiah may be born, to crush the Romans!

After several toasts of wine that overflowed throughout the feast, the dance followed in the small garden of the house. The men formed one circle, and the women, another. Everyone forgot all the cares besetting us. The wine helped uplift everyone's spirits, drinking and dancing all our woes away.

John: Come on, Philip, it's your turn!

Philip: To the newly weds of Cana / I must tell you / this feast is so great. I don't want to leave you behind!

Peter: Your turn, Jesus!

Philip: To the center!

Jesus: How radiant is the bride / and the groom so dignified / how delicious is the wine / that is served to everyone!

All: Good!! Very good!!

A Woman: What a beautiful wedding, la, la, la / long live the groom, la, la, la / long live the bride, la, la, la / may they live happily, la, la, la, / if all weddings lasted for a lifetime, la, la, la / I wouldn't get so weary of life, la, la, la,!

Another Woman: Hey, Mary, we haven't danced like this for a long time...! Have we?

Mary: Ufff!.... I can't anymore! I've got to stop!

Mary stopped dancing and headed for the kitchen, where Sirim's mother was preparing the honey-flavored tarts...

Mary: How are the tarts coming, Joanna? We can smell the aroma from outside..!

Joanna: Uff, I never thought marrying off a son would mean so much work. You will see what I mean, when your turn comes...

Mary: Oh, that will be the day...! And when it comes, I will be dancing with more gusto than you can imagine..!

Joanna: Oh, nothing of the sort. You will have to stay in the kitchen, like I'm doing now...

Mary: Say, can I give you a hand?

Joanna: Samuel has gone to get more wine. You may help him fill up the pitchers.... The party is getting to be more and more enjoyable, isn't it, Mary?

Mary: Why, yes! There's so much excitement.

Joanna: We've done what we could to give them the best for their wedding. And little by little, we shall be able to pay our debts, don't you think so? Oh, here comes Samuel....

Samuel: The guests are drinking a lot, and we only have three fourths of a barrel left. If it goes on like this, in no time we won't even have a drop left.

Joanna: Oh, this can't be. Have you looked into the other barrels?

Samuel: Of course, I have. They're all drained.

Joanna: I'm sure you haven't looked well. There's gotta be more.

Samuel: What a distrustful woman! I told you we only have this much, and not more.

Joanna: What do we do now? Tell me, Mary, what can we do? Oh, God, what an embarrassment! How can I tell the guests that there's no more wine to toast... that they must all leave... Oh, my God, what can I

do?

Samuel: I don't know. I can't buy more wine. We already owe three barrels of wine. They're not going to lend us anymore.

Joanna: It's your fault for having invited the whole barrio! Poor people like us can't afford to hold parties, you know that, old man. See, now we've run out of wine!

Samuel: Hush, woman, for they might hear you outside....

Mary: Hey, Jesus, will you come here for a minute..! Jesus!!!

A Man: Jesus, your mother's calling you at the door.

Jesus: I'll be right back!

Mary: Listen, Jesus, something's happened.

Jesus: Are you feeling bad? Are you tired of dancing? What happened?

Mary: No, son, it's something else.

Jesus: You look so sad, Mother. This is a wedding party.

Mary: Jesus, there's no more wine for the guests.

Jesus: Oh, so... do you want me to buy more wine? The truth is, I haven't got a single cent...

Mary: No, son, it's not that...

Jesus: Then, why are you telling me?

Mary: And to whom should I tell it? Can't you think of something?

Jesus: I don't know, this fast... Are you really sure there's no more wine?

Mary: Go and ask Sirim's mother, who's weeping like she was in mourning.... the party's all over!

Jesus: What's happened, Samuel?

Samuel: Nothing, young man, except that there's no more wine to serve. What can we do! We just have to accept it... and this woman doesn't stop crying.... Damn, you better shut up, you make me all the more nervous!

Mary: Don't shout at her, Samuel. She's as nervous as you are, poor creature!

Jesus: So there is no more wine. Are you sure of this?

Samuel: See for yourself, Jesus. There's only a quarter of a barrel left. What am I to do? I can't make miracles. All the guests drank it, so they can't complain.

Joanna: The party was too beautiful to end this way!

Samuel: There you go again!

Jesus: Have you thought of something, Samuel?

Samuel: Yes, tell the people that this is all over, that they can leave. Now, if they don't want to, then, they must make do with water. I have nothing else to offer. They can drink as much water as they like.

Jesus: I don't even have a copper to offer you, Samuel; I can't help you buy more wine.

Samuel: I know. All those who have come to my house are as poor as I am. There's no one to ask for help. If my guests wish to continue dancing and having fun, then, let them drink water with a little honey for sweetener, if they like. Tell me, Jesus, is there anything I can do?

Jesus: What you said exactly. Come, let's fetch water from the well and fill up some of the barrels. Or we can fill up the large earthen jars that are by the door. There are about five or six of them, if I'm not mistaken.

Joanna: What are you planning to do, old man? Have you two gone crazy, serving water to the guests? Oh, Mary, this is really embarrassing!

Samuel: What do you say, Mary?

Mary: Do as Jesus says. We have no other choice. Explain to the people what's happened.

Joanna: Oh, God, I can't stand this humiliation!

Jesus and Samuel, the groom's father, filled the earthen jars with water from the well. There were several people in the house. The dancing was over. The smell of sweat and wine mixed with the women's perfume and the burned oil inside the lamps. Everyone expected to be served more and more wine....

Mary: Son, what will the people say when they find out about the water in the jugs...

Jesus: The party will go on, Mother. Don't worry.

So the party continued...

John: Blazes, this wine is better than the other one! Look how well they kept it! Let me have another glass!

Peter: This man, Samuel, is different. He does the opposite. He serves us the best wine when we're almost drunk!

Philip: Long live the newly-weds! Long live Sirim and Lydia!

Samuel: Tell me, Jesus, where did you get all this wine? From whom did you buy it?

Jesus: Forget it, Samuel. It doesn't really matter. Don't you see everyone is enjoying the party?

Samuel: Try this a little....

Joanna: Oh, how good it is..! I knew you had something coming, old man!... But why did you have to make me suffer so?.... You old man!...

Mary: Jesus, what's all this about?

Jesus: The party goes on, Mother. God wants this party of the poor to last forever!

The joy in Sirim's house lasted for nights. That wine delighted everyone; it flowed without end. Later we found out that the new wine was the same water from the well in Sirim's house. It was Mary who told us. She also told us how she realized for the first time, that day, that there was something in Jesus, she couldn't easily figure out, but which was as delightful as a wedding feast.

The wedding feasts in Israel lasted for seven days. Wine was an indispensable item, being the most popular drink, and a symbol of love. Red wine was commonly drunk. There was much eating, drinking and dancing during these feasts. A lot of food and sufficient wine had to be prepared in order not to disappoint the guests who looked forward to this week-long celebration, considered the most awaited event of the year. Among the poor communities, wedding feasts entailed an enormous economic effort on the part of the grooms' families. Although these weddings in Cana are usually depicted as celebrations among the wealthy and the elegant, they had to have taken place in an environment of the poor, to which Jesus and his friends belonged. They were occasions for merrymaking, for excitement, typical of Oriental feasts, and were even a bigger hit among the lower class.

Only John gives us an account of the weddings at Cana. The very structure of his gospel, as well as his style, makes it a theological synthesis of Jesus' message in which every historical detail contains a symbolic meaning. Israel's tradition, her poetry, and the prophets' writings portrayed the Messiah's coming in the form of a wedding. In the Messianic feast, wine flowed in abundance (Is 25:6). In Cana, Jesus changed the water into wine: The water represented purification as commanded by the Jewish laws, which dictated that religion, for many, should center on the fulfillment of external norms. All this ends with Jesus: the water is changed into wine, which is a symbol of feasting, of inner freedom, of the eucharist which is sharing. The sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God is not the oppressive law, but a communal life. We must read this account, therefore, not in the context of a miracle, but as an announcement of God's plan. The day of feasting for the poor has come, a celebration without end. There ought to be endless joy, for God will have more and more wine to toast.

Jesus was a cheerful man with an open mind, who sang and danced with his townmates. He was not a mere spectator at their feasts, who would simply bless the occasion with his presence. Rather, he was another participant in these happy gatherings. One does not have to go to the temple nor to a quiet place in order to meet the Lord. God is in the midst of hustle and bustle, in a banquet or in a dance. He even organizes these feasts: Jesus compared once and again the heaven that God prepares for his children to a wedding feast.

Mary's intervention at this moment in Jesus' life has been used, at times, as an argument to boost the theological idea that we need Mary's intercession in obtaining God's favors: Mary would ask them from Jesus and Jesus, from God. Nevertheless, Christian tradition strongly insists that the only mediator between God and people is Jesus, the Master of history, on account of his resurrection (letter to the

Hebrews). Mary's presence in the wedding at Cana and her intercession before Jesus, on one hand is a symbol: The faithful Israel (represented by the mother) acknowledges that "there is no more wine" in the stone containers (which represent the Mosaic law written on stone tablets). This means that the Law has lost its value, and is devoid of meaning.

On the other hand, it is a proof that Mary's life was like that of Jesus. She shared her daily chores with her neighbors, as well as the problems of her people and their joys. Like any other woman, she did not stand-out on account of any miraculous sign.

Regarding what we call miracles, John, in his gospel always refers to them, using the Greek word "semeion" ("sign"). This may serve as a clue for us not to reduce a miraculous act to a mere work of wonder that is more or less spectacular. A miracle is always a sign that God liberates or releases human beings: from sickness, from fear, and from the sadness of death... In each of the accounts about the signs made by Jesus, it is necessary to determine what these signs indicate, what form of liberation they are referring to, and of what relevance they can be for us, rather than focus on the significance of whether something extraordinary took place or not.

(Jn 2:1-11)

18

A MADMAN WANTS TO ENTER

A month passed, and then another. Jesus stayed with us in Capernaum. Every night when work was over, we would gather in Peter's house to have a chat and make plans. Our friendship grew by the day, like the fruit in the fields of Galilee that ripened at the right time. One Saturday we went to the synagogue with Jesus. Bartholomew, the madman was at the door....

Bartholomew: Pray to God! Pray to God!... Look at theeem!... Look at theeem!... Glori, gori, gori, uuuu! I want to go inside and pray to the Lord! I want to pray to the Lord!..... Gori, gori, gori, uuuuu!.....

Bartholomew was always dirty and smelled like rancid wine. His eyes were yellowish and his voice like that of a squawking crow, as it crossed the sky. He clapped his hands and wept as he begged permission to enter the synagogue. Everybody in Capernaum made fun of him....

Bartholomew: Let me in!.... Gori, gori, gori, uuuu!

Peter: Here comes Bartholomew again, the one we saw at the market the other day.

Jesus: Oh, yes, I remember...

Peter: A truly cursed man, nobody can stand him when he comes bugging you.

Jesus: What if they let him in, in the synagogue? Would he be pacified?

James: How can you let this crazy man in here? He's dangerous, Jesus. Once, he stripped a lady naked right in the street.

Peter: On that same day, he wanted to drown himself in the lake....

James: I wonder why they ever saved him. They should have let him go right down the bottom of the lake! Men like him are good for nothing!

After a little chat on the patio, we all went inside the synagogue, which was our temple. Every Saturday, we would gather in the Temple to worship the Lord, singing psalms, asking the Lord of the heavens not to abandon His people. The women stayed on one side, behind the wooden grills, while the men stayed at the center. Everyone focused attention on the sacred Book of Law, which was located in a place looking towards Jerusalem, the holy city of God.

Rabbi: "Lord, who will enter your house? Who will reside in your sacred mountain? He who has no stain,

he who is pure, he who has a clean heart, clean hands, he who does not taint his tongue with deceit...”

After the readings and the prayers, one of the men stood to explain the meaning of the Scripture we had just heard. That Saturday, it was Saul’s turn, an old businessman from the village of artisans who never failed to go to the synagogue....

Saul: Brethren, we have heard, very clearly, the message in the psalm, that in order to enter the house of the Lord, one must be pure and clean. Therefore, we must not forget that in the Lord’s house, no slaves nor orphans can enter. Neither are the lepers, nor the lame allowed to enter. Not even the prostitutes nor the adulteresses, nor the women in their period. Only the clean and the pure. The bastard children can’t enter the house of God, not even the abandoned ones, nor the shepherds with their reputation as thieves. Neither can the castrated enter the house of God, nor madmen, nor those possessed by an evil spirit. The psalm says it very clearly: “He who has no stain, only he shall be able to enter the house of the Lord...”

Saul’s homily was quite long and boring. When I looked on my side, I saw that James was already half-asleep, while Peter was snoring. So were the others. Outside, Bartholomew, the madman, continued to scream. At one time, his yelling drowned the nasalized voice of Saul, and we could hardly understand what the preacher was saying....

A Woman: What an impertinent fellow. Will someone please shut him up?

A Man: Jair, will you tell him to keep quiet? We can’t hear a word here!

Saul: As we were saying, the Lord’s house is only for the clean and pure, in body and in spirit, and....

Peter: Let that man in, so he won’t make noise!

James: Keep your mouth shut, Peter!

Rabbi: This man who is screaming outside is impure!... In no way can he be allowed inside. It’s the devil who has sent him to keep us from worshipping God. But the evil spirit will not leave him!

A Woman: Well, with all this yelling, how can we go on praising the Lord, Rabbi?

Peter: If we allow him inside, I think he will be calm!

Jesus: I think so, too. So, why don’t we let him in?

Rabbi: That’s enough. That man is not clean. He’s crazy! Why, he can’t even distinguish his right from his left hand. How can he know God so he can praise Him?

Jesus: But God surely knows him!

Rabbi: The Lord only wants the pure in His midst!

A Man: The Rabbi is right!

Jesus: Well, I believe the Lord wants everyone in His presence. He will take care of cleansing them. He loves all of us...

Peter: Very well said, Jesus! So, let Bartholomew in!

James: You are just wasting your time, Jesus. This crazy man is not worth your effort.... And you, Peter, stay out of this!

Peter: Shut up, James, will you? Jesus is right.....

While we were arguing whether or not to allow Bartholomew inside the synagogue, the door suddenly flew open, as if a hurricane had blown to push it open. Rolling like a ball of yarn, Bartholomew, bathing in sweat and laughing boisterously, gained entrance to the synagogue.

Bartholomew: Ha! ha! Ha!.... I’m here!.... Gori! gori! gori! uuuu!!!

The women started to scream and there was pandemonium in the synagogue...

Bartholomew: I wanna pray! I wanna pray!... Gori! gori! gori! uuuu!!!

His eyes were blazing like burning coals....

A Man: Get him outta here!... Why is everybody not moving? Damn!!

James: Get outta here! Get outta here!

Bartholomew: I wanna pray!.... I wanna...! Gori! gori!

A Woman: This is too much!... We need a rope to tie him up!...

A Man: With or without a rope, we'll get him out of here!... Gimme a hand, fat man. Let's kick this wretched man outta here!

Bartholomew: Gori! gori! gori! uuuu!!!

James: But he's stronger than Samson!

A Woman: Then cut off his hair!

A Man: Tie him up good...! Damn!

James: All you women! Stay away from him! He's dangerous!

A Man: Give him a punch to silence him!

Another Man: Outta my way, you idiots, and leave him to me!

Julian, the blacksmith, whose brown arms were as hard as steel, grabbed Bartholomew by the nape and dragged him towards the door. The madman resisted, kicking with all his might, on all sides...

Another Man: Out you go, intruder! Devil!

Jesus: Hey, let go of that man!... Leave him alone!...

Jesus finally gained his way through the crowd.

Jesus: Can't you see he's a miserable man?.. Leave him alone... and give way... so he can get some air...

Little by little, the crowd began to disperse. Bartholomew was panting like a horse after a race, whimpering, with his face flat on the ground.

Rabbi: Don't touch him! The man is impure. Stay away from him! I told you, no one is to go near him!

Jesus ignored the Rabbi's warning and stayed beside the madman.

Jesus: Why should I keep away from him, Rabbi?

Rabbi: Because he's impure! Such impurity sticks like scabies!

Jesus: He's not impure. He's a poor creature, who's tired of people making fun of him and rejecting him. That's why he's acting this way. But God doesn't want him outside His house.

Jesus leaned towards him....

Jesus: Bartholomew, Bartholomew, do you hear me? What is wrong with you?

The madman opened his eyes and looked at Jesus defiantly....

Bartholomew: Leave me alone!... Leave me alone!

Jesus: Hey, didn't you say you wanted to pray with us?

Bartholomew: I know you! You wanted to kill me!... I know you!...

Jesus: Will you shut up!

Bartholomew: I know you!.. Gori! gori! gori! uuu!! I know you! You are a friend of God! You are a friend of God!

Jesus: And so are you, Bartholomew!

Bartholomew: Uuuu!!! Uuuuu!!!

Jesus: Come on, man, be calm now...

Bartholomew was weeping, and his body was shaking. Jesus bent over to help him stand....

Jesus: Come on, stand up and come with me... Okay, that's it...

When he was on his feet, Bartholomew gave a loud cry.... and fell... unconscious.

A Man: Bartholomew's dead!

Peter: He isn't moving!... Jesus, what's happened?...

A Woman: Poor fellow...

Rabbi: God has punished him for wanting to enter His house!... He was a sinner!.... Impure!... All of you, stay away from him!

Bartholomew, the madman, lay on the ground, pale as a sheet. He was motionless.

Jesus: He's not dead, Peter. Why should he die?...

Peter: Yes, he is, Jesus. Look at his face... He's gone... When he gave out that loud cry, his soul left his body.

A Woman: Did you hear what the Rabbi said? God killed him...

A Man: That's right. God punishes the insolent!

Jesus: God didn't punish him. He's not dead...

Jesus went near him and shook him.

Jesus: C'mon, brother, get up!... You've scared all of us out of our wits, and we have to continue with our praying... Come now, Bartholomew!

The madman got up. He wasn't pale anymore. He looked tired but was smiling, showing a couple of broken and dirty teeth...

Jesus: Come with us inside, Bartholomew. You can stay with us...

The madman took a seat between Peter and me, and prayed and sang with us. From that day on, he would go to the synagogue, to the market and to the plaza. He was more relaxed. Eventually, we understood that that man whom we had ridiculed and ignored all along had a place among us too. That poor man, wretched and dirty as he was, was a brother of ours.

During Jesus' time, like in ancient times, the lack of scientific knowledge, and the ignorance about the human body, led to the practice of attributing certain illnesses to evil spirits. This was particularly, true, of various psychological disturbances, mental diseases, in which the form of behavior of the patient (screamings, uncontrollable movements, attacks...) was more evident.

To use the word "crazy" was equivalent to saying "possessed by the evil spirit," and therefore, it was just like saying "impure" (which meant: dominated or possessed by an "impure spirit," the devil). A majority of the ancient religions were of the belief that in this world there are impure persons, actions or things, as well as the opposite. One and the other influence each other. Such impurity had nothing to do with what is externally filthy. Neither does purity have anything to do with cleanliness. Nor has it anything to do with what is moral, "what is good" or "bad." What is "impure" is related to unknown and dangerous forces, and what is "pure" is full of positive powers. He who is impure cannot go near God. The idea of purity-impurity is basically a "religious" concept. Since ancient times, the religion of Israel assimilated this way of magic thinking. In fact, many of the existing laws then dealt with purity, with specific reference to: a) sex (menstruation and hemorrhagia were considered forms of impurity); b) death (corpse is impure); c) certain diseases (leprosy, madness were likewise impurities); d) some food and animals (the vulture, the owl and the pig, were, among others, impure animals). Most of these laws are preserved in the book of Leviticus. As the people were evolving from a magical religion to one that emphasized personal responsibility, these ideas became obsolete. Nevertheless, some groups observed them to the letter, thus the practice of long cleansing or purification to make themselves acceptable to God. Jesus dismisses these magic practices, and through his words and actions removes the barrier between what is pure and impure in the old religion. The good news is that what is really pure is found only in people's hearts and in just treatment of brothers and sisters.

Jesus' sign took place inside the synagogue of Capernaum. About five hundred years before Christ, when the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of Israel were deported, the Jews started to

build “synagogues,” houses of prayer, where they all gathered to pray and read the Holy Scriptures. In Jesus’ time, although a new temple was built in Jerusalem, a number of synagogues already existed all over the country. There was a small one built in Capernaum, over which, four centuries later, a bigger one was constructed, and whose ruins, with all its great historical value, are preserved up to the present time. All the people gather at the synagogue every Saturday, to pray and to listen to their Rabbi or to a countryman who wished to give a commentary on the texts of the Scripture being read. The synagogue is not exactly the equivalent of our temple. It was a more familiar place, more lay-oriented, wherein one could express self freely without being interrupted, and where there was really no need for a holy person or minister to be present. The Rabbi was a teacher-catechist (not a priest).

Nowadays, many persons who are sick in mind are situated within the borderline of the community. The sane make fun of them; some families conceal them as a scandal without giving them a chance to be rehabilitated, thus making them useful to society. They are, like Bartholomew, the new impure ones.

Jesus’ sign in this episode is an indication that the house of God, the Christian community, is open to everyone, including the less fortunate. It is a sign of liberation: God appreciates them, and He has a place and a mission for them.

(Mk 1:21-28; Lk 4:31-37)

19

PETER’S MOTHER-IN-LAW

When we left the synagogue, James, Jesus and I went to Peter’s house. Rufina, his wife, was preparing a good dish of lentils for us...

Peter: Come on in, fellows, and sit here in the shade. Food will be ready in a jiffy... and I swear everyone will have a good share.... Come, Jesus, let’s get some olives while Rufina’s tending the fire.

Simon Peter was a special type. Peter, the stone-thrower, as we all called him, had a curly beard and a nose as big as a tomato. He was the best rower on the lake and the noisiest, too. He had the stink of a fish, but was always in good humor. With four sons to feed, and a wife, he had to work himself to death. Peter loved Rufina, his wife, very much, in spite of their constant bickerings....

Peter: Hey, lady, when will those lentils be ready? These fellows are hungry!... For God’s sake, hurry up!

Rufina: What do you think I’m doing? You should have given me the money earlier, you tightwad!... These lentils don’t come from heaven. One has to pay for them, big nose!

Peter: And that witch of a vendor simply couldn’t trust you?

Rufina: That witch as you say she is, has been lending us food for three weeks already, and if you don’t pay her before Saturday, that’s the end of it!

Peter: And what did you tell her?

Rufina: That she was right.

Peter: Oh, really?

Rufina: Yeh, she’s right!

Peter: Hey, don’t raise your voice when you’re talking to me!

Rufina: And don’t you raise that voice of yours, either, scandalous man! Now I know why my mother is sick – because of your screamings!

Peter: Of course not! It’s your laziness that made her sick, because if she were here, she’d be tending the kitchen and the lentils would be ready!

Rufina: Oh, Peter... Peter....

Peter: Now, what is it?..

Rufina: Don't accuse me of being lazy; it's not true...

Peter: And don't you call me tightwad, you know I hate it....

Rufina: Oh, Peter, what would I do without you?

Peter: Hmm... That's for me to say... what would I do without you, Rufi?

Peter and Rufina had four sons: Little Simon was the first son. Then came Alexander, who was five years old; Reuben, three; Ephraim, two and.... well, another one was coming, whom we all hoped would be a girl.... Peter's brother, Andrew, the skinny one, and still unmarried, lived with them, as well as their father, Jonas, a grumpy old man, and his mother-in-law, Rufa, who had been ill for two months....

James: Well, Peter, where are the lentils? Are they coming or not? Maybe a goat has eaten them before they could get to our table!

Peter: Don't be impatient, my friends. The food will be ready soon. You see, my mother-in-law has been ill, and things have been difficult since...

Little Simon: Jesus, our grandmother is sick.

Jesus: Oh yes? Where is she, Little Simon?

Little Simon: Over there, in the corner.

Peter: Old Rufa is my mother-in-law. It's really sad, you know; a case of a bad fever.... Say, why don't you greet her and tell her one of your stories, while my wife is cooking up the lentils?... Come inside, Jesus, the old woman is there lying down.... Just don't mind the mess around you. You know how it is to live in only one room, with so many people around....

Jesus: How are you, Gran'ma? How do you feel?

Rufa: I can't sit. I'm dying.

Jesus: But how do you feel?

Peter: She's a little hard of hearing, Jesus.

Rufa: Who are you?

Peter: He's a friend from Nazareth, do you hear me? I said, from Nazareth. His name is Jesus and he's going to spend a few days with us. He knows a lot of jokes. Ask him to tell you a funny story.

Rufa: Will that make me laugh? I'd rather cry!

Jesus: Come on, Gran'ma. Don't be such a killjoy. What is ailing you? Tell me, please....

Rufa: Oh, my son, what do I know? ...I'm not a doctor!

Peter: Okay, Jesus, I'll leave the two of you. I'll go ask Rufina to hurry up. I'll let you know when food is ready....

Rufa: It's somewhat strange, son. Look, I feel I have fever inside my body.... Do you hear?

Jesus: Yes, Gran'ma, I hear you very well.

Rufa: Outside, I feel terribly cold, even my skin cringes because of the cold.

Jesus: It is nothing serious, Gran'ma. It's just a simple fever.

Rufa: But my son, how can the heat and cold go together, and then you say it's nothing?

Jesus: There is nothing strange about it, Gran'ma. Even affection and hatred go together. Didn't you hear the bickerings between your daughter and your son-in-law a while ago?

Rufa: I'm deaf, you know. I hear some noise but I know not where it comes from.

Jesus: Directly from the kitchen, where Peter and Rufina were quarreling.

Rufa: Ah, those two are like cats and dogs. I don't understand the young people of today. They swear their love for each other, and yet, they never cease quarreling.

Jesus: Well, it's like that. I guess, Gran'ma, have you had this experience yourself?

Rufa: That was long ago.... Now, my teeth are almost gone.... Look... Ahhhh.... I'm like an old fishing net that wears out easily. I'm not good for anything anymore.

Jesus: Don't say that, grandmother. I'm pretty sure, if you just get up from there and fix yourself a little, and take a walk along the village, someone will certainly notice and give you a compliment.

Rufa: What did you say?

Jesus: Compliments, Gran'ma, words of admiration.

Rufa: Hi, hi, hi... Good heavens, my son. That might have been true before, when I had all my teeth, and my hair was smooth and...

Jesus: ...and they were saying beautiful things as you walked through the streets of Capernaum, is that right, Gran'ma?

Rufa: The last compliment I received was when I was forty years old, can you imagine? I was still attractive then.

Jesus: Really? Tell me, Gran'ma, what did they tell you?

Rufa: Bah, I don't remember. 'Twas such a long time ago.

Jesus: Now I'm curious to know the secret of your charm, Gran'ma. Come on, tell me.

Rufa: Oh, one of those foolish things of men. Imagine, I was on my way to the market, with a rose in my hair... Then I heard someone say: "Every time I see you, I tell my heart: what a beautiful sight that makes me stumble". Hi, hi, hi,... 'Twas a fruit vendor who told me that.

Jesus: Say, Gran'ma, you've got very pretty hair.

Rufa: And soon, it will be falling off too. Everything in us, old people, falls off, like dried fig leaves.

Jesus: Their leaves fall during winter, but they grow again in spring and begin to have flowers.

Rufa: There's no more spring for old people like us. Now you see me here; when you come back tomorrow, perhaps, I'm no longer here.

Jesus: Our body wears out, Gran'ma, but not the heart. The spirit never grows old. What matters is to keep the spirit young. Look at our Lord.... oh, the years that He's lived since the creation of the world! God is young, for He is young at heart, just like you, Gran'ma.

Rufa: God does not remember old people.

Jesus: Don't say that, Gran'ma. God cares about all of us: the big and the small ones, the young and the old. God never abandons us.

Rufa: Well, sometimes I feel abandoned, my son, like those old dried logs floating in the water, with nowhere to go....

Jesus: No, Gran'ma. You're still strong enough to go on. And when the Lord finally calls you, don't be afraid, because we're not to stay on this earth. We're gonna join the Lord in His big house, where there is a place for each one of us.

Rufa: You speak very well, young man. God bless your tongue!

Jesus: And God bless those bones that you may become still stronger.

Rufa: Thank you, my child. But that's no longer necessary. Nobody needs me in this world..

Jesus: How can you say that, Gran'ma? Your grandchildren need you. Your son-in-law would be more at ease right now, if you were to give your daughter a hand in the kitchen. She's having a hell of a time cooking the lentils right now, which are taking forever.

Rufa: Ah, my son. No one will ever beat me in the kitchen. As you can see, until two weeks ago, I was kneading bread, gathering firewood and attending to the laundry. Sewing is not for me anymore; my eyes are tired. But the rest of the household chores I still carry out the way a newly-wed does.

Jesus: And you were saying that you are good for nothing anymore....

Rufa: Yes, but now I am down with this illness. I don't even have the strength to sing a tune.

Jesus: You mean you can sing, too, Gran'ma?

Rufa: Why, yes, my son. I loved to... I was a happy person before.

Jesus: My grandfather, Joachim used to sing to us on the farm. His favorites were the songs of yesteryears, those of your time....

Rufa: Are you fond of old songs?

Jesus: Very much, grandmother.... Say, do you happen to know the song "The Lilies of King David"?

Rufa: Sure! A friend of mine taught it to me, during our trip to Jerusalem for the trade fair.

Jesus: Can you sing it, Gran'ma?

Rufa: I am sick, young man. How can I sing?

Jesus: Of course, you can, Gran'ma. C'mon, sing it, please... May be you will be more comfortable when

seated... Come, give me your hand... cheer up..

Rufa: Just a minute, young man. I feel faint...

Jesus: You look good, Gran'ma... Now, try to stand.... yes... uupps!... that's right... slowly now...

Rufa: Hold it, young man.... my bones are... oh....

Jesus: You see, you can do it!... Don't you feel a little better now?

Little Simon: Gran'ma, are you well now?

Peter: Mother, why are you on your feet? Go back and lie down immediately!

Jesus: Leave her alone, Peter; she'll sing "The Lilies of King David" for us, won't you, Gran'ma?

Peter: The Lilies of.... Now, I don't know which of the two of you is sick with fever. Or have the two of you gone crazy? You better see this for yourself... Rufina..!!

Rufa: Leave me in peace, Peter, will you? I feel a lot better now.

Children: Gran'ma is cured! Gran'ma is cured!!

Rufina: But, Mother, why are you up, now? Go back and lie down on the mat!

Rufa: Go, lie down yourself, if you want, and don't pester me. I feel alright, and right now I'm going to the kitchen to give you a hand. Then they will see that the old Rufa can still be useful at something, my goodness!

Jesus gave old Rufa a strong desire to live. Peter's mother-in-law got up that day and succeeding days. She helped in the kitchen, did the laundry and served at the table... while she sang the melodies of old, as taught to her by her grandparents, which she, in turn, taught to her grandchildren.

Peter had a mother-in-law, and therefore, was married. This is one detail of the gospel. The composition of the family (his wife, Rufina, and his four sons) is an elaboration of the episode. Jesus' disciples were men of flesh and bones, engaged in their own occupation, with family, a house, and with a psychological make-up different from each other. The gospel gives us more data about Simon, nicknamed Peter (also called "stone-thrower" in the account) that will help us reconstruct his way of being. A protagonist in several episodes in Jesus' life, Peter appears as a vigorous man, impulsive, affectionate, very generous and close to Jesus on account of their profound friendship. Peter's house, where Jesus meets the old Rufa, is one of the historically authentic places among the more tangible remembrances of the life of Jesus. Of Peter's house are preserved its foundations and threshold at the entrance, through which Jesus certainly passed a hundred times. The foundations reflect the extremely small space where Peter and his family lived in poverty.

In Jesus' time, there were less old people than today. Human span of life was shorter due to a dearth of medical knowledge. Most men and women died young according to present-day perception. Old folks were very much loved and their presence inspired respect in the family. They were likewise responsible for transmitting family history, cultural traditions, etc. Jesus does everything for everyone. He approaches grandmother Rufa in a manner we should treat our old folks: by making them feel their worth, giving them the strength to confront their afflictions with hope and preparing them for the hour of death with serenity and trust in the Lord. This "miracle" of Jesus is a sign of God's love for the old, who, at times, are rejected and deemed useless by the society of today.

(Mt 8:14-15; Mk 1:29-31; Lk 4:38-39)

20

A LEPER IN THE VILLAGE

Peter: Hey, John! James!... Leave the nets and come here. Hurry!

One morning, while we were cleaning the nets, Peter called us aloud from the house of Caleb, a fisherman from the village. When we got there, he seemed to be in mourning, the women were screaming, the people were shoving each other at the door, and the house smelled of eucalyptus leaves burned near the sick. Caleb's wife, who was dressed in black, was weeping non-stop, as she pounded her head against the wall.

Anna: This is a curse of God! A curse of God!

Eleazar: It is leprosy! It is leprosy! We shall call for the Rabbi right away to examine you!

Caleb: Don't touch me! You're lying, this isn't leprosy... Don't touch me!

Eleazar: You've been hiding it all this time, you wretch. Why don't you remove those bandages and show us your arms.

Caleb: They're only wounds... so.... leave me alone. This isn't leprosy. No, it isn't.

John: Peter, is Caleb a leper?

Peter: That is what they say. Imagine the hassle caused by Eleazar's news. He says he has some stains beneath those bandages and claims they're leprosy.

James: Caleb is a liar! He told us he was bitten by a spider, that is why his arm is wrapped with bandages!

Peter: Eleazar has spread this thing all over the village, and he wants to bring this to the priest, to make sure what it really is....

James: Well said, dammit! Let the Rabbi come and if this fellow really has leprosy, then, he should get out of here! And what does he want? For us to catch the disease?

Anna: This is God's curse.

All of us were scared of leprosy. It spread through the flesh, like vines extending through the walls, devouring the body until it was eaten away. Besides, since leprosy could be contagious, the law demanded that those afflicted be separated from family and community, and that they not go near anybody. Leprosy was the most dreaded of all diseases...

Eleazar: You see? You see?... These wounds are leprosy. They have the color of sand.

Caleb: This isn't leprosy, Eleazar, I swear to God Almighty, it is not!

Eleazar: Don't swear, you liar! You should've told us about it. This thing is contagious, and you know it!

Anna: This is God's curse! This is God's curse!

A Woman: Poor wife, she does nothing but pound her head against the wall...

Salome: If Caleb has leprosy, then the wife may just as well be a widow.... what with the three sons she has!

Another Woman: He must have done something to be punished by God. I never really liked Caleb... He must have something impure inside him...

Caleb's house was full of people. The news that he had leprosy spread like wild fire through the village of fishermen. Old Eleazar, after having removed the bandages around his arm and examined his wounds, went to the synagogue to look for the priest. It was he who had the last say. Soon after, the Rabbi arrived at Caleb's house.

Rabbi: Okay, out of here!... Out, everybody!

Anna: Ay, Rabbi, we are cursed by the Lord!

Rabbi: Be patient, woman, and stop talking about curses, until we know what this really is.

Caleb: This is not leprosy, Rabbi! Old Eleazar is lying!

Rabbi: I said, everybody, out! Now, let me see your arm...

Caleb: I don't wanna leave my house! I tell you, it isn't leprosy! I'm clean!...

Rabbi: Well then, what are these stains, Caleb?

Caleb: They're wounds, Rabbi, wounds that can be cured.

Rabbi: Have you put something on to cure them?

Anna: Rabbi, I applied oil with sunflower seeds and the intestine of crushed red fish....

Rabbi: Humm.... Since when did you have these wounds?

Caleb: I don't remember.... About four months ago... I don't want to go away from here!

Rabbi: Well, you have to leave your house, Caleb. Your wounds are stuck to your skin, and your hair has turned white.... it's leprosy, alright.

Anna: This is a curse of the Lord!

Caleb: No, no, no, I'm not going to leave!..

Eleazar and the rest of the men threw him out of the city. For fear of touching him, they tied him with a rope and dragged him out of the house like an animal. Caleb resisted, hitting them and kicking them, as he wept desperately. His wife and children saw how he was dragged through the wide streets of Capernaum, to the hill caves, where the lepers lived and died in solitude.

Anna: Ay, Salome, what has my husband done to be punished by God this way?

Salome: Don't ask me, woman, I have not slept for two nights since I learned about it.... How would I know why the Lord has punished him this way!

Anna: Tell me, what am I going to do now?

Salome: Look, I already told my husband, Zebedee, to give you some money, so that you can mend nets. With this, you'll have something to keep you going. If you need something, just let me know, and I'm gonna help you... If we eat, so do you...

Anna: What will my poor Caleb eat in the caves? He will live at the mercy of the almsgiver....

Salome: Woman, don't weep. Your sons need you...

Two weeks passed since Caleb was taken away from Capernaum. One evening, while we were playing dice at home, my mother, Salome, brought in a pot full of dried fish and some pieces of bread...

James: There goes number four!... You win, Jesus...

Peter: Six and three!... It's your turn, James....

Salome: Hey guys, take this food to poor Caleb. His wife is sick and, can't go. I have to take care of the boys. I told his wife not to worry, that we would attend to it...

James: I'm not going, woman. You wouldn't want me to be taken to the caves as a leper, would you? You know it's contagious, don't you?

Salome: I know, I know, but you don't have to go near. Shout so he hears you, and leave the food in the middle of the road....

Salome: And you, Peter?...

Peter: Well, lepers make me sick to my stomach. Something happens to me that... I don't think I can go near them, even if they pay me one hundred dinars!

Salome: That's very brave of you, big nose!

Peter: Say whatever you wanna say, but I don't think there's anyone here who would dare....

James: Are you scared of lepers, too, Jesus?

Jesus: It's not that, James, but....

Salome: Well, you better decide, between now and tomorrow. I spent quite sometime preparing this food, which is not for you, in any case.

Finally, after long discussion, Jesus and I decided to take the food to the caves. The sun had hardly risen, when we started for the caves. They were at the exit of Capernaum, on the left side of the road leading to Corozaim...

Jesus: Call him, John. When he hears you, he'll come out.

John: Hey, Caleb!.... Caleb! Where are you? This is John, the son of Zebedee! Caleb!

Soon, a man whose body was covered with rags, with dishevelled hair, came out from one of the caves. It was Caleb, the fisherman from Capernaum....

John: Look there, Jesus... But I can't just throw him this food, as if he were a dog...

Jesus: So, what do we do now?

John: Maybe we can go a little closer. He'll be happy to see us, but... it might be risky, because the disease is contagious. I don't know... If you don't want....

Jesus: Okay, let's go, John.

Jesus and I moved closer until we reached the clearing where Caleb was waiting. When we were just a stone's throw away, we stopped. Caleb wept.

Caleb: John, how's my wife?... and the kids?

John: Don't worry about them, Caleb. Anna's mending nets on the wharf, and earning her dinars. The children have to eat, you know. They're alright.

Jesus: How are you, Caleb?

Caleb: And how do you think I am? Dying of disgust!... what with all these rags... A number of lepers are already rotting... If it weren't for this damned disease.... I'd go back to fish in the lake, I want to be with everybody...!

Jesus: Do you still have those wounds on your arm?

Caleb: Yes, but it's not leprosy!... If only God would cleanse me!... But God never passes through these caves...

Jesus: Caleb, look, Salome prepared this fish and bread for you..

Jesus went closer, to give him the food...

John: Be careful, Moreno!

Jesus: Let me see those stains, Caleb...

Jesus helped him remove the dirty bandages around his arm...

Caleb: I wanna go back to Capernaum....

Jesus: But let me see those stains, first....

Caleb: Look at me.... look... look.... there's nothing...! Where are my wounds?... I'm clean!... The stains are gone! I'm clean!!

John: Jesus, what happened? What happened?

Caleb: I'm healed! I'm healed!!

John: What have you done to him, Jesus?

Jesus: But, John, I...

Caleb: I'm clean, I'm healed!!.... Help me remove all these rags!... I'm healed!!

Jesus: Caleb, don't shout so loud, the others might come out of the caves. Come, let's go to Capernaum. You gotta show yourself to the priest, to make sure that you're clean.

Caleb: I'm clean, I'm healed!...

The following day, the Rabbi purified Caleb with the blood of a bird offered as sacrifice. He washed him seven times and declared him clean, and released another bird as a sign of his healing.

Rabbi: Yes, it's true. His flesh is clean and there's no white spots on it. Your leprosy is gone. You may now go back to the village, Caleb. You're healed. You may go back to your family.

Caleb was free again to live with everyone. That evening, we had a party in the fishermen's village to celebrate. Weeping with joy, Caleb recounted what happened: He said it was Jesus of Nazareth who cured him. The news spread so fast that Jesus had to stay away for a time from Capernaum.

Leprosy, which in the Bible includes many skin diseases (like rashes, bumps, stains, pimples, etc.) was a most dreaded disease. It was always considered as God's punishment, obliging the leper to separate from family and from the community in order to live. The leper was, aside from being repugnant, impure from the religious point of view, so it was the priest who determined the disease as well as its cure, if there

ever was any. The law on this matter was extensive and presented in detail in the Old Testament. Because it was such a horrible disease, it was the popular belief that it would disappear with the coming of the Messiah.

Lepers were to live isolated in caves. They could not go to cities, and when they were on the road, had to shout their impurity, to warn people. Such isolation was not only on account of the contagious nature of the disease, but because its religious implication, that the afflicted was "cursed by God." When Jesus went near the leper and touched him, he showed a gesture of compassion, which was a voluntary violation of the religious law, making liable anyone who touched an impure person (Lev 5:3). This is a sign that with Jesus, all limits between the pure and the impure are gone, and that the God that he reveals to us disregards whatever external distinctions exist. God does not punish nor curse anyone with disease. Neither leprosy nor any sickness, no matter how terrible, is God's punishment or revenge on people. Its explanation is found in natural causes and it is the field of medicine which determines origin and cure.

The bacteria that causes leprosy was not discovered until 1868. Nowadays, it is no longer considered an incurable disease, although there are still a number of Hansenites all over the world. Poor hygienic practices and lack of preventive care at the onset of the disease explain why the disease still continues to be widespread. Present-day Hansenites still live in separate communities, although it is a fact that leprosy is no longer a contagious ailment when minimal precautionary steps are taken. The four evangelists attribute 41 miracles to Jesus. Matthew cites the greatest number: 24. John gives the least: 9. The stories about the miracles are strictly related to what the evangelists narrate about activities and mission of Jesus. In this sense, we can say that they are essential to the gospel. Most of these acts or miracles are related to the healing of different diseases. Even the severest of critics acknowledge that Jesus became a man with certain powers to cure the sick, to alleviate suffering, and to strengthen faith which would be the source of healing. These are powers that are difficult to determine to this day, even over a distance of two thousand years. From the theological point of view, the miraculous act in the gospel narration must always be viewed not as a manifestation of something "extraordinary," but as a sign of liberation. God sends his son as the liberator, Jesus proclaims the good news of this liberation, making signs, at the same time, to indicate that this liberation has already come.

(Mt 8:1-4; Mk 1:40-45; Lk 5:12-16)

21

JASMINE STREET

On the other side of the wharf of Capernaum was a street full of jasmine flowers. It was named thus because in one corner of the village were dirty houses with faded paint which smelled of jasmine flowers. It was the perfume used by prostitutes. Jesus met one of them at the Jordan. Her name was Mary, who was born in Magdala. A couple of months before, she came to Capernaum to do business with the seamen of the village... One evening, Jesus left Peter and Andrew's house, and passing in front of the wharf, the synagogue and the market, headed in the direction of Jasmine Street. He was alone....

A Woman: Hey, you, stranger, over here!... Come, come... I may not be the youngest here, but I charge the least!

Jesus looked for a rundown little house of adobe and black stones where, he was told, Mary the Magdalene lived. He pushed the door open and found a narrow and damp porch, where several men were waiting, in a squatting position. All eyes were glued on the bamboo curtains, behind which the young whore was arguing with a bad client...

Magdalene: Get outta here, you devil, and don't you ever come back if you got no money. Rubbish! Go do

your thing with another!

A Man: May the fires of hell devour you, bitch!

Magdalene: You first, you filthy man! Puah...! Who's next?

An old man with yellowish teeth stood up from the floor and went toward the prostitute. Mary had her dress unbuttoned, and her hair was dishevelled. The lamp on the porch illumined her face... a mirror of youth that was fully made-up. The old man pushed her and entangled himself with her behind the bamboo curtains...

A Man: She's a wretched woman! One unguarded moment and she bites you!

Another Man: She's one helluva whore. Not even the devil can produce a better one!

Man: Hey, stranger, what's your name?

Jesus: Jesus.

Man: Is it your first time here?

Jesus: Yes.

Man: Lemme give you some advice, man: Since you're new here, she's gonna charge you double. Pay only half. If she yells at you, take out your knife. These creatures take advantage of strangers, Y'know. Always keep an eye open and don't leave your clothes near her reach....

One after another came and left. Jesus was the last in line. At the end of an hour, he was the only one left on the porch...

Magdalene: Hey, you, what's the matter? Are you comin' inside or not? C'mon, let's get it over with for today. Damn these sailors!

Jesus: Mary!

Magdalene: Who are you?

Jesus: Mary, don't you remember me? We were together at the Jordan, in the old woman's house. She even gave me those doughnuts!

Magdalene: Jesus! Is that you, Jesus?

Jesus: Yes, I am. Bring the lamp closer...

Magdalene: With so many men I know.... But... why are you here?

Jesus: I'm staying in Capernaum for a couple of days. I came to visit my friends.

Magdalene: But of course. I was told there was a new face in the village, a peasant who was half carpenter or a bricklayer... but I never imagined it was you... C'mon in.... Gosh, am I glad to see you again!

Jesus: I am, too, Mary. Yesterday, I was told that you live here, so I came.

Magdalene: So, what do you do? Are you working on the wharf, in the market, or ...where else?

Jesus: I'm doing odd jobs here and there. Just lemme know if your roof caves in, or if you have broken stairs... or you might need some doorlocks....

Magdalene: Where do you stay here?

Jesus: In the fishermen's village. I'm staying with my friends whom I met at the Jordan, remember?

Magdalene: With Peter, James and their kind?

Jesus: Yes, we're good friends...

Magdalene: Oh, what friends you have! I told you to avoid them. They're a bunch of cheats. They talk a lot, yes, this is what they know. I know them very well!

Jesus: Okay, let's not talk about them. I came to greet you. They told me you were staying here...

Magdalene: I was so surprised to see you here that I forgot about my job. Please excuse me. You wait... I'll just take off my clothes.

Jesus: No, Mary, I didn't come here for that.

Magdalene: That's alright. I've come to like you since I saw you at the river. This time, I won't charge you anything. But it's my job, so next time, I'm sorry, you gotta pay, so I'll have something with which to pay my oil lamp. Business is business, you know.

Jesus: But I told you, I'm here simply to greet you... to have a li'l chat with you. Don't you believe me?

Magdalene: No man has passed through this door “just to greet me.” What do you want? Why have you come?

Jesus: Nothing. I just wanna talk to you for a while..

Magdalene: Say, countryman, is there anything wrong, huh?

Jesus: Nothing, young lady. What’s your problem, Mary?

Here I am, wanting to visit you and you treat me worse than Herod’s bodyguard.

Magdalene: C’mon, out with it... What do you want from me?

Jesus: Well, if my presence is bothering you, then, I’ll go.

Magdalene: No, don’t leave, but... really, I don’t know what to say....

Jesus: Now, will you button up and take a seat... Tell me, how has everything been with you since our meeting at the Jordan?.. Hey Mary, what’s the matter with you?... Why don’t you say something?... Are you afraid of me? I’m not carrying a weapon with me, and I don’t know where you hide your money... Mary...

Magdalene: Huh, what?

Jesus: No. nothing. Lara, lara, lari... Do you know this tune? This is what they sing in my town when harvesting wheat and... I see you are not familiar with this song... Ehem... Listen to this other one... Loro, la, lalaa, la... this they sing when harvesting grapes... when they crush the grapes... You don’t know that song either, do you?... Tell me, you’ve been here for sometime... where can I find a good shoemaker who doesn’t charge much... I need a new pair of sandals. The ones I’m using are worn-out, and so full of holes a camel could pass through them! That’s why I’m asking if you know someone.... Ehem... You know something, Mary? My mother enjoyed the honeyed doughnuts given by that old lady friend of yours from Beth-barah,, remember? Yes, what was her name again? Remember? Wait, it’s at the tip of my tongue... Simphoriana... No... not that... Simphorosa.

Magdalene: What’re you talkin’ about? Her name’s Ruth.

Jesus: Ruth, that’s it, Ruth. I knew it started with an R.

Magdalene: Oh, gosh, the River Jordan!... ‘Twas such a pity, wasn’t it?

Jesus: What was a pity, Mary?

Magdalene: That everything ended as it did.... Any word about the prophet?

Jesus: Nothing new. He’s still in prison. Herod won’t dare release him for fear of his wife, neither will he dare kill him for fear of the people.

Magdalene: How disgusting! The prophets are languishing in jail, while the swine are seated on the throne.

Jesus: This prophet John seems to be a nice man, doesn’t he?

Magdalene: A nice man? Better, a nice foolish man. “The Kingdom of God is near, the Messiah is coming!” And those who came were the soldiers who took him prisoner and silenced him.

Jesus: He sowed a seed. Someone after comes to water it. Then, another one will come and harvest it.

Magdalene: You must be a little fool yourself like the prophet, Jesus.

Jesus: What do you think, Mary? Will the day of justice come to this land?

Magdalene: How’s that?

Jesus: If there’s gonna be justice like the prophet John was saying.

Magdalene: What do I know, and what do I care? Whichever way it is, we’ll always be at the end of the line.

Jesus: What line?

Magdalene: The way to the Kingdom of God, like you were talking about. They say that God covers his nose when someone like me passes in front of the synagogue... Oh, wait a minute.... the light at the porch is about to go out... I need to add a little oil..

Jesus: Do you leave your light on all night?

Magdalene: Do I have a choice? If they see that the house is dark, then they don’t come anymore. With the high cost of living nowadays, you can’t afford to refuse a client who comes during the wee hours. So you

see, I wait all night for some disgusting client who will slobber over me.... Why are you so quiet?

Jesus: I was just thinking... Perhaps you're better prepared than anyone else.

Magdalene: For what?

Jesus: Nothing. Just some stupid idea of mine. Listen Mary, when I was a little boy in Nazareth, I was afraid of thieves. Now, I just laugh about my boyish fears.

What would have they robbed us of, my parents and me, in that hut? Nothing, just a pair of old pots. But I was scared of them. At times, I would spend the night with one eye open, watching for the thief.

Magdalene: And what does that mean?

Jesus: One evening I thought: God must be like a thief, who comes when one least expects. What is important is that the house shouldn't be dark so he can find the door. Then I told my mother not to extinguish the light during the night, for the Lord might come.....

Magdalene: And what has that gotta do with me?

Jesus: Don't extinguish your light, Mary. Maybe when you least expect it, someone unexpected might come.

Magdalene: Well, look, I never thought you would come today.

Jesus: I'm leaving now. It's getting late.

Magdalene: Please don't go. It's still early.

Jesus: For you, it's always early. I gotta start the day early to fix a plow.

Magdalene: Are you sure you just wanted to talk with me?

Jesus: Yes, what's wrong with that? Has my coming bothered you?

Magdalene: No, no...the truth is.... ever since I came to this damned city, nobody....

Jesus: Nobody what?

Magdalene: ...that nobody ever came to.... to... talk to me... and to greet me.

Jesus: Probably because they don't know you yet.

Magdalene: Or that they know me too well.

Jesus: Goodbye, Mary. Now you can rest a little.

Magdalene: Wait, Jesus.... Will you stay long in Capernaum?

Jesus: I dunno yet. Most likely, I will...

Magdalene: Will you come again?

Jesus: Sure, woman. And when I do, I hope you'll have your lamp lit. Goodbye, Mary, see you soon!

Mary saw Jesus off, who passed through a dark street, the street of jasmine flowers, as the people would say.... Then she went back to her room, fixed her face make-up and lay down on the mat on the floor. That night she waited, but no one came anymore. The lamp remained lit until the cocks of Capernaum crowed to announce another day.

The prostitutes were marginalized women, despised by all, not only because of the "impurity" of their occupation, but also because of their condition which was one of the lowliest in the social structure of that time. It was not for Jesus' sake that he spoke of them as models of being open to the message of liberation, and therefore, the first beneficiaries of the Kingdom of God (Mt 21:34). This word of Jesus, as well as his warm attitude toward the prostitutes – Mary Magdalene was one of his followers – constituted a very grave scandal among the religious men of his time. One of the most original things in the Gospel was the good news for the marginal, for those "without morals," to whom the laws of the period shut the door firmly to all possibilities of being close to God. The God that Jesus proclaims, and this is what constitutes the novel part of it, shows his preference for these "sinners."

Jesus not only opens the door of the Kingdom to these women; he especially approaches one of them, so much so that the gospels would make of Mary of Magdala the first witness of his Resurrection. Mary's condition and the relevance given her in the Gospel have given rise to novels and films, even to a new interpretation of her relationship with Jesus from the point of view of a frustrated love affair. Without

entering into this hypothesis (whose only basis is a literary one) what ought to be highlighted here is the enormous capacity of Jesus to befriend and rekindle hope in those who, having been despised by everyone, likewise scorned themselves. God's forgiveness, through Jesus, is not only in words from a distance; it is translated into action which, in this case, is the act of going to the house of a prostitute, talking to her on equal footing, notwithstanding the scandal it would have brought to "decent" people. In doing so, Jesus fulfills the prophets' promise: God will search for the lost. (Ez 34:16).

In those times, houses were illuminated by oil lamps. They were usually made of clay, with two openings, one for the wick and the other for the oil. At times, these lamps would be lit the whole night: which was a way of driving away evil spirits. That is why many lamps were found inside the sepulchers of the period.

One of the most common topics in Jesus' parables is that of vigilance. The Lord will come at anytime, and one must be ready to welcome Him. God is an unexpected visitor who surprises people who must always be on guard, who must always be watchful. The parables of the vigilant servant, the thief, and the lamp (Lk 21:35-40) are along this line which Jesus employed to speak of the Kingdom of God. Mary Magdalene, who was used to staying awake on account of her "nocturnal occupation," understood, better than anyone, such an analogy.

22

THE GOOD NEWS

We arrived in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. I travelled with him from Capernaum. It was Saturday, a rest day. At the first hour of the morning, the Nazarenes were all jammed into their small and dilapidated synagogue. The men were wrapped in sheets with black and white stripes. Some entered the synagogue chewing dates to stave off hunger, something which was prohibited. The women, as was customary, stayed in one corner behind the dividing screens. Among the rest of the village women was Mary, the mother of Jesus.

All: "Listen Israel / the Lord is our God / only the Lord. / Love the Lord your God / with all your heart / with all your soul and with all your might. / Remember these words as I command you today...."

We started the ceremony by reciting aloud the morning prayer. Then followed the eighteen ritual prayers. When it was time for the reading, the old Rabbi signalled to Jesus, who was by my side. Jesus made way through his townmates and went toward the lectern where the sacred books were kept....

A young man opened the sandalwood box and took out the scrolls where God's Law was written in black and red letters. It was the Holy Scripture where the wise men of Israel, for over a thousand years, scrutinized the meaning behind every word and every syllable, the will of the Lord. Jesus took the book of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll, raised it with his two hands and started to read haltingly, the way peasants did, for lack of schooling...

Jesus: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me.

The spirit of the Lord has called me to bring good news to the poor: their liberation!

The broken hearts shall be mended,

the slaves shall be set free,

the prisoners shall see the light of day

I come to proclaim the Year of Grace of the Lord, the Day of Justice of our God:

to console the weeping,

and put a crown of triumph on their humiliated heads,

they shall be garbed in party dresses and not in

mourning suits,
they shall sing songs of triumph and not lamentation.”

Jesus finished reading. He rolled up the scroll and returned it to the assistant of the synagogue, then sat down in silence. All our eyes were glued on him, awaiting a commentary of the text. Jesus likewise, seemed to be waiting for something. His head was cupped between his hands, and he was noticeably nervous. After a while, he stood up and began to speak...

Jesus: Brethren... I... I... the truth is, I don't know how to speak before so many people... Pardon me for not speaking like the priests or the doctors of the Law... Well, I'm just a peasant like you, and I don't talk much. Still, I thank our Rabbi for having invited me to comment on the Scripture...

Rabbi: Don't be nervous, young man! Say anything, whatever occurs to you. Then tell us what happened in Capernaum, about the leper.... People keep on saying many strange things...

Jesus: Well, brothers and sisters, I would like to say that... that these words of the prophet Isaiah are... really great. I heard the prophet John say the same words in the desert. He said: “This is going to change. The Kingdom of God is near.” And I thought: yes, if God has something in His hands, but... but what? What is it that God has to change...? Where will the Kingdom of God begin?... I don't know, but now, after reading the words of the Scripture, I think I have understood what it means.

The smell of sweat of the Nazarenes mixed with the burned incense, and one could hardly breathe. Everybody felt the warm air that enveloped the whole synagogue. Jesus was perspiring tremendously....

Jesus: Brothers, sisters.... listen to me... I... I'm bringing you great joy: our liberation. We, the poor, have spent our whole life bent like animals over our land. The powerful have placed a very heavy yoke on our shoulders. The rich have robbed us of the fruit of our toil. The foreigners have taken over our country and even the priests have joined them and threatened us with a religion based on laws and on fear. And so we are like our ancestors in Egypt during the time of the Pharaoh. We have partaken of bitter bread, and drunk lots of tears. They have given us so many beatings that we even thought that God has already forgotten us. No, my brothers and sisters. The time has come and the Kingdom of God is near, very near.

Old Ananias, the owner of a press house and an oil mill, and all the lands bordering the hills of Nazareth, which extended up to Cana, raised his cane like a long accusing finger:

Ananias: Hey, you, young man, son of Mary, what stupid things are you talking about? Will you explain to me what it is that must change? Whom are you alluding to?

Jesus: Everything has to change, Ananias. God is a parent who does not want to see his children treated like slaves nor dying of hunger. God's like a carpenter who uses a plane to level off a wall: everyone shall be equal, there'll be no rich nor poor; no pharaohs nor slaves; everyone's family to everyone. God'll come down from heaven to be with us, the most trampled upon on earth. Haven't we always heard that God ordered the Year of Grace? Haven't we just heard it?... God wants a year of truce every fifty years. God wants to tear up all titles of property, all debt contracts, and all deeds of sale and purchase; he wants the land to be divided equally among all of us, because this land belongs to God, and everything in it. There are not to be any differences among us. That no one shall have more nor less. This was what the Lord commanded Moses a thousand years ago, and is still waiting, because no one's complied with it. Not even the rulers, the landowners, nor the usurers wanted to fulfill the Year of Grace. Now's the time for it to be fulfilled!

Everyone was silent. We were all amazed at how well Jesus, the son of the carpenter, Joseph and the peasant woman, Mary, had expressed himself.

A Neighbor: Those words sound beautiful, Jesus, but they can't be eaten. “Liberation, liberation...!” But when, tell me. Is it for the other life, after death....?

Jesus: No Esau. That would be too late. The Year of Grace is for this life. The Kingdom begins on this earth.

Another Neighbor: So when? When the rich become compassionate and distribute their accumulated wealth among us?

Jesus: Stones don't melt from the inside, Simeon. You gotta have a hammer for this.

Susana: So when do we see the fulfillment of the word you've just read?

Jesus: Right now, Susana. Right now. We're going to start today. Of course, this isn't a one-day struggle. You don't crush a stone by one stroke of a hammer. Maybe it's gonna take us another thousand years, like Moses. Or it could even take two more thousand years. But we'll also cross the Red Sea and be free. We gotta start today!

Jesus was no longer trembling. With his large calloused hands, he firmly supported himself on the edge of the lectern breathing profoundly like someone who was to take a deep plunge.... He was about to say something significant.

Jesus: I'd like to tell you this... I feel, cramming up in my throat, like arrows in the archer's hand, the voices of all the prophets who spoke before me, from Elijah, that valiant one from Carmel, to the last prophet we've seen in our midst: John, the son of Zacariah whom that skunk, Herod, holds as prisoner in Machaerus. Brothers and sisters, God's patience has come to an end! The Scripture I've just read isn't for tomorrow, but for today. Don't you see? It's being fulfilled right before your eyes.

The old Rabbi scratched his head with uneasiness....

Rabbi: What do you mean by, "It's being fulfilled right before our eyes?" I have before me the Sacred Book of Law, praise the Lord Almighty. And you're right beside this Book, commenting on what you've read in it.

Jesus: I claim those words written in this Book. Pardon me for the way I've spoken, brothers and sisters, but....

Jesus paused. He looked at us slowly, as if asking permission to say what he was about to say....

Jesus: When John, the prophet baptized me in the Jordan, I felt God was calling me to proclaim the good news. That's why, now, I wanna....

A Neighbor: Watch your words, Jesus. Who do you think you are? From the way you talk, you're putting yourself at par with the prophet Elijah and John the baptizer!

Jesus: I'm not comparing myself to anyone. I'm simply proclaiming liberation for us, the poor!

An old man with a hunched back like a camel burst with laughter:

An Old Man: Hey, Doctor, heal yourself first!

Jesus: What did you mean by that?

Old Man: Because we're all bad, but you're worse!.... What misery will you liberate us from, when you're the most miserable in Nazareth? Look at your mother over there, behind the dividing screen... Hey, Mary, don't hide yourself, for everybody knows you here. Who is your father, Joseph?... May he rest in peace... a wretched man, like us. And look at your cousins here... For the love of Abraham, how can you free us when you don't even have a copper in your pocket?

A Woman Neighbor: I think this Moreno has become presumptuous!

Rabbi: Wait, my brothers, let him speak! Let him speak!

Neighbors: Enough of that silly talk! Make a miracle!

Neighbor: That's it, a miracle!

Neighbor: Tell us what happened in Capernaum! Did you learn some witchcraft to cleanse the lepers and cure the widows with bad fever?

Neighbor: Tell us, Mary, who taught these tricks to your son?

Rabbi: One moment, one moment!.. Jesus, do you hear what they say? They're right, son. Aren't you talking of liberation? Well, it must start here in your town; after all, charity begins at home.

Neighbor: You cured the lepers in Capernaum, why don't you cure the ones who're here?

Lady Neighbor: C'mon, what are you waitin' for? Do you know that my legs are full of wounds?

Jesus: Neighbors, history repeats itself. During the time of the prophet Elijah, there were a number of needy widows, but he was instead sent to the city of Zarephath in a foreign land. During Elijah's time, there were lots of lepers in Israel and the prophet cured Naaman, the Syrian, who was also a foreigner.

Neighbor: Hey, what do ya mean by that?

Jesus: Nothing, but this is what usually happens. No prophet is welcome in his own land. Fine, I'm going back to Capernaum.

The Nazarenes started to kick and whistle at Jesus...

Neighbor: No, you're not going back to Capernaum: You go to hell! Have you ever seen a charlatan worse than him?

All: You're a fake!.... a liar!.... Take him away from here!.... Out! Out!

The men with fists in fighting position rushed towards the lectern where Jesus was, while the women were yelling behind the dividing screens. The fight had begun and the old dilapidated synagogue shook with the uproar of the Nazarenes.

It was in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up that he made the first public proclamation of God's good news for the poor. In this text about the basis of the promise made by the prophet Isaiah seven hundred years before is a summary of what Jesus' life was to become and what, in essence, is the Gospel: A liberation for the oppressed. This is a fundamental passage and vital to the understanding of the Christian faith.

In present-day Nazareth, there is a small synagogue built on the remains of the one that existed in Jesus' time. The former must have been a lot smaller than what we see at present, as there were very few residents in the village. Like all synagogues, it was built in such a way that when the people prayed, they tended to look to the direction of the Temple of Jerusalem, the seat of religious worship in the country. In the synagogue the women never mingled with the men. There was a specific place for them, which was separated by dividing screens. Neither could the women read the Scriptures in public, nor give their commentaries.

When people gathered on Saturdays in the synagogue, they always started their prayer by reciting the "Shema" ("Listen, Israel...," Deut 6:4-9), one of the prayers preferred by the Jewish religious. It was then followed by 18 ritual prayers in anticipation of the reading of the Scriptures. The most sacred place in the synagogue was a nook facing Jerusalem. Here were kept all the scrolls of the Torah (Law), in which were written all the books we still read today in the Old Testament of the Bible. They consisted of rolled scrolls unlike the books that we have today and were kept inside artistically engraved wooden boxes.

Jesus, like all the Israelites of his time, spoke Aramaic, of the same linguistic family as Hebrew, which is still spoken in some towns of Syria. It was spoken in the whole country of Israel as a popular and domestic language about five centuries before the birth of Jesus. Hebrew was exclusively spoken by the learned men of the Law. The Scriptures were also written in Hebrew. The scroll in which Jesus read in the synagogue was written in Hebrew. This explains Jesus' stammer, who was not at home in an educated language, since he was only a peasant, and therefore not well-read.

It was the custom for any man present in the synagogue to read an excerpt from the Scripture and comment on the same before his countrymen, based on how it inspired him. This was a mission of the laymen, and not exclusive to the Rabbis. The text read and commented on by Jesus is taken from Isaiah 61:1-3. The decision with which Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, of liberation, bothers his countrymen who neither accept nor believe that a poor, rugged man from their kind could come and liberate them from anything. We usually refuse to accept as "savior" somebody who is near us, who is like us, who is ordinary and simple, as we begin to look for great signs, for saviors coming from outside, who are extraordinary and superior, before whom we render our admiration. But God's plan is the contrary. God chooses to be revealed in the poorest, in the most humble of creatures.

The Year of Grace was an ancient legal Institution dating back to the time of Moses. It was also referred to as the Year of Jubilee, which was announced by means of an instrument called “yobel” in Hebrew. This Year of Grace was to be fulfilled every fifty years, during which time all debts should be written off, all properties acquired returned to their former owners (in order to avoid excessive accumulation), and all slaves set free. This law was a way of proclaiming that the only master of the land is God. From the social point of view, this law helped maintain unity among families who deserved a dignified life. It was likewise a memorial of equality that originally existed among the children of Israel upon coming to the promised land when nothing belonged to anyone and everything belonged to everyone. (Lev 25:8-18). The Year of the Sabbath existed in the same light, and was celebrated every seven years. These legal institutions were considered as laws of liberation, as Jesus proclaimed. True to the tradition of his country, he referred to the Year of Grace as a starting point to initiate immediate reforms in the country, because of the big gap between the rich and the poor.

In Nazareth, in the synagogue, Jesus manifested maturity of conscience. When he applied the phrase of Isaiah: “The Spirit is upon me” to himself, it was a way of considering himself prophet in the tradition of all the prophets before him. After the resurrection, the primitive Church accumulated various titles for Jesus, in order to describe his mission: “Lord, Son of God, Christ...” History, as gathered from the gospels, shows, however, that the title unanimously acclaimed by the people and his disciples was that of prophet. The prophet is defined in opposition to the institution. We must not consider Jesus as a theologian or professional teacher who was more radical than the rest. Rather, we consider him within the context of the institution. He lacked what the teachers of his time had, theological studies. The training of teachers was rigid, and lasted for many years, starting in infancy. When Jesus was addressed as “rabbi” (teacher, master), he was treated in a familiar and common way during his time, and this title should not be translated as teacher in the theological sense. On the contrary, Jesus was accused of teaching without authority (Mk 6:2). When he spoke in the synagogue, he did not do so as a theologian nor as a teacher, but as a lay prophet.

(Mt 13:53-58; Mk 6:1-6; Lk 4:16-28)

23

A PROPHET IN HIS OWN LAND

That morning, when Jesus read the words of the prophet Isaiah in the small synagogue of Nazareth, his neighbors got mad at him. Immediately, there were shouts of protests and malediction. The uproar grew so intense that when the Rabbi tried to maintain order in that mess, it was already too late....

A Neighbor: You, a prophet? Ha, ha, ha...! A prophet in tatters!

A Woman Neighbor: He says he’s gonna liberate us. Who the hell does he think he is? Hey, son of Mary, beat it, and leave us in peace!

Old Man: Get this troublemaker outta here! Out with him! We don’t lose anything by getting rid of him.

The Nazarenes rushed at Jesus with their fists high. He felt four strong arms over him that brought him down from the lectern. In-between shovings they took him out through a narrow door at one end of the synagogue. Everybody followed behind, screaming and whistling...

Neighbor: To the garbage dump!... Throw him into the garbage pit!

Woman Neighbor: Right! To the garbage dump!

The neighbors pushed Jesus toward a low cliff where the women burned their garbage every Friday...

Ananias: It is only when I become old that I hear such stupidity!

Ananias, the wealthiest man in the neighborhood, raised his cane into the air and with all his fury, charged at Jesus:

Ananias: ...This is what you get for poking your nose!...

Everything went bad, and I tried to calm them down, but...

John : Hey folks, please, listen to me for a minute, don't be.....

Before I could finish what I was going to say, a fat Nazarene took off one of his sandals and hurled it toward my direction with all his might...

Neighbor: Lick this, friend!

The sandal hit my face and my nose started to bleed. Jesus was also bleeding and his tunic was torn into pieces.

Woman Neighbor: To the dump! To the garbage dump! The charlatans into the garbage!

I remember that scuffle very well. Now I can laugh at it, but at that moment, we all got the scare of our lives. Jesus' neighbors were really furious and didn't want to have anything to do with him. Well, that was already obvious. When Moses went to talk to his countrymen in Egypt, he was also branded as meddlesome and kicked out. The same thing happened to David, who was persecuted by his own compatriots. Joseph, likewise, was sold by his own brothers. Well, this always happens. No prophet is well-received in his own land.

Neighbor: We don't need anyone to solve our problems for us! Much less do we need you, storyteller!

Neighbor: Hey, you creep, don't push!

Neighbor: Wha'd you say?

Neighbor: You heard it... that you're a creep!

Neighbor: You say it again and I'm gonna punch you in the mouth!

Neighbor: You're a creep.

Nazareth was a notorious and violent neighborhood. The sun never set without a Nazarene spitting out curses and getting embroiled in fights for any simple misunderstanding.

In a few seconds, they forgot about Jesus and his pronouncements in the synagogue. The fight became a free-for-all.

Neighbor: Imbecile! I'll make you swallow those words!

Neighbor: Pay what you owe me or I'll chop off your head!

The boys also got involved in the melee. Some picked up a few stones and gave them to the old men who couldn't use their fists. The women, on the other hand, pulled away each other's head scarf and bun, and scratched each other's face...

Susana: I'm gonna crush you, you filthy devil!

Susana was knocked over the floor, while fighting with the girlfriend of the butcher, Tryphon.... I also saw Mary, Jesus' mother, whose eyes were red and her hair dishevelled, trying to come near us.... Then we heard that stentorian voice behind us....

Judas: Stop fighting! That's enough!

They were two men, one was clambering over the other man's back, like a jockey on a horse. The man under was a burly, and freckled, blond man, named Simon. The man on top was also young and strong. He had a yellow scarf tied around his neck and was brandishing a knife in his right hand. His name was Judas of Iscariot. The two zealots went near the Nazarenes...

Judas: That's enough, fellows. What is it that you really want? To kill and destroy one another?

The fight is all over now.

Neighbor: And who are you, if I may ask?

Judas: I'm someone like you, my friend, like him and like everybody else.

Neighbor: And who gave you the right to interfere?

Judas: Nobody. But I'm meddling, because it hurts to see that the mice are killing one another while the cat is smiling and licking its whiskers.

Neighbor: What's that supposed to mean?

Judas kept his knife under his sweat-drenched tunic and never got off Simon's back... The Nazarenes forgot about their bickerings and listened to the man who had just arrived...

Judas: Listen, my friends: Once there was a hungry cat and there were three mice – one was white, the other was black and the third was colored. The three were well hidden in their caves. So the cat began to think: "What must I do so I can eat them all? My legs are too big to fit in the cave. What am I gonna do?" Then the cat quietly went near the first hole where the white mouse was sleeping and whispered: "Little white mouse, the black mouse says that you're a rascal." Then he went to the black mouse's cave and said: "Little black mouse, the white mouse says that you're a coward." And finally, to the colored mouse, he said: "Little colored mouse, your other two companions say that you're the most stupid of all."

Neighbor: So what did they do?

Judas: Exactly what we did. They came out of their caves and began to fight among themselves. They ended up so tired, they didn't even have the strength to run nor hide. Then the grinning cat came, held each one by the tail, and zas! swallowed all of them. This is what the Romans want: for us to fight each other so they can swallow us whole. Folks, they wanna divide us. "Divide and rule," thus says the two-headed Roman eagle. Do you see this scarf around my neck? This was given to me by Ariel, the legitimate grandson of the Macabees. They were good patriots, who didn't waste their strength fighting each others.

Woman Neighbor: What Judas of Iscariot says is true! Our enemies are other people!

Judas: Exactly, woman. Reserve the knife for the throat of the foreigners, and the stones for Herod's head and his men. Save your strength to fight them when the time comes.

Then Judas took out his knife. With one hand he took a lock of hair and cut it with the other. Then he threw the hair into the air swearing:

Judas: We wanna be as free as these strands of hair... May the Lord of the Army cut my body into two if I don't fight for my people's freedom!... for the freedom of the people of Israel!!!

The Nazarenes already had a lot to talk about and amuse themselves with that afternoon. Each one returned home, shaking the dust from their cloaks. The melee had enlivened them. Judas and Simon, the two zealots, came to us...

Judas: How is the reckless son of Zebedee?

Simon: We recognized you from afar through your beard, John!

John: And so did I! What a surprise to see you around, Judas! Blazes, Simon, I haven't seen you for a long time!

Simon: How're you doin', John? And the rest of the boys? Still casting nets for crabs?

John: Look, let me introduce my friend: This Moreno was born here in Nazareth, but right now he is staying with us in Capernaum. His name is Jesus and he's got good ideas in his head. Look, Jesus, this freckled giant is Simon, the most fanatic zealot in the movement. He gave a punch to a Roman guard, and before he could turn the right cheek, he gave him another blow to the left. And this guy with the yellow scarf is Judas, a patriot like no one else. He was born far from here, from Iscariot, but he can already spit in-between his teeth like we Galileans do.

Jesus: I'm happy to meet you, Judas.... and... and I also wanna thank you.

Judas: For what?

Jesus: For saving our lives, my friend. Had you and your friend not come, they would've killed us with their beatings...

Simon: But, didn't John say that they were your neighbors?

Jesus: Exactly. Didn't you know that he who eats from your hand is the first one to bite you?

Simon: You're right. That is how it is. Well, Judas, it's getting late. Let's go.

John: Are you going to Cana?

Judas: No, to Sepphoris. There's been a squealer in the group over there and we wanna find out who he is. We can't allow treachery among the zealots.

John: Very well said, Judas. Be hard on traitors.

Judas: Hey, Jesus, I'd like to have a longer chat with you. Maybe you can help in our struggle.

Jesus: Probably you and Simon can give us a hand too. We also have plans.

Judas: Of course, my friend. That's what we're here for, to help one another. Well, so long, John. See you in Capernaum, Jesus.

John: See you soon, Judas. May the scarf of the Macabees bring you luck!

Simon: Goodbye, boys. See you!

Jesus: Goodbye, goodbye!... Come, John, let's go see my mother at once. She must be more worried than the bricklayers of the tower of Babel!

Jesus and I walked to the house of Mary.... Meanwhile, in Nazareth, tongues kept on wagging....

Old Man: Can you imagine that, friend? And he claimed himself to be a prophet, this Moreno whom I've seen since birth and whose nose I've cleaned 40 times!

Woman Neighbor: These false agitators really make me furious. They talk of peace but they also bring in the sword! They talk of love and bring in stories, but look at the mess they get us into!

Neighbor: To hell with Mary's son! He's always been such a good fellow, so complacent... and what has he got into... well, he had it coming... bad company.... and the mother is too soft on him....

Mary: For God's sake, son! How embarrassing!

Susana: Better: What audacity! I can't believe it, Jesus!

Jesus: Okay, Mother. I'm going back to Capernaum. Don't worry about me.

Susana: I warned you Mary. Tell me who your friends are and I'm gonna tell you who you are. Have you seen this hairy man he came with...?

John: Look, Mam, I don't.....

Susana: You are one of them, one of those agitators in Capernaum. There's Peter, the stone-thrower, Andrew, the skinny one, and James, the red-haired... Such friends you have, eh? And didn't you see those two who came, one of whom was clambering over the other like a horse... Oh, what very mischievous youth they are.

Jesus: Come on, Susana, please stop it. You're also troublesome at times. I saw you when you were holding Tryphon's girlfriend by her bun!

Mary: I beg of you Jesus, for my sake, please don't get yourself into any more trouble.

Jesus: But, Mother, I did nothing but explain the Scripture, and they began to throw stones at me... Is it my fault? Tell God not to speak so clearly. It seems to me that it's the Lord who wants to get himself into trouble....

The next day, very early, Jesus and I started our way back to Capernaum. We returned with beating marks and welts on our body. We were happy though. We had started using our voice to proclaim the good news of liberation of the poor.

The opposition of Jesus' countrymen which started by not accepting "that one of them" should introduce himself as a prophet and speak about liberation, was reduced to a collective struggle. This unleashing of violence, where quarrels and revenge surface, is typical of small towns. One must also take into consideration that in Oriental countries this type of tumult, the result of aggressiveness, is common.

Jesus' words in the synagogue make him into a symbol of contradiction and scandal among his countrymen, the rich, as his words reclaim justice and equality. Initially, a scandal for the majority of the poor, too, because they refuse to accept that a poor man like themselves can become a leader. Long periods of suffering sometimes breeds skepticism among the poor. Since the price that one has to pay to attain freedom is the risk of starting without knowing how well things will turn out, one is met with all sorts of resistance. At this moment, the prophet's task becomes difficult because opposition comes from the oppressor and the oppressed at the same time, as the latter has not yet shed off an attitude of passivity. (Ex 5:22). Christian faith, as proclaimed and lived, is always a sign of contradiction. The Gospel is not an effective balm in attaining universal unity through love. It unleashes conflicts. Jesus said he came to bring war not peace. If the evangelical word is double-edged, it is because it divides, cuts, wounds, and exposes hypocrisy concealed by false religion, inequality among people, injustice maintaining such inequality and the fear of freedom in the hearts of the oppressed. Judas of Iscariot is introduced in the episode. Some claim that this monicker made reference to his place of origin: "Iscariot," a small village in the region of Judah. However, experts in the matter of zealots see in "Iscariot" a deformed version of "sicario." The "sicarios" were a group of fanatic nationalists from the zealots' party which used the "sica" (dagger) in committing acts of terrorism against the Romans. Judas was accompanied by Simon, the "zealot," one of the twelve apostles. All this indicates that in Jesus' group there were men of various political tendencies.

Even the extremists who never appear in the Gospel invited Jesus as a "partisan" – to put it in modern terms – to be a leader of a popular movement unrecognized by official institutions.

The fact that Judas betrayed Jesus has put him in a very bad light in the course of history. He has become a good example of perversity, of evil incarnate. The historical figure of this man has been mythified to the maximum, and generations of Christians have used him as a form of catharsis for their feelings of guilt, thus converting Judas into a kind of a "scapegoat." There are some towns and villages, where the effigy of Judas is beaten, burned or hanged every year. It is imperative that we remove this barrier that impedes us from looking at him as one who was more than a friend of Jesus, certainly more politicized than the rest, and therefore more practical, perhaps, and more efficacious.

In the account, Judas narrates to the people of Nazareth a story with all the characteristics of a parable. Explaining an idea and teaching a lesson by the use of images as in a parable was a manner of speaking not exclusive to Jesus. It is an Oriental mode of expression, and very common especially among the popular class.

To show his political personality, Judas appears with a yellow scarf belonging to a grandson of the Macabees brothers, heroes of the Jewish resistance against Greek domination in the country about a hundred sixty years before the birth of Christ. The Macabees were organizers of the guerrilla struggle in Israel which achieved important victories against the powerful Hellenistic empire. In the people's mind, they were a symbol of courage, patriotism and freedom.

(Lk 4:28-30)

24

LIKE A MUSTARD SEED

In the early morning of the next day, after that scuffle in Nazareth, Jesus and I traveled north to Capernaum. Soon the heat of the sun began to pervade the Galilean plains, made golden by the ripe wheat grain, promising an abundant harvest.... There was a cheerful air in the field.... We, too, were happy, in spite of the blows we received the day before....

John: I can't help but laugh every time I remember... When that old man, Ananias, raised his cane.... he was furious.... He was red like... like....

Jesus: Like your nose, John, which is as red as a tomato.

John: The truth is, and this isn't because they're neighbors or relatives of yours, Jesus, they're an impossible lot, and damn them!... They're all also starving like us. You tell them about the Year of Grace and the liberation for all, and instead of being happy about it, they kick you in the ass... not even the devil can understand them!

Jesus: The laws of Moses are antiquated, John, but since they were never complied with, they look new. New wine bursts the skins. And that is what happens. Of course, they will always tell us that some have more and others less, because that is life, and that is how God wants it. We ought to have more patience.... And, then somebody suddenly shouts no, because if all the laws of God were complied with, and the world would be available for everyone, the same poor people would be shocked and couldn't stand it. Well, they also claim that our grandparents complained to Moses, dreaming of eating the garlic and onions of Egypt!

John : Hey, Moreno, don't talk to me about food at this moment, because my belly's rumbling.... We better walk fast so we can get there in time for the soup!

Although tired and beaten, the road seemed short. We were dying to tell our companions everything that happened in Nazareth... After crossing the valley for several hours it was already noontime, and the palm trees of Capernaum were already within our sight...

Zebedee: Look who's coming, the rascals!... Just in time!

John: We're back, old man!

Jesus: How's life around here, Zebedee?

Zebedee: Very well, a lot better than yours, I guess. Here, we were already thinking that the soldiers laid their hands on you!

John: Not the soldiers, but the neighbors of this Moreno, who're more hostile than a bitch giving birth!

Zebedee: Salome, leave that stove and come over here fast; your son and the Nazarene are back!.... And how're things in your town, Jesus?

Jesus: Oh, there... the same thing that happened to King Neco, who went for wool, but came out sheared himself!

Salome: Oh, John, my son... and you too, Jesus.... Tell me, what happened to you? You seem to have come from battle.

John: 'Twas a mauling session, Mother. In Nazareth, they gave us a good beating...!

Salome: Really? And may I know why?

John: For no reason at all, Mother... The truth is, we....

Salome: Hum!... It must be something serious, I must say...

Jesus: They invited us to speak, Mam,and we did.

Zebedee: And what the hell did you say?

Jesus: Nothing. That the reason why there's poor people is because there are rich people, and that the poor'll only go up if the rich go down.

Salome: And you claim you said nothing. Have you ever seen a more vicious tongue than yours, Nazarene?...

Jesus: But that was what Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea and the rest of the prophets announced...

Salome: Like I told you, Zebedee. Anytime, this guy will simply get himself killed.... And look at this son of yours... Look what's happened to your nose, John...

John: Don't worry, Mother, it doesn't hurt anymore...

Jesus: They hurled a sandal at us, Mam Salome... I bent over just in time, while this poor guy nearly swallowed it!

Salome: Praise be the Lord! Let me get a piece of raw meat, it'll help reduce the swelling!

Zebedee: I hope it's not the slice that I'll have to eat later, woman!

Salome: C'mon inside. Better wash your feet, so we can cure those welts...

Zebedee: Then you can tell us about the squabble in your village!... Damn! Had I known it, I would've

gone with you!

That night, we got together to talk about the usual thousand things... It was not only our group that was present. The news that Jesus had returned spread through the whole village, and some fishermen and other neighbors from the market slipped into the house....

James: So, what now, Jesus. Are you going to stay here for good?

Jesus: Well, if you don't kick me out, can I stay?

Zebedee: I think the Moreno likes it here!...

Jesus: It isn't that, Zebedee. In Nazareth there's less work and....

Ruffa: Poor guys!

Salome: Don't feel bad for them, Ruffa. After all, who told them to get themselves into trouble, huh? Serves 'em right!

Peter: But Salome, you heard your son... Jesus and he didn't do anything...

Salome: You too, shut up, Peter, for not one of you's an angel!.... Tell me folks, who among you would speak before so many people in a synagogue saying that this world is topsy-turvy and must be set right.

Jesus: And how do you suppose you'd say it, Salome?

Salome: You don't have to say it. It can't be said, Jesus, because in this country, they put a muzzle on whoever talks a lot!

John: Oh, yeah? In other words, we just let them do their thing, while we relegate ourselves into a corner, like a dust bin?

Salome: And what do you want to do, John? For this world to exist, there must be the poor and the rich. Even the rabbi says that in the synagogue!

Peter: No, Mam, not necessarily so. That's the story they forced down our throats to silence us. Yes, and don't tell me you're shocked. Okay, what did the law of Moses say? For every fifty years, a year of truce. Tear up those property titles, write off those debts, set the slaves free.... Let's begin anew, the way it was at the start. Everything belongs to everyone and to no one. That was the year of Grace that Moses wanted, do you hear?the year of Grace...!

Salome: Well, that's funny....! Look, Peter, don't you believe it, ever since Eve ate that forbidden fruit, things have been that way and will continue to be so. That's the only thing I'm aware of.

James: I know it's very convenient to say that. Of course, it's easier to complain about the darkness than light a candle. And that's what happens.

Salome: That's not so. The truth is, there's a certain restlessness in your being, which I can't figure out, and I'm not happy about it. This feverish feeling has grown ever since this Nazarene came around... Yes, yes, and don't put on that face, Jesus, for you know damn well it's true.... Look, guys, listen to me, forget about these crazy ideas for now. If this time they just punched your noses, next time around they're gonna break all your bones!

Jesus: As John was telling you before, the wine is new...

Salome: What wine are you talkin' about, you fool?

Jesus: The Kingdom of God, Salome. He's talking about the Kingdom of God that's come, and will burst the old wineskins!

The moon shone during the night, as the south wind began to blow... Eyes sparkled with curiosity as they were illuminated by the flickering light from the lamps hanging on the wall... Jesus was sitting on the floor, with crossed legs, in the middle of the group. He was perspiring, but smiling.

Jesus: Friends, in spite of the beatings we got, John and I were very happy when we left Nazareth. We have this great feeling inside and don't like to keep it to ourselves. It's the good news that the prophet Isaiah wrote about, many years ago, and which we read about in my village and is now being fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has come! Yes, my brothers and sisters, the time has come. When the time comes for the sheep to rear its young, then the lamb is born, and she can't wait, for it is time. This is the time of the Lord,

who can't wait. Small group though we are, God's gonna show us the way and we'll move on if we can push one another onward!

Peter: That's well said! You have my support, Jesus!

James: That's the way to talk, Moreno!

Salome: Just a minute, just a minute, you crazy bunch! The flute sounds beautiful, alright. All that's fine. And I'll be the first to lend a hand, if need be, in a fight. I'm well trained for this, what with all the blows I've had to give my rogue husband!...

Zebedee: Hey, hey, now what are you saying...

Salome: Nothing, old man, but one has to put feet on the ground. Who's gonna set this world aright?... You?... You, with a hole in each sandal and two patches on your trousers?... Come on, don't aim so high 'cuz you don't know the consequences...!

Peter: Well, Mam, one should start with something, isn't it?

Salome: Sure, by staying put, for God's sake, without interfering in places you're not needed!

Zebedee: You're wrong, old woman. These young men are right. We spend the whole day and half of the night complaining that things are going from bad to worse, and we don't lift a finger to improve them. Now, what does that lead to?

Salome: But, God, you gotta open your eyes, for you could end up in the grave. Since when have you seen a dove challenging an eagle?... Tell me... Put that in your head, young men!

Philip: Well, at least, I've done that already.

Philip, the vendor, who had been quiet all along, scratched his huge head, and looked at everyone, as if predicting a bad omen...

Philip: I don't intend to sink the boat, but in all sincerity, Mam Salome is right. What the devil can we do, being the last in line? I think the best thing that we can do is forget all about this, and go back home. So, if there's nothing else....

Jesus: Hold it, Philip, don't leave yet... Come here, big head....

Philip: What do you want now, Jesus?

Jesus: Tell me one small thing...

Philip: Enough of those stories of yours, Moreno, we already know each other....

Jesus: No, Philip, just name me one small thing...

Philip: Oh, well, ...let me see... a comb....

Jesus: No, something smaller...

Philip: Smaller than a comb?... well, what do I know... a ring.

Jesus: Smaller, still....

Philip: Let me see... a pin! That's the smallest I have in my cart.

Jesus: That's still very big, Philip. Think of something as big as the size of the pin's head... What's that smallest thing a peasant can hold in his hand?....

Philip: The smallest....

Ruffa: A mustard seed!

Jesus: That's it, exactly, Gran'ma Ruffa. A mustard seed.

Ruffa: That was very easy to guess, Jesus. The mustard seed is so small, it can hardly be seen....

Jesus: However, when it falls to the ground and takes root, it grows into a big tree, as tall as the height of two men... It is such a big tree that the birds come looking for rest and food...

Salome: I see your point, Moreno.... A small group and yet, it can accomplish great things...

Jesus: Yes, Salome. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

Peter: Very well said! And we are the sowers, ready for anything! The cowards, like Philip, should stay for awhile, blazes!... 'cuz we're already a small group!

We continued talking and arguing up to the wee hours of the evening. Outside, the wind stirred the

waters on the lake and shook the dried leaves of the mustard trees that grew along the shore....

After that failure in Nazareth. Jesus undertakes his activity in Capernaum, in the small house of the old man, Zebedee, in the company of the group of first disciples and the residents of the village. He tells them the parable of the mustard seed. It is a story typical of the beginnings of Jesus' activities in Galilee. It is a classic parable of contrast: The beginning is small, insignificant; the end, a beautiful bush will be the marvelous result of what God has in His hands.

The mustard is a plant that grows wild in Palestine. Along the lakeshore, it grows as high as three meters tall. That image of a tree that serves as a resting place for the birds and provides shade to whoever goes near is a symbol of God's kindness and generosity (Ezk 17:22-24). In the old sayings of the Jewish rabbis, the mustard seed was considered the smallest of seeds. Although it is no more than a bush, Jesus calls it a tree, an exaggeration, to emphasize how God's plans surpass ours, take us by surprise, much more than we can imagine. When we undertake a difficult and risky project, and for our part put in all we can, God enriches and makes what is great out of the smallest. The Kingdom of God is born of anything small, among the poor and with them, God forms his community. This community is a call to lead in the truly important events of history.

The Kingdom of God is new wine. Jesus proposes this idea in the beginning of his activity as the fulfillment of the social laws during the time of Moses. Those laws – the Year of Grace being one of them – focused on equality, the overcoming of social classes, the avoidance of accumulation of wealth by a few at the expense of those who were starving to death. These were old laws that turned out to be new since they had never been complied with. In Jesus' time, differences among the Israelites were still being ignored.

The existence of social classes, the rich and the poor, for many, is "God's will," a "fate," a natural event that defies change, an irremediable reality that can never be altered. This manner of thinking, like Salome's, is common among the rich for it suits them to believe so. It is the same among the poor because the rich and their servers (the school, the false religion) have taught them this attitude of resignation, have made them believe that God wants it that way, and promises heaven in the other life if on earth they accept their misfortune. Nevertheless, "in the beginning this was not so; poverty and wealth came to people later" according to St. Gregory Nazianzen (Discourse 14 M.G. 35, 857-910). The Kingdom of God begins here on earth precisely when there exists no more differences among people, when the earth's properties are distributed equally among us, when human beings are no longer considered rich nor poor. Instead, they are living as brothers and sisters, children of the same Father, enjoying the same rights and the same opportunities.

(Mt 13:31-32; Mk 4:30-32; Lk 13:18-19)

25

THE TAX COLLECTOR

At the boundary of Capernaum, on the street coming from Damascus, was the customs house where Matthew, the publican, son of Alpheus, collected taxes. All merchandise brought in by the caravans of businessmen through this route into Galilee paid their contributions here....

Matthew: Hey, you, with the red turban!... Yes, yes, don't pretend you don't see me. Pay seven dinars!

Trader: Seven dinars?... Seven dinars for two boxes of pepper? That's too much!

Matthew: That's what you owe. Don't argue anymore, my friend, or I'm gonna call one of the soldiers....

Trader: What a wretched man!... Thief!... The tax shouldn't be that high!

Matthew: Are you gonna pay or not? Many are waiting....

Trader: Here, take it.... And go to hell!

Matthew: Next.... Let me see, you.... How many sacks of wool do you carry with you?

Another Trader: Ten sacks, sir.

Matthew: Ten sacks, really? ...You're a liar!... What about those four you're hiding behind the camels?

Another Trader: But those are not from the....

Matthew: Shut up, you cheat. Now you'll have to pay me four more, so you'll know how to respect the law. You can't deceive me, my friend....

Another Trader: But I didn't want to....

Matthew: Ten and four is fourteen, plus four more is eighteen. Come on, let go of your eighteen dinars. And go tell your lies to the marines!

Matthew dipped the pen in the inkwell and scribbled some numbers. Leaning over his table, he was more jittery than he had been before. His beard and fingernails were stained with ink. There was always a jug of wine beside his bunch of papers. Everytime he spotted a caravan coming from a distance, or some traders along the way, he would rub his hands, have a few shots of wine and prepare to collect a good amount of money from them... In the entire Capernaum, there was no other man more hated than he. We would spit everytime we passed in front of his stall. The women cursed him and we never saw a child approach him.

Another Trader: Please don't charge me too much, sir... With this oil, I practically don't earn anything for my children's food...

Matthew: What're you telling me? I don't give alms here.

Another Trader: Could you just gimme a little discount? ...I really need it...

Matthew: Weep somewhere else and try to get some money. I'm just following orders...

Another Trader: You're taking advantage of our being illiterate you sonovabitch! Your computation, is not clear!

Matthew: Hey, you, cross-eyed fellow, who told you to poke your nose into this? C'mon, gimme twenty, and beat it!

Taxes were a nightmare for us poor people. Rome collected taxes in the whole of Judea. In our land of Galilee, it was King Herod who sold himself to the Romans whom we had to pay. His officials, the tax collectors who we called publicans, were positioned at all the entrances of the cities in Galilee, collecting customs duties as ordered by the king. The publicans even increased these taxes so they could keep the difference, thus enriching themselves. Soon they, too, earned the hatred of everyone.

Matthew: Well, let's see. You're the last... what do you have to declare?

Another Trader: Two sacks of wheat and three barrels of olives.

Matthew: Open that sack, you might be concealing something...

At mid-morning, Matthew had finished off with the caravans of the first hour. That was the time for him to count his collection. He separated what was intended for Herod's soldiers and for himself. Then he sat at the table with his jug of wine and book of accounts. He wouldn't know how to exist without the two. Near the stall were the soldiers who guarded the customs house. They played dice while waiting for new traders to arrive. At this time Jesus passed in front of Matthew's stall...

Matthew: Hey, you, come over here...

Jesus: What's the matter?

Matthew: What do you have in that sack?

Jesus: Horseshoes.

Matthew: Really?... And where are you going, may I ask?

Jesus: To Chorazin.

Matthew: What for, may I know?

Jesus: To shoe some mules. I've been making horseshoes, and I'm going there to sell them. That's my work.

Matthew: Pay three dinars and then you can go. Are you deaf? I said, three dinars.

Jesus: Why do I have to pay three dinars? I'm not going out of Galilee. I'm going to Chorazin.

Matthew: And I don't believe you. I'm not stupid, you know. You're one of those involved in smuggling, with the Syrians!

Jesus: What smuggling are you talking about? I'm going to Chorazin to shoe some mules.

Matthew: And I'm saying you are going out of Galilee and you are involved in smuggling! ...You can get yourself into trouble, as much as you like... but you have to pay three dinars...

Jesus: But, what three dinars are you talkin' about? ...I can't pay you... I haven't got a single cent.

Matthew: Then, you gotta pay me with those horseshoes.

Jesus: How can I do that? If I have to leave them here, there's gonna be no work for me, so, what will I go to Chorazin for?

Matthew: Ah, that's your problem. Either you gimme three dinars or the sack of horseshoes.

Jesus: But, what's all this crap?

Matthew: It's the law, my friend. The law grabs smugglers, like you, by the throat. That's how I caught you.

Jesus: I'm sorry, Matthew, but I'm not involved in any smuggling with the Syrians. Neither do I have three dinars, nor can I give you the horseshoes. I have to work. Please lemme go.

Matthew: Don't ask me for favors when I'm talkin' about the law. Besides, I don't wanna waste my time with you... Puah!... You're a smuggler. You can't deceive me. These horseshoes shall not leave the customs. Everything has been said now, so do whatever you please...

Jesus: Pff! What a guy! That means, I gotta wait until you cool off tomorrow and listen to reason.... Can I sit here?

Matthew: Do whatever you wish, and don't bother me anymore. To hell with smugglers!

Jesus sat on the floor, leaned on one of the walls of Matthew's stall and stared at the road that vanished afar. The heat of the sun became intense, and soon enough he dozed off. Meanwhile, Matthew continued counting his money, scribbling more and more numbers on the papers.... When Jesus woke up, the jug of wine was empty and the tax collector's eyes were red and sparkling. Just like every other day, before noon Matthew was already drunk...

Jesus: Hmm... I fell asleep. Well, Matthew, have you solved my case?... What? Are you allowing me now to proceed to Chorazin with the horseshoes?

Matthew: You don't get outta here! That's what I say! Hik! And let me work in peace!

Jesus got up and stretched his arms while yawning. Then, leaning over the table, he followed closely the direction of Matthew's pen...

Jesus: That one... must be difficult, huh, Matthew?

Matthew: Hmm...

Jesus: I mean, writing. I can write only a few letters... I would like to learn more.... Why, you do it very fast.

Matthew: I had a teacher for this... In this job, if you can't write, you're nothing...

Jesus: If I stay longer in Capernaum, will you teach me...?

Matthew: Hmm... I can write, but I can't teach, blazes!

Matthew: Say, Matthew, how long have you been in this job?

Matthew: Bah, many years. I don't remember anymore. One, two, three, four... I don't remember.

Jesus: Do you like your job?

Matthew: Of course, my friend. Who doesn't like to have money anytime, so he can buy what he wishes? I have no need for anything... Of course, I like my job... Hik! Damn, you're messing up my computations... Will you shut up and let me work in peace!

Jesus: But, you paid a price for this, didn't you?

Matthew: What?

Jesus: That in order to have everything you want, you had to lose friends.

Matthew: What do I need friends for? No one is a friend to anyone. If someone is at your back, beware, he wants to get something from you. I don't believe in what you're saying!

Jesus: Well, but.... don't tell me you're used to having people spit at you when they pass by.

Matthew: Oh, let them. They can even blow their noses if they like. They spit at me, I curse them. They can insult me, but that's all, that's all they can do. I can extract their money, and that's more important. I can hurt them even more! What? You think I'm wrong? ...I couldn't care less.

Matthew momentarily set aside his work and, with his eyes swollen from having drunk too much alcohol, turned to Jesus...

Matthew: Hey, who're you, and why do you ask so many questions? Do you think I don't know you? ...I know your group here in Capernaum. This skinny one and the red-haired and....

Jesus: And John and Peter...

Matthew: Yes, a gang of bandits. Smugglers, that's what you are. You, being the stranger, must be their chief..

Jesus: Enough!... We're a group of friends, Matthew. I met them at the Jordan, when we went to see the prophet, John...

Matthew: Another agitator!... I want to know what you're up to. Be sure, I'm gonna find out. I have a way of doing so.

Jesus: If you really wanna know, then, you gotta come with us one day.

Matthew: Yes, yes, because you're concealing something. I know your kind very well. You're like chameleons, you change colors fast, and how!

Jesus: I'm serious, Matthew. Why don't you go to Madame Salome's house one day, so we can have a li'l chat...

Matthew: Why don't you come to the house, eh? Why, you and your friends wouldn't dare set foot in my house, would you?

Jesus: I wouldn't mind, really. If you invited me, then I'd accept it. I'm gonna tell my friends right away...

Matthew: Would you eat at my house?

Jesus: Yes, Matthew, if you say so.

Matthew: I see you can pretend pretty well, stranger. But... you see, for a long time, I haven't invited anyone to my house...

Jesus: Then, I'll be your first guest. When do you want us to come? ...This coming Saturday? ...or tonight, if you want...

Matthew: Are you serious?

Jesus: Of course, Matthew. After having been detained in this boring place, I'm hungry, and I can't stand it any longer. Let me inform the rest. We shall go to your house tonight, okay?

Matthew: Sure. Hik! But, we're gonna need some wine for everyone. I can't eat without wine!

Jesus: I can see that...

Matthew: So, better come with me to buy some wine...

Jesus: It's a deal. Let's go!

Jesus left his horseshoes beside Matthew's working table and walked toward the tavern of Joachim, who was blind in one eye. The tavern was located at the exit of Capernaum. Matthew, who was wobbling, followed him.

According to the data that we gathered from the Gospel, Matthew, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, was the son of a certain Alpheus who was a tax collector at the customs of Capernaum – a gateway for caravans coming from Damascus. In the gospels of Luke and Mark, he is also called Levi. Since the Second Century, he was considered one of the authors of the four Gospels. In the story, Matthew appears as a man of weak character, a pessimist, a skeptic, who finds in his drinking some refuge from the society that

considers his job disdainful.

Since the time of Persian domination, Israel knew what it was to pay taxes to a foreign power. It was only up to the time of the Roman empire that collections were unsystematic. The whole Roman province was obliged to pay taxes to the Roman treasury, although some cities and prime allies of the empire could collect them for their own benefit. Such was the case with the Galilean tetrach, Herod Antipas, who collected them from the different cities of Galilee, among which was Capernaum. Matthew, therefore, was an official of King Herod, a great collaborator of the Roman empire. Taxes were a big burden for the people and an important weapon of the rulers for political control. To the computed sums were added certain amounts, in the form of gifts, and bribery to be given to authorities and to administrative personnel. There was corruption from the lowest level to the highest.

The tax collectors (publicans) belonged to the most contemptible social category of the country, including the usurers, the money-changers, gamblers and shepherds. In this job, aside from the strict collection of dues, – which was reason enough to earn the hatred of the people – all kind of cheating occurred. Due to the numerous frauds and the futility of determining the number of all those victimized by them, the publicans were socially stigmatized which caused them to lose their civic and political rights. In the language of the people, the tax collectors are always associated with thieves, pagans, prostitutes, assassins, and adulterers. They were indeed the society's excrement. All these highlight the great scandal of having Jesus invite a publican to become part of his group, and reiterate on several occasions that the Good News he was bringing along was primarily intended for the "publicans and sinners."

In all probability, Matthew was a rich man because of the fraud committed in his occupation. But he would not belong to any of the prestigious families, since tax collectors were no more than sub-lessees of some wealthy contractors, usually of the upper social class. Matthew's occupation has, at times, been interpreted as proof that Jesus got followers from various social classes to emphasize the social harmony that the Gospel was seeking. This is not correct. The gospel's message is obviously directed to everyone, but not in the same manner for everyone. The Good News for the poor is this: that they will cease to be poor. The rich are asked to renounce their wealth if they want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The message clearly shows that God takes sides, that God is not neutral. That Jesus associates himself with Matthew and invites him to his group signifies that he is breaking all socio-religious barriers of "decent" people of his time by befriending the undesirables and the sinners. During that time writing was usually done on papyrus. The papyrus was an aquatic shrub that grew on the marshland. This was harvested at the northern part of the lake of Tiberias. Its fibers were made into baskets, boats and a kind of paper that could easily be rolled. The color of ink with which one wrote was black, basically made of very thick soot. A number of writers would carry their inkwell hanging at the waist. Naturally, a tax collector had to master the art of writing, and normally should have some knowledge of Greek, because of dealings with traders from other countries. In the light of these qualifications of Matthew, Jesus' level of culture was notably inferior, for he was "semi-illiterate." In such a society, as in any other society, one who knew how to write had an edge over uncultured neighbors who were dependent on them for knowledge and whom they could, naturally, assist or deceive.

(Mt 9:9; Mk 2:13-14; Lk 5:27-28)

26

IN THE TAX COLLECTOR'S HOUSE

Jesus: So, ain't you comin'?

James: O'er my dead body, Jesus! Have you gone crazy? How can we ever eat with that bum?

James' screaming resounded through the wharf of Capernaum where Jesus had come to talk to us about Matthew and to ask us if we wanted to go with him to his house. But we had hated the tax collector

for so long that nobody wanted to go along.

Mila: You mean he's comin' over to eat here?

Matthew: Yes. He's from Nazareth. I think he's weird. I suspect something, but....

Mila: Don't you think this guy's dangerous, Matthew? Otherwise, why would he come to this house if....

Matthew: I told you he's weird. Actually, he doesn't look bad, but I guess he's....

Mila: It's been such a long time that no one from town has come to have lunch with us... except once, those Roman captains... I'm sick and tired of them!

Matthew: You can't complain, Mila. My job comes from them.

Matthew's wife was a poor woman. Her husband's job, one of the most despised in our country, had alienated her from everyone in Capernaum. She shut herself up in their house and refused to go out. Whenever she went to the market, the other women would whisper at her back and make fun of her. She didn't have any friends. Nor did she have children. She hardly needed to prepare anything for invited guests. That's why, that evening, in spite of her husband's suspicions, she was happy.

Neighbor: Hey, Salome... Salome!

Salome: What's the matter, Anne?

Neighbor: Is it true what they said about that stranger living in your house?

Salome: Tell me what they said.

Neighbor: Mila, the wife of that brazen Matthew – may the fires of hell consume him – dropped by and told Noemi that the Nazarene was gonna have dinner in their house....

Salome: What? No kidding! That's a big lie. Why would he do that?

Neighbor: You don't believe it? Ask the people in the marketplace. Everyone's talkin' about it. I was told that Jesus was a decent guy.... Then, how come he's gonna have dinner with a tax collector?

At dusk, when the first star appeared in the sky, Jesus headed for Matthew's house. He was alone. The tax collector lived at the end of the fruit vendors' village. There was no other house within seven meters. Nobody wanted to live near him. That was how much we hated the tax collectors in Israel.

Matthew: Come in, stranger. That one peeping out is my wife, Mila.

Jesus: Good evening, Mila...

Mila: Welcome to our house, sir... I mean... Well, my husband told me you'd be coming, so.... We also invited Captain Cornelius to join us... I hope you won't mind... you know... he's a friend...

Matthew: Hey, stop the small talk, woman! Why don't you finish preparing the eggplant in the kitchen!

Mila: Okay, okay, I'm going....

Matthew: So, you've come alone, huh? Your friends didn't wanna soil their sandals by setting foot in my house...

Jesus: Yeah, that's true... they didn't wanna come. I told them, but... but...

Matthew: That's okay. Worse for them. The less mouths there are, the more food for us.... Come on in...

Meanwhile, we gathered in the house of old Zebedee. We were indignant. My mother, Salome, who was always in control, did not prepare soup for us that night....

Salome: Even the rabbi knows about it!... What shame! Everyone is talkin' about us!... Wait till I get hold of you, Jesus....!

James: There was no way of keepin' him from havin' dinner with that swine.

Peter: I don't quite get it.... What would Jesus want from that stinkin' tax collector?

James: Rather, what would he want from Jesus? There's something fishy here.

Salome: That's right. Something stinks here like rotten cheese.

James: Ain't we gonna do nothin'? Shall we just sit around and do nothing...?

Peter: Why don't we just go there and tell him the truth when he leaves? He's gotta have this clear in his head.... What do you think, huh? Shall we go near Matthew's place?

Matthew: So, the woman is telling this guy: "Yes, I wanna take you!" Ha, ha, ha... What do you think,

huh? Ha, ha, ha...

Mila: For heaven's sake, Matthew, will you stop those silly stories....

Matthew: Oh, come on, serve Jesus more meat, and more eggplant too. Look, his plate is empty.... You came here to stuff yourself well, do you understand? No one starves in my house!

Jesus: Well, okay, but that'll be the last. I'm full. You cook very well, Mam Mila....

Matthew: Yes, sir, she's a great cook. That's what Cornelius always tells her, but she never believes it. Of course, for one who is used to being spat at in the street, how can she believe she could do anything good?... This wife of mine hides herself in a shell. She fears people. I tell her to ignore them and not mind what they say, is that right, my friend?!... Every one for himself... But she is a very stubborn woman, you know... ha, ha, ha.

Mila : That isn't the point, Matthew. It's just that....

Matthew: Shut up! Look Jesus, in my kind of job, when an account I'm working on gets smudged with ink, nothing can remove the stain and it remains there. The same thing happens to us tax collectors. The moment you get into this job, then you're stained forever. But one must get accustomed to it so as not to suffer, like this woman...! There is never a day that passes without her shedding tears. She's a cry baby, you know!... But this ain't no time for weeping. Attend to Jesus, woman. Lemme tell you one more joke. There was a very tall woman who fell in love with a dwarf...

Andrew, Peter, James and I went near Matthew's house. We were seated on the street, and from there, could hear the laughter of the tax collector, the lights inside the house. We couldn't imagine Jesus behind those walls having dinner with one of Herod's bootlickers... After a while, Eliab, the rabbi passed by and saw us...

Rabbi: Well, look who's here....

Peter: Hmmm...

Rabbi: So, this good friend of yours is now in the company of the tax collector.... How come? This morning he was seen drinking with this fellow in the tavern and now, he has joined him for dinner at his house.... Now, what do you say to this. Or, are you also expecting to be invited inside?

That was just what we were waiting for. Peter stood up suddenly and grabbed some stones in the street, and started to hurl them at the windows of Matthew's house....

Peter: Damn this tax collector, as well as you, Jesus, and everyone else!

Mila: Oh my God! What's that noise?

Mila: Matthew, run!

Matthew: What's happening here? Dammit!

Jesus: Wait here, Matthew, don't leave. Let's go, Cornelius.

Jesus went to the door. Behind him was the Roman captain. At that moment, a stone zoomed between the two...

Jesus: What're you all doin' here?!

Peter: You, what are you doin' here? dining with that traitor, that leech?

The rabbi, Eliab, wrapped in his black cloak, defiantly approached Jesus....

Rabbi: How dare you break bread with sinners? Everyone in Capernaum is talking about you, stranger.

Jesus: Oh, yeah? Let them, if they want.

Rabbi: You can't sit at a table with an unclean man.

Jesus: And who's forbidding me to?

Rabbi: The Holy Law of Moses, and our sacred customs. Are you not aware that he who sits with an unclean man becomes unclean too?

Jesus: Hey, Rabbi, are you clean?

Rabbi: What?

Jesus: I'm askin' if you're clean. You've lifted a finger against Matthew. Take care that God won't lift His finger against you.

Rabbi: Watch your words, you lousy man! You call me a sinner, when I'm a teacher of the Law!

Jesus: No, you were the first to call Matthew a sinner and all of us here seated at his table. So, Matthew's a sinner. Fine. Well people don't need a doctor. Sick people do. Matthew is sick and he knows it. We need to heal him.

Rabbi: What nonsense are you talkin' about, you stupid peasant! So you are the doctor, aren't you? And you've come to cure this poor fellow, Matthew...! You are as sick as he is. You listen to me... He who gets into a pigsty becomes like a pig. Now you're as dirty as that filthy tax collector. Aren't you aware of what the Scripture says about that? Don't enter the synagogue without first offering a sacrifice for the forgiveness of your sins.

Jesus: And aren't you aware of what the Scripture says somewhere: "What I want is love and not sacrifice?" The Lord prefers love over penance.

Rabbi: How insolent! Damn you! Someday you're gonna eat your words!

The rabbi spat on Jesus' face. He was so red with rage, the veins in his neck were about to burst. Furiously, he shook his sandals before him and left...

Peter: You've betrayed us, Jesus. We never thought you could do this to us.

James: Once and for all, tell us: On whose side are you?

Peter: This is all talk: "Things are going to change, things are going to change." And here you are, dining with a traitor and a Roman soldier. Then what?

Jesus: This is what we've been saying all along. So that things will change, people must change. Matthew is the most detested man in Capernaum. But we can be of help to him.

James: You can go to hell, Jesus! Alright, do whatever pleases you, but beware of that man. He can throw us all in jail.

Peter: Let's get outta here. Continue your dinner... and may you all choke, damn it!

Jesus and Captain Cornelius went inside Matthew's house again, and continued dining with him. We returned to the village without saying a word. As far as I can remember, that was the first serious fight we had with Jesus. We could not comprehend why he had done that, for then, we did not understand that in the Kingdom of God there was place for a man as despicable as Matthew, the tax collector.

The tax collector, aside from being hated by the people, was an outcast. His testimony did not have any juridical value; and in a sense he was like a slave, as he found himself inferior before his countrymen. As a "sinner" he was morally rejected, to the point that the money coming from the tax collectors' coffers could not be accepted as alms for the poor for it was dirty money. Such contempt of the people likewise extended to their families. That Jesus not only befriended one of these men, but also dined with him was a grave scandal for the residents of Capernaum. Jesus' friends combined this moral scandal with something political, since Matthew was a collaborator of the Romans.

In order to understand what Jesus did exactly when he dined with Matthew, one must be aware of the fact that among Orientals, to entertain a person and eat with him at the same table is a sign of respect, peace, trust, fraternity and forgiveness. Sharing food at a table is a sign of sharing one's life. That Jesus dined with Matthew – as he did with other Publicans and sinners – was not only a social happening where he manifested his extraordinary humanity or sympathy for despised people. Such a gesture carried with it a profound theological meaning, as it gave the most meaningful expression of God's love for lost souls. It is a gesture in anticipation of the final banquet in history where God will seat at the principal places of his table those whom "decent people" rejected as the last.

The rabbi, the city's guardian of morality, is one of those most seriously scandalized by Jesus'

conduct. This is not surprising. A prophet who spoke of God the way Jesus did and also contradicted religious laws at the same time was intolerable. To avoid “sinners” was the greatest obligation of the pious who wanted to please God. This is because the Rabbi thought the same God rejected the sinner and would only take him if he repented and mended his ways. Then and only then, would he become the object of God’s love: when he reformed himself. Jesus revolutionizes this false religious idea. For God, it is not only the moral aspect that counts. It is more than that; the process is reversed and it is God who approaches the immoral by showing a person special love of preference. That was then – as it is even today – a scandal, the disintegration of what is “moral.” Up to the end of his life, Jesus would be accused of immoral conduct by decent persons, because he drank and ate with the “Publicans and sinners.”

The message of the gospel is always an announcement of change. It requires a readjustment in relationships among people leading to genuine equality. Likewise, it requires each and everyone to reform attitudes, and a thorough change in sense of values, options, etc.

*There should not be any opposition between structural and personal conversion, favoring one person over another. Both aspects of this change-conversion complement each other and are necessarily mutual. The ideal the gospel speaks of is a new man and woman, in a new society.
(Mt 9:10-13; Mk 2:15-17; Lk 5:28-32)*

27

THE LOST SHEEP

Peter: For God’s sake, Jesus, open your eyes! Can’t you see?... Matthew has been sold to the Romans, a bootlicker of Herod!

Jesus: Matthew is a man, Peter, like you and me.

James: Damn that man and damn you, too! Matthew is a traitor. Tax collectors are traitors, and they gotta be crushed like serpents!

Peter, James and I stayed with Jesus at the wharf’s inn beside the lake. The night before, Jesus was in the house of Matthew, the tax collector of Capernaum, and had dinner with him.

John: Haven’t you noticed that this guy, Matthew, is always alone as if he were a leper? No one in the city wants to be with him or go near him.

Peter: And you know why? Because he stinks and you can smell him miles away.

John: Is he the kind you want in the group, Jesus? What’s it that you really want?

James: I agree with Andrew. If this good-for-nothing creature joins the group, then I’m goin’. I don’t wanna be with traitors.

Peter: Neither do I. May the One in heaven cut off my balls if someday I betray my kind!

Jesus: I wouldn’t say that you are a traitor, Peter. Who doesn’t know that Matthew is a traitor to the country? But probably, we can all reform Matthew.

John: “Probably... probably...” And what could be worse is that he may spill the beans and get us all killed on account of your imprudence! I’m sorry, Jesus. You’re not gifted with political talent. You don’t even have a sense of smell. No one ever puts a wolf in the midst of sheep.

Jesus: Who ever told you Matthew is a wolf? Wolves are different, John. Matthew used to be like us. I know he’s a crook now. But still, he ain’t no wolf.

Peter: Oh really? Who then is the wolf?

Jesus: I dunno; but when I saw Matthew seated at that stall, alone with inkstain and half drunk... I remembered an ancient story told to me by Joachim when I was a li’l boy in Nazareth....

Joachim: There was once a shepherd with a hundred sheep. When the sun rose in the morning the shepherd would get up and lead his flock to the mountain where there was greener grass and cooler

water... All his sheep were strong, healthy, clean and well-taken care of, except one who was sickly at birth and had one leg shorter than the others. This sheep was always left behind because she was limping. Ever since she was born she was despised and ignored by everyone. No one ever played or ate with her. Nobody even went near her. She was always alone... One day, as the shepherd and his flock were going to the mountain, it began to rain... The shepherd started to run and his sheep ran after him to return to the fold. The sick sheep tried to run too, imitating her companions, but she couldn't keep up. She would trip, then would rise again, and would fall again... The shepherd and his flock lost their way at the turn of the road. The lightning flashed and the fog blurred the way. The weak sheep got lost, and dragged her lame leg looking for her companions' tracks. But the water washed away the road and she didn't know where she was nor which way to follow. She went to and fro and was getting drenched in the rain, and got farther and farther away from the rest. It was getting dark... Meanwhile, the shepherd, followed by his flock, reached the fold. He always made them pass through the hole so he could count them one by one...

Shepherd: "...95...96...97...98...99... What happened? I'm missin' one sheep. This can't be. Maybe I counted wrong..."

Joachim: And he counted again...

Shepherd: "...95...96...97...98...99...there are only 99 of them! I'm missin' one sheep! Maybe it's the sick and limping one... Good Lord, where could this poor creature have strayed?"

Joachim: The other shepherds told him, "Hey, don't worry about her. She's sick and can't walk. She's of no use to you. Let her sleep in the open air, or just leave her to the wolves..." Evening came, and the lame sheep, alone and lost, continued to go to and from the mountain. She cried but no one responded. She cried louder and louder, but alone in the mountains all she could hear from afar was the howling of hungry wolves... The lost sheep got very scared. She ran without knowing where to go and fell into a ravine... She rolled over sharp rocks doing somersaults, sliding down below where the earth was muddy. She was beginning to sink... The shepherd was lying on his straw mat and keeping warm. He tried to sleep, but in vain; he was thinking of his lost sheep.

Shepherd: "...Mmm... What a time to get lost on a bad night like this!... Why does she always have to be the last? Uff... well, what can we do? She asked for it, let her come out of it. I am going to sleep."

Joachim: The sheep with the broken leg still had a spark of life in her. As she exerted her last effort to get out of the ravine she sank even more. The mud was slowly swallowing her... In the warmth of his hut, the shepherd finally fell asleep... And while he was sleeping peacefully the lost sheep went down, down the dark ravine. The mud covered her mouth and her whole body. She could neither shout nor move. She was dead.

Peter: What happened afterwards?

Jesus: Nothing. That's the end of the story.

John: What?

Jesus: Yes, the story's finished.

Peter: But why should it end that way, Jesus?... What did the shepherd do?... He let her die?

Jesus: Well, the shepherd did what he could...

Peter: What he could! Tell me why he didn't look for the sheep...

Jesus: That's easier said than done, Peter, to go out in the middle of the night during a storm....

John: Hell, he should've covered himself with a cloak!

Jesus: What about the other sheep, huh? He had to watch over his flock....

Peter: The good-for-nothing was sleeping!

Jesus: He had to take care of the ninety-nine sheep...

John: Bah, they could've been left alone. Didn't you say they were healthy and strong? But the poor, helpless sheep...

Jesus: Well John, neither is she worth much. After all, she's only one...

John: No, no, no, it's not fair that way, Jesus. That story of yours has left a lump in my throat. I hate the ending.

Peter: So do I.

Jesus: I don't understand you guys, because that's just how you wanted the story to end....

Peter: We? But you were the one who told us the story, dammit!

Jesus: No, you did. You John, and you too, Peter. So did you, red hair! Fortunately, God has given it another ending. Yes, God tells us the story in a different way. Listen... Once, when the shepherd reached the fold, he began to count his sheep...

Shepherd: ...95...96...97...98...99... Well, well, I'm missin' one sheep. I gotta go and look for it right away!

Joachim: But his companions told him: "How can you go out in this kind of weather?... There's a heavy downpour out... It's already night. You won't be able to find her. Anyway, she's only one. Are you going to leave the ninety-nine behind for this one?..." But the shepherd ignored them, took his staff, put on his cloak and hurriedly left in the midst of darkness to look for the sick and stray sheep...

Shepherd: Starlight!... Starlight, where are you?! Starlight!

Joachim: He called her by her name. He ran from one side to another, went up and down the hill shouting at the top of his voice until he was hoarse... He didn't mind the rain, the cold of the night nor his weariness... He was only thinking of his sheep who was in danger. He had to find her before it was too late...

Shepherd: Starlight!... Where are you? Starlight!

Joachim: After having looked everywhere there was hardly a tinge of hope left in him, when he heard a bleating from afar... Yes, he knew that voice... Of course, he knew it was her!

Shepherd: Starlight! Starlight!

Joachim: It was his sheep, and she was alive!... The shepherd rushed down to the bottom of the ravine and took the sheep... she was out of danger! He then carried her on his shoulders, covered her with his cloak and returned her to his fold. He bandaged her wounds and lay her beside her sisters on the warm straw mat. That night, the shepherd was so happy that he woke his neighbors up...

Shepherd: My friends, I have found my sheep! I have found my sheep! She was lost and almost dead... But I have found her! Rejoice with me, my friends! Come, let's all drink to this... I want everybody to be happy tonight!

John: Well, that's better, dammit. But tell me...

James: ...Tell me, Jesus, after all is said and done, what's the purpose of your story, huh?

Jesus: I dunno, James... Sometimes... sometimes I think God will be happier to see a lost soul like Matthew goin' back to Him and changin' his ways, than to see the ninety-nine whom we believe to be good and just.

Six centuries earlier, the prophet Ezekiel wrote in his book: "Thus says the Lord: my flock is astray and there is no one to take care of them. That's why I am here. I myself will take care of my flock and watch over them. I shall take them from places where they go astray on cloudy and foggy days. I shall look for the lost sheep and bring back the stray ones, cure wounds and heal the sick. I shall lead everyone to the path of justice."

Jesus' friendship with Matthew, the tax collector, creates the first serious conflict in the apostolic group. The other disciples do not know how to interpret such a gesture.

If the gospel calls for a radical equality among people, it will necessarily provoke conflict in society and even within the same Christian community. It is difficult to eliminate such prejudices, to accept the other person as a brother or sister, and to overcome all types of discrimination. This is a long process and sometimes, a painful one. Even if properly channeled, these pressures may give way to a real crisis of growth and maturity within the community.

The parable of the lost sheep is one in which Jesus wants to explain what God is like.

At the outset it is surprising that Jesus compares God's feeling and attitude with those of a shepherd. Together with the tax collectors and others of despicable occupation (usurers, money-changers, etc.), the shepherds were known as people of ill-repute during Jesus' time and were undoubtedly considered among the "sinners." They were suspected of pasturing their flocks in other people's fields and were believed to be involved in much cheating and stealing.

Up to the present, it is the custom in Palestine for the shepherd to count the flock at dusk before putting them into the fold to ensure that no animal was lost. The shepherd in Jesus' story has 100 sheep. For those familiar with those times, this flock was of average importance. Among the Bedouins the flocks would ordinarily number between 20 and 200 animals consisting of sheep or goats. A herd of 100 sheep was exclusively tended by only one shepherd who, because of his economic situation, could not afford to hire anyone to help him.

On the whole, the data of the evangelical text and the particular detail of a shepherd carrying the sheep on his shoulders makes one think that the sheep was an especially weak animal. This is basic in the narration in order to get a picture Jesus makes of God: it is not the worth of the animal which compels the shepherd to look for her. It is enough that the sheep is his own and he loves her for her being handicapped. He also knows her; he is aware that the sheep cannot find her way alone. The good shepherd – says Jesus on one occasion – knows each of his sheep and calls each one by its name (Jn 10:1-21). This parable deals essentially with God's feeling – the joy of recovering the lost one. Such a feeling of joy will be fully manifest at the end of the story when the day of reckoning comes. God will be happier to announce the salvation of "one lost soul" than that of the many just ones. It hurts to see these erring ones all alone by themselves and being despised all their lives, but Jesus will be immensely happy to have them beside him. Jesus speaks of a joy defining God: that of salvation and forgiveness. He acts in the same manner as God who has a preference for the weak and the despised. We see God in Jesus' words and works. The whole of Christian Theology is embodied in this...

Jesus compares God to a shepherd and says the same of himself. In the gospel of John, Jesus appears as the Good Shepherd. Such analogies have a lot of antecedents in the Old Testament. The text of the prophet Ezekiel (34: 1-31) announcing the Messianic times is the most direct source of Jesus' being inspired by this parable. The image of the shepherd carrying his lost sheep on his shoulders is strongly emphasized by Jesus to his apostles. This, together with the fish and the bread, is also the most frequently-used symbol of the first Christians. We find this image of the Good Shepherd in sculptures, sepulchers, altars and catacomb walls where the persecuted Christians gathered to pray and celebrate their faith.

(Mt 18:12-14; Lk 15:3-7)

28

GOD IS ON OUR SIDE

At dawn it rained in Galilee. Dark clouds from Lebanon cloaked Esdraelon's plains. Lightning, like arrows of fire, flashed through the sky and struck the crown of palm trees. Those were summer storms.... We were confined to our houses and patched the roof holes as we awaited the end of the interminable torrent....

It rained the whole morning. The drenched earth could no longer soak up anymore water. The clouds were all the more dispersed and posed greater fury...

A Man: I'll be damned! Hailstones! Hailstones!

It was noontime when it cleared up. The marine crows reappeared and fluttered about the ash-colored

lake.... All of us fishermen hastily went to shake the wet sails of our boats and stretch the dripping nets. As we left, we heard screams from the fields.... The women were running like crazy, lamenting and pulling out their hair. The men followed behind with bowed heads.

Man: What happened? Why are the women weeping? Who died?

A Woman: The wheat! The wheat is destroyed!

The farmers left their houses and rushed to the fields where the storm had destroyed the wheat due for harvest. The grain had been battered by the violent storm and was scattered on the ground.

A Woman: The wheat's destroyed! The wheat's destroyed!

Another Woman: There won't be any bread for the poor this year!

The whole of Capernaum lamented the crop's loss as though they were mourning a child's death. The artisans, traders, fishermen and even prostitutes in Jasmine Street all sympathized with the farmers in the fields. If there was no harvest then no one would have anything to eat...

A Man: Damn this rain! What will become of us now?

A Woman: We shall all starve again and be at the mercy of the usurers, or beg on the streets!

Another Woman: Perhaps, even sell our souls to the devil!

Peter, James, Jesus and I were getting drenched among the ruined crops in the midst of those screams... Gradually, we managed to move away from the city. The farmers climbed the hill of the seven fountains and from there gazed at the vast flooded field that could pass for the lake of Tiberias...

A Woman: Ay, what sin have we committed to deserve such misfortune?

Another Woman: It's gotta be the sins of many taken together, because if it's not the rain it's the drought, otherwise it's the increase in taxes or a child getting sick... Be that as it may, we're always the losers!

A Man: Look at the result of my labor for these past few months... everything's lost... all ravaged...

Dammit... they can bury me on this land, land which is not even mine!

Old Woman: We die with the wheat crops... Oh God... help us!

Another Man: Why do you have to call on God for help? Leave Him alone in heaven 'cuz He's too busy counting the stars.... God doesn't care!

Woman: Let's just accept our fate, my friend... Nothing can be done about it...

Man: Yes, let's be resigned to our fate... But what if my children cry again for bread tomorrow?

Shall I tell them to accept this as our fate?

Old Woman: This is life, my son; the life of the poor. We simply bow our heads to accept everything that comes our way...

Man: Well, I can't take this anymore – I've suffered all my life, do you hear? Year after year it's always like this... Until when will this last?...

Jesus: Hey guys, look above you! Look up!

At that moment a rainbow appeared in the sky... Jesus was the first to see it....

Jesus: That is the Lord's arch!... It is the sign of peace after the deluge!

Woman: Will you stop that silly talk, stranger!... There might be peace in heaven but on earth, all is hunger! Where there is starvation, there are tears and damnation!

Jesus: No, woman. The rain has ceased and so have the tears. Nothing can be solved by weeping and pulling one's hair.

Old Woman: And what else can we do, huh? Before, we had very little; now, we've got nothing. Nothing's left for us to do but weep!

Jesus: No, grandmother, we've got eyes to see the Messiah!

Man: Who'd you say it was? The Messiah? Ha! And where has this young man been hiding, that he doesn't even show his face? Tell the Messiah to hurry up, because, with the way things have been goin' for

us, we might all be dead when we're supposed to welcome him!

Jesus: But he's comin' soon! Look at the rainbow, brothers and sisters, God is coming down through it!... Our liberation is near!

The people were milling around us. Jesus was beside me, his naked feet were sunk deep in the mud and his beard was dripping wet...Up above, the rainbow crossed the purified air, bridging heaven and earth....

Jesus: Listen to me, my sisters and brothers: It rained so hard the whole night and day that we thought it would never cease.... This was what Noah thought after forty days of heavy rain. But it stopped, and he came out of the Ark. Likewise, this was what our ancestors in Egypt thought after four hundred years of suffering and subjugation, but they crossed the Red Sea and were freed. We have also spent four hundred years of oppression. The pharaohs have always crushed us to death like these wheat grains. We were ground into small bits and the flour that came out of our own sweat was made into bread that they ate. All this is over. God will wait no longer, and neither shall we!

Man: Hey, what is this idiot sayin'?..... Look, you... are you crazy or what?

Jesus: Neighbors! We have reason to rejoice, in spite of everything!

Old Woman: Are you mad, young man? Why the hell should we rejoice when we've lost everything?

Jesus: We have the Lord, grandmother. We still have Him. He's on your side! He's offered his Kingdom to us, understand? To us, who are starving, downtrodden, the losers; to all of us!

The people kept on shoving one another in order to hear what Jesus was saying. The women stopped weeping, squeezing their mud-stained and rain-drenched skirts to dry. The men shook their heads, cynical and sarcastic, but also drew closer to listen to Jesus....

Jesus: Yes, indeed, we have reason to rejoice! Happy are we, the poor, for ours is the Kingdom of God!

An old man wistfully supported his chin with his cane....

Old Man: I think you are playing a joke on us, young man. It's misfortune and not joy to be poor. No one ever goes to the wake to congratulate the dead.

Jesus: Please listen to me, old man. God doesn't commend you for being poor. He will commend you though, because you will cease to be such. This includes you and everyone else. A new world is about to begin! The Kingdom of God has come! For us who lament to see our sick and undernourished children, for us who wet the earth with our tears.... God's joy shall be for us! Now, we hunger; but on the day of liberation, no one will be wanting in bread or wine. We shall soon eat and drink in His Kingdom... and that will be very soon... We, the hungry, shall receive God's justice!

Woman: "Soon, soon".... When will that be? ...In heaven perhaps... Yes, in the other life, because we shall all have perished of starvation!

Jesus: No, we shall have no need for food in the other life. This is for our time on earth... The Kingdom of God is coming to this world!...

Jesus leaned over and picked up some wet mounds of earth... His eyes sparkled as if he were holding a treasure in his hand...

Jesus: This earth belongs to us... the land, the wheat and the wine are God's legacy to us, the humble!

Old Woman: Say whatever you like, my son. I'm eighty years old now and have yet to see a hairy frog or a poor person defeating a rich one.

Jesus: That we shall see, old woman; with our own eyes! Have faith. Happy are those whose eyes are pure, for they shall see the coming of the Kingdom on earth!

Some of the men squatted to hear him better. The sun began peeping behind the clouds and was reflected in the pools from the typhoon. Despite the havoc done to the crops, it seemed to us that not everything was lost....

Jesus: The Messiah is coming to level the earth. No longer will there be hills nor ravines. Nothing shall be high nor low. All shall be equal and be brothers and sisters. No one shall have more than the other. Happy are those who share what they have: God will share His Kingdom with them!

Woman: That's what I have always been saying. Goodness!... If we were only less selfish we would have lived in peace and without such extreme anguish!

But that small group believes the world is all their own and we are what we are now, fighting for a handful of wheat grains while their barns are filled to the brim. Do you think this is right, stranger? Tell me.

Jesus: That's why there can never be peace: because the wealthy's barns are not shared with those who are always in need. Many talk of peace: their lips utter sweet and beautiful words yet they steal and kill with their own hands. They talk of peace yet are children of war. God commends not them but the true artisans of peace: those who work for justice, the children of God!

All: Good! Good!

Jesus: The rich are blind. The blind can't see the rainbow's radiance, much less our sufferings, simply because they refuse to see. What ambitious people!.... They shall be ruined when the time comes. Soon we shall hear them scream just as we have wailed now. They may be laughing now, but soon they shall weep and grieve in excruciating pain when the Lord empties their chests; the Messiah strips them of their rings and robes, starves them and swipes their money the way they did to their workers.... Yes, my companions, things will change, the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

All: Good, that's the way to speak!...

John: Beware, Jesus. There are so many people here. There will always be a squealer around. We will be accused of troublemaking and....

Jesus: Let them do what they want, John. My friends, when the powerful hate us, when they persecute us in every town and drag us to courts, ...we must rejoice too! That is always the fate of those who seek justice. Elijah and all the prophets were persecuted and that is why John is still in prison. This doesn't matter though. God commends those who fearlessly speak and risk their lives to defend others. Yes my friends, let us proclaim all this to the world, for the peasants of Chorazim to hear, for Bethsaida's artisans, for Tiberias' fishermen and for the prostitutes of Magdala. Let the news spread throughout the valley for everyone to hear, from the fount of Dan to the arid lands of Beer-sheba. God is on our side! He is with us, the poor people; God is fighting on our side!

Jesus said this on the Mount of the Seven Fountains that faces the lakes near Capernaum.

The Beatitudes – one of the best known parts and adopted from the Gospel – best summarize the fundamental preachings and activities of Jesus: the proclamation of the Good News to the poor. The Beatitudes are not a collection of conduct norms (such as “we must” be poor, “we must” be merciful...). They are joyful news intended for the poor, the losers and the oppressed. In order to highlight this aspect of the Good News – which is very concrete – and not to reduce the Beatitudes into mere moralizing and abstraction, Jesus in this episode discourses on the Beatitudes in the concrete situation of hopelessness and pain, and that was when the peasants of Capernaum lost all their harvest.

The so-called “Mount of Beatitudes” or “the Mount of the Seven Fountains” is situated about three kilometers from Capernaum. Although it is of low altitude – about 100 meters – one can see the whole of Lake Galilee from its peak in an exceptionally breathtaking view. The Church of the Beatitudes was constructed there in 1937. It has eight walls in memory of the Eight Beatitudes as cited in the Gospel of Matthew. On various occasions they were adopted as a formula for consolation. Those who weep and suffer from hunger should not despair. God will wipe their tears, feed them and fill their hearts with joy.... up to the world beyond. If everything has been bleak for them on earth then their fate will change in the afterlife. Such adulteration of the Gospel departs from the false interpretation that the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaims to the poor is equivalent to the Kingdom of “the heavens,” as a kind of promise for

the other life. The Gospel, however, is an historical message. If Jesus calls the poor blessed and tells them to rejoice, it is because they will cease to be poor when the Kingdom of Justice comes on earth. The Beatitudes are already an indication of God's intervention. Hope is proclaimed that a change in history in favor of the oppressed is now under way. The Gospel is not a kind of resignation or consolation for the less privileged but a catalyst for commitment, a call to "hold high one's head with the coming of the day of liberation." (Lk 21:28).

Instead of saying: "Happy are you, the poor," Jesus says: "Happy are we, the poor." "We who weep, we who hunger..." Jesus was poor, as poor and oppressed as the people of Capernaum to whom he addressed the Beatitudes. This is too easily forgotten, making Jesus some kind of a religious guru who "makes himself poor," disguises himself, so that the poor will understand him better. This is his apostolate and gesture of divine condescension with the suffering people. Having this in mind, we distort not only a portion but the very essence of the Gospel. We misrepresent God's plan who wished to reveal Himself concretely in the person of a humble peasant of Nazareth. In fact, up to this day, He continues to manifest Himself in the life and struggle of the poor.

There have been speculations on who these poor people were to whom Jesus addressed the Beatitudes. So much has been said about the "poor in spirit." In Luke it says: happy are the poor, while in Matthew, it is: the poor in spirit. (In other translations, we have: Those who know how to be poor, those who opt to be poor). Surely, Luke's tradition is the most original. Jesus addresses himself to those who actually have nothing, those who suffer hunger. This "spirit" which Matthew added later on is in line with the preachings of the prophets of the Old Testament, who often discoursed on the "humble in spirit," the "downcast in spirit," the "anawim" (the poor). The word "anawim," a key word in biblical texts, corresponds with the unfortunate, the oppressed, the helpless, the hopeless men and women who rely on God's mercy because they are rejected by the rich and powerful. Luke stresses the fact of the poor's external oppression. Matthew, on the other hand, focuses on their spiritual need (which is always present in people suffering from external oppression). Matthew and Luke wrote for different readers. The Church addressed by Luke was generally composed of oppressed men and women within the powerful structure of the Roman empire: slaves and urban people of various social orientation exploited by the harsh conditions of life... Matthew catered to the Jewish Church which was still easy prey to influential thinking of the pharisees, like: Decent people are good and obey moral laws, etc. His "poor in spirit" are those who lack morality, the sinners, people of ill-repute... Notwithstanding this difference in nuances, Luke and Matthew successfully get across the prophetic message of Jesus: The Kingdom of God is His gift to the poor of this world. Although Matthew presents us eight Beatitudes and Luke only four (including his lamentations against the rich), the texts should not be misunderstood as an index handed to us by two different types of people. Both evangelists speak of one and the same reality: "Happy are the poor" and this sums up all the Beatitudes. Everything boils down to this prescription: Happy are the poor because God is on their side and they cease to be poor. They are not happy because of "their good comportment," but because "they are poor." The situation they are in, oppression and exploitation, has earned for themselves God's sympathy. God prefers the poor not because they are "good" but because they are poor. This message of Jesus is absolutely revolutionary. Aside from saying that moral norms as criteria for God's benevolence do not count, the message further states that God puts Himself in the context of historical conflicts: the side of people on the bottom of the ladder.

The meaning of "poverty" can be erroneous. In the Bible, poverty as a state of oppression is a scandalous condition because it is anti-life. Therefore it is against the will of God. Poverty must be rejected, fought against and eliminated. It is not fate but the consequence of human abuse of others. Christian attitude towards poverty must be that of God: reject it and show a preference for the poor. It is an option which does not end in mere denunciation and words of condemnation. The old Mosaic Laws were not mere words; they were social laws intended to avoid poverty and defend the poor. Every effort to fight and suppress poverty is therefore a step toward promoting the Kingdom of God even if those who are involved in it do not believe in God nor in Jesus.

Therefore, poverty should not be introduced as a Christian ideal. To opt for poverty – in present-day situations of injustice being experienced by various countries – becomes a Christian preference only when it is in solidarity with the poor in their struggle against poverty. Taken in another light, poverty shall be understood as “infancy” before the Lord: such as the attitude of humility, with no power, with no aspirations. This “poverty-infancy” tandem is in line with this biblical interpretation. However, it is obvious that a person who accumulates wealth and privilege at the expense of others shall never be poor in this sense if he or she does not first rid self of wealth and power.

(Mt 5:1-12; Lk 6:20-26)

29

THE POOR MAN’S WHEAT

It was Saturday when the hailstorm destroyed the wheat crops that were about to be harvested. In Israel, Saturday is a day of rest. Women do not light their stoves, nor do men go to the field. The seventh day of the week is consecrated to God. But that Saturday was not a day of rest for us. We were gathered on the Mount of the Seven Fountains facing the lake together with the farmers from Capernaum who had lost their harvest...

A Man: This year’s gonna be very bad. It’s gonna be a year of hunger.

An Old Woman: Everything’s gone. The storm did it all!

Another Man: Not all, old woman. Eleazar’s farm wasn’t destroyed and he has plenty of wheat.

A Man: Phanuel’s farm was also spared. Those rascals own so much land and their barns are so numerous that not even heaven can destroy them.

Another Man: The rich always land on their feet like cats. They’re never losers. Now they’ll increase the price of flour to that of gold!

A Woman: Are they trying to kill us?

Man: What else can we do but tighten our belts! We can’t go against the will of heaven!

Old Woman: But we can do something about the hoarders.

Man: Really? And what can we do? Shall we confront them on their farms?

Old Woman: Why not? What did our ancient laws say? That the poor may gather the excess on the rich men’s farms so no one goes hungry in Israel.

Man: Old Deborah is right. Moses commanded the rich to give away excess food that the less fortunate might have something to eat.

Woman: Did Moses really say that? Then let the Law of Moses be fulfilled, dammit!

When the wife of another farmer named Ishmael said this, everyone looked at each other indecisively. The men scratched their heads while the women whispered among themselves...

Woman: What are we waiting for?... Didn’t the stranger from Nazareth and all of you say that God’s on our side and that things are heading for change? Why don’t we give him a little push so that things will change soon?... Let’s gather the grains in Eleazar’s farm!

Man: Yes, let’s all go!

Old Woman: Hold it, hold it!... Alright, we all go there, but without haste and without making trouble. This was how Moses led the Israelites through the desert. It’s much better to claim justice the right way!

All: That’s very well said, grandmother!... Let’s go, everybody.

With Ishmael’s wife and old Deborah at the lead, we all started to go down the hill and headed toward the vast tract of land starting from the north of the Seven Fountains. We passed through miles of fertile land

owned by the powerful Eleazar...

Man: Are you all out of your mind?... Where are we headed? This can't be!

Woman: And why not?

Man: How can we slip freely into his farm?

Woman: This miser Eleazar has all his barns filled with the previous harvest.

Man: Yes, but...

Woman: No more buts.... This man has more than enough!

Man: While we have nothing!... Come on, everybody, let's all go! In the name of God!

We were like an army in tatters. We went splashing through the fields, sliding down the muddy slope as we approached the posts that marked Eleazar's property. The storm was so strong, it destroyed the crops, but the farm was so huge, grain lay scattered here and there, undestroyed....

Man: Look, there is still so much wheat left!

Old Woman: Let's start it! And don't you worry; Ruth started this way. See how well it turned out for her in the end.

We dispersed through the inundated wheat fields, like ants swarming in confusion after a storm. We were all covered with mud up to our knees. Then we started to cut the sturdy ears that had withstood the violent storm. The men took out their knives and began to harvest. Behind them were the women who were gathering the wet wheat in their skirts....

Old Woman: Gather all you can! ...everything! Fill your skirts with whatever you gather!

Man: Listen, old woman, aren't we doing something wrong?

Old Woman: Oh, my son, I dunno, but they say that a thief who steals from another thief is forgiven for one hundred years!

Man: And what do you say to this, young man from Nazareth?

Jesus: Well, I think we've got to.....oh!

Man: Be careful, Jesus...!

Jesus slid and fell on his butt into the mud pool. When we saw him, his face was covered with mud, and we all laughed boisterously....

Man: Hey, man, don't eat the soil!

Woman: This stranger looks just like Adam when God created him in paradise...!

Jesus laughed as well, as if someone had tickled him. His tunic was wet and he was supporting himself on a few rocks. Finally, he managed to get himself out of the mudpool...

Jesus: What a life, my friends.... A while ago, we were all weeping, now we're laughing. And how things change... We can change things with the help of our hands, with God's hand supporting us.... Yes, we can move on! Tomorrow, everything will be different. We shall rid ourselves of the present pains, and there'll be no more tears nor screams. We'll all be happy and God'll be happy, too, because He's on our side. God'll lend a hand and will help us build a new world out of this old clay.

We continued pulling the stalks. Jesus was gathering beside me and I remember him still laughing over his fall. Peter, James and Andrew were helping a group of farmers who had penetrated the inner part of the farm....

When we had finished cutting enough wheat, Eleazar's foremen arrived. They were rushing toward us, with poles and hunting dogs....

Foreman: Thieves, thieves!

There was great confusion. Most of us were able to jump over the posts with our arms and the women's skirts full of wheat ears. Others left the wheat and their sandals, fleeing like scared rabbits,

leaping from one mudpool to another....

Eleazar: May I know who thought of this plot against my farm? Who gave you the right to steal from my property?

Woman: With God's right. We came here in the name of God!

Eleazar: Oh really? Or could it be in the name of the devil! He who steals is the devil's brood!

Man: He who sucks the blood of his laborers like you do is father to the devil!

Eleazar: You shut up or be beaten up!... This way you will learn how to respect the law, you thieves!

Man: We weren't stealing. Why call us thieves?

Eleazar: So you're not stealing. What shall I call you then? I caught you with your hands in my wheat, pulling the few ears that were left after this morning's storm. And you say you're not thieves!

Woman: We ain't no thieves. We simply obeyed God's Law.

Abiel: Shut up, you big mouth! Don't you ever mention the name of God with your filthy lips!

We were brought by Eleazar's men to one of the yards of the house. With him were his two friend scribes, Abiel and Josaphat.

Abiel: I tell you, Master Eleazar, you gotta find out who's behind this conspiracy... who the mastermind is.

Eleazar: Who're your leaders, huh? Who advised you to steal from my property?

Old Woman: It's hunger. Yes, we're dictated by hunger. We need wheat for our children!

Eleazar: So! If you weren't so lazy, you wouldn't experience hunger. Hunger comes from laziness!

Woman: It's the result of people's greed people like you!

Eleazar: If you shout at me again, I'll have your tongue and hands cut off!... But what's got into your head? That I will allow such a brazen act in broad daylight like this? I'll inform the Roman captain and you won't leave jail without paying damages. You all hear me?

Jesus, who was quiet until then, replied to the landowner...

Jesus: Aren't you contented with the wheat that is kept rotting in your barns? And you still want to deprive us of the excess grain that you have?

Eleazar: And where did this young man get such temerity? Well, you listen, stranger: I'm gonna kick you and the rest right into jail!

Jesus: Then, you'll have to put King David in prison too.

Josaphat: What did this damned fellow say?

Jesus: I said David did something worse than what we did, yet David became a great saint.

Abiel: What nonsense are you talkin' about? What has King David gotta do with this?

Josaphat: With whom do you think you are talkin', peasant? We're teachers of Law from the school of Ben-Sira.

Jesus: Well, if you're really teachers, then you'll remember David and his companions. They were hungry, and entered not into the farm but the Temple of God, where they ate the consecrated bread on the altar.... Do you realize that? God didn't punish them for having stolen bread because they were hungry! A starving human being is more sacred than the holy temple of the Almighty!

Josaphat: Oh dammit! What's this insolent talking about?

Your own words betray you. You must be their leader. Go tell the tribunal your story about King David, so you'll get the beatings you deserve!

Woman: We only got what belonged to us, according to Moses!

Eleazar: Shut up, you bitch! All this is mine and nobody else's, do you hear? All this land extending down to Lake Merom belongs to me and nobody can take even a single grain of wheat from it!

Jesus: We have taken only a few stalks while you have stolen the whole land, which is worse. The Scripture says that the land belongs to God and nobody can take possession of it. You're the thief, not us.

Eleazar: I'm getting impatient, you thieves!... I was the one being robbed, yet you expect me to bear your impertinence?!

Abiel: And the worst thing is they did it today.

Josaphat: Today is the Sabbath, a holy day. These people have violated the Law on two counts: by stealing and working on the Sabbath. Do you realize the crime that you've committed against the sacred Law of God?

Jesus: People are not created for the Law but the Law is for people. If you really understood the Law, you wouldn't accuse us of any crime. The first law that God commands of us is: We should have enough in order to live.

All: Dammit! That was very well said!

Eleazar: Enough of this silly talk! We shall all go to the synagogue right now and let the tribunal hear you! Hurry up!

The noisy crowd was getting bigger. Several farmers, men and women alike who were waiting outside the farm joined us on our way to the city. The landowner and the scribes advised the Roman soldiers to maintain order and to take us to the synagogue, where the teachers of Law would judge what we did.

This episode is in a way related to the previous account. Jesus proclaims that God is on the side of the poor – that He suffers and struggles with them. Jesus puts into practice the message of this proclamation and the poor who believe in it rely on him for the consequences as they move on to realize their liberation. The gospel is not merely words of liberation but deals with the act of liberating being undertaken by Jesus' followers. At the same time, in our communities the gospel cannot end up with mere accusations, with mere words. It should be translated into concrete action, inspired by the message of Jesus such as: organization, commitment, struggle...

The culture of the Mediterranean – where Palestine is located is a “wheat culture.” Just as in Central America, the culture of the “Mayas and the Aztecs” is a “corn culture.” Similarly, we speak of the culture of various tropical countries as “banana culture” or “rice culture.” Wheat was the principal crop of Palestine and constituted the bulk of agricultural provision to the cities. Famine corresponded to scarcity of wheat.

Galilee was known for the quality of its wheat. In the fields around the lake as well as in Capernaum, there were vast wheatfields mostly owned by a few landowners. Feudal estates were common in the north. One of the goals of the zealots' movement was agrarian reform, which earned the sympathy of the farmers and the small landowners. On the other hand, the big landowners collaborated with the Romans who assured them of retaining ownership of vast tracts of land.

When the first tribes of shepherds came to Israel, land was distributed among families, according to the area they occupied. The ownership of land was a family inheritance and from the religious point of view, God was considered the owner of all land (Lev 25:23). To go beyond the limits of family patrimony was a violation of the will of God. Nevertheless, in Jesus' time and before his time, there were big landowners who on various occasions acquired lands by putting fraudulent landmarks on their farms (Job 24:2). The prophets repeatedly denounced the economy (Is 5:8; Hos 5:10), which was further encouraged during the period of Roman domination. From the economic point of view, the most tangible consequence of the Roman occupation was the process of extending feudal property at the expense of communal ownership. This led to the rapid impoverishment of the farmers, who, from small landowners became hired laborers in the service of wealthy landlords.

To stop this greed, there were laws in Israel limiting property ownership and excessive accumulation of the same: The Year of Grace, the Sabbatical Year. There were other laws to protect the poor, the orphans, the widows and the foreigners according to which the landowners had to yield part of their harvest and surplus products from their farms and trees (Lev 19:10; Deut 24:19-22). The residents of Capernaum pulled the wheat grains on a Sabbath day. The law of the Sabbath was the core of the existing legal system in Israel in Jesus' time. A willful violation of this law, and after a first warning, was sufficient reason for a death sentence. The law of the Sabbath prohibited any type of work or effort on this sacred day. At present, there is no law of this kind in our country. Just as Jesus proclaimed in his time, the

supremacy of people over the law of the Sabbath, we Christians must proclaim with the same strength the social meaning of ownership (property) in a manner Pope John Paul II would formulate it: "The social obligation of ownership."

The most ancient tradition of the Church has pointed out that when a poor person, out of necessity, takes what is an excess from a rich one, that person should not be rebuked nor be considered a thief. A thief is one who takes away what the other needs. On the question of what is "mine" and what is "yours," St. Basil said to the rich and the powerful: "Tell me, which things are yours? You took them from somewhere and here you are claiming them as yours? You claimed as your own what used to be property of all. Now, who is the thief? What other name can you give to someone who does not clothe the naked when he can very well do it? You refuse to give bread to the hungry; you hide in your chest the cloak to clothe the naked, and you let the sandals rot in your house rather than give them to the barefoot..." (Homily "Destruam").

The peaceful, mass action undertaken by the residents of Capernaum to fight for their basic right to life is supported by the ancient Mosaic law. Jesus was similarly inspired in justifying the above by citing the episode of King David in the sanctuary of Nob (1 S 21:1-7), where he took the consecrated bread so that he and his men would have something to eat. The great freedom with which King David acted was the same style that Jesus would always resort to, in order to show how a law became worthless if it was oppressive to people and to life. St. Paul would later on say that the law of the Christians is no other than the law of freedom (Gal 5:1-18).

(Mt 12:1-8; Mk 2:23-28; Lk 6:1-5)

30

THE WITHERED HANDS

Eleazar, the landlord, caught us picking the heads of wheat on his farm after the storm destroyed the crops in Capernaum. The scribes who were his friends dragged us into the synagogue to judge our act. It was the day of the Sabbath.

Abiel: Go inside, you band of rascals!

Josaphath: Now let's see what you gotta say to the Rabbi. Thieves, bandits!

Abiel: C'mon, and make them pay, the guilty ones!

Although the synagogue had a number of wide entrance doors, many people had to climb through the windows in order to get in. They didn't want to miss anything in that altercation. Half of Capernaum was there.... The Rabbi, who was getting impatient, walked from one side to another, without looking at us...

Abiel: Rabbi Eliab, these men here have instigated the people to steal wheat from Eleazar's farm.

Josaphath: They trespassed into somebody else's property!

Abiel: If they had only been ordinary thieves, we wouldn't have brought them to you! They stole on the day of the Sabbath! They've desecrated the Law of Moses!

Rabbi: Oh?.... And that's why they are here.... May I know why you did it?

A Man: Because we're hungry!

All: That's right!!

Rabbi: Silence!.... Only one will speak!

A Man: We've lost our crops, Rabbi! We need food!

A Woman: Our children will starve to death!

Rabbi: Quiet, all of you!... I said only one must speak!... Let's see, you, come over here!.... Yes, you!..

The Rabbi grabbed Nito by his tunic sleeve. He was the son of Anna, a good but not very bright boy...

Rabbi: Answer me: Did you break into the farm of landlord Eleazar to get some wheat?

Nito: Yes, Rabbi!

Rabbi: That farm belongs to Eleazar, did you know that?

Nito: Yes, Rabbi!

Rabbi: If a farm belongs to somebody, its harvest belongs naturally to him, did you know that?

Nito: Everybody knows that, Rabbi!

Rabbi: Then, why did you steal wheat which isn't yours?

Nito: Because I was hungry, Rabbi!

Rabbi: But the wheat belongs to Eleazar!

Nito: It is I who was hungry, Rabbi.

Rabbi: Come here, rascal. What right have you to go into somebody else's property and steal what is not yours? Come on, answer me!

Nito: Well, because.... Pardon me, Rabbi, what was it that you said?

Rabbi: Excuses, excuses. That is all you can do, come up with excuses. You do something wrong, after which you deny having done it.

Nito: But I did go, Rabbi. All of us here slipped into his farm to pick some heads of wheat. I picked several of them!

Rabbi: Oh, really? So, you brazenly took what wasn't yours?

Nito: Well, of course. In fact, after this, I'll go back to gather some more.

Woman: Eleazar has a lot of wheat on his land, while we don't have any!

John: God can't allow people to starve to death while others live with a full stomach!

Rabbi: But what's all this mess! We're in the synagogue, in a sacred place!... Besides, today is the Sabbath, a holy day!... What's happening here?....

Abiel: Rabbi Eliab.... This group of fishermen were the ones who instigated the people. Apparently, this stranger from Nazareth has put some crazy ideas into their heads....

One of the scribes with a bony body pointed an accusing finger at us. Then he stared at Jesus, who looked so relaxed, as if nothing was happening at all....

Rabbi: What have you got to say, Nazarene? Did you start all this trouble?

Jesus: People will do anything when they have an empty stomach.

Rabbi: Listen to me, you insolent farmer. This country has laws that must be obeyed, you hear? And what does the Law say, huh? Do not steal!.... Do you hear?

Jesus: What about the man who hoards wheat on his farm, isn't he a thief too, Rabbi?

Rabbi: The Law says: Do not steal. Do you understand? DO NOT STEAL!

Jesus: And the one who pays very low wages, isn't he a thief too?

Rabbi: That's enough! You're all guilty for having violated the law. Furthermore, you did it on the day of the Sabbath. What does the Law say about this? You shall observe the Sabbath as a sacred day. You will work for six days, but the seventh day shall be a rest day, which is dedicated to the Lord! That is what the Law says. Is that clear?

Jesus: But God made the law for people and not people for the law.

John: That was very well said!

Rabbi: Shut up, damn you! Speak only when asked!

A Man: You better keep quiet, John, as this is getting complicated. It might put you on the spot.

Rabbi: What do you want, huh? Do you want to put an end to everything and destroy the laws that Moses gave us?

Jesus: On the contrary, Rabbi. We don't wanna destroy them but to give them real meaning.

The Rabbi was already very furious, but he tried to control himself....

Rabbi: Brothers, sisters please ignore this stranger who's here to cause trouble and confuse you. You have done something terrible, which I hope will not be repeated. You have violated the Law of the Sabbath, which is the work of God. You are fully aware that when the shadows cover the walls of the city on the eve of the Sabbath, you are commanded by Law to shut all doors in the whole of Israel until the end of the sacred day. The Sabbath is a day of rest. No one's allowed to make any purchases, any sale, not even to walk more than a mile. No one's to transport wheat, wine, grapes or any merchandise. No one's to lift weights, to cook....

The Law of the Sabbath was so rigid, its prohibitions so numerous, that when the Rabbi started to cite the interminable list of "don'ts" of the law, we felt as if the yoke of the oxen rested on our shoulders....

We breathed a sigh of relief, when Eliab had finished. Then Jesus broke the silence....

Jesus: I wish to ask you teachers of the Law a question: What if the only sheep you had fell into a pit on the day of the Sabbath, would you not pull it out, even if it was forbidden by law?... What is allowed to be done on the Sabbath: the good or the bad? To save life or to lose it?... What do you think, gentlemen?

There were whispers of approval from everyone present, and this gradually heightened like a rising tide....

A Man: Jesus is right! He explains things better than the Rabbi!

Abiel: This is getting us nowhere, Rabbi Eliab. This man's dangerous.... and you have to teach these people a lesson.

Then the scribe with the bony body extended his arms like a bird about to fly and fixed his eyes on us....

Josaphat: Thieves! Charlatans! God will punish you for what you've done on a Sabbath day! Thieves! God'll paralyze your hands, because they've offended Him by stealing!.... The Lord's curse'll be on you, who're violators of the Law! Your hands'll all be paralyzed!

The screaming voice of the scribe shook the synagogue and made us all tremble. Then there was a commotion in one corner, at one end of the Temple. Everyone turned to see what was happening.

A Man: Hey, Rabbi, here's one whose hand's already withered, but he's not a thief!

Asaph: I am an honest man! I wasn't involved in that stuff!

A Woman: He's always had this disease. It's an old one! The scribe's making a new curse!

Asaph, the fruit vendor, had his right hand paralyzed for many years. When he saw that everyone was looking at him, he wanted to hide himself and leave the synagogue, but the bony-structured body wouldn't let him go.

Josaphat: Hey, you, with the withered hand! Don't hide yourself. Come here!... to the center!

Everyone around him pushed Asaph to the center of the synagogue. His face was all red.

Josaphat: Do you see this man?... Do you see him well?... Same way, God will paralyze the hands of those who have stolen wheat. The Lord's curse is on you!!

His voice echoed like thunder. Then there was silence afterwards. Everyone expected lightning to strike down the roof of the synagogue and burn our hands. We heard Jesus' voice instead...

Jesus: It's the Sabbath, Josaphat. It's also prohibited to curse on this day. Don't ask for God's malediction. God never does anything evil on Sabbath nor on any other day of the week. You claim to be an authority of the Scriptures, yet you're wrong. God didn't make the law to be a burden to people and to crush them. God wants everyone to be free, so they won't become slaves of the law... God won't paralyze our hands. On the contrary, He'll make them free that they can continue with their struggle and with their work, just as He

will cure the hand of this man.... Asaph, extend your hand!

Asaph, the fruit vendor, stretched his arm and began to move it. There was great uproar!... We all rushed toward him to touch his hand and to see if what we had witnessed was true.

A Woman: Praise the Lord!... Never before have we seen anything like this!

A Man: If this ain't the end of the world, then it's gotta be the eve!

The Rabbi, who was very indignant, shouted from the lectern...

Rabbi: All of you, get out of the synagogue! You've desecrated the temple of God!... Out, out you go!

Neither the scribes nor the Rabbi succeeded in driving us out of the synagogue. There were so many of us, and pandemonium was such that it was impossible to drag us out... The good news about the healing of Asaph spread through the whole valley of Galilee like wind blowing through the trees. From that day on, the teachers of the Law began to plot against Jesus....

The Israelites gathered every Saturday in the synagogue in order to pray and worship the Lord. It was there where Jesus and his companions were judged for having violated the law of the Sabbath, which was a day of rest. Jesus' words and actions before the Rabbi and the people stresses that in order to worship God truly, one must take into account the liberation of the poor.

The Israelites trace the Law of Sabbath back before the time of Moses, to the very designs of God's creation. Tradition has it that God created people on the sixth day, after which he set the seventh day as a day of rest. This order of creation indicates – as Jesus himself has said – that “God instituted the Sabbath for people,” that is, for good. Jesus considers this precept about the Sabbath as God's gift to human beings, a gift using free time, that people might not be enslaved by work. Jesus has rejected as a burden for people, the tradition and customs perpetuated by the rabbis and pharisees for generations.

The traditional concept of the Sabbath became so tedious on account of the “do's” and “don'ts” that people had to observe on that day.

In Jesus' time, there were 39 types of work listed as prohibited, except in the one instance when the Law could be relaxed, that is, when one had to save a life. Jesus was not satisfied with this as the only exception and rebelled against this uptightness as contrary to the will of God.

Christianity in other contexts has sometimes been reduced to a mere catalogue of laws which are not necessarily intended to liberate but to suppress. The ideal of Christian life has at times been equated to the scrupulous fulfillment of negative norms: “You cannot”... “It is prohibited”... “God will punish you if you do this”... This is a terrible caricature of religion and an attitude that is wholly anti-Christian. Jesus always puts people above any law.

A Christian, by definition, is a free person before the law.

Jesus was a constant violator of the principal laws of his time. That is why he was a rebel in the eyes of the teachers and lawmakers of his town.

Judging him on this basis, we would say they were right. When Jesus insisted through his words and actions that the Sabbath was made to protect peoples' needs and not to suppress them, he was making an interpretation contrary to common practice. Any law that suppresses a person and does not allow him or her to live has no value whatsoever.

The Rabbi was the religious authority in the community. In the episode, there were two teachers: The doctors or theologians whose mission was to interpret the laws and to monitor their implementation. All acted as faithful allies of the landlord and defenders of his interests, as justified by the religious law of the Sabbath. What Jesus did for Asaph, the fruit vendor, by healing his paralyzed hand, brought home a point that a curse with which a false religion threatens a person cannot win over the grace of God who wants people to live and be free.

This episode is related to the two previous narratives. The sign that God makes through Jesus,

strengthens the proclamation of liberation through the Beatitudes. He blesses the liberating action carried out by the poor people of Capernaum. The three chapters constitute a tryptych-summary of a catechetical scheme often repeated in the gospel: Proclamation-practice-sign.
(Mt 12:9-14; Mk 3:1-6; Lk 6:6-11)

31

THE STORY OF THE SOWER

In those days, Jesus was already popular in Capernaum. The people sought after him to listen as he spoke about the Kingdom of God. I think they also came to listen to his stories since he had a knack for story-telling.... We who belonged to the group became more excited each day....

Peter: This is it, pal! The people are beginning to open their eyes!

James: I told you Peter, this Moreno from Nazareth's very smart. I always thought that with him, we'll go far. I think I'm right!

Peter: Hey guys, why don't we go to the wharf?... We'll all roast to death here inside!... Let's go, Jesus!

We left Peter's house when the sun was about to drown itself into the lake. The heat was terrible that day. There was not even a wisp of air in our midst.... We sat at the lakeshore beside the wharf, awaiting the cool afternoon breeze.... Suddenly, old Gaspar, his wife, the twins from the big house and my father Zebedee appeared with Samuel, the limping one, and a number of fishermen.

One Woman: Hey, you from Nazareth. You spoke with firmness in the synagogue the other day. Come on... tell us in all honesty... anyway, you can trust us.... What are you really up to?

Jesus: Not I, neighbor, but the One from up there.

Woman: What do you mean the One from up there?

Jesus: That's right, God is weary of waiting and said: "Be prepared, 'cuz my turn has come."

One Man: God said that?

Jesus: Yes He did, and cast the seed in the air.

Man: What seed are you talkin' about? You?

Jesus: What else but the seed of the Kingdom, my friend.

Woman: We ain't gettin' nowhere. Not even Solomon can understand you!

Jesus: That the Kingdom of God has come, my companions! There's no need to wait anymore. It's already in our midst!

Woman: If it's true, then where's it? At least I should see it around.

Jesus: Nor do you see the wind, but it blows. The sun eagerly reflects its rays even if it hasn't risen from behind the mountains. The Kingdom of God is like that. You don't have to look above or below you. Nor do you have to go far looking for it, for it's just around you... it's in our midst!... in everybody's midst.... Where there are two or three of us who want a change, then the hand of God's there!

Men: If that's so, then count my fingers and my hands, and everybody else's! You'll find out how many we are!

Jesus: Yes, we're a considerable number now... I just hope we won't have the same fate as my uncle in Nazareth....

Another Man: What happened to him...?!

Jesus: To my uncle, Jonathan and....

Peter: Hey, we can't hear anything from here!... Speak louder, dammit!

More and more people gathered at the lakeshore... They came from their houses, sweating after a long

day's work... Even the men who were drinking in the tavern came closer....

Jesus: As I was saying, this uncle of mine, Jonathan...

Peter: Not even Joshua's trumpet can silence the people. It's a big crowd we have here.

James: And damn this heat!

Peter: Listen, red hair. I've got an idea.... Why don't we move in to Gaspar's boat... we give it a little push and from the water we'll be able to see the people better and everybody can hear.... Whatta ya say, Jesus?

Jesus: Are you out of your mind, Peter? Why do we all have to go into the lake?

Peter: Don't tell me you're scared of the water, Moreno...

Jesus: No, well... but... this water is already a little murky...

James: To hell with these farmers!.... They're even more scared of the water than the cats are!

Peter: Come on, forget all this fuss and let's go to the boat... Unfasten the rope and stretch it a few cubits!

James, Peter and I went with Jesus on Gaspar's boat, staying a little away from the shore....

One Woman: Where the hell are you all goin'?!

Peter: We ain't goin' nowhere, lady. We're just looking for a better place. With this noise, we won't understand each other... Go ahead, Jesus, with your story about your Uncle Jonathan....

Jesus: You see, my Uncle Jonathan went out every summer to sow in his little piece of land... just like all the farmers did... I was a little boy then when this happened but I remember when one day I saw him cross the village carrying a sack of seeds on his shoulders, and I ran after him....

Little Jesus: Uncle Jonathan!... Uncle Jonathan!.... Wait for me uncle...!

Jonathan: And where's this little brat goin' in such a big hurry?

Little Jesus: I'm goin' with you Uncle, so you can teach me how to sow....

Jonathan: Oh?... So you wanna learn how to till the soil instead of being a carpenter like your father? Very well then; I'll teach you to be a good farmer.... Come li'l boy, let's begin on that end... I'll teach you how to scatter the seeds and sing the planting songs.... Listen.... La, la, larara...

Jesus: So we reached the small farm. Uncle Jonathan and I passed through the posts marking the land. Then he slipped his big brawny hand inside the sack, took a handful of seeds and threw them at random....

Jonathan: This is good seed, my boy...! May God bring the rains soon that the bushes may take roots well!

Jesus: He took another handful again and threw the seeds into the air....

Little Jesus: Hey, Uncle, the seeds are coming out from the sack..

Jonathan: What're you saying, snot-nose?

Little Jesus: I said some of the seeds are falling from the sack... Look, Uncle, there!

Jonathan: Of course my son; that always happens. Some seeds fall on the other side of the posts while some fall along the path...

Little Jesus: Do you pick them up again, Uncle?

Jonathan: No, my boy. Don't waste your time on that.... Leave them for the birds that they can have somethin' to eat, the poor creatures... Come, keep on walkin', ...in a short time, the sun'll be up and we'll be sweating like pigs... La, la, larara...

Jesus: Then, when I was already grown-up, I began to liken some people to those seeds that fall along the borders of the farm.... It reminds me that one has to work hard so that this world will be just. These seeds also remind me of people who are indifferent, who don't care about others, but think only of themselves. Their heart is calloused and dry, as dry as the soil along the roads... The Kingdom of God cannot thrive there....

Jonathan: Now my boy, slip your hand into the sack and take all the seeds that you can and cast

them into the air, like I do.... Do it firmly, dammit! Haven't you eaten yet?

Little Jesus: I have, Uncle. I drank a jug of milk before coming here....

Jonathan: You gotta prove that to me...C'mon, throw the seeds far and away!... That's it...! No, not over there... What are you doin'?

Little Jesus: Why not, Uncle?

Jonathan: You rascal! Can't you see those thistles?...If you sow along this part where the bushes grow, and since the thistles grow taller than the bushes, then the plants choke and die.... Remember that, little boy. Come on, don't doze off, 'cuz we got a lotta work to do... La, la, larara....

Jesus: When I grew up, I thought that money and the easy life were the thorns growing by our side. There are people who talk so much about justice and they firmly agree. They want so many changes for the world, and beautiful words fall from their lips... But when they're asked to share what they have with their neighbors, they have a change of heart... and they shy away... Yes my friends; money's the bad seed that's in conflict with the Kingdom of God.

Little Jesus: Here Uncle, look...! There ain't no thorns here... Gimme a handful to sow along this part...!

Jonathan: Yes, my boy, this is good soil.... But don't be deceived... You gotta be very careful... as you can never be sure.... Come, put a piece of stick here....

Little Jesus: Where?

Jonathan: Here... remove the soil... dig a little...

Little Jesus: Hold it, Uncle.... Hey, these are rocks!... and there are plenty of them...!

Jonathan: That's why my boy, don't be too trusting.... Those seeds you have sown will grow, but when the summer heat comes and the soil is not very deep the seeds will not grow roots, the young plants will get scorched and wither. Come my son; we have to move fast or else the sun will fry our heads too... La, la, larara....

Jesus: In time, I thought that the seeds that fell on rocky ground were like people who really want to do something for others, and so start out with enthusiasm and hard work... but later, when problems come their way, when the powerful try to stop them and begin throwing people in jail..., putting their lives in danger, then they lose heart and back out. These people don't have good roots.

Little Jesus: What about this part, Uncle?

Jonathan: Yes, here, my boy. Look at this soil... it's black and fertile, like that dark girl in the Song of Songs. Yes, this will give good harvest!

Little Jesus: Shall I sow the seeds, Uncle?

Jonathan: Why, of course, son!.. And use both hands!... Come on, move fast!.... And do it with enthusiasm, dammit, 'cuz this land will yield plenty, I assure you! La, la, larara...

Jesus: This is the good soil that produces good people: those who have a big heart, those who get involved with people in spite of their fears, those who risk their lives and their money, working tirelessly to give their children and their children's children a world different from ours. These are the kind that God needs for His Kingdom!

Jonathan: Pff.... There ain't no more seeds left, my boy. The earth is full of seeds. You gotta take care of 'em so that they won't perish... In a few days, God willing, and with the rains, everything'll be covered with young plants. And in a few months, they're gonna be as tall as the bushes, with sunlight and rain cultivating the grains... You'll see, snot-nose, how beautiful this farm will become... Some bushes will produce heads that yield 30 grains, others 60 and still others yield 100 grains. Yes sir!

Little Jesus: I'll go with you on that day, Uncle...

Jonathan: But of course. We gotta leave early, after a good shot of wine to give us strength. After

which comes the time for harvesting, as the Lord has set it!

Little Jesus: Are you gonna teach me how to cut the crops, Uncle?

Jonathan: Sure, I'm gonna teach you how to cut and sing. I see how willing you are to work, although apparently, music isn't your cup of tea! C'mon, listen to me closely, and sing with me.... La, la, larara...

Jesus: Yes, my friends, let's all open our ears and listen to the story of the sower! Everyone must look inside to see which soil one is like!

It was night already when Jesus finished talking. The tide was beginning to rise and the boat where we were gathered was moving gently.... The people returned to their houses, whispering among themselves on the road.... We returned to the wharf and stayed a little while talking and discussing with Jesus... At night, after a long and hot day, the wind began to blow over the vast round sea of Galilee.

The parables are perhaps the texts in the gospel where we can "hear" Jesus most faithfully and "see" the environment where he grew up and developed himself. In the parables where he makes use of farm images, we see Jesus, the peasant, who is used to working on the farm since childhood. To sow the seeds randomly, despite a chance of wasting, reflects the lack of skill of the sower. But that isn't so. The parable of the sower describes in detail the usual manner of planting crops in Palestine. This parable corresponds – like that of the mustard seed – to the beginning of the Gospel preaching. In telling this story, Jesus manifests his unlimited trust in the Lord who in the end, despite the usual losses and difficulties that accompany this agricultural activity, will provide the sower with abundant harvest at least on a piece of land. Jesus is so confident that this will happen, and so great is his joy over God's plan that he exaggerates the final yield to a large extent. He speaks of a yield of thirty, sixty and even a hundredfold of the harvest. In Palestine, a 7.5 yield from a harvest was regular. A tenfold yield was a good harvest. In speaking of God's generosity, Jesus often exaggerates his comparisons. It is a way of saying that such generosity has no bounds and that God surprises us with more than we expect when we perform our work. Aside from its being the "parable of the indefatigable sower" it is likewise known as the parable of the "lands." A very ancient catechetical tradition adopted by the Gospels tried to decipher the meaning of each element of this particular story of Jesus. This led to the formulation of a catalog with four types of people, according to their reaction to the message of the Gospel (the Word). In this line, "to listen to the message," we must not translate it or understand it as simple intellectual knowledge of God. "Orthodox" people declare that they "believe in everything that the Holy Mother Church" dictates, but this does not hold water if they don't live the message. The evangelical message repeats that no one understands God and knows nor accepts his Word if one does not accept others, particularly the poor (James 2:14-23). The Christian God is only accepted or rejected through an attitude of justice with which we work. Medellin formulated it thus: "Where there is unjust social, political, economic and cultural inequality, there is a rejection of the gift of peace of God, and much more, a rejection of the Lord Himself," (Document of Peace).

In this episode, Jesus concretizes that of "listening to the message": "Working for justice in this world," "sharing what one has with others," "working for others," "risking one's life and money"... These are the various translations of the essence of the biblical formula, which is "working for justice." The prophets likewise converted into concrete examples what ought to be done to remain faithful to the Word of God. (Is 1:10-20 and 58:6-10).

(Mt 13:1-23; Mk 4:1-9; Lk 8:4-8)

The story of the wheat stealing in Eleazar's farm spread like wildfire through the whole of Galilee. Our group was already known in Capernaum and the people whispered about us in the market and square. Rumors spread all over the cities, around the lake and eventually reached Nazareth....

Susana: Mary, Mary,... where are you?

Mary: What's up, Susana?.... Tell me what's happened?... Has any one of your children fallen ill, cousin Simon?

Simon: Not mine, but yours. Haven't you heard yet?

Mary: About what?.... Has anything happened to Jesus?.... What've they done to my son?

Susana: They're gonna do something to him if you don't tie him up!

Mary: For God's sake, tell me what's happened....

Simon: He and his group of bums slipped into the farm of Eleazar, the most powerful landlord in the whole north... Have you seen old Ananias, here? Well, he's a tame cat next to a lion like Eleazar.

Mary: Why did they have to slip into his farm?

Simon: As you might expect, cousin Mary. To steal some wheat heads. Your son's a thief.

Mary: What? That's absurd.

Simon: But he is. And the worse thing's that they did it on the Sabbath.

Susana: Besides, Jesus said before the tribunal that he doesn't observe the Sabbath because he doesn't want to; that the laws were made for people and not the other way around; that he can do anything he wants!

Mary: I can't believe that. It can't be....

Simon: He's crazy, Mary; your son's out of his mind. Ever since he was hit on the head by Rachel's son, something's gone wrong with him.

Susana: No, man, no. This started after he went to the Jordan to see that hairy man baptizing in the river. That's where he had a slip. I told you Mary, your son's changed since then....

Simon: He also said that those who're up would go down and those who're down would go up. He's inciting the poor against the rich.

A Neighbor: Therefore he ain't crazy. Damn! That's what we need here. Someone to turn the tables and change the situation!

Simon: Who d'ya think would shout this to the whole world? Eleazar's already denounced him. He's blacklisted.

Susana: Mary, you gotta do something fast!

Mary: But I can't believe a single word you're saying: I never taught these things to my son....

Neighbor: Well, he learned all that when he went away!

Susana: He was also seen in Jasmine Street, the red light district, you know.... Ehem!!

Simon: And they saw him drinking in the tavern by the lakeside, with Matthew, the tax collector, damn him and his pals!

Woman Neighbor: There must be something between him and Matthew's wife, because I was told he's often seen in their house up 'till late in the evening, and....

Mary: That's enough, that's enough.... It can't be, it can't be my Jesus. He must be sick....

Woman Neighbor: Sick? Ha! So he's sick of brazenness! That's what it is!

Simon: He talks a lot, that's why, and he bums around. That's what he's been doin' since he left Nazareth. Tell us, Mary, has he ever sent you some dinars to buy beans?.... He doesn't even think of his mother!

Susana: Not quite, Simon. The truth is....

Simon: Where there's smoke, there's fire. Cousin Mary, something's wrong with your son. Either he's out of his mind, or he's become brazen. If until now he's not yet one, but has joined a bunch of scoundrels, then he's likely to be one. If you'll take my advice, go and fetch him right away.

Susana: That's right, Mary! Bring him back to Nazareth and let him stay here. He was brought up here, so here he should stay. Very soon he'll forget about this idea of the Messiah and the liberation. He'll go back

to his tools and bricks: his real life. You are his mother and he will obey you. Go, look for him at Capernaum.

Mary: But Susana, I can't go there all by myself....

Susana: Your cousins'll go with you, won't you, Simon?

Simon: Sure, Mary. We'll accompany you. I'll go tell my brother, Jacob....

Susana: I'm goin' too. And when I see that son of yours, I'll really settle with him, by damn! I'll give him a piece of my mind, and he'll remember me for that. He's no right to behave like this...

The next morning, before sunrise over the plains of Aesdreton, the group of Nazarenes started their journey to Capernaum to look for Jesus. His cousins went, and so did Susana, including a neighbor who didn't want to miss any detail of the event. Mary, in tears, was with them....

Mary: But why?... Why does he let me suffer all this shame? My God, why?...

Simon: Don't worry, Mary, whatever happens, we'll bring him to Nazareth!... Take it easy; leave everything to us. We'll teach Jesus how to obey his family. Dammit!... Hurry up, Mary!...

The journey was short by the outrage they all felt. When they reached Capernaum and crossed the Gate of Consolation, they inquired from the first house in the village....

Simon: Pardon, Madam... would you know where this tall, brown and bearded guy lives? He's half-bricklayer and half-carpenter... who came from Nazareth a few months ago?

A Woman: You mean.... Jesus of Nazareth?

Mary: Exactly. Do you know him, Madam?

Woman: But of course! Every one knows him here. He lives in Zebedee's house, by the wharf. Salome takes care of him more than a mother does.

Mary: I'm his mother.

Woman: Oh, really? Well, are you here to visit him?

Simon: We came to fetch him. Our cousin is out of his mind.

Woman: No, what happens is that this brown-skinned guy is so frank, he tells the truth to the rabbi's face and to the landlord's, and reasons out before the Roman governor. I'd say he's a prophet.

A Man: What? You mean this peasant is a prophet?

Another Woman: They say there's a thin line between a prophet and a nut. If you're his family, you'd better take him with you. Many strange things have happened since he came to this city.

Woman: What are you saying, you meddling woman? Jesus is a good man. Didn't he cure Bartholomew, huh? Don't you remember anymore?

Another Woman: Oh really? Or better, he cured him with magic! The Nazarene must have made a pact with the devil.

Woman: Oh, yeah? What about Caleb, the fisherman? Didn't he cleanse him of leprosy? Didn't he cure Asaph's hand, the fruit vendor, huh? I swear by God, this Jesus must be a good quack doctor!

Man: A quack doctor? And I swear that the only medicine he can think of is to steal wheat from a neighbor's farm. If you don't believe me, then go ask the old man, Eleazar!

Woman: To hell with you! The Nazarene is a decent man.

Simon: Say whatever you wanna say, we're his family, and we're gonna get him outta here right now. Could you tell us where he is now?...

Another Woman: Come with me. I'll take you to Zebedee's house!

Man: Hey, guys, don't get lost!... Hurry, hurry up! This is getting interesting!

The word spread around, from house to house. The women left the stoves they were tending and their brooms, to join the group of Nazarenes. The men who were idling their time away in the square stood up and went towards them. As usual, they were preceded by the kids as they shouted through the narrow street that reeked of onions and rotten fish...

John: What's the commotion about, dammit! Have they murdered King Herod?

A Woman: Hey, John, they're looking for the stranger!

John: What's happened? Maybe they're soldiers coming with fat-neck Eleazar.

Man: These ain't no soldiers. It's his mother who walked all the way from Nazareth, with his cousins. His entire family's here!

Jesus: What's the matter, John? Who is it?

John: Can't you hear their screams, Jesus? Your mother and relatives are out there looking for you.

Jesus: My mother? Something must have happened!

John: Go and meet them, Nazarene!

Jesus: What's all this screamin' about? Has someone passed away in Nazareth?

Susana: You're the one who's gonna kill us of shame, Jesus. I can't believe you could do this to your mother!

Jesus: What are you talking about, Susana?... What's all the trouble?... Have you all gone crazy?

Susana: You're the crazy one. Who ever taught you to steal wheat, huh? And to be inciting the people, huh? To make them rebel against the rich? Since when did you learn to get drunk with tax collectors and associating with prostitutes, huh?... Who ever taught you to live like a rogue and a vicious person? Speak up!

Simon: Let's do the interrogation later, Susana. You don't wash your dirty linen in public. Come on, Mary, tell your son to pack his things; we're going back to Nazareth right now.

Mary: Jesus, son, let's go. You're gonna go back to Nazareth with us. Your cousin's right. Since you left home, you've done nothing but foolish things. Come, we're leaving....

But Jesus did not move; he didn't even batt an eyelash...

Susanna: Are you deaf? Didn't you hear what your mother said?

Jesus: My mother?... I'm sorry, Susanna. This woman who claims what we're doing is silly can't be my mother. Her face may resemble my mother's, but she can't be my mother. My mom never listened to gossip. She was always courageous, speaking of a God who wants to see His children proud and confident. She taught me to become responsible, to ignore what others would say. This woman isn't my mother. Neither are these people my family. I don't even know them.

Simon: I told you so, cousin Mary. He's delirious! Now he claims not to know us!

Jesus: I really don't know you. My mother, brothers and family are someone else: they fight for justice and are not like you who hinder their struggle.

Simon: Stop all this nonsense! Now, will somebody please lend me some rope.... Our relative is out of his mind. There ain't nothing we can do but to tie him up!

Jesus: You're wasting your time, cousin. The truth cannot be suppressed by tying it up with ropes. God's word is like the wind; it can't be stopped by chains or ropes. The messengers of this word's gotta be as free as the wind. What we gotta say, we say it from the roof. And what must be done, we do openly.

But the Nazarenes were not convinced. Fuming mad, they stayed in front of our house and continued the fight... The truth was, during those months and even the following months, Jesus was called many names. They called him crazy, a drunk, a glutton, and a troublemaker. A lot of people never understood him. It's not good to sew a piece of new cloth on an old suit. One cannot put new wine into old wineskins.

Jesus scandalized his neighbors in the synagogue of Nazareth when he spoke to them with great conviction about liberation and the Kingdom of God. They were not the only ones scandalized, but his own family as well – his mother, his cousins – who could not comprehend his actuations nor his words. They really thought he was crazy. The freedom with which Jesus violated laws and faced authorities to argue about the ancient customs of his people scandalized his family, brought up in a highly traditional peasant society. For them, such freedom was perilous madness.

In their gospel, Mark and Matthew speak of Jesus' "brothers and sisters." Four of these brothers are

even named: Simon, Joseph, Judas and James (Jacob) (Mt 13:55). Surely, the Greek word used by the evangelists is “brother,” but it’s a literal translation in Aramaic. One must realize that in Jesus’ language, this word “brother” likewise encompasses distant relatives: nephews, second cousins, etc., such that when the Gospel of John says that Peter was Andrew’s brother – son of the same parents – he specifies it by adding to “brother” another word that may allow the translation as “brother in the flesh,” which undoubtedly defines the relationship (Jn 1:41). A large amount of data about the Gospels and tradition unanimously shows us that Jesus was the only son of Mary.

In the episode, Simon appears as one of the cousins of Jesus. If Mary’s objection to her son’s actions is above all emotional, a result of her fear of an impending danger, his cousin’s attitude is a lot more ideological. Simon is a concerned poor man who is moved by financial concerns; materialistic and skeptical, he rejects any change, any novelty, especially if the prime mover of this novelty is a friend or a relative. The very serious conflict met by Jesus with his family must be defined within the level of rumor-mongering. This gossiping is typical of small towns where everything that shatters existing norms is judged with severity, and the absence of more significant happenings magnifies the trivialities.

The evangelical text about Mary’s confrontation with her son has hardly been taken seriously. This is a less known text and is rarely preached. Nevertheless, it is a Marian text of great significance. It brings us close to Mary, as we see a mother who fears for her son who does not understand her, and who even opposes her by taking a step different from what she has desired. Like any other mother, Mary suffers anguish in seeing her son getting embroiled with the authorities for fear of losing him. This is the real Mary. Mary undertook a long and difficult road to faith, during which she experienced uncertainties and vacillations. The beginning of Jesus’ activities in Capernaum was, for her, an especially difficult moment which she could not accept. It was so difficult that three of the evangelists took this conflict into account, even if they were aware that their lectors might find it rather disconcerting or scandalous.

The family was a very significant institution in Israel. Family ties were so strong that they lasted for life. The veneration and respect of children for their parents belonged to a deeply-rooted tradition in the country. This notwithstanding, fidelity for justice’s sake is for Jesus the first and foremost of all obligations. He firmly situates it over and above family considerations. If this episode highlights Mary’s human frailty, it likewise focuses the freedom which always characterized Jesus.

(Mt 12:46-50; Mk 3:20-21, 31-35; Lk 8:19-21)

33

WE HAVE ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT EACH DAY

Simon: Tie him up, tie him up! You’ve heard him! He’s lost his sanity! He’s crazy!

The fishing village seemed like an agitated beehive when Jesus’ relatives came to look for him, saying he was crazy. The Nazarenes amassed at the front door, preparing ropes that would tie Jesus up while the neighbors of Capernaum shouted and laughed as they witnessed the family squabble....

Mary: Hold it, cousin Simon. Don’t do that... Lemme talk to him. Lemme pass, I’m his mother....

Mary forced her way through our house where Jesus was....

Mary: Please, don’t mind him!... My son is sick and he doesn’t know what he’s saying... He’s sick....

Jesus: No, mother. I know what I’m saying. You just wasted your time and your trip. I’m not going back with you.

Mary: Jesus, don’t be discourteous in front of these people. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, talking to me like that?

Jesus: That’s okay, mother. I’m sorry... but listen to me: They’ve poisoned your mind with silly talk. I

must say this, even if they are neighbors of mine: Rumors spread like wildfire in Nazareth. I'm not aware of what they've told you about me, but whatever it is, if you just believe one eighth, then you've got only a little truth.

Simon: Oh? So, in spite of all the nonsense you uttered before, you still have the nerve to call us liars, is that right?

Jesus: Cousin Simon, the truth is... oh well, the truth is, you're a blabbermouth.

Mary: For God's sake, son, what's gotten into you? How could you speak that way to your relatives?... You've changed a lot, Jesus. You weren't like that before.

Jesus: Maybe it's you who've changed, Mamma. You used to tell me before: "One's gotta do what one oughtta do, regardless of what people say." What's happened to you now?

Mary: I'm scared, son, so scared. There's a lot of soldiers and spies around. The situation's getting worse every day.

Jesus: That's why we oughtta do something soon. Or would you rather have the same situation as we have now, where people starve to death right before our eyes until the same happens to us?

Mary: It's not that, Jesus, but.... things get so complicated. Tomorrow they might just tell me that you've been imprisoned and...

Jesus: Don't think of what will happen tomorrow. We've enough to worry about each day, don't you think so?

Mary: These days I'm reminded so much of your father, Joseph....

Jesus: Well, as far as I can remember, there are no cowards in Father's family. He hid those poor fellows when the soldiers were after them. He saved their lives.

Susana: Yeah, and lost his instead. Do you want your mother to lose you too?

Mary: Don't make me suffer this way, Jesus, I beg of you. Why don't you just stay put in Nazareth? You can earn a living by making horseshoes, and patching roofs.... Then get yourself a wife, raise your own children, that I may one day see my grandchildren.... Why can't you be just like the rest, Jesus? Why?

Mary dried her tears with a striped scarf she wore in her hair. She didn't want to be seen in tears, as she felt humbled and embarrassed in the midst of the people around her. The Nazarenes were ridiculing Jesus, and the people from Capernaum were making fun of the Nazarenes. Both caused her much pain....

Simon: Don't waste your tears for this rascal son of yours, cousin Mary. Your son doesn't wanna work, that's it. He'd rather involve himself in politics than work. So much silly talk, but less work. Tell me, how will your mother live if you don't even earn anything to buy firewood? Have you got any savings at all? Have you got any business in your hands?... Why, you don't even have a lot to bury yourself when you die!... This one thing I should tell you, Jesus: Don't look for help at my door later, for I'll not lend you a single centavo, do you hear?

Jesus: I never borrowed anything from you, cousin Simon. I work with my hands like you do. I owe you nothing. My mother does not feed on your bread, nor dresses herself with your clothes. This one thing I must tell you too: You seem to worry too much about the food that you eat, your own food, that is. Well, that's right. You must earn your daily bread by your own sweat. But look at the birds of the sky, the sparrows, the seagulls.... They neither sow nor reap, nor have they saved anything, yet they don't lack anything to eat. Everytime I see them, I ask myself: Aren't we worth more than these birds?

Simon: Yes, you go ahead with your stories and those sweet words. But the words can't be eaten, do you hear?

Jesus: Look at the flowers, cousin, those white lilies that grow in the field, with no one tending them. They don't spin or weave... but whenever I see them, I wonder: Dammit, not even King Solomon, in his elegant, woolen suit, was clothed better than any of these. If God takes care of the grass that grows today but is burned tomorrow, how can He not care for us who are His children?

After Jesus had said this, Simon, his cousin, grabbed the small bag of money that was tied to his waist and proudly shook it. The people crammed together all the more to see his face better...

Simon: Listen, dreamer.... This is what counts. I don't care about the rest. The lilies of the field? The birds?... All that's nothing!... When you look up at the sky, to see the sparrows pass by, look with an open mouth... no bread will come down from heaven, but something else! No, my cousin, no. Tell your story to the marines... One must take life seriously.

Jesus: Not quite, Simon....

Simon: Do you expect us to beg the Lord for food with our arms crossed?

Jesus: No, Simon. One has to work. But you must also trust in Him. God knows our needs, shelter, clothing and food. If we do our part, then, He'll not fail us. But you must also think of the needs of others who have less than you. I believe that if we concern ourselves about the needs of others more than ours, then they'll likewise be taken care of.

Mary: Oh, son, that's easier said... but when life becomes so difficult....

Jesus: But Mamma, you yourself taught me this. You said:

“Happier is he who gives than he who receives.” Don't you remember anymore? “Help your brothers and sisters and God will help you,” you would tell me this day in and day out. Well, I want to help my people to be free, even if I have to pay the price that all the prophets have paid....

Mary: Your words scare me, son... I beg of you, Jesus, don't get yourself into trouble.

Jesus: Mamma, please, don't try to twist the road that you yourself have paved for me. Nothing is resolved with fear. Nor can you solve problems that have not come. There is enough to worry about each day....

My brother James and I remained inside the house so as not to provoke the Nazarenes the more....

James: What a cousin Jesus has!... It's as if a mad dog had bitten him!

John: And this Susana is too much...!

James: The mother can't even say a word!

Salome: What else can the poor woman do? It's her son and she must take care of him.

John: For God's sake, Jesus is already thirty years old...!

Salome: Even if he's seventy. For a mother, her son's age doesn't matter.

James: Of course, and that's the problem. For you, mothers, we never grow up and you want to control our whole life.

Salome: That isn't so; what we want is that we support one another. We mothers suffer in anguish for whatever happens, goodness! At least, I can say I'm still fortunate because I have you near and you two have been behaving well. But who knows,... one of these days...?

John: Mamma, here you go again....

Salome: Well, you started it. Ever since this Moreno came here, you've been overacting. Listen to me, you crazy pair, he who plays with fire, gets burned. So, will you stop your politicizing, do you hear me? Get out of it, you guys!

James: Well, well, Mamma, a fight in here and one outside is one too many. Come, let's see what's happening in the street.

Outside, the squabble among the Nazarenes continued. Simon, Jesus' cousin, was getting impatient....

Simon: Hurry up, Mary. Jesus is out of his mind. You heard him talk, didn't you?...

Mary: Please, Jesus, let's go back to Nazareth.

Jesus: No, Mamma, I'm stayin' here. We're tryin' to do something so that you and I and all the poor of Israel will inherit God's promise.

Mary: You don't have to do it for me... but in memory of Joseph, may he rest in peace. Haven't you any respect for your late father?

Jesus: My father would be very happy to see me doing this, don't you think so, Mother? He was never a coward in the face of danger. On the contrary....

Mary: Are you disobeying me? ...your mother? Jesus!... For the last time... I beg of you: come with me to Nazareth.

Jesus: I'm not going.

Mary bit her lips in a desperate gesture. Then she broke into tears, disconsolately....

Susana: Let's go, Mary. Take it easy....

Mary: What do you want me to do, Susanna? Nothing is left for me. I had a husband, but I lost him. I had an only son, and I've lost him too. Nothing's left anymore....

Susana: Take it easy, lady, don't think about it for now...

Mary: I don't understand, Susana.... Why does Jesus have to do this to me, why?...

Simon: Because he's brazen. He's rebellious and insolent. Let's get this over with, once and for all. Jacob, give me the ropes!... If he doesn't want to come of his own will, then, we'll have to drag him like a beast!

Mary: Please Simon, don't do that. Leave him alone, if he doesn't want to come....

Simon: What? And let him do as he pleases, involving himself in politics and putting us on the spot, which could imperil our lives as his relatives? Then he's gonna make us pay for all his fiendish acts? No way! He's gonna come with us, whether he likes it or not!

Simon and James (Jacob) approached Jesus with two sets of rope. Jesus stood by the door of our house....

Jesus: I may be involving myself in politics, cousin Simon, while you waste your time in matters you don't really care about. And will you please refrain from telling lies to my mother? You do nothing but spread lies and mess up people's lives. Why don't you live and let live? Dammit!

Simon: I dare you say that again.... Come on!

Jesus: That you mess people's lives....

Simon lost his cool and punched Jesus in the face. The people milled around all the more. Jesus, wobbling, wiped the blood that was starting to flow from his nose....

Simon: Come on, fight like a man!... unless you're not one! Come on, give it back to me.... Defend yourself, coward... or I'll hit you again, and make a man out of you, sissy!...

Jesus crossed his arms and went near Simon....

Jesus: I have nothing against you, cousin. Why don't you leave me alone?

Simon: I want you to fight me...!

Jesus: No, I won't give you the pleasure.... You may beat me, if you want... but I'm not fighting back....

Simon waited with clenched teeth and fists. Jesus remained calm, without removing his gaze from his cousin, who, once again, lost his patience....

Simon: Idiot.... You're an asshole!... I always thought you were nothing.... Now I'm convinced you're even worse than I thought!... Puah!... Let's go, Jacob! Let this puppet stay where it pleases him!... Hurry, 'cuz we have a long way to go!

The Nazarenes undertook the journey back to their village. Simon and Jacob went ahead of the group, letting out their outrage by hitting the stones along the road with their canes.... Mary, Jesus' mother, held Susana's arm for support, feeling very depressed because of the incident in Capernaum that afternoon....

In this episode, Jesus' conflict with his mother is somehow overshadowed by his conflict with his cousin Simon. The materialistic personality and indifferent attitude of the cousin gave an occasion to focus on the well-known words of Jesus about the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field, which are not at all easy to explain without resorting to an alienating interpretation. This is because these words of unconditional trust in God's providence – if not explained well – may prove to be offensive to those who, in their misery, are forced to look for means in order to survive.

Certainly, one must "eat in order to live" and not "live in order to eat." However, because of poverty people are constrained to be "materialistic" in exerting all effort to get food for the day. This is the

general situation in many countries today. Jesus does not denounce the urgency with which the poor look for means to survive. That would be in contradiction to the rest of his message. What he criticizes is the selfish ideology of the hoarder, the materialism of the greedy and that of the egoist who only think of themselves and their own well-being, in utter disregard for the needs of others. For ones who seek to break the vicious circle of having to earn more, and offer their lives in the service of others, these words of putting one's trust in the Lord sound different. The one who fights for justice amid economic difficulties is aware that God is watching, and will provide, in addition, the means to continue the fight.

A person must not be a production machine. Nor should she be a consumer machine: To have more in life may conceal the true Christian ideal, which is being more: Being happier by giving and receiving. Mary's being a widow accentuates her fears. In Israel, a single parent with no man in the house was extremely helpless. In the episode, Salome, in her conversation with James and John, manifests her great understanding of Mary's situation. Mothers find it difficult to let go of children, to stop influencing them and to accept their children's decision to engage in risky undertakings. For a newborn child to have his or her own life, the umbilical cord connecting them to the mother must be cut. Throughout the whole of life, this act must be repeated in order for the mother and son to grow and develop into mature personalities. (Mt 6:25-34; Lk 12:22-34)

34

THE SONS OF EPHRAIM

A pair of small lamps illuminated Peter's house, producing shadows on the walls. That night, like almost every night, we stayed after dinner talking, and Jesus told us the story of old Ephraim.

Jesus: ...Yes, that man had a heart as huge as this lake. His name was Ephraim and he had six children. The first four were girls and the other two were boys. His wife died when the last child was born. Ephraim became a widower and had to work very hard to raise his six children. He had a small piece of land at the right side of the hill of Nazareth. There he sweated it out from morning till night, plowing and sowing. He worked like an old mule to provide them with their daily bread.

Jesus: The years passed and his daughters got married. Ephraim was left with his two sons: Reuben, the elder one, and Nico, the youngest....

Neighbor: Good morning, Ephraim!... How's life treating you, neighbor?

Ephraim: Well, as you can see my friend, working very hard!

Neighbor: But your sons are already helping you, aren't they?

Ephraim: Of course. Right now, the elder one is plowing one side of the field... It's almost sowing time for us, my neighbor.

Neighbor: Ah, that son of yours, Reuben, is a grand boy, yes sir. He's very dependable... but your other son... he's something else!

Ephraim: Poor Nico...

Neighbor: Don't defend him, Ephraim, 'cuz every one here knows your son's misadventures. All he does is run after the girls. He's a bum, that's what he is. You gotta talk to him, Ephraim. Correct him while there's still time. He isn't growing up properly.

Ephraim: This boy grew up without a mother, neighbor. I had to be mother and father to him, do you understand? I know him quite well. He isn't a shameless guy, definitely not. He's just a little confused....

Jesus: That night, Nico, the youngest son, came home very late....

Ephraim: Where could he've gone?... This is strange because your brother always comes home to eat....

Reuben: Oh yes; if only for this, he knows how to come on time... How brazen can he get... He doesn't even bend his back to work, but you should see him eat... Oh, Papa, I'm done... I'm going to bed now.

Ephraim: I can't sleep until he comes home, son. I'll wait for him.

Jesus: Nico came home past midnight. The old man, Ephraim, was waiting for him....

Nico: Cheers to life, cheers to love...! Hic! Hey, Papa, you're still up..? Hic...!

Ephraim: Son, why did you come home so late? I was worried about you....

Nico: Old man, life must be lived! Hic!... I was with some friends... We have some plans, you know. We're leaving this little town... It's so boring here, Papa... I'm bored to death here, and I can't stand it anymore.

Ephraim: But son, what're you talking about?

Nico: I'm leaving. Tomorrow I'll be off. I don't wanna stay here stagnating. I wanna see the world....

Ephraim: Nico, my son, you're drunk. You dunno what you're saying....

Nico: Listen, Papa. I know you're keeping some money from the previous harvest... Gimme what's due me... I'm gonna enjoy life... Cheers to life, cheers to love...!

Jesus: The next morning, old Ephraim took from a hole in the yard the money he had been saving from the last harvest, and gave his son what was due him. He was old enough to claim his inheritance. He wrapped the money in a piece of handkerchief and gave it to him hoping, up to the last minute, that his son wouldn't go away...

Ephraim: Well son, if that's your decision....

Nico: Hey old man, stop being sentimental.... Money's supposed to be enjoyed and not kept....

Ephraim: And... where are you going?

Nico: Anywhere I can have some fun...!

Ephraim: Son, send me news about yourself through the traders coming here....

Nico: Nobody ever comes here, Papa, because this is a dead town. I'm sick and tired of everything and everyone here.... I'm going now, Papa, goodbye!

Jesus: Ephraim saw his son off as he disappeared down the road without even looking back. The father followed him with tear-laden eyes until he was lost on the horizon, among the olive trees along the road....

Reuben: Damn him, Papa! Why did he get the money he didn't earn?

Ephraim: Your brother is free, son. If he wanted to leave.... I'll not tie him up like a donkey. He isn't my slave either.... He's my son...

Jesus: At the port of Japhia, Nico started to squander the money he got from his father. Months passed by. He was in the company of women, got himself drunk or would simply gamble... All the money that Ephraim had saved by working like an old mule was squandered in a short time... Meanwhile, in Nazareth, his father never stopped thinking of him....

Neighbor: How's life with you, Ephraim... just like any other day?

Ephraim: Yes, my neighbor, here I am still waiting.... The caravans from the South pass at this time. My son could be in any one of them...

Neighbor: He's not coming back, Ephraim, after having been given such a large amount...

Ephraim: I don't know anything about him. It's as if he died.

Neighbor: Exactly. Consider him dead and suffer no more. Forget about him. You have five others left and they're good. Forget about this black sheep....

Jesus: But how can a mother or father ever forget the child they've brought up? How can they cease worrying about the child who's part of their guts?...

Though his son forgot him, Ephraim never forgot his son....

Nico: Hey, potbelly, bring me another jug over here; my throat's so dry! Hik!... Besides, my girlfriend here, also wants to have a shot!... Isn't that right, precious one?.... Ha, ha, ha...!

Jesus: Another month passed and another... Nico continued to squander his money. One day he bet all he had left and lost.

Nico: Damn the luck!... What the hell can I do now?

Jesus: He then looked for a job but found none. Things did not go well in Japhi. The harvest had been poor because of the drought that year. Money was scarce and there was hunger everywhere... Finally, after several days, a man contracted him to work on a pig farm in exchange for a measly salary....

Nico: What a miserable life! I'd gladly eat those carob beans instead of the pigs... but if the owner sees me, he's gonna kill me with a beating... By the horns of Beelzebub, I've never felt so starved before!

Jesus: So weeks passed. Nico was dying of hunger while the pigs all got fat. He was filthy, stinking even more than the pigs, and he did nothing but complain....

Nico: Here I am, a shabby and miserable man, while at home they're probably enjoying a nice and hearty meal.... They may be poor there, but they always have something to eat. I gotta return... I can't bear this anymore.... I'm gonna tell the old man: Look, Papa, I'm sorry, I was wrong, things have been bad for me. Say whatever you want; yell at me; do anything you please; but please, help me. I'm sure the old man will soften up and will give me some money.... Yes, I must return....

Jesus: And so he decided to return....

Ephraim: It's been more than 3 years since your brother went away....

Reuben: He's your son, and not my brother. For me, it's like a hundred years ago....

Ephraim: If I only knew where he was, I'd look for him...

Reuben: You could use up 10 sandals and still not find him. This son of yours is dead. Forget about him once and for all, Papa....

Jesus: That morning, like all mornings for more than 3 years, Ephraim went out to the road during the passage of caravans from the south, hoping to get some news from his son.... When the sun peeped over the horizon and illuminated the road, the poor father saw something coming from afar. Someone coming near. His heart told him it was his son, and old Ephraim, like a child, ran to receive him....

Ephraim: My son, my son!

Jesus: He embraced and kissed his son....

Ephraim: My son, you've returned...!

Nico: Papa, look, I'll explain....

Ephraim: There's no need to explain. You've returned and that's enough! Come, let's go... Neighbor, help me bring me the best suit in the chest and get me the wedding ring of his mother for him to put on, and a pair of new sandals too.... My son's in tatters.... You, servant, bring the fat calf and roast it fast.... My son's hungry and he's so thin, he has to eat well... He isn't dead! He's alive!... He was lost, but I've found him!

Jesus: Soon, the whole of Nazareth was in Ephraim's house. The old man told the whole town that Nico, his son, had returned. He was home again....

Woman Neighbor: Where have you been, you rascal? Here we thought you had left the country....

Another Woman: How many girlfriends did you have?... See how happy your father is today. Look, he's dancing with Susana!...

Nico: The truth is I've never seen him so happy.

Woman Neighbor: Ever since you left, he's been waiting for you everyday. He always said you'd come back.

Another Neighbor: You did come back, young man! Come, let us dance to that!

Jesus: At noontime, Reuben, the older brother came back from work on the farm. As he approached the house, he heard the music playing and he wondered....

Reuben: Hey, you, what's all the noise in the house?

Neighbor: Why, didn't you know? Your brother Nico's back! There is a big feast goin' on in your house. Your father even ordered the slaughter of the fattened calf for the celebration. Run and catch up!

Jesus: The elder brother was enraged when he heard this and didn't want to enter the house. Old Ephraim was informed what happened and he ran to look for his older son...

Ephraim: Reuben, my son, Reuben... your brother's back! He's back safe and sound! Come inside, we've been waiting for you...

Reuben: But Papa, you knew very well how this bastard squandered your money in wine and with whores. Now you offered him the fattened calf for his food and party.... You're outta your mind, Papa!

Ephraim: Yes, my son: I'm crazy. I'm mad with joy. I was told that your brother was dead, but as you can see, he's back with us. We'd lost him, yet we've found him. How can I not be happy? If I only had three calves, I would have killed all of them so we could have even a better celebration!

Reuben: Of course. I have spent my whole life with you, working and obeying you every time, yet you've never offered me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends....

Ephraim: Why didn't you tell me, son? ...You know fully well that what's mine is yours. You know how I love the two of you....

Jesus: The old Ephraim embraced his older son with the same joy with which he embraced Nico. Then they went inside the house. Reuben embraced Nico and smiled. He hadn't smiled for a long time.... After a few days, when his daughters and their families went to Nazareth for a visit, Ephraim had his two sons seated around the table, and everyone in the family was there.

That is the story of old Ephraim, that old father whose heart is as big as the lake. If you understand, then you understand our Lord...

It was Jesus who taught us how to love God as our Father.

The parable of "The Prodigal Son" should have been entitled "The Parable of the Good Father" because it is he who is the real protagonist in Jesus' story. This is one of those parables used by Jesus to teach those who listened, how God is. Ephraim's character – that of generosity, patience and infinite capacity to forgive – best describes the greatness of God's heart.

In his talks, Jesus did not resort to abstract language in expressing concepts and ideas. He used concrete images. In this parable – without naming it – he tells how God can forgive. He describes it with various symbolism. When Ephraim found his lost son, he clothed him with a new tunic. In the Orient, such a presentation of a new dress is a gesture of great appreciation and in biblical language it symbolizes the coming of salvation. The father also gave him a ring and a pair of sandals to wear. The ring typifies the

full trust one gives to another, while the sandals represent a free person (the slaves never wore them). Lastly, the banquet; meat was eaten only on special occasions. To partake of a meal together at the same table was indicative of the forgotten past and a sign of complete communion. In presenting these images, Jesus tells us how God can be forgiving to one who repents and goes back to Him.

The parable consists of two parts; it tells about the two types of attitude shown to God by the two sons. For them, the father is the same: understanding and easy to forgive with open arms. But the older son does not share in the joy. He has done no wrong all his life but neither has he understood who the father is. Here, Jesus invites those who are “good and just” to share in the joy of seeing those who were lost – the less fortunate – also seated at the table and participating in the banquet. For people like the older brother, the gospel always turns out to be scandalous. Because of their merits accumulated in the course of time – prayers, observance of the commandments and sacrifices – they not only wanted the Lord to reward them with heaven, but also wished to deprive the rest, particularly the sinners, of the same blessings. Sadly enough, this attitude is common among a great number of people who call themselves Christians.

In this story, Jesus compared God to the father with the big heart. He taught his disciples to call on God “the Father” as he always did. In all the books of the Old Testament, it is said that God treats His children as “a Father” but on no occasion did anyone address Him as “my Father.” (The invocation “Our Father” is used in collective prayers, in the name of the whole community). The immense trust with which Jesus addressed the Lord as “father”, as “Papa” (“abba”), the Aramaic word affectionately used to mean father, is an outstanding characteristic of his personality. In the whole literature of prayers in ancient Judaism, not a single prayer is found invoking God as “Abba,” not even in the liturgical or private prayers. At this point, Jesus was not heir to the tradition of his ancestors. Instead, he opened a new road unknown to anyone and replete with theological consequences which enabled us to get to know him more profoundly. Thus, through him, we definitely come to know God as our “Father.”
(Lk 15:11-32)

35

SLIDING THROUGH THE ROOF

In those days, Peter’s house was the most frequented in Capernaum. As the sun hid itself behind Carmel, our group, together with a number of village folks, gathered there to discuss our own problems...

Rufa: Yes, that’s fine. We need justice, equality and reforms, but... what about our soul, huh?

Peter: What soul are you talking about, mother-in-law?

Rufa: Yours, Peter, and mine and everybody else’s. If after all this mess we all die and are condemned, then what?

John: But old woman, why are we going to be condemned?

Rufa: Because we’re all sinners, dammit! We gotta worry about cleansing our souls!

A Man: Yeh, yeh, mother-in-law. The soul can wait, ’cuz we gotta feed our stomach first, don’t you think so? The Messiah’s comin’ with enough food for everyone!

Rufa: Well, I’m telling you, Peter. First and foremost, we gotta clear our conscience with the Lord; there’ll be enough time to worry about what to eat. Am I right or wrong, Jesus?

Jesus: I dunno, gran’ma. I think a bird needs two wings in order to fly, but can’t do it with a broken wing.

Rufa: What do you mean by that?

Jesus: God doesn’t separate things from each other. Everything goes together, like the body and soul, heaven and earth, the past and present...

That night, the cold wind blew over Mt. Hermon. Rufina, Peter’s wife, started to prepare soup with

roots as an ingredient. The whole neighborhood smelled its aroma and everyone came to partake of it. In a short while, the house was filled with people...

A Man: Hey, I can't hear a word they're saying.

A Woman: I heard something like a bird having two wings in order to fly and... Stop pushing, will you? ...Look who's here... the sons of Floro... and the old man too!

Another Man: How come the old fox is here?

Son: We wanna get in. We brought our father here all the way from the other end of the town....

Another Woman: Well, you better go back to where you came from! Don't you see there ain't no more space because of the crowd here?

Four young men carried an improvised small bed made of a fishing net and two paddles. Lying on it was Floro, a weak and paralyzed old man. His eyes were red and bulging like those of a frog.

Son: Give way, please!

Man: But how can you get this cripple inside?... There isn't even room for a needle in there!... Go away, go away!

Floro's sons tried to slip through the door, through the kitchen and through the yard... but in vain... There was a big crowd. But Floro wasn't about to give up without seeing Jesus. And then an idea occurred to him.

Son: It's terrible here, Papa. We better get outta here...

Floro: No way. I'm not budging here without seeing Jesus..

Son: But Papa, there's nothing we can do. We can't get in there....

Floro: Bring me up to the roof, then.

Son: How's that?

Floro: Bring me up to the roof, then lower me through it. For me it would be easy to do...

The four sons removed the paddles and rolled the net around the old man. They raised him up the roof of the house and started to take the clay-covered posts away. Meanwhile, Jesus continued to talk about the Kingdom of God....

Jesus: Yes, the same thing that happens to a bird also happens to a boat whose paddling need be coordinated for it to move ahead. In the Kingdom of God, everything goes in unison; everything.

Rufina: What's happening here... Peter, for God's sake, come over and look at this!... They're boring a hole in our roof! Come, Peter!

Peter: What's the matter, crazy woman?...

Rufina: Look, Peter; some people are scaling the roof!

Peter: Dammit, what's happening here...? Hey, you come down immediately or else...! Are you outta your mind? Bring me the broom, Rufina, and I'll break their necks if they won't come down...

Rufina: Oh... Peter!

In a matter of seconds, Floro's sons slid downwards, breaking the middle beam as the roof collapsed over our heads. Amid falling dust and broken posts appeared Floro, the paralytic, like an octopus trapped inside a net....

Peter: Look what you've done! You beast, idiots, you sons of a bitch!... You've ruined my roof! Who's gonna repair this now, huh?

Son: We lost our grip and slid...

Peter: Damn! You'll have to pay for this!

Son: The roof posts are a little rotten, so...

Peter: That's none of your business! Who ever told you to scale my roof, huh?

Son: Papa told us to....

Peter: Papa, Papa! You call this cretin “Papa”....? Rascal, what a miserable man!

Jesus: That’s enough Peter... It’s really nothing...

Peter: Oh yeah? Have you ever seen a man falling from the sky like a mashed bird, huh? He could’ve harmed my mother-in-law and might’ve killed me!

Jesus: That’s alright... Nobody got hurt...

Peter: But look, everything’s ruined: my roof, my windows, my stairs, everything!

Jesus: Don’t worry, I’ll fix it tomorrow. I’m an expert in roof repairs, you know.

Rufina: You’re an expert, yes... while this old man is an expert in destroying them! Is that right, Floro? You don’t know this man, Jesus. He’s Floro, the cripple. Don’t take pity on this sly fox. Do you know how he broke his legs? He was scaling walls and slipping through rooftops in order to steal. Scoundrel, I’ll give you a good beating!

Peter: Why the hell did you have to pass through the roof and not through the door, huh? Come on, speak up. Your legs may be paralyzed, but not your tongue!...

Floro: Because I’m crippled.

Peter: Yeah, I know... You’re a bandit! That’s what you are, and these four sons of yours are even worse. C’mon, get this rascal outta here!...

Jesus: Hold it Peter.... That’s not the way to handle this. Let him speak first. Why have you come, Floro? And why did you do this?

Floro: Because I wanted to get in. An old woman at the door was driving us away ’cuz “there’s no more room” inside. I really wanted to see you.

Peter: Why didn’t you stay by the window to listen, like the rest?

Floro: Because I wanted to see this man called Jesus who came to the city and cures the sick. My legs are paralyzed.

Rufina: Your sickness is in your hands, you thief! God will not heal you!

Peter: Look, Jesus, this man, as you can see, is a thief. Now he’s useless, but before... If I told you now, you wouldn’t believe me!...

John : This old man stole the candleholders from the synagogue without even blowing the candles out!

Peter: If you lost a dinar, you would find it inside his pocket. He even stole bread and olives so that he and his children would have something to eat!

A Woman: He’s a thief and a drunkard!

A Man: And a gambler!

Rufa: He’s a troublemaker too!

John: Let him go to hell; he’s as sinful as his sons!

Jesus: Is this true, Floro?

Floro: Yes sir. That’s all true. I’m a scoundrel. But my sons are not. My children are good.

Another Man: Good? Everytime Floro and his sons went to the marketplace, it was like a plague had taken over, because they ravaged everything!

Floro: That’s a lie. My sons are honest and decent.

Jesus: Are these four your sons, Floro?

Floro: Yes sir. They’re the older ones. The two pairs are twins.

Jesus: Do you have more children?

Floro: Uhh... I have ten more at home. I have fourteen children.

Jesus: Fourteen? Dammit! You have more than the tribes of Israel!

Floro: My wife gives birth to two at a time.

Jesus: Why did you steal? Didn’t you have a job?

Floro: Yes, but it wasn’t enough with fourteen mouths to feed. My wife would say they’d die of hunger. I worked during the day and stole at night. Yet it was still not enough! I became desperate and cursed the Lord. Yes sir, I committed every sin in violation of the Law. I can’t be forgiven. I’m a sinner yet my

children are not. I brought them up to be good and hardworking.

A Man: Your children are as insolent as you, old liar!

Floro: No, no, please don't say that. They are not like me.

Another Man: A chip off the old block!

Floro: No, spare them please! They're good. Believe me, stranger, my children aren't like me.

Jesus: It's alright, Floro. Take it easy. Look, you trust your children so much. And God trusts you. In the Kingdom of God, everyone has a place, even if he has to slip through the roof. Be happy, Floro: God forgives your sins. Believe me, He's forgiven your sins.

The paralytic looked at Jesus surprisingly with bulging eyes. He was smiling, though. Everyone was stunned by those words of Jesus....

Man: What did you say, stranger?

Jesus: That God has forgiven Floro.

Man: And who're you to say that?... This old man's a scoundrel. He can't be forgiven....

Jesus: Are you sure?

Man: Of course!

Jesus: Listen to this! Which is easier to say: "Your sins are forgiven" or "Your legs are cured"?

Man: Neither of the two. The first is a blasphemy... The second... is impossible.

Jesus: You're wrong, my friend. There is nothing impossible with God. Haven't we said before that in the Kingdom of God, everything goes together, like the body and soul...? Come, Floro, you can get up now and go home with your sons....

Then the incredible happened. Old Floro stood up, stretched his legs with great ease, then carried the net and oars that served as his bed, over his shoulders. His face was radiant with great joy. He then looked at us and started to walk. Stunned and scared for what had happened, our gaze followed his steps until he was out of sight. Never had we seen an event like this....

In Jesus' time and even today, a great number of Oriental dwellings have flat rooftops. These used to rest on a base of beams covered with branches, above which there was a layer of flattened clay. In ordinary houses this beam structure was made of sycamore wood. In big buildings, wood of stronger material, like cedar, had to be used. This type of light and provisional construction – wherein the roof could be raised during hot weather – explains how Floro, the paralytic, could be lowered from the roof to the interior part of Peter's house. The neighbors who were gathered on that day occupied not only the entire space of the house which was extremely small, but also clustered in the yard which was shared by several families in the neighborhood.

The dualistic idea is deeply-rooted in religious thought. On one hand, one speaks of sacred things, persons and places; and on the other of profane things, persons and places. People are said to have a soul (that is, spiritual, lofty, worth emulating) and a body (material, with baser instincts that ought to be controlled). Likewise, one speaks of the material and the spiritual, or the natural and the supernatural. In recent times there has been a desire to differentiate emphatically in this light, salvation from the promotion of the human. (Or liberation in Christ from temporal liberation). The future awaiting people is likewise seen as distinct and opposed to the present: as in heaven and earth; the here and the beyond. In reality, none of these opposite pairs find basis in the message of the Gospel. The words of Jesus and his attitude totally discard these false divisions by proclaiming that all people are equal – all are holy – that God fills in the universe He himself created, and that eternal life begins the moment people opt to defend the life of others.

The miracle that Jesus performs on the crippled man, Floro, is a sign that God does not consider any differences of this type. God simultaneously frees the paralytic of his sickness and from the burden of his weakness, his sins. For God – according to Jesus' signs – the body and soul go hand in hand. God is interested in the complete person. None of these dualisms matter anymore in the gospel. Nor do the

dualisms in action matter. In our struggle to transform our history from misery and injustice to that which is authentically humane, we construct the history of our salvation, the Reign of God. In other words, we are beginning our heaven here on earth now. And that is why we find God in people.

God knows the individual history of each man and woman. Therefore, he knows the ulterior motives of our actions and like a just judge, he is aware of the extenuating circumstances whenever we “sin.” The extreme need – and such is the case of Floro who had so many mouths to feed – is a great extenuating circumstance of our human debility. When confronted by Jesus, the paralytic “sees” his complete life and accepts it as is, and considering his limitations, he confesses this life in all sincerity. God, through Jesus, likewise sees and accepts it. He forgives him, and cleanses him of all his faults and even elevates him. Such accounting is made clear: Jesus is the messenger of God’s unconditional forgiveness and brings joy to peoples tormented heart.

We must not “read” Jesus’ miracles as proofs of his might nor majesty. What is majestic isolates, and what is powerful makes us tremble; it scares us. If the miracles by Jesus had this effect, everything would have been contradictory to the plan of God, who wanted to be near us through Jesus. Each of these signs brought the poor and the humble of Jesus’ town closer to him. They saw themselves in him who was a friend they could love and a leader they could follow. Those who stayed away from him, who definitely did not admire him, were those who believed that God was with them through their prayers and laws. Therefore, there was no need to support a poor peasant who was capable of discoursing on religious matters and enkindling the hope of a people terribly overcome by too much suffering.

(Mt 9:1-8; Mk 2:1-12; Lk 5:17-26)

36

AS SMALL AS MINGO

Canilla: Jesus! Jesus!... Wait!

Jesus: What’s the matter, Canilla?

Canilla: Teach me the three fingers’ trick.

Jesus: Again? I already taught you that yesterday.

Canilla: But I forgot.

Jesus: I’m gonna do it tomorrow.

Canilla: No, I want it now.

Jesus: Okay, watch it closely so you will learn... You hide your thumb this way... Then twist your little finger this way and...

Canilla: I know it! I know it already... Look... Am I doing it right?

Jesus: Better than I do. Now, go and teach it to Nino, who still hasn’t learned to do it....

Canilla: Yes, I’ll show this to Nino.

Jesus: And then in the afternoon you go to Peter’s house with him. I wanna know if you’re learning how to write the alphabet in the synagogue.

Canilla: Goodbye, Jesus!

Jesus: Goodbye, Canilla!

I think the children of Capernaum became Jesus’ friends in such a short time. They always followed him so he would teach them a trick or tell a story. The boys were running to and from the street the whole day. The rabbi met them only once a week to teach them how to read, while they did nothing but play and do mischief the rest of the day. The same thing happened in Peter’s house.

Mingo: You’re a pig, pig, a filthy pig!

Their four sons were moving about from morning till night and not a day or night passed without someone crying, laughing or picking a fight with one of the brothers. Rufina spent the day running from the kitchen to the garden and back, also picking a fight with them. Old grandma Rufa had her own chores to attend to. When Peter returned from his fishing, he was always in for a surprise....

Peter: What's it this time, woman? How did the children behave today?

Rufina: Like rogues, as always. Little Simon wounded Mingo on the head with a piece of iron metal....

Pedro: He has a cut on his head?... And what did you do?

Rufina: And what could I do? I washed his head with water from the lake and put a patch on it... Oh Peter, I'm afraid these boys will kill each other...

Peter: No, but they're gonna kill us first. Oh dammit! What little brats. Sito! Sito! Come over here!

Rufina: Don't hurt them, Peter. He already received a good strappin' from his gran'ma... Leave him alone...

Peter: They gotta learn their lesson, Rufina. We have to correct them while we can...

Rufina: But they're still kids. It doesn't really matter yet...

Peter: Sito, I told you to come over here!

Rufina: Listen, instead of beating him, why don't you just pick his lice. Mamma was too busy to do it. I'm sure his head is full of them....

One day, like any other day, the three daughters of my brother James went to play with Peter and Rufina's sons. When the seven children got together, the garden of old Jonas' house looked like the Sea of Galilee on a stormy day...

Little Simon: Now, I laugh and everybody cries! Ha, Ho, Ha, ha..!

A Girl: Now, do it the other way around! I cry and you all laugh! Boo... Hoo...

Another Girl: I'm bored. Let's play something else, Sito!

Mingo: Let's play soldiers!

Little Simon: Okay!

Girl: What about us?

Little Simon: Mila and you will be the lions... Come on! Let's go look for some swords!

Girl: What about me: what am I gonna be?

Little Simon: You're gonna be another lion!...The swords! Where are the swords?!

After a while, at mid-afternoon, Jesus arrived in Peter's house...

Jesus: How's everything, Rufina?

Rufina: I'm here, Jesus, in front of the stove, as always...

Jesus: Hmm...! The soup smells good...!

Rufina: You can stay for dinner if you want... Dinner'll soon be ready. Everything gets delayed because of these boys. Right now, Reuben is suffering from diarrhea, and he takes most of my time. Look...

Jesus: Maybe he's got worms...

Rufina: Of course, what else could it be... It's either the worms or some other sickness. This never ends...! Well, Jesus, are you gonna stay for dinner?

Jesus: No Rufina, thanks. I came to look for some poles I asked Peter to keep for me here. I need them in my work. Would you know where he put them?

Rufina: Oh Jesus, with so many things in my head, I don't remember where they are now, but I saw them yesterday... Why don't you ask Peter?

Peter: Oh yes, your poles... They were just here in this corner!... Where are they now?

Jesus: I wanted to do the repair that I promised our neighbor on the other side... while it's still early...

Peter: Yes, of course! But where the hell are they now? Rufina!

Rufina: Don't you ask me, Peter, I dunno...!

Nina: Ay, ay, ay!....

Little Simon: I killed you, I killed you!

Nina: Oh, Uncle Peter, look at Sito! Uncle Peter!

Peter: Damn these children!... Little Simon!

Jesus: Peter, look, she's bleeding...

Peter: Rufina, Rufina! Run!... Little Simon, come here quick!... Here are your poles, Jesus! They are all broken! Okay, who gave you permission to play with these poles?

Little Simon: They were our swords, Papa!...

Peter: Swords, huh?... And what were these swords for?

Little Simon: So that we could kill the lions. She was the lion.

Peter: These poles are not yours, damn! They belong to Jesus and he needs them for his work... Alright, pull down your pants, quick! You too, Mingo, show me your buttocks!

Rufina: Don't beat him, Peter. He's too small...

Peter: Yeah, he's too small to be beaten, but look at the mischief he's doing... Rufina, take the girls to their house... Now, to hell with these boys! Here, take this... so you will learn to respect what's not yours, dammit!!

Jesus: Peter...

Peter: Insolent!... disobedient!... you wretch!...

Jesus: That's enough, Peter...

Peter: Bad seed! You good for nothing...!

Jesus: Peter, for God's sake, I can replace those poles...

Peter: You shut up too, Jesus! These boys gotta learn their lesson!

Mingo: Oh, oh, oh... ohhh...!

Peter: Now, you two will stay here kneeling on these stones until I tell you. Do you hear?... Do you hear me well?

Little Simon: Papa, we're sorry... I'm scared... It's dark here... Please forgive us...

Peter: So you're scared, huh? Well, you're gonna stay here till I tell you. And you better be ready, because the moment you move, the witch will come and take you with her long fork to the bottom of the lake!

Rufina: Don't scare them, Peter...! How dare you, Peter!

Little Simon and Mingo were left in the yard, with a punishment of kneeling on stones. Peter went inside the house... Jesus was beside Rufina by the stove...

Peter: Pff!... I'm sorry, Jesus. Your work was ruined. I'll get other poles for you...

Jesus: Don't worry, Peter. I'm sorry for the children. You have beaten them very hard. And they're still... kids.

Peter: They're kids, alright, but look at the mischief they do. No Jesus, don't defend them.

Jesus: Forgive them, man... They didn't know it was wrong...

Peter: Right, but they did it, and that's it.

Rufina: Yes, Peter. Listen to Jesus, and let the children in. They'll catch cold outside. Come on, forgive them. Tell them that the soup is ready...

Jesus: Come on, Peter... soften up... Don't be too hard with the boys...

Little Simon: And then, Papa... Mila said "grr", and Mingo took her by the tail and...

Jesus: See, Peter? They've forgotten their punishment... Children forget... and forgive so easily. That's the good thing about them.

In my country, children hardly mattered, and that's the truth. They were taught the basic things, they received a good beating and we grown-ups never conversed with them nor asked their opinion. They mattered only because when they grew up, they could work. But not with Jesus. He could see something great in children.

Every time Jesus went to Peter's house he loved to chat with the children. He would sit by the yard under the lemon tree and soon Peter's boys and their neighbors, as well as James' daughters, would come

running to him. Jesus gladly obliged them with his stories. That day, Jesus was teaching them some tongue twisters....

I don't know how Jesus managed to attract the children to himself. I think he acted a bit like them and played with those brats like he was one of them... That day, when Peter and Andrew came home from fishing, they looked through the window and saw the children swarming like bees as they flocked around Jesus....

Rufina: I wonder why Jesus doesn't get married and have his own children. He surely knows how to pamper them. Look how fascinated they are with him, what with the stories he tells them each day...!

Peter: Well, they better get back their senses right now. We gotta discuss something in Zebedee's house right now and Jesus has to come with us. Hey, kids.... beat it..! Everyone... and don't bother us! Out... out... out of here!

Jesus: But the children are behaving well here. Let them stay with me.

Little Simon: Papa, Papa! I just learned a new tongue-twister today!... That night...

Jesus: Oh Peter, you just don't know...

Peter: Oh hell, you're even more patient than Job with these children!

Jesus: The truth is, I'm very fond of children, Peter...

Peter: Of course, because they're not your children. If you had your own to support today and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, then it would be different.

Jesus: Peter, Peter...

Peter: Yes, I know, they're still hiding under the skirts of their mother and...

Jesus: ...And that's the best thing about them. They're kids and they're not greater than what they really are. And unlike us grown-ups, they're happy being such. We think we're important, we become serious, we crack our heads solving the most difficult problems in the world... while this kid, well, look at him: he sleeps, for all he cares about the world....

Rufina: He's tired, Jesus... He fell asleep sucking milk...

Jesus: See how good he looks with his mother, Peter... He fears nothing in his mother's arms, even on your lap... Sometimes I think that the entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven oughta be small too, so small that only the children could go through it.

Yes, that's it... While we adults have to bend our heads, leaving behind our pride, grudges, fears, everything... Yes, we have to make ourselves small, like Mingo... or Little Simon... or Mila... so we can get through that door.

Before he went to sleep, Jesus caressed Mingo, held him in his arms for a while and kissed him. Oblivious of everything, Mingo slept soundly on his mother's lap.

In Jesus' milieu, children mattered very little. Certainly, they were considered as God's blessing, but a human's worth became a reality only when reaching majority age. From the point of view of the law, of a person's obligations, and religious rights, lack of concern included children, common in the writings of the period: "the deafmutes, idiots and the young." Side by side with the old people were the sick, the slaves, women, the crippled, the homosexual, the blind, etc. In the same manner that Jesus had an authentically revolutionary attitude towards women, his actions towards children – very much related to how he related with women – was surprising during his time. As children, he made them the privileged heirs of the Kingdom of God. This means that children are closer to God than adults, and as such they already had their own worth, and not just for what they would be when they grew up. Jesus' position had no precedent in the traditions of his ancestors. It was absolutely original.

Jesus' attitude toward children was not an empty theory nor an idea floating in the air. It was put into practice. Jesus shared much of his time playing with children, laughing and joking with them, talking to them about their small problems. These moments of sharing – devoid of sermons and many words – show how adults' attitudes should be towards children. It is an attitude founded on the respect for their

smallness, without expecting from them what they cannot give at their early age. In other words, to follow the classic formula of Paul: In order to win the children, be like a child. (1 Cor 9:23).

The children who were close to Jesus were not like those found in pictures: well kept, in spotless tunics, piously asking for a blessing with such angelic faces. The children in the barrio of Capernaum were street children, inured to wanting and to working at an early age, untidy and creatures full of lice wearing rundown sandals, like present-day street children in our cities, like our peasant boys who are consumed by work and hunger even before they outgrow their infancy. Peter's or James' children, or those of Jesus' other disciples, must have been like them, undergoing the same preoccupations and joys of raising a family.

When Jesus talked to adults about "being like children" in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, he was not asking them to be as pure as children (as in being chaste). The idea that the child is more chaste than the adult, in this sense, is alien to Jewish thought. Rather, Jesus is referring more to the attitude that we must have before God – a Father who welcomes us in his arms. Being a child basically means learning to utter "Abba" once again, or "Papa" or "Daddy." Jesus always addressed God with this word, full of trust, affection and familiarity. "Abba" is the Aramaic word by which the children call their father and it is the first word that the baby babbles. Addressing the Lord in this manner means that he has set aside all fears of a bad God who takes account of our failures. It conveys seeing in God a home, a refuge, and a big heart.

(Mt 19:13-15; Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17; Mt 18:1-5; Mk 9:33-37; Lk 9:46-48)

37

THE CRY OF LAZARUS

That year was a bad one in all of Galilee. The summer storms had ruined all the harvests. The wheat crop, the rye and the olive groves were destroyed. Hunger came like a plague and knocked at every door and the epidemics and desperation consequently followed. The farmers sold at any price the fruits of the next harvests which had not even been sown. The usurers had a heyday and loaned money with an interest rate of 80 to 90 percent. More and more beggars mushroomed into the cities each day. Capernaum was not spared from them....

Jesus: Look John, there they go again...

John : Yeah, they'll sit in front of Eleazar's house and stay there the whole day waiting for the garbage to be disposed so they can scavenge melon skins or some scrap meat...

Jesus: No, no, it can't go on like this!

John: Today it's the peasants, but tomorrow, it's gonna be us, Jesus, the fishermen of the lake. Then, the artisans. This will never end.

Jesus: Let's join them, John. Let's stay in front of Eleazar's house....

Beggar: What are you talking about, Nazarene?... about God?... Bah!.. God doesn't listen to us. He's deaf.

Jesus: No, He's not deaf. You haven't shouted loud enough for Him to hear. Is that right, John?

John: Exactly. Come, let us shout all together until the rocks tremble and split!

Jesus: Until the God of Heaven hears the screams of the hungry and gives us a hand...

Beggar: Well, what are we waiting for? Let's all scream!

All: Aaah!... Aaah!... Aaah...!

Jesus: One night, God was taking a rest up in heaven, and Abraham passed in front of His door...

God: Ah, my friend Abraham, come...!

Abraham: At your service, my Lord.

God: Abraham, what's going on down there, that I hear a lot of noise?... Don't you hear it? Listen well...

Beggars: Aaah!... Aaah...! Aaah...!

Abraham: It's like the rumbling of thunder promising a storm. Or it could be the roaring of an impending earthquake.

God: You're wrong, Abraham. Nothing of the sort. Listen well...

Beggars: Aaah! Aaah!... Aaah!...

God: These are men and women weeping and screaming. And the children too. Don't you hear? They're my children, Abraham! Something terrible must be happening to them. Come, go down immediately to earth and find out what's the matter. I'll be waiting for you.

Abraham: At your service, my Lord. I'm going right away.

Jesus: And old Abraham put on his sandals, took his cane and headed as rapidly and obediently as before, when he left Ur of Chaldea, for an unknown land... Soon enough, a perspiring Abraham returned and faced the Lord...

God: So you're back, Abraham.

Abraham: Yes, my Lord. I was there for only a few seconds and my ears almost burst because of the noise. The yelling of the people was like boiling water, or a volcano about to explode. Their cries can be heard from all four corners of the earth.

God: Tell me what's wrong. Why are my children screaming?

Abraham: Because they're hungry.

God: They're hungry? Why, that can't be. When I created the earth at the beginning, I planned everything well. Do you think I'm irresponsible?... No, I planted many fruit trees, sowed many seeds that would give them abundant food, created the birds that fly in the sky, and the fish in the rivers and the animals that provide delicious meat on earth. I created everything so that people would have food to eat. This doesn't include the wealth that's hidden in the bowels of the earth and in the seas. They can't be hungry. Everything was well planned. There's sufficient food for everyone on earth. Why is this happening now?

Abraham: You have forgotten one important detail, Lord.

God: What is it?

Abraham: Human beings. They've taken it upon themselves to divide the land... do you see what I mean?

God: I think so... "The one who divides gets the lion's share"... Is that it?

Abraham: Exactly. This is what a group of people have done... to own everything. They have all the food hoarded in their barns.

God: What about the rest?

Abraham: They're the ones shouting at the doors of the rich, waiting for the garbage to be thrown out of the window so they can get the spoils and eat them. They're starving.

God: I can't believe what you're saying, my friend Abraham... Is this what my children on earth are doing?

Abraham: Just as I have said, my Lord.

God: Hearing all this, Abraham, I'm about to lose my patience. I'm so enraged that I feel I want to summon all the clouds in heaven, as I had done before during the time of Noah, to bring the floods and submerge the earth in water. Why, I'm too ashamed to have them as my children, whose hearts are not made of flesh but of stone.

Abraham: What can we do now, my Lord?

God: Have you forgotten that I am the judge of heaven and earth?... Michael, Raphael, Gabriel and Uriel, come right away!

Jesus: And, without batting an eyelash, the archangels presented themselves before the Lord...

God: I will mete out judgment on earth. I want you to descend to earth immediately and bring me one of those crying out in hunger, that he may give his declaration. Then bring me one of those who are feasting, one whose stomach is full, as well as his granaries. I am going to question the two. Come on, move fast!

Jesus: So the four archangels turned and immediately descended to earth, where the screams were heard. Michael and Raphael grabbed one of those dying of hunger by the shoulders, while Gabriel and Uriel did the same to a rich man who was also dying, not of hunger but of extreme self-indulgence... The two were brought before God's tribunal...

God: The meeting may now come to order. You, what's your name?

Lazarus: Lazarus, my Lord.

God: You're one of those creating a lot of noise down there, aren't you?

Lazarus: Yes, Lord.

God: Will you tell us why you and your friends are screaming so much?

Lazarus: Because our children are dying of hunger, because our wives don't even have a drop of milk in the breast with which to feed them. Our men are so weak that their knees tremble for not having eaten for seven days. That's why we're crying out loud. Day and night we do this, that justice may fall upon us... Look at me, my Lord... You can count my ribs one by one... I'm all skin and bones. My wounds are all over my body and dogs come to lick them and I allow this because their saliva eases the pain.

God: Stop my son. That's enough... Do you want to ask him anything, Abraham?

Abraham: You said you're hungry... Some say this happens because you hate to work, that you're a bum.

Lazarus: No, Father Abraham, it's not true. All our lives we do nothing but work and sweat. We toil like animals. The rich drink our sweat and suck our blood. They wring us like grapes in the pressing field, and like olives under a millstone. These are the people who hoard everything but won't even give the crumbs from their table for us to eat.

Jesus: God was teary-eyed while he listened to poor Lazarus' account. Then, God stood up, walked a few steps, and faced the rich man...

God: Who are you?

Epulon: My name is Epulon.

God: What can you say about the declaration of Lazarus?

Epulon: Well, to tell you frankly, I don't know anything about it...

God: Of course you do!... Unless you're deaf!... I know you can hear perfectly well. Why didn't you listen to these people seated in front of your house and crying out in hunger, begging you to share with them what you had in excess?... I heard them from heaven... Why didn't you hear them when you were just beside them?

Epulon: Lord, I... You know? There was a lot of noise at the party, so I couldn't hear.

God: Liar! Now you'll hear. Open your ears 'cuz I am going to pass judgment: You're being accused of murder, rich man Epulon; for having killed your brothers and sisters of hunger or having allowed them to die, which is the same thing.

Epulon: But Lord, the farm, as well as the wheat and barns, are mine. They're all my property... Why should I give to someone whose name I don't even know?

God: Mine, mine, all you can say is mine! Who gave you the right to claim what's not yours? I created this world and everything in it. I created it from the beginning and it's mine. I lease to anyone I like... Who're you? You were naked when you came out of your mother's womb and will return naked to the womb of the earth... The only thing that's yours are the ashes; they're your only property.

Epulon: Have mercy, Lord, have mercy on me...

God: You never had pity on your brothers and sisters. You wished to be alone and you'll remain alone forever.

God: Lazarus, come and take a rest. You've suffered enough.

Lazarus: I can't, my Lord. How can I when my companions continue to scream down on earth?... Don't you hear them?

God: You're right, son... Look, I've thought of something better. I'm going down with you to earth. Abraham!

Abraham: At your service, Lord.

God: Lend me your sandals.

Abraham: Yes, my Lord.

God: You stay here, Abraham. Here you'll find peace and glory, but on earth, there's hell from the egoism of some. I'm needed down there by my children who're crying out for justice.

Abraham: Lord, are you out of your mind? How can you leave your house in heaven?

God: It's alright. My home is down there with the homeless, with thousands of people like Lazarus, who know not where to go. Goodbye, Abraham, and take care of everything until I come back. Let's go Lazarus, and hurry. We'll start a Kingdom of Justice for the poor people of the world. From now on and forever, I'll be with you each day, until things have finally changed.

Beggar: But things have remained the same, countryman. We're tired of screaming... and the landlord's house remains closed. Eleazar is selfish and cruel, like the rich man in your story.

Jesus: We can't expect much from him and from people like him, but look, other doors will be opened for you... Hi, Madame Anna, will you come over for a minute!

Neighbor: What's the matter? What's this noise around? My ears are almost bursting because of it!

Beggar: We're hungry.

Neighbor: Well, the truth is I don't have much to spare, but.... Let's see if can add more water to the soup!

Old Samuel opened his door too, and Joanne, the wife of Lolo. Deborah did the same, as well as Simeon the hunchback...

The poor people's doors were opened to welcome poorer ones... Yes, the Kingdom of God was close to us....

In Palestine, as in the rest of the ancient world, natural catastrophes – which people did not know how to prevent or control – were a cause for great starvation periodically besieging the country. Intense droughts, hurricanes, and torrential rains destroyed the harvests, the main source of income for most people. This state of starvation was an index for a drastic increase in the price of basic foods. The number of beggars grew in the cities and on the roadsides. Speculators and hoarders took advantage of the situation, which is exactly what happens nowadays.

There exists in all cultures stories describing the twist of fate befalling people in history. These are ways of expressing people's rebellion against acts of injustice committed in history. On the basis of this, Jesus narrated the parable of the rich man, Epulon ("opulent") and the poor man, Lazarus. In these parables, Jesus tries to show his listeners, dramatically, the demands of justice in the gospel. The name Lazarus – meaning "God helps" – is important in the parable: God helps the poor, in as much as in this life he has been "one who is worthless."

In the parable, God judges the rich and the poor in the persons of Epulon and Lazarus. He shares in the pain experienced by the poor. On the other hand, the rich are deaf to the poor's cry of anguish. Wealth hardens people's heart and plugs their ears. That is why the rich cannot enter the Kingdom of God – which is a kingdom of equality – unless they renounce wealth.

In our present world there is enough food for everyone everywhere. There are sufficient raw materials to provide every family a decent way of life. It is not true that the world is overpopulated. The majority of

the third world countries are underpopulated. It is also a fallacy that population is the cause of poverty for millions of people. Many do not have because a few people have an excess. God does not condone this situation. He created the world in abundance: its riches, fruits, mines, all for everyone's benefit. But the ambition of a few widens the gap between the rich and the poor day by day. God hears the cries of anguish, of protest and rebellion of the poor, and He responds by taking their cause as His own. God grieves by their side and fights with them too. The cause of liberation of the poor in this world is God's cause. Equality obtained among people in this world means the realization of the message of Jesus in the Gospel.

Although the parable talks of something beyond, of justice that God will give in the next life, the constant message in the Gospel is applicable to the present. That is why, in this episode, God wears Abraham's sandals and goes down the earth to immediately start the liberation of the hungry: This is Jesus, God's messenger, who tells us that God is in a hurry to carry out his plan to distribute the earth's riches among his children on earth.

To be a Christian is to say "This is ours," and not "This is mine." The rich persist in defending property, and in doing so, contradict God's plan. St. Ambrose said: "Don't give to the poor what is yours, but give him back what is his. This is so because you claim as your own what is common property and what has been given for the benefit of all. The land belongs to all, and not only to the rich." (Book of Naboth). It is Christian to share, to create a community, and to share one's wealth. The poor are often freer and more capable than the rich to share the little that they have, and to learn the value of saying "ours."

This parable has always been used to discourse on hell and a cruel God who denies the rich man, Epulon, even a drop of water, who almost gets converted upon learning of the punishment that awaits him... Jesus does not want to scare anyone with the flames of hell nor present a vindictive God. What he wants to show us is the severity, the radicalness of God's judgment, which cannot be swayed by the rich people's alibis. It is very clear that in the Kingdom of God, there is no place for those who refuse to help alleviate the misery of others: Only those who share their food with the hungry shall find a place beside God.

(Lk 16:19-31)

38

IT HAPPENED IN NAIM

In those days, great was the misery all over Israel. Hunger spread, like an oilspill, to all the cities by the lakeshore and throughout the farms. There was starvation in poor people's houses, and it became their constant companion day and night.

Naomi: Here, son, take it... Just make do with this piece of bread and...

Abel: I can't stand this!... Damn!... I work like a beast under the heat of the sun, and this is what I get: a piece of hard bread!

Naomi: Oh my son, what can I do if there's nothing more than this?... We're indebted to everyone, and nobody wants to lend us a single cent anymore...

Abel: It's not you, Mamma... Until when will we put up with this?... Tomorrow it's gonna be the same thing... filling up the barns of this fortunate Eleazar and then back here to chew a crust of hard bread for supper. This isn't life, dammit!

Naomi: Abel, my son, don't curse, for God might punish us...

Abel: That's it! Here we are living in misery, and worse, God comes to punish us! Well, let Him do what He pleases, for all I care!... To hell with God and with Eleazar, and with everyone!... Oh...! Oh... this pain...!

Naomi: Son, what's the matter?

Abel: Nothing... it's nothing, Mamma... I'm going to lie down... Leave me alone, Ma.

Naomi: Are you feeling bad, my son?

Abel: I'm tired, I feel like they beat me several times... and I feel cold all over my body...

Naomi: Oh, Lord God! When will you ever remember us, when?

Woman Neighbor: Let me look at him, neighbor... Oh, yes, this boy is burning with fever... he looks sick...

Naomi: Holy God! What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do?

Woman Neighbor: Don't worry. Let me prepare some bitter lemon for him and you'll see how soon he will get well...

Naomi: Do you think so, neighbor...?

Woman Neighbor: He'll get well, you'll see... If he doesn't, then what can we do? Don't be sad Naomi; if this is really meant for him, then let's just accept it.

The doctor came that night...

Doctor: Your son is serious, lady. The high fever has consumed his whole body.

Naomi: He hasn't uttered a word for two days, Doctor. He doesn't even know who I am... Oh, my son, my son!

Doctor: I can't do anything.

Naomi: Is he... going to die?

Doctor: This question of death is God's concern and not ours.

Naomi: If he dies, what will I do?... He's the only one I have, the only one.

That young man was the only one Naomi had. Her husband passed away several years before. Since then, Naomi worked on the farm in order to raise her son. Her hands became calloused and her youthful face developed wrinkles. That year, hunger struck Naomi's house, as it did the rest of the houses of Israel. This was followed by sickness. That day at dawn, death came to that house.

Naomi: Abel, my son! Abel!... Abel!

Woman Neighbor: Don't call him anymore, Naomi. He's gone.

Naomi: It can't be!... It can't be!

Woman Neighbor: Learn to accept it, woman. God gave him to you, God took him away from you.

Naomi: But I needed him!... He was the only one I had!... I live because of him!... Now, what's the use of life?

Woman Neighbor: Better resign yourself, Naomi, and have patience....

Naomi shut the eyes of her son Abel and, assisted by her neighbors, washed his body and wrapped it in a clean white sheet. Soon the mourners came, those women who wept for our dead and informed everyone of death through their songs. Their plaintive cries were heard through all the houses of the small town of Naim. Naomi's friends came to console her and to prepare her son's burial...

Woman Neighbor: Oh Naomi, your son was seen working with you in the field up until last week. The mourners gathered beside the dead body. Some men played vigil music with their flutes, while the others prepared the little bed on which to place the dead boy during interment.

Another Woman: It's destiny, Naomi, which is written in the book of heaven. No amount of tears can erase it. So, accept your fate.

Naomi: I'm all alone! I'm all by myself! I have no husband to give me other children, nor children who can give me grandchildren... Of what use are my breasts, my womb and my hands!... I'm useless!

Woman Neighbor: Be resigned to your fate, woman.

Naomi: Why? Why me?... He's the only one I have!

Woman Neighbor: It was a case of bad fever.

Naomi: But he was very young. He didn't have to die! He didn't have to die!

Woman Neighbor: Accept your fate, woman, accept your fate...

During those days of hunger, Peter and I went with Jesus to Nazareth. Jesus wanted to send Mary, his mother, some money and to see how she was. Before returning to Capernaum, we passed by Naim... where a cousin of his lived. Naim was a small town attached to the outskirts of Mount Gabaiah and very closely guarded by the heights of Mount Tabor. As we were approaching Naim, we heard from afar the mournful music of the flutes and the plaintive cries of the women...

Peter: What a curse! This is the third death that we've seen on the road... Since we left Capernaum, we've done nothing but come across funerals.

John: It must be another case of black fever again. There must be an epidemic here.

Jesus: What epidemic are you talking about? It's hunger, John. We poor are dying of hunger. There was no harvest, prices have gone up, and so have taxes. People will naturally die of hunger.

Through the road leading outside the town, we saw the funeral heading toward us. Everyone witnessed how the mourners, dressed in sackcloth, beat their bare chests, and pulled their hair while crying in anguish. Behind them was the dead man being carried by four men on an improvised bed. He was wrapped in a white sheet. Then we saw him... He was a young man. There was no trace of beard on his face. Beside him must have been his mother, anguish written all over her face. She was crying and tearing her dress off while lifting her arms to heaven. Many men and women from the town accompanied her... We followed the cortege when it passed in front of us...

Woman Neighbor: Oh my God! Oh my God!... Poor Naomi! Poor woman!

John: Who died, madam?

Another Neighbor: Abel, Naomi's son. His mother was widowed six years ago. He was her only child... What a misfortune! He died so young!

Jesus: This guy didn't have to die.

Woman Neighbor: But he died. He had this black fever which is deadly. Oh my God! Oh my Lord!

The funeral cortege passed through the narrow and dusty road bordering the hill of Naim and at the far end, was the small cemetery...

Woman Neighbor: He died this morning at sunrise...!

Jesus: He didn't die, woman... Don't say that. Better say: They killed him... Yes, yes... he was killed by those who overpriced the little wheat that the rains have left us! He was killed by those who continue to enrich themselves while the children of Israel are dying of hunger!

The people behind the cortege turned to Jesus who raised his voice while uttering those words, amid lamentations and flute sounds. The commotion that ensued spread fast enough and the men carrying the dead stopped walking. Everyone was looking at us...

Neighbor: Hey, what are these strangers shouting about at the back? Respect the dead, dammit!

Woman Neighbor: This man is saying that Abel was killed not by black fever nor any other fever, but that he died of starvation.

Another Neighbor: It doesn't matter anymore. He's dead, and he's dead.

Naomi: My son! My son! Oh my son!

Neighbor: Keep on moving! Stop this silly talk! Come on! Continue playing the flutes!

Naomi: My God, why did you take him away from me? Why?...

Without uttering a word, Jesus moved his way through the flute players and the farmers from Naim. Peter and I followed him. Jesus stopped by the boy's mother and in a low voice began to say the prayer for the dead of Israel. Beside him, the mourners continued weeping, in keeping with their job...

Naomi: My son! My son's dead! He was the only one I've got!

Neighbor: Hey you, what's your business disturbing the funeral?

Jesus went near the boy's mother...

Jesus: Now, now, stop weeping, woman...

Naomi, her eyes full of tears, turned to Jesus...

Naomi: I've lost everything I had!... Everything's gone!... Everything!

Neighbor: Come on Naomi. You must accept your fate.

Naomi: No! I don't want him to die! No, no!

Jesus: Neither does God want your son to die. Neither does He accept it.

John: Hey Jesus, let's get away from here. There's nothing we can do.

Jesus: Stay, John. I want to see him....

Then Jesus went near the small bed carrying the dead boy and looked at him; he also had tears in his eyes. The mourners were gathered around the corpse, their hair disheveled. They were crying in deep sorrow. They never stopped...

Jesus: What was your son's name?

Naomi: Abel, his name was Abel...

Jesus: Of course, Abel... History keeps on repeating itself... Abel... Where are the Cains who killed you?... Until when, Oh God of Israel? Until when will you turn a deaf ear to your many children dying of hunger?... Until when shall our mothers mourn the early death of their sons? The blood of this Abel is clamoring to God from this earth. This boy didn't have to die, he can't die... Abel, stand up, Abel...!

Jesus bent over the dead boy, took him by the arm and helped him to sit. Abel opened his eyes. His eyes were big and scared, as if he woke up from a long nightmare....

Naomi: My son, my son...!

Seeing this, the men dropped the small bed on the ground and ran like hell. They were followed by the mourners and the flute players, as well as by the other neighbors from Naim. They were running and screaming, horrified... Peter was as white as chalk, while my legs were trembling. Only the mother was left with us, who was looking at her son with tears still in her eyes, but she did not dare touch him.

Naomi: Abel, Abel, my son...!

Jesus looked tired, like one who had just fought a hard battle. Soon, what happened in Naim spread through the whole Galilee. And the people were saying: "We have a prophet in our midst. God has come to help His people."

Hunger is a powerful medium for the majority of diseases. In the days of drought or loss of harvests, real epidemics come about (plague, fevers) and no one even knows their origin, much less how to fight them.

Naim is a small city, around 15 kilometers from Nazareth. Its name means "beautiful." It is situated by the mountainside and closely sheltered by the height of Mount Tabor. At present, a small Franciscan church serves as a reminder of Jesus' passage through this village.

The Israelites had many ways of showing their sorrow for the dead: They ripped off their clothes, loosened their hair, beat their breast, and poured ashes on their heads... They mourned their dead with ritualistic weeping from the time the news of a death became known up to interment. At times, this was a scandalous ritual. Not only the relatives and neighbors but the professional mourners as well, came to weep for the dead. Generally, a group of flute players were present during the wake, and would even play during the funeral. They wept, screamed or sang "lamentations," which almost always commenced with an "ay." These lamentations continued even after the burial for a period of seven days, which was the duration of mourning in Israel.

When Jesus replied to John the Baptist's question about what he was doing in Galilee, he enumerated

five signs for the coming of the Kingdom of God: That the blind would see, the crippled would walk, the lepers would be cleansed, the deaf would hear and the dead would be brought back to life (Mt 11:1-6). All these are signs of the Messianic time. Luke included this episode in his Gospel. The Good News that Jesus brings us is this: God rebels against the death of His children. He does not want death to be considered as a final destiny. He is the God of the living and therefore, fights against death.

In the episode, the widow's son is called Abel. It is a way of telling us of a "type" of death. Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve, slain by his brother Cain, will forever be the type of the just person killed unjustly. To die of hunger is to die unjustly; it is murder. God does not want any of His children to perish in this manner. The act of Jesus, bringing Abel back to life, is therefore, not a gesture of pure compassion, but God's firm manifestation of His rebellion against this unjust death. As in Genesis, in the face of hunger, we are always confronted with this question: "What have you done to your brother?" (Gen 4:9).

In the face of millions of people dying of hunger, no one can say: I am not responsible; this problem does not concern me; I cannot do anything. Hunger is actually the number one problem in the world. Two out of three persons living on this planet suffer from hunger or malnutrition of some kind. This is followed not only by death but by a long string of diseases – some hereditary – and countless family problems. Many entire countries suffer from hunger. In a society where hunger is a chain that binds the majority of people, the Kingdom of God will begin when this situation disappears and a new life begins by way of good nutrition. If being a widow and witnessing the death of her only son is truly an extreme situation of sorrow, there is nothing more unjust than dying due to hunger in a world where a few countries squander food each day, as people become blind to the misery of their brothers and sisters.

Death is the natural end of life. It is always much more painful when it comes prematurely and unexpectedly: When one is young, when one has hardly had a chance to live like a human being... There are Latin-American countries – Haiti, for example – where life's expectation does not exceed forty years. (In developed countries, it reaches seventy-five years.) In many third-world countries, it is a fact that millions of men and women die "before their time." Those who die of hunger, even if they die in their beds, die because they are killed. Their blood, like that of Abel's, cries out to God from earth.

(Lk 7:11-17)

39

A STORM BY THE LAKE

Jesus: ...And then this Samaritan came with his camel!

Zebedee: Well, guys, this is enough for now, don't you think?... Let's end all these stories; tomorrow we gotta start work early. C'mon, let's all go to sleep.

John: Hey, old man, don't be a "kill joy." Go to sleep if you want, and leave us alone... What happened again to the Samaritan, Jesus?

Jesus: Well, this man goes and...

Zebedee: Don't you have ears? I told you to go to sleep!... You sleep so late and then doze off in the boat. You, Jesus from Nazareth, will you shut up now and reserve your stories for the next time?

John: Just let him finish with this one, old man. He's half way through it. Come on, what happened to the Samaritan?

Zebedee: No. If you wanna end your story, get up early tomorrow morning so you can go fishing with us. In the boat, you can tell us all the stories you want. But now, this small talk is finished, do you hear?

We would always get together with Jesus to play dice, to hear his stories and laugh at jokes he already told several times. Sometimes we would meet at Peter's house, and other times, at Zebedee's, my old

man's house, to take time out from the day's work. The wee hours of the night simply slipped away without our knowing it.

Peter: Yes, why not, Jesus? Come and join us in our fishing tomorrow. Ever since you came to Capernaum, you never dipped your finger into the water.

Jesus: Who, me? Go fishing? No way. That's not my cup of tea, but yours, lake men. I know nothing about it.

Zebedee: It's high time you learned, dammit! "There's always time for learning," as my late father used to say.

Salome: Yeah, he always said that, but he never learned himself. He was more stupid than a laborer!

Jesus: No Peter, leave me alone with my bricks and tools. We from the inland are not real lovers of water.

John: Cheer up, Moreno! There's always a first time.

Peter: Tomorrow will be a good day for fishing, yes sir.

James: I'm not sure about that, Peter. They say that the Great Coffe is shaking...

Salome: You don't have to go very far then. Today the sun was as red as tomato, which is a bad sign.

Peter: What nonsense are you talking about? The lake is as still as a poor man's jawbone!

James: This lake is treacherous, Peter. Everything's so quiet and the wind from Mount Carmel will suddenly come pounding down the lake.

Peter: Don't be a soothsayer, James. I tell you, the weather's very fine.

James: Philemon, the crippled, was called a soothsayer, and where is he now? Buried at the bottom of the lake!

Peter: Go to hell, red head! The weather has been fine today, and it'll even be better tomorrow!

James: I bet there's gonna be a storm tomorrow! The Great Coffe's shaking!

Zebedee: Hell, that's enough! If you're not with stories, you're fighting. Go to sleep everybody! We gotta get up early to work!

The Great Coffe was the name given to a number of rocks found between Bethsaida and Capernaum. The old seamen used to say that from there, they could hear the agitated waves of the Great Sea whenever a storm was approaching...

Zebedee: C'mon, lazy bones, get up!... Didn't I tell you?... Now you can continue with your storytelling sessions!... On your toes, everyone!

It was only about four o'clock in the morning when my father, Zebedee, was already starting to wake us all up...

Zebedee: Hey, you, Nazarene, didn't you say you were coming, too?... Well, hurry up!... Rub that dirt off your eyes and move fast...

After taking some hot root soup that Salome had prepared, we headed toward the wharf, as we always did, everyday....

Zebedee: To the boats, guys, for the weather's good and we gotta take advantage! Today's gonna be a lucky day!

We sailed out in two boats and, with our big nets, headed toward the lake. Peter, James, my father Zebedee, Jesus and I were on the first boat. On the second were Andrew with the twins, and old Jonas. The last of the evening stars were still shining in the sky. Gradually, we were moving away from the shore as we paddled through the lake. The wind barely blew and the sail was hanging by the mast.

Zebedee: Hey, John, what's the matter with that fellow? Look at his face...

John: He's as white as flour...

Peter: Farm people are not used to this... They get dizzy with the splash of water...

James: Or they're scared of the water!

John: Hey Moreno, why don't you lie down over there, maybe your fear'll go away!

James: It'll pass. Leave him alone...

Zebedee: The net, guys, get the net ready!... My nose is telling me there's a school of goldfish over here. Strengthen the buoys, Peter... You, James, loosen up a little... Hey, you guys on the other boat, let's all cast the net!...

While we were getting the big net ready, Jesus went near the rail and held on with his two hands. He was very dizzy... Later, he threw himself down on the headrest of the stern and curled himself up on it. Soon he fell asleep...

James: Hmm... I don't like this... the wind is blowing strong...

John: Yeah, all of a sudden it's blowing very hard...

Zebedee: Take in the sail a little, if you don't want the wind to sweep us like what happened to Habakkuk!... Peter, don't let go of the net, 'cuz it's loaded with needlefish!... Pull hard!

James: For the love of Satan, this wind is blowing still harder! A storm is brewing!

Zebedee: Damn, gather all the oars and let's go back to the shore! These waves are going to swallow all of us!

Peter: You guys on the other boat!... Jonas!... Pull in the net and let's go! A storm is coming!

Jonas: Alright! We're going ahead! Good luck!

Zebedee: Dammit! This guy's still sleeping?!... Look at him... he's all curled up like a frog!

John: Hey, Jesus, wake up!... There's a storm coming... one of the worst, I guess... You better get up... Hey, he's not moving... I think he's dead!

Peter: He's scared to death, that's what he is... Poor guy, this is the first time that he went fishing!

Jesus: How did I ever get into this, huh?

Zebedee: Our man has finally resurrected. What's he saying?

John: What were you saying, Moreno?

Jesus: I was asking how I ever got into this mess!

Peter: What's the matter, Jesus? Are you scared?

Jesus: Of course, what do you think?

Zebedee: What about the story you were telling us last night? Come on, tell us now!

James: Damn, these waves will ruin our sail!

The stern suddenly creaked terribly. A huge wave lifted us into the air, hurling the boat back into the lake, amid the storm's fury. We were drenched to the bones. Peter and I hurriedly fastened the sail, but unfortunately missed, and it was torn to pieces. The wind blew before us, shaking our boat violently each time.

James: I told you, Peter, I told you not to set out into the lake today, as the Great Coffin was trembling!

Peter: Go to hell, James! How was I supposed to know that?

James: That's because you're so stubborn! I warned you not to go away from the shore! But you're so stupid, you even brought more men than ever on the boat! This boat's gonna sink because of our weight!

John: Well, why don't you throw yourself into the water to lighten our load?

James: Take it easy, 'cuz before long we'll be joining the crippled Philemon down there, and it's all your fault. D'ya hear?

Peter: Listen, beast: no one expected this to happen!

James: Oh really? Didn't you see the sun turn red, redder than my hair, yesterday?

Peter: Then why did you come, imbecile? You could've stayed behind!

James: So I'm the stupid one, am I? You deserve a punch in the nose!

Peter: Just try, you pig and you'll know who I am!

James: I warned you about the Great Coffin!

Jesus: That's enough, James!!!... and shut up, Peter!! To hell with both of you! Why don't you do something instead of bickering with one another? We're all going to drown here and you waste time

arguing on who's right....

Zebedee: Well said, Jesus! These two're wasting their energy! I wonder which is worse: to face the storm or to put up with these two nuts!... C'mon guys, let's take a turn toward the starboard... if we row with all our might, then we can save our skin! Each one take his own oar and we'll row at the same time!... Harder, fellas, let's go, yahhhh!

All: Yahhhh!

Zebedee: God helps those who help themselves... let's go, yahhh!... Push harder, come on, yahhh! (Yahhh!)

As though it were Beelzebub's neck, go, yahhha! (Yahhh!)

Don't stop, dammit, let's go, yahhh! (Yahhh!)

Don't be scared, just go, yahhh! (Yahhhhh!)

Men of little faith, go, yahhh! (Yahhh!)

Up with our faith and down with the oars, go, yahh! (Yahh!)

Old Zebedee led us in synchronizing the rowing of our boats. Gradually, in full force and with our veins about to explode, we were advancing in the midst of that dark and stormy sea... Since he did not know how to row, Jesus was given a jar to bail out the water that entered the boat....

After our long bout with the waves, when the storm had calmed down, we saw the darkened rocks along the coast. Slowly, we touched bottom with our oars as we drew near the rocky ground which formed an opening between the cliffs... Not too far away, we could see a small city....

Peter: Look, imagine where we've landed? We're on the other side of the lake! This is Gerasa.

James: Gerasa? What the hell am I doing here? This is the land of pigs!

Zebedee: Rejoice that you've finally touched land, even if it belongs to the Gerasenes! By now, you might have already swallowed a lot of shellfish!

John: That's true, old man. That would've been scary!

Zebedee: It was the Nazarene who must've been really scared, alright...

Peter: When that strong wind nearly smashed us on the side, you were nearly scared to death, weren't you Jesus?

Jesus: The truth is, I was never so scared in my life!

James: Don't laugh now, Peter, but you also smell like piss!

Peter: Well, listen... Jesus was like the captain of the boat when he yelled at us and said: "That's enough and shut up!..." I think even the sea was scared by that scream and so it calmed down.

Zebedee: Come on, guys, let's take something to warm our stomachs. Let's see if these pagans are hospitable enough to attend to castaways like us!

Many years later, everytime we remembered that storm in the lake, Peter would say that the huge waves calmed down when Jesus yelled. I don't know, my fear then was so great that I couldn't remember what happened exactly. There was only one thing I was sure of: that each day, the Moreno seemed to us an extraordinary human being. From him we learned how to be united in order to overcome any difficulty.

The geographical structure of the Lake of Galilee beside the River Jordan, flanked on the north by tall mountains, hastens the formation of heavy storms accompanied sometimes by hurricanes and huge waves. Peter and his companions, like expert seamen, knew, by means of different signs – the color of the sky, the wind's direction – the possibility of an impending storm. Nevertheless, since these storms come unexpectedly, they could not ever really be absolutely sure.

We cannot read all the texts of the Bible, whether of the Old or New Testament, in the same manner, and use the same criteria. The Bible, besides being the Word of God (and this does not always mean "historical word"), is a collection of stories which the people of Israel have transmitted from parents to children, through the centuries until such time that they were put into writing. In these accounts, the people

tell us what they have lived, felt, thought and sung. Consequently, there are books that are considered historical narratives, others are religious outlines or sketches, or catechetical summaries, theological outlines, refrains, and others, poetry. These are what we call the “literary genres” of the Bible. Not taking this into account, one may, out of confusion, look only for “what happened” in the Scripture, what is strictly historical, while the deeper meaning of faith found in the symbolic teaching of a number of accounts, may lose out.

The Gospels tell us of six miracles Jesus did “about nature.” The sign that Jesus did was not regarding a person to be cured, but about the physical elements. In one of these accounts Jesus calms a storm, simply by raising his voice. In each of these texts, there is an attempt to come up with an outline for catechesis in order to transmit an idea....

It must be remembered that for the Israelite mentality, the sea – like the lake of Tiberias – was considered a haven of the bad spirits, the demons, the powerful and occult forces which represented danger for people. That Jesus was able to calm the waves is a symbol of power which God had given him. It was a way of proclaiming that He was the Messiah, the Lord, and therefore a way of saying that a poor peasant’s weakness, like that of Jesus, is stronger than all the powers working against the community.

It is likewise true – and this is the central message of this episode – that the weakness of the poor is strengthened and efficient when the poor are united, when they become organized, when they row together in the same direction. Before such criticisms against power, “the miracles” that control lightning and thunder, are always acts of unity.

(Mt 8:23-27; Mk 4:35-41; Lk 8:22-25)

40

IN THE LAND OF THE GERASENES

After the storm we disembarked in Gerasa, on the other side of the lake. Our boat with her tattered sail was moored near one of those black and pointed rocks by the cliff. Old Zebedee, Peter and Jesus, my brother James and I started to walk through the rocky ground along the shore toward the small town at the end, about a thousand meters away...

Zebedee: These pagans must be very fond of pork... Look how many swine there are! It’s an enormous herd...

John: Who could this man be, running toward us?... He’s making some signs...

Andronicus: I see you’re strangers...! Where do you come from?

Peter: From Capernaum, my friend, from the other side of the lake!

Andronicus: That far? And you traveled in such bad weather?

Zebedee: We were caught by the storm. We went out fishing and almost died!

Andronicus: It’s not surprising. Trypho announced it.

Peter: How’s that? Who said what?

Andronicus: Yesterday, Trypho went around Gerasa announcing to the people that a storm was coming, and that the sun was as red as a ball of fire.

John: And who the hell’s this guy?

Andronicus: He’s the adviser of the entire land of Gerasa, the sorcerer, a friend of the gods and the demons: He’s Trypho, the witch. Strangers, listen to me, if you want a piece of good advice.

Zebedee: Well, as they say in my homeland, he who listens to advice doesn’t perish young. Come now, what’s your advice?

Andronicus: If you wanna cross the lake again, you'd better consult the powerful Trypho first. He's gonna tell you whether to go or not. He'll unfold for you the mysteries of the sea and the land, as well as the sky.

Peter: If indeed he knows so much, let him tell us where to eat a good piece of lamb's head, as we're already starving to death.

Andronicus: You may have a good laugh now, but when you're in front of Trypho, you may not feel like doing so. Come with me, strangers...

Jesus: Hey, you haven't told us your name yet...

Andronicus: My name is Andronicus. I work as a swineherd for Aesculapius. All the herds you see belong to him. Come, follow me...

Andronicus, the swineherd, took us across the country surrounding the city of the Gerasenes. Behind, by a grove of oak trees, was the town cemetery. At the far end was an open cave...

Zebedee: Where are you taking us, pal? We have no need to reserve a space in this place yet!

Trypho: Ahh... Ahh... Ahh...!

John: Pff! at the rate we're going... If I don't take anything to warm my stomach, chances are you'll have to bury me in this place!

Trypho: Ahh... Ahh... Ahh...!

John: Hey, Andronicus, who's the one shouting?

Andronicus: That's precisely where we're going, strangers. In that cave, Trypho communicates with the living and the dead. Follow me!

We followed the Gerasene, passing over stones and tombs until we reached the entrance of the stinking cave. We covered our noses as we went inside...

Then we saw the famous sorcerer: his body was huge and hairy, barely covered by a dirty rag around his waist. His arms and feet were in chains. He was a mad man...

Andronicus: Trypho!... Kumi kerti!!

Trypho: Ah, ah, ahhh!

John: What's he telling him, Peter?

Peter: What do I know? Even the devil doesn't understand this jargon of the Gerasenes... Hey, Andronicus, what are we supposed to do, huh?

Andronicus: Shut up. The sorcerer is invoking the spirits of the dead.

Trypho: Ah, ah, ahhhh!

Andronicus: Trypho wants to know what you want.

Jesus: Nothing. Tell him we're here to greet him....

Zebedee: ...that we're leaving before this nut hits us with his chain.

Andronicus took a piece of stick and made a sign to Trypho. Then the sorcerer approached us, with his two fists raised, like they were two hammers....

Trypho: Ah, ah, ahhh!

Andronicus: The spirits want you to ask questions and you'll receive a reply.

John: C'mon, Peter, ask him anything.

Peter: What am I gonna ask him?

John: I dunno. Ask him who's gonna win in dice tomorrow, or... if you'll have good fortune this year. Ask him to read your hand...

Peter: Hmm... I don't think he can do that...

Andronicus: You'd better make up your mind. The dead can't wait for the living.

John: How about you Jesus, anything in mind?

Jesus: Well, yes... I'm gonna ask him something.

Andronicus: Ask him anything, stranger. Trypho is endowed with so many powers. He knows everything

and discovers everything.

Jesus: Well, if that is the case, then ask him what should I do with Cleotilde. My knees tremble before her and I get dizzy when I'm with her.

Andronicus: Marratina!

When the mad man Trypho heard the swineherd's command, he bent to pick up a stone on the ground and began to hit himself with it. Then he gave out a loud cry. He pulled off his tatters, and half-naked and bleeding, rolled over the ground, entangled in his own chains... After a short while, Trypho remained still, like a wounded animal...

Trypho: Ah, ah, ahhh!

Andronicus: Shh!... The dead spirits are now answering your question, stranger: She's not the right woman for you. She can't give you a child. Leave her and look for someone else.

John: Ha, ha, ha...!!!

Andronicus: Hey, imbecile, what are you laughing at?

John: Ha, ha, ha...!! Cleotilde is the name of Zebedee's boat... You know, this Moreno's scared of the water and gets dizzy whenever he's on the boat! Ha, ha, ha...! Your dead spirits are fake!...

Andronicus: If you don't have faith, then get outta here and stop bothering me. Have you come to provoke me? Trypho doesn't want to be bothered.

Peter: Jesus, let's go. This man can't predict anything. He's crazy.

Jesus: Yeah, we'd better go.

Andronicus: Hold it, strangers. Trypho doesn't do this for free. It's one dinar for every consultation.

Zebedee: A what?... Friend, the shipwreck robbed us clean of our pockets. We don't even have a copper. You have barked up the wrong tree.

Andronicus: You gotta pay, otherwise you're gonna be cursed by the spirits before nightfall.

Jesus: Hey, Andronicus, whom did you say you were working for?

Andronicus: For Aesculapius, the wealthiest proprietor in Gerasa. He trades purple in Damascus. He owns enormous herds of swine, as well as cattle, donkeys and camels.

Jesus: I see... and this poor fellow also works for him, doesn't he? I guess you're his business administrator, aren't you?

Andronicus: Hey, what do you mean?

Jesus: I say this Aesculapius and you make big money out of the screaming of this poor man.

Andronicus: What nonsense are you talking about? Pay me the dinars, and get out of here.

Jesus: No, my friend, we're not going yet. Come, I want to consult the "great Trypho" again.

Andronicus: He's resting now. He can't answer to you.

Jesus: Yes, he can, of course. Trypho, my brother, listen to me... They're exploiting you!

Trypho: Ah, ah, ahhh!!!

Andronicus: Marratina!!!

Peter: He with his a-a-a while the other with his marratina, make an odd combination.

When the swineherd gave the order again, the mad man attacked Jesus who bent over, so Trypho landed on the ground. Thick and white saliva came bubbling from his mouth. This fit lasted for a few minutes... Then Jesus leaned over the poor creature and whispered something in his ear...

Jesus: Trypho, my brother, they've abused you plenty, by using your sickness to suck money from gullible people. They use their ignorance in order to enslave you more... The Lord doesn't wish to see you this way. C'mon, Trypho, get up... James, John, help me remove his chains. Maybe we can take the lock off with a sharp-edged stone or a knife.... and you, Andronicus, get outta here, fast...!

Peter: But Jesus, you're crazier than he is. He's dangerous, he can hurt you..

Jesus: No, you're gonna see... Come Trypho, and keep still... We won't hurt you...

Trypho: Ah, ah, ah...

Trypho went near Jesus like a tame dog and let him cut open the chains... He was free.

Meanwhile, Andronicus, the swineherd, rushed to his patron, Aesculapius and told him what happened and what the strangers from Capernaum had done. The news spread like wildfire. The Gerasenes left their houses and headed for the cemetery, to find out what was happening...

Woman: Tell me, what did you ask the sorcerer?

Jesus: I asked where the money of the foolish victims would go.

Woman: What was his reply?

Jesus: Trypho stood up and said: "To the pockets of Aesculapius! Believe me, countrymen, that was the only true prediction he made. The swine of Aesculapius got fat from your money.

While Jesus was talking to the Gerasenes, Trypho remained seated on a rock, his head buried in his hands. The women washed his wounds and his welts. They had also placed an old tunic over his shoulders. As we were about to go back to our boat, Trypho stood up and looked at Jesus, grinning at him like a child...

Trypho: Let me go with you...

Jesus: No, Trypho. You belong here. When people see you working and living like the rest, the people will say: There are no sorcerers nor witchcraft. Only God is powerful. Go and tell your neighbors how good the Lord has been to you.

Trypho: Yes, yes, I'm gonna tell everyone! I'll tell everybody!

So he left and started to tell everyone in all the towns of the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him. Aesculapius, with the loss of his business, told people that the strangers from Capernaum scared his swine and that a herd of pigs hurled themselves over the cliff and drowned. Since then, this story spread through the land of the Gerasenes....

Gerasa (or Gadara) was a city by the oriental coast of the Lake of Galilee. It was part of the so-called Decapolis (a league of ten cities), a territory with Greek customs, and inhabited almost entirely by foreigners. For the Israelites, it was a Pagan area, the land of the gentiles. The ruins that are presently preserved range from two hundred to three hundred years after Christ. The swine (or pig) was an impure animal for the Israelites. To eat its flesh was strictly prohibited and it was a symbol of rejecting the Jewish religion. This rejection went to the extent of considering swine herding as something degrading. In Gerasa, which was a foreign territory, inhabited by non-Jews, such religious scruples did not exist. At present, the Muslims also prohibit the eating of pork. Popular beliefs are often manifested through magic, prophecies, witchcraft and various forms of superstition... Certainly, all these religious expressions hamper the survival of the Christian faith, as they are associated with fear, with a blind faith in destiny, in what is "written," and have very little to do with a life of freedom and responsibility. What is even worse, however, is the business that derived from these beliefs. Behind gullible people is always someone who takes advantage of the situation. These "religious deals" also happen within the Catholic faith. The devotion to a number of saints, to miraculous relics that are being sold to the people, almsgiving to please a particular saint, and the pilgrimages which translate into an income for agencies of tourism, etc., are forms of this religiosity "used" to the advantage of some people. We should be wary whenever economic benefits are associated with religious belief. The criterion for the validity of any of these was given by Jesus himself when he said: "Give for free what you have received for free" and "You cannot serve the Lord and money." In order to be close to the real God, a God who wants people to be free and happy, one must gradually shed off these primitive religious ideas which are an authentic "opium of the people" because they numb one's senses, paralyze and prevent people from seeing clearly the true face of the God of Jesus, a God who wants His children accountable to history, and committed to transform the world. The miracle that Jesus performed on Trypho is a sign that God frees us from the chains of false religion. And it is a sign which does not only free him – a man mentally deranged and used as a business tool – but also the people,

who, upon discovering the secrets of “fortune-telling,” shed off their many fears.

The story of the possessed man from Gerasa is a typical text in the Gospel that has “adorned” history in order to make it more spectacular and more dramatic. Through the times, events that impress people are exaggerated and magnified when retold, thus making them appear more marvelous. Certainly, behind those hundreds of pigs that hurled themselves into the devil-infested sea – as the Gospel describes it – there are several legends transmitted from one person to another, and which the evangelists, without any possibility of confirming them, put into writing in order to derive a message of faith from them.

(Mt 8:28-34; Mk 5:1-20; Lk 8:26-39)

41

THIS IS A DECENT HOUSE

Salome: So what now?... Ain't you goin'?

John: Where to, old woman?

Salome: To the house of Simon, the Pharisee, where else? His son was introduced in the synagogue today, and he's givin' a party to celebrate.

John: I'm not a party-goer, much less if the party's in the house of this fellow.

James: Come on, John, cheer up. Simon always serves good pastries.... What about you, Peter? Aren't you comin' either?

Peter: Am I gonna be missing anything in the house of this stingy old man?

Salome: You say he's a miser, but look Peter, he's invited the whole family. Y'know how it is here in Capernaum, everyone's a relative of everybody. Imagine, half the city is going there to eat.

James: Yeah, let's all go. Don't be a kill-joy... Go tell Rufina, Peter. Hey, Andrew, don't just stand there like a scarecrow... What's the matter, Jesus? Ain't you comin'?

Jesus: I'm coming, James, although I'm not a relative of this fellow, Simon.

James: It doesn't matter, Moreno. You're our friend, and friends of the family are relatives too. I tell you their house's gonna be teeming with so many people, like a barrel of olives... Come fellas, let's all have fun!

The redhead insisted that we all go. Soon, we found ourselves in the streets of the moneylenders, in front of the house of Simon, the Pharisee. While we were waiting outside the door, we saw two women beside the wall. We knew them and in fact, the younger one was making some gestures to Jesus....

Mary: Pssst...! Hey, Nazarene...! Pssst...! How're you?... This is a friend of mine, Selena, so leave him alone.

Selena: Who's he?

Mary: He's a nut...

Jesus: Hi, Mary! I was thinkin' about you. How's life?

Mary: It's a job, compadre. One must take advantage of the times. Isn't that right, Selena?

Jesus: And how, because I could smell your perfume from the other street!

Selena: Yeah, compadre, and since we're night owls, you don't see us, you just smell us!

Mary: You may laugh now, silly girl,... later, you might spend three hours waiting here for nothing.

Selena: Well, you shouldn't complain, because with this Moreno around, your problem is solved for the night.

Mary: That's none of your business, Selena. I already told you this is something else....

Jesus: Mary and I are friends, you know.

Selena: So I see. The trouble is she's so well made-up and I can't compete. It's alright, friend, you won... I give up.

Mary and Selena had a bottle of jasmine oil hanging around their necks. This was the perfume prostitutes always used...

John: Come Jesus, they 're gonna open the door now!

Jesus: I'm coming, John... wait...!

Mary: Why do you always go with this kind... Go, join your friends, or you'll be left out!

Jesus: I don't mind. Aren't you coming inside?

Mary: Who, us? Ha! Didn't I tell you, Selena? This guy's crazy!

Jesus: No, Mary, I'm serious. Why don't you come inside with the rest?

Mary: How we would've wanted that! To be able to eat some pastries, at least! But this is where we belong. How do you expect us to enter? "This is a decent house, the house of Simon, the Pharisee." May the devil swallow him up, the damned old miser!

Jesus: Why do you speak ill of him? What's he done to you?

Mary: To me, nothing. But to all the unfortunate who owe him money...! That's how he became rich; by lending ten and collecting twenty, and squeezing necks if they fail to pay on time!

John: Hey, Jesus, what's the matter? Ain't you comin'?

Jesus: What about these ladies, John, can't they go inside?

John: Who, these two whores here...?

Mary: Oh yes, let's go in... After all, business is bad... At least, we can gobble up something warm inside...!

Jesus: What do you think, John? Can we let them in?

John: Well, I don't think anyone will notice... Come on, and mix with the group...

Mary: Wow, this is gonna be fun!... Well, as they say, better be on time than be invited! Let's go, Selena, move on...!

Selena: No, no Mary. I'd better stay here and wait for a customer. You go ahead. If you get bored, then come out and let's exchange places...

Mary: Well, you're gonna miss something... see you soon!

Selena: Don't forget to bring me some of the goodies!

We joined Peter and the rest of the group. When we were already passing through the entrance, one of the servants with a serious face cut through to Mary, the Magdalene...

Servant: And where d'you think you're goin', huh? This is a decent house, d'ya hear?... Out, out, outta here!

Jesus: Hey, friend, has this woman done you any harm? If not, leave her alone....

Servant: Look, Nazarene... Of course, you ain't from here, so you don't know. But this woman beside you is a "whore." So...

Jesus: So, we who are with her are also indecent. Do you have anything else to say?

Servant: To hell with you, stranger! Well then, you can go inside with her, but I warn you, insolent woman, don't make trouble. And you, make sure you give yourselves a nice bath later, so you won't smell like jasmine oil!

Mary: Sonavabitch... Puah...! "This is a decent house"... Yeah, he won't make his eyes impure by looking at me... But when he goes to my house tomorrow, he's gonna be the first John at my door! What a filthy creep!

Jesus: Leave him alone, Mary. If you don't want them to mess around with you, then don't mess around with them, either... Come, let's go inside!

The house garden was very spacious and there were many people. We from the barrio were seated towards the end, on straw mats, and were served dates to fill our bellies. The tables in front, well decorated

and full of the best food, were reserved for the businessmen and the rich relatives of Simon, the Pharisee... One of them came near us...

A Man: Well, well, Mary, what a good catch you got! How did you get the Nazarene?

Mary: Damn you sonovabitch! Get outta my sight! I ain't workin' now!

Man: That's alright lady. Don't get mad. I was just kidding...!

Mary: Didn't I tell you, Jesus? I don't belong here...

Jesus: You asked for it, Mary. Who ever told you to put on so much perfume? Not even a carpenter's brush could remove the smell!... C'mon, forget it and eat something...

Then came Benneth the cripple, who was wobbling and carrying a half-finished jug of wine...

Benneth: Look who's here, a siren on our shore! Mary, my dear one, I've been lookin' all over the place for you... At last, I've found you...! Hik...!

Mary: Go away, dirty old man and sleep it off!

Benneth: Don't treat me that way, precious one. I may have drunk too much wine... but you're overdressed too! Hic! Ain't I right, my friend?... This woman's better without so many clothes on...!

The crippled Benneth rushed toward Mary, and suddenly tore off her dress. Then Jesus pushed the drunk man who slipped and fell on his back. Soon a commotion ensued in that corner of the garden... To make matters worse, the bottle of jasmine that Mary was carrying around her neck rolled on the floor, broke into pieces and the whole place began to smell like a carnival...

Servant: What the hell's goin' on here?... I warned you, bitch; I don't want no trouble!...

Jesus: You started it...

Servant: Will you shut up, stranger! Now, you're gonna know who I am, you whore!

The servant raised the tray he was carrying in a threatening gesture. Mary leaned over and threw herself at the feet of Jesus, as if asking for protection....

Servant: Stay away from her, 'cuz I'm gonna teach her how to respect a decent house!

Jesus: James, John, help me!

My brother and I rushed over to the servant, but the other neighbors fell over us...

A Man: Here, take this for being such a troublemaker!

The matter would have gotten worse, if at that moment, Simon the Pharisee had not come, having been warned of the trouble. Simon was the owner of the house...

Simon: What's goin' on here? Can't we have our celebration in peace?

Jesus: There's nothing here... We were just conversing.

Simon: Conversing? What's this woman doing on the floor? Is she conversing too?

Servant: She's one of the women from Jasmine Street..

Simon: Oh? And what is this whore doing in my house? Who let her in?

Jesus: I did, Simon. She came with me.

Simon: And who are you to dirty my house?

Servant: He's the man from Nazareth. I'm sure you've heard of him.... He's known as a prophet.

Simon: So you're a prophet! I didn't know that the prophets of today allowed themselves to be cuddled by whores... Now, now, get this woman out of my house! I'd rather smell a cat's urine than the perfume of a sinner!

Mary remained on the floor. With her hair disheveled, she cried shamefully at Jesus' feet.

Simon: I said get this woman out of here! My house is a decent one!

Jesus: Simon, if you allow me, may I ask you something?

Simon: What do you want, stranger? Come on, make it fast. This perfume is making me dizzy.

Jesus: Listen to this story, Simon: There were two men who were indebted to a moneylender. One owed him fifty dinars and the other, five hundred dinars. But both of them lost their harvest and did not have a single centavo to pay him.

Simon: And the moneylender sent them to prison accordingly.

Jesus: On the contrary, he felt pity for them and so he wrote off their debts. Now, tell me, Simon: Which of the two men should feel more grateful to the moneylender?

Simon: What a question! The man who owed him five hundred dinars, of course. He was pardoned for a greater amount, so he should be more grateful. What's this got to do with this prostitute?

Jesus: A lot. But I doubt if you'll understand, since you've never forgiven anyone, neither have you ever felt the need to be pardoned. But this woman needs to be forgiven, and therefore, knows how to feel grateful.

Simon: What does she have to be thankful for?

Jesus: Of course, she has nothing to thank you for. When we, the barrio folks, entered your house, we were put here at the back, you didn't even come to welcome us, nor did you give us water with which to wash our hands. She doesn't have to thank you for anything. But the Lord, yes, because He has forgiven her for all the debts she owed Him.

Then Simon, the Pharisee, firmly gripped the handle of his cane and looked at Jesus with hatred....

Simon: Crazy man! Get this woman out of here! And the Nazarene too, and everything that smells of jasmine. I prefer to smell a cat's urine to a sinner's perfume!

Jesus lifted Mary from the ground and left with her. We, too, went away from there, and so did the rest of the barrio people. I think it was after that party in Simon's house when Mary of Magdala started to change.

An old proverb of the rabbis in Jesus' time went like this: "Don't speak too long with a woman in the street." This meant with any woman and not only with a prostitute – which was worse. On many occasions Jesus violated the customs of his people with respect to relationship with women. Within this freedom toward tradition, he showed special treatment to the "bad women" who profoundly scandalized the "good" people of his time.

Jesus continuously reiterated God's preferential interest in sinners, that they were closer to God than the pious ones and the observers of the law. This provoked angry protests, especially among the Pharisees. One must bear in mind that these Pharisees were not always from the upper class. They also came from the simple class. What characterized one and the other was the pride which they flaunted, being members of a community of the chosen people of the Lord. And this was because they fulfilled the laws and the religious practices with many scruples. That is why they despised the "immoral" and "damned" creatures of God. All throughout the gospel, Jesus told of their hypocrisy to their face, and tried to make them see how they, more than anyone else, alienated themselves from God because of their pride.

Even today, we are not wanting in Pharisees. There are many people who gloat over their "decency," their good education, good family – and in most cases, the money they have – which separate them from the lowly. They not only think of themselves as superior and more important, but they have also come to identify Christianity with social class, and their morality with appearances. All this is pretension which has nothing to do with the gospel. Christian virtues are primarily attitudes of solidarity and equality among people, in contrast to feelings of pride or discrimination. On no occasion did Jesus claim special treatment or preference for himself, as great men and women surrounded by servants, luxury and distinctions do, just to highlight the importance they want extended to themselves. What Jesus claimed was treatment with respect, and deference for the poor and the marginalized. He did not want any privilege for himself but equality for all.

Jesus told Simon the Pharisee a short story: that of the two debtors. It was a parable about

forgiveness. Through this story, Jesus pointed to the sinner as the one who really “knew” how to forgive, and therefore the only one to be grateful. The Pharisee, proud and despising, would never understand this, since he did not believe he should be pardoned for anything. Neither did he know what it meant to be grateful. Gratefulness for having been forgiven – a basic dimension in a person’s relationship with God – is not within the reach of a self-righteous person.

(Lk 7:36-50)

42

THE ROMAN CAPTAIN

Cornelius was the Captain of the Roman troops in Capernaum. His huge house was always guarded by soldiers. Matthew, the tax collector, often went to see him because he was a friend...

Cornelius: Will you have some more wine, Matthew?

Matthew: Yes, a little more. It’s very good, is it from Cana?

Cornelius: Yeah...

Matthew: Hey, you haven’t drunk anything... Is anything the matter?

Cornelius: I’m just worried, Matthew.

Matthew: What’s wrong? Are the zealots in another conspiracy?...

Cornelius: No, it has nothing to do with politics.

Matthew: What’s your problem then...? Do you need money? If you want... I can lend you...

Cornelius: Nothing of that sort. It’s about.... Mark.

Matthew: Who’s Mark?

Cornelius: One of my servants, who has been with me for ten years.

Matthew: What’s wrong with him? Is he leaving you for another master?

Cornelius: No, but he’s sick. He’s been very weak lately and hasn’t taken anything to eat. He has terrible pains. I’ve sent for all the doctors in Capernaum and they say his condition is serious, that he’s gonna die... I keep thinking about this, Matthew.

Matthew: For the love of the Almighty, how could you be so concerned about a servant, Cornelius? C’mon, pour me some more wine, my cup is empty...

Cornelius: I love him like a son, you know. I trust him more than anybody.... I don’t want Mark to die....

Matthew: Well, I don’t know... If he’s very sick.... I don’t know..... Hey.... maybe....

Cornelius: Maybe what?

Matthew: Nothing, this wine is putting ideas into my head... I dunno... but I’ve heard about Jesus, the Nazarene, well, you know him too, I guess. They say he’s a healer. They say he cleansed the skin of a leper, and cured an insane man. They even say that there in Naim, he brought a dead man back to life... I think these are just stories invented by people. But it seems this Nazarene really has a knack for healing... There are farmers who know a lot about herbs....

Cornelius: And... and so?

Matthew: Tell him to see your servant. You don’t lose anything by trying. What do you think, huh? Don’t tell me this is a silly idea, dammit!

Cornelius: I also thought about that last night, Matthew, but...

Matthew: But what?

Cornelius: This Jesus is something.... but he’s spoken hard against the Romans and we know it. We have

spies all over the place. Besides, the men he goes with... well, we know their leanings...

Matthew: They're agitators, and Jesus isn't far behind. But that's another matter. Didn't you say you were so worried about this servant of yours? Well, ask Jesus to see him.

Cornelius: Do you think he'd come, Matthew? I'm a Roman soldier... and you Jews are so fanatical... I dunno...

Matthew: Well, if you don't have the courage to ask him, then I'm gonna do it, dammit! He's a friend of mine. I invited him to have dinner at home and he went... I think he can help you, Cornelius.

Cornelius: I think so too, Matthew.

At noon, when Matthew had finished collecting taxes from the caravans from the North, he went to the fishermen's barrio by the wharf to look for Jesus in my father's house...

Neighbors: The devil's publican! Go join your own kind, you filthy bastard! Traitor!

He was wobbling, as always, because of the alcohol in him. The people spat at him, as expected, as they insulted him. But the spirit of the wine numbed his hearing. We were having lunch when Matthew arrived...

John: Hey, filthy man, what's your business around here?

Matthew: I'm looking for the Nazarene.

John: And may I know why?

Matthew: It's personal. Is he here?

Jesus: I'm here, Matthew, what do you want?

Behind Jesus were my parents, James and his wife. People also began to mill around the narrow street... They were curious to know what Matthew was looking for in the barrio. Zebedee, my father, was the first man to raise his voice. Then the yelling spread like wildfire....

Zebedee: What are you doing here, sonovabitch? Don't you dare set foot in my house!

James: You haven't lost anything here, drunkard! Go to the other corner and do your thing there!

Neighbors: Out, out!

Matthew: Go to hell, all of you! I said I came to see you, Nazarene!

Zebedee: Jesus, what have you to do with his kind, huh?

Jesus: I don't know what he wants, Zebedee. You haven't allowed him to speak yet... Did you say you were looking for me, Matthew?

Matthew: Yes, and the rest can all go to hell!

Jesus: Okay, what's the matter, Matthew?

Matthew: Cornelius, the Roman Captain, wants you to go to his house.

Jesus: What for?

John: This is a trap, Jesus. Don't trust him.

Matthew: His servant is ill. He wants you to see him.

James: Tell the Roman Captain and his servant to go to hell! You can join them too!

Matthew: Now you talk too much, redhead, and so do all of you here, but when you had to build the synagogue, you had to ask the Captain to grant you permission....

John: Ah, but that was a long time ago!

Matthew: Yeah, what about last year, when you were in trouble with the prisoners... You had to look for the Captain to help you get out of trouble, huh?

Zebedee: Will you shut up now, swine? You're a good for nothing leech! Get outta my sight before I squeeze your neck! I don't even wanna see your shadow around! Get outta here!

But Matthew did not leave. He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his tunic and looked at Jesus...

Matthew: So, are you coming or not?

James: Of course he ain't comin'!

Jesus: Hey, James, let me answer that, will you? Yes, I'm going with you, Matthew.

Zebedee: Listen Jesus: once you set foot in this Roman Captain's house, you will never come back to my house, ever! Do you hear? Do you hear me right?

Jesus: I'm not deaf. No need to scream, Zebedee. Let's go, Matthew.

Jesus and Matthew forced their way through the people and headed down the street. My father, red with rage, pounded the wall with clenched fist, then went inside the house. All of us followed him. Outside, tongues wagged furiously as they talked about what had happened.

Captain Cornelius' house was at the outskirts of Capernaum, beside the headquarters. Jesus and Matthew, closely followed by a bunch of curious people, left the city and headed for the Captain's house....

Matthew: I hate your friends, Nazarene.

Jesus: They return the favor, Matthew. Hate begets hate. Its always the case.

Matthew: As you can see, this doesn't matter to Cornelius. Your friends may detest him, but he's always tried to help them, whenever possible...

As they were nearing the Captain's house, Cornelius went out to the street. The people pressed hard against Jesus while Matthew tried not to miss a word they were saying...

Cornelius: Greetings to you, Jesus! I'm glad Matthew has persuaded you to come.

Matthew: I had a hard time doing it. That old man Zebedee even cursed him for having agreed to come to your house... He also says Jesus can't set foot in his house anymore.

Cornelius: Zebedee said that?

Matthew: Yes, and more, he spat on me when I knocked at his door.

Cornelius: And who are all these people with you?

Matthew: The nosy ones as always. For lack of entertainment here in Capernaum, they gotta look for something to amuse themselves.

Cornelius: I'm really sorry, Jesus. I never thought this would cause you so much trouble.

Jesus: That's all right, Cornelius. And don't worry about Zebedee. Barking dogs don't bite.

Cornelius: They also say that an "ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Look Jesus, I'm not really worth all the hassles you've gotten into by coming to my house. As you've seen, I didn't even dare look for you myself...

Jesus: Matthew told me your servant was sick.

Cornelius: Oh yes, Mark. I've heard about your having cured several sick people. I'm helpless, you see. He's burning with fever. I thought you....

Matthew: Cornelius wants you to cure him, if you can....

Jesus: I would like to see him. Let's go....

Cornelius: No, Jesus. I don't mean to give you problems. Look, the God you believe in – as you Jews always say – is the master of life and death. If He can command sickness to go away, then Mark will be healed.

Jesus: Do you believe so, Cornelius?

Cornelius: Well, when they give me orders, I obey. When I command one of my soldiers to come, he does come. And when I dismiss him, he leaves. Isn't your God the master of all of us? Then there's no need for you to go inside. All you have to do is to command this sickness to go away in the name of this God you believe in, and it'll obey you.

Jesus was amazed at what the Captain said, and he turned to the people who were following him....

Jesus: Dammit, this man who's a foreigner has more faith in our God than all of us put together!

A Woman: What did you say, Nazarene?

Jesus: That the day will come when outsiders, like Cornelius, will sit at the same table with our father Abraham.

A Man: Now look who's talkin'! How much were you paid by the Captain in order to give those

compliments?

Jesus: Really, I'm telling you: they'll enter the Kingdom of God, and many of those who are inside and are so sure of themselves, will be left outside.

Woman: But what's this man talkin' about?

Man: Are you with us or not, Jesus?

Matthew: To hell with all of you! If you're not creating trouble, you're out to promote dissent. Get outta here, you gossipers and scandalous lot, outta here, all of you!

Woman: You get outta here, you drunken traitor!

Jesus: Leave 'em alone, Matthew. Let's go now. Stop worrying about your servant, Cornelius. God'll grant what you expect from Him.

Cornelius returned to his house amid whistles and yells of the people... Jesus was peeved and raised his voice...

Jesus: You got eyes and yet don't see, ears and you don't hear.

Man: What the hell is there to see? Yes, that this Captain is a Roman beast. The Romans're our enemies. He who praises the Romans is as much beast as they are!

Jesus: You got eyes but don't see, ears but don't hear.

Woman: There you go again! You're the blind one, Nazarene!

Man: He's not blind, but has sold himself. C'mon, show us how much this Captain paid you!

Woman: Down with Rome and with all traitors!

The disturbance lasted for sometime. When the people got tired of yelling, they returned to Capernaum and spread the story of what happened. Having taken another route, Jesus returned to the fishermen's barrio, where we were waiting for him. Meanwhile, in Captain Cornelius' house, Mark's fever had subsided.

Although Matthew was not an official of the Roman Empire, but of Herod – because he had his customs office in Galilee – he maintained very good relations with the Roman soldiers. Rome retained Herod on his throne. Due to the strategic position of Capernaum, the city had a Roman garrison headed by a Centurion. He (the captain or commandant in our language) was the military authority over the troops, (the smallest unit of the Roman infantry =100 soldiers). The Roman soldiers were hated by the Israelites who considered them as the country's invaders. They symbolized the imperialist power of Rome which, in those times, owned the greater part of the known world. National pride and the desire for freedom of the Israelites were a constant source of confrontation with these foreign soldiers. As far as Jesus' friends were concerned, (who were greatly influenced by the zealot spirit – obviously nationalistic and anti-Roman) this hatred and rejection were difficult to overcome. If Jesus' act of accepting Matthew, the Publican, marked the first serious conflict within the group of the apostles, his open attitude toward the Roman Captain would certainly be a cause for another crucial discussion among them.

As regards the Roman occupation, the Israelites were – and still are – an extremely nationalistic people. Their awareness of being the chosen people of God was at the root of this sentiment, which in most cases, discriminates against other nations and from which grew an attitude of contempt for foreigners.

In Jesus' time it was generally believed that the coming of the Messiah would be the day of God's judgment over all nations and therefore a time of vengeance against them. Jesus absolutely put an end to these ideas. In the gospel, nationalism is replaced by universality. Although Jesus associated with foreigners only on isolated occasions – one of which was this one – his acceptance of them was a sign that God does not favor any particular race or nation.

In this episode, the focus is not so much on the boy's healing, as on its significance for our faith: The need to transcend nationalistic barriers or obstacles.

(Mt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10; Jn 4:43-54)

THE WHEAT AND THE BAD GRASS

That afternoon, after fishing, we all gathered in the house. Jesus' visit to Cornelius, the Roman Captain of Capernaum, enraged everyone. For several hours we did nothing but nag him about it... My father, Zebedee, was the most vocal of all.

Zebedee: Wait till he comes. I'm gonna give him a piece of my mind, dammit, I'm gonna say things to his face which no one has ever told him. I can't stand the shame that he's caused us, and I'm not about to tolerate bootlickers of the Romans. The bootlickers are as filthy as the Romans, because they support their dirty tricks, damn!

John: Take it easy, old man... C'mon, relax....

It was already dark when Jesus peeped in the door...

Jesus: Zebedee... Zebedee... May I come in?

No one answered....

Jesus: I asked if I could come in...

Zebedee: Go to hell, Nazarene!

Jesus: As everybody knows, and I suppose you've already told him that I didn't set foot in the Captain's house. I didn't enter his house. "I didn't stain my sandals by stepping on the Roman's yard"...

Zebedee: Who do you think you are anyway? Do you think you can just come and go with nobody ever questioning you? Or don't you know who this Matthew is, that blood-sucking tax collector? And don't you know who this Cornelius is, that damned Captain who's possessed by the devil like all the rest of his kind? You've been staying with us in Capernaum for six months and until now, you don't know these slob? Now, answer me.

Jesus: I think I know them better than you do, Zebedee.

Zebedee: Oh, yeah? Better than I do? So, why don't you join them in their hang-out and gnaw bones with the country's traitors! I can't provide shelter to chameleons who conveniently change their colors!

Jesus: Does this mean that I can't come in?

Zebedee: Come in, dammit, come in... You can't just stand there like a beggar... After all, I already lost my cool before noontime, even before this swine, Matthew, came to see you...

Jesus went inside the house and looked at everyone... Then he sat on the floor, with crossed legs. We were expecting an explanation from him, but he didn't say anything.

Zebedee: Damn you, Jesus? Have you swallowed your tongue?!

James: Let's make this clear, Jesus: We are here everyday trying to figure out how we can get rid of these Romans, and here you go to the house of their chief, Cornelius, no less. May the lightning strike him dead!

John: Once you said that the Romans are squeezing our necks and that things have to change; but now, the whole barrio has seen you with this traitor, Matthew, on your way to the Captain's house... What's the matter with you?

Zebedee: May the gates of hell open up and swallow you, Jesus. We can't understand you! Well, ain't you gonna speak up?

Jesus: Zebedee, this Captain Cornelius isn't a bad man. Believe me.

James: He's not a bad man, dammit, but he's a Roman! That's enough!

Jesus: Yes, he's a Roman... so what?

John: The Romans are our enemies.

Jesus: Cornelius is a Roman. We're Jews, and the others are Greeks... So what?... You don't eat the skin of the fruit but the flesh inside, don't you?... This captain has the skin of a Roman, but inside him is good fruit.

James: Then beware that you don't choke on this fruit!

Zebedee: Nonsense, Jesus, this is nonsense... I think you're getting to be scatterbrained. If we say we gotta get rid of the Romans, so be it! And that's final!

Jesus: Well, look, old man. I think, what happened to Titus and Abdon will also happen to you.

Zebedee: What do you mean? And who the devil are they?

Jesus: They were Renato's companions...

Zebedee: What're you talkin' about, dammit?

Jesus: Renato was a farmer who owned a small parcel of land, out there behind the hills of Nazareth...

Jesus: When the rainy season came, Renato planted all his land with wheat...

Wife: What now, old man? Are you tired?

Renato: Yes, I'm tired but happy, woman... I expect a good harvest this year, you'll see.

Wife: And we'll be able to buy sheep, won't we?

Renato: Not one but four, woman. We're gonna buy a goat too... It's gonna be a good harvest, you'll see, you'll see...

Jesus: But Renato had a troublesome neighbor who was envious whenever things went well with his neighbors. One midnight, this neighbor got up and slipped onto the land where Renato had sown wheat...

Neighbor: Ha!... I'll sow bad seed on the farm and will destroy his harvest... Then I'll die laughing seeing the expression on the stupid man's face, ha, ha, ha!

Jesus: So while everyone was sleeping, the evil man sowed bad seeds on the land of this poor man, Renato... After a few days, the seeds began to sprout and the land began to clothe itself with a green mantle of young blades. The wheat and the bad seed began to grow together... When Titus and Abdon, friends of Renato, passed by and saw the disaster, they ran to their friend and told him...

Renato: Hey, what's the matter, huh?

Titus: Open the door, Renato! It's us!

Renato: What seems to be the trouble, pals?

Abdon: Don't you know?

Renato: What?

Abdon: There are weeds on your land! We looked closely and saw a lot of weeds growing...

Renato: That can't be. I chose the seeds very carefully. I sowed wheat seeds of good quality.

Titus: But the whole farm is loaded with crab grass.

Renato: Hell! Who would've wanted to cause me harm?

Abdon: You can figure it out for yourself... Everyone knows him.

Renato: Do you think he's capable of doing such a thing?

Abdon: Why, of course man. He's capable of doing it and more. This neighbor of yours is evil.

Renato: How I wish I could squeeze his neck and...!

Titus: Take it easy, Renato. There's no need to worry. Tomorrow, Abdon and I will give you a hand. The three of us will rid your farm of the weeds that are growing and your problem is solved.

Renato: Thank you, my friends, thank you. I'm counting on you.

Jesus: The following morning...

Renato: Hey, wait a minute. What are you pulling? Let me see...

Titus: This is bad grass, look...

Renato: No, man, no. That's wheat.

Titus: Look closely, Renato, these are weeds.

Renato: Don't be silly, Titus, I tell you, these are wheat stalks!

Titus: What do you say, Abdon?

Abdon: Let me see... I don't know, they look the same to me...

Titus: I swear by Abraham, this is bad grass, Renato!

Renato: And I insist that it's good grass, Titus, and you're uprooting my wheat!... Pff!! One problem after another. That neighbor of mine destroyed my land and now you're killing my harvest...

Abdon: Okay, Renato, what do you want us to do then?

Renato: Look, friends, please pardon me. I'm grateful that you've come... but, let's leave this for another day. Will that be okay? Since we can't see the fruit yet, it's too difficult to distinguish wheat from weed. Let's wait for them to grow together, until we can separate one from the other. After all, the harvest won't be damaged. The only problem is that in the end it'll involve more work separating the good fruit and throwing away the bad ones.

Titus: You're right. It'll be worse to pull out the wheat thinking it's bad grass. It's too soon to know.

Renato: I'll let you know when it's harvest time. Then we'll burn the weeds while we put the wheat in the barn. Is that okay?

Abdon: Sure, it's okay, Renato.

Jesus: So the days passed by, and the wheat grew together with the bad grass. When harvest time came, Renato and his friends separated the wheat heads from the weeds easily. This time, they were not mistaken. They learned patience and committed no mistakes.

Zebedee: So I'm likened to Titus and Abdon, Renato's friends, huh?

Jesus: I think so, Zebedee. You said: "Cornelius is bad grass, so out with him! He's got to be pulled out."

Zebedee: Yes, I said it, and I'm saying it again, hell!

Jesus: Well you see, God isn't that way. He's more patient, because He knows that people are like trees: we are known by the fruit. If a tree yields good fruit, then it's a good one even if it has an ugly skin. But if the fruit is bad, the tree is bad, notwithstanding its good appearance. What matters is the fruit, Zebedee. C'mon, tell me, have you ever seen a vine with thorns bearing grapes?

Zebedee: No!

Jesus: And have you ever seen a bush of thistles with figs on their branches?

Zebedee: Nope!

Jesus: Sooo...

Zebedee: I still maintain that Cornelius is a Roman wolf. Tell me who your friends are and I'm gonna tell you who you are!

Jesus: Of course, that one is easier. We point an accusing finger, we put a label on other people's foreheads saying: You're the bad ones, we're the good ones. "My God, send forth your fire from heaven and destroy all these scoundrels!"... But the Lord simply smiles and says: Hey, how can you tell wheat from bad grass? "Because this is Roman, and that one is Jew, and this Pharisee's a pious man, while he's a rebel zealot, and this Saducee's a traitor, while this man is a priest of the temple!"... God takes away all labels they carry and burns them in the garbage. Show me the fruit and then we talk. Don't you think, Zebedee, we should focus more on what one does than on the label one has?

Zebedee: There is only one thing that matters to me, Jesus...!

Jesus: What is it, Zebedee?

Zebedee: That the captain is a Roman! And just the sight of him makes me throw up! That's why your having gone to his house was in poor taste indeed! It'll always be so for me until the end of the world!!

John: Take it easy, Papa... You might faint... be calm....

Jesus: When that day comes, perhaps you'll understand everything, Zebedee. It's only at the end when we see things clearly. The matter of separating wheat from weeds belongs to God, not to us.

My father, Zebedee, kept on grumbling. And so did my brother, James, and Peter, and I. We spent several hours arguing with Jesus. Not one of us understood the story of the wheat and the weeds then.

The nationalism of Zebedee, his children, and certainly the majority of Jesus' disciples, was one of intransigence which afforded them much prejudice. In Zebedee's case, it was especially political prejudice against the Roman authorities and collaborators like Matthew. The biases of Jesus' friends were not of the moral or religious kind, on account of their social condition, but they were intransigent in political matters. Understood in a strict sense of superiority or power, nationalism can be a very dangerous feeling and it may run counter to Christian universality. Jesus' gospel is a message that tends to do away with barriers among nations in favor of a profound solidarity among all people.

In the face of this intransigence, Jesus narrates a parable to his friends. The parable of the wheat and the weeds is a call to understanding and tolerance. Jesus makes them see the hazards of prejudgment and the value of patience until harvest time. In Palestine a type of weed grows into the so-called "poisonous weed," which is bad grass and is very similar to wheat. When it grows, it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. If – as told in the parable – there is much of this kind growing in a field through the fault of the bad neighbor, it is dangerous to pull the weed out prematurely. The roots get entangled under the ground with those of the wheat. It is better to wait till harvest time to pull the weeds out from among the bundles of wheat. This way, one would not be mistaken. It is a common practice among farmers to make use of the weeds by drying them and using them for fuel. Palestine is a land that lacks forests and therefore, combustible material is scarce.

In this parable Jesus wants to tell us that no one is empowered to dictate who is who, to put on labels, and therefore to discriminate against others. People cannot read hearts, and the wish to classify others as "good" and "bad" may cause them to commit big blunders. Only in the movies – (which are not usually the best) can it be clear right from the start, who is good or bad.

The parable refers likewise to judgment day when God will proclaim the harvest at the end of history, during which the chaff will unmistakably be separated from the grain. When Jesus talks about judgment, he also talks of God's patience. God is patient because He is good and gives every opportunity to people. He is patient as He is wise, and does not fall into the trap of appearances: He judges people according to their actions, not by position, nor the garments worn, nor the function people discharge.

For a long time we Christians have avoided concrete commitment in history, hoping to have a clearer understanding of who are the good people and the bad ones. This manner of behavior is not only indicative of a lack of realism but pride as well. We want to be "gods." Only God is capable of differentiating wheat from bad grass; and only at the end shall he separate one from the other. Meanwhile, everything is together in the course of history. Those who do not commit to anything by considering themselves pure sin the most. Certainly, they have not done anything sinful, but they have not accomplished anything either – big or little – and therefore, shall be accountable.

(Mt 13:24-30)

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THE FIG VENDOR

That day at dusk, James, Peter and I were with Jesus at Joachim's tavern near the wharf. We were all

seated on the floor, playing dice...

James: Five and three!... This round is mine too!

Peter: Hold it, redhead, it's still my turn!... Bring me that cube.

Jesus: Come on, Peter, save the honor of the sons of Jonas!

Peter: Hold your breath, fellas, here I go... Five and four! I win!

John: Damn this stone thrower! He got it from his sleeve!

Innkeeper: What's going on here? Who's winning?

John: At the moment, this redhead and the big-nose. But they say they haven't gone far enough...

Innkeeper: Because those who are behind drink a lot! Hey, you losers, don't give up! Right now I'm bringing you a pitcher full of the best wine from Galilee and you can all have a good toast! This will give you good luck in the game, in your fishing and while you're in bed with your wives!

John: Dammit! There you go again with your gimmicks, Joachim!...

Melanie: Figs, figs! very good, and as sweet as honey!

James: ...and there goes that woman again!

It was Melanie, the fig vendor, who came at that moment...

Melanie: Figs, figs, buy my delicious figs!...

James: There goes that woman again...!

Jesus: Who, James?

James: The fig vendor...

Jesus: I see her often in the market.

Peter: She's everywhere. If you're not quick enough, she'll even follow you to the toilet just to sell her damned figs!

Melanie started to linger by the inn, carrying her old and dirty basket of fruit on her head. She was a very thin woman always dressed in black. She shouted her wares in a shrill voice, like a raucous bird, and smiled at every prospective buyer of her ripe figs...

James: What a cheap woman! What with her terrible condition!...

Jesus: Why, what's the matter with her, James...?

John: The whole town knows about it... It's something unbelievable, Jesus! She's different from other women who have their period every month. For many years she hasn't stopped bleeding...

Peter: That's it, she's in bad shape... No doctor has been able to cure her. Apparently, this woman had money before, but spent it all on doctors... Now, she has nothing!

John: All the healers of Galilee know her, but no one has ever found the cure for her!

Peter: But she continues selling figs to earn more money to pay more doctors....

Melanie: Figs, figs, buy my delicious figs! They're as sweet as honey, figs, figs!

James: No, we don't want your figs....

Melanie: They are very good. Look... They're full of honey... look...

James: Go sell them somewhere else! We don't want your figs.

Melanie: Why don't you try them, stranger....?

Jesus: I don't have a single cent with me, woman...

Melanie: Hey, aren't you the one who...?

James: Stay away from here, we said! Beat it!

The fig vendor continued to hang around the inn, as we kept on making fun of her and her sickness....

Jesus: Isn't she married?

James: But Jesus, what man would be willing to put up with such a disaster?... She's not woman nor anything. She can't even have a child...

Jesus: But she works very hard... I see her around the whole day with her basket of figs...

Peter: Sure, because she pokes her nose into everyone's business. The only work that women engages in is

chatting. I guess the Lord took the women not out of Adam's ribs but from his tongue. Oh, these women!... The trouble with them is that they're so weak, and wear themselves out so easily...

Jesus: Rufina's not weak, Peter. Without her, what would happen to your home, huh?

Peter: Rufina works hard, alright, but... she's always complaining... You gotta always treat her with affection, you know; otherwise she's out of her mind. I tell you, women are like straw blown by the wind...!

Jesus: You can't say that of Salome... She's a very strong and a very smart woman...

John: Well, she happens to be my mother, Moreno... so that's something else...

James: Women are weak, dammit... Look what happened to Jairus' daughter...

Jesus: Why?

James: Well, that girl was already a young woman... Poor creature... a few days ago, she caught a bad cold... and look at her now: she's dying! And all because of a cold! That's because women are weak and sickly.

Jesus: Why is she dying? Is she that serious?

James: This morning, I was told she hadn't gone...

Peter: Women die more often than we change shoestrings! We ought to thank the Lord for making us men, dammit! What do you think?

John : Hey, fellows, the pitcher's empty! Let's go to the inn next door... They serve better wine there.

James: That's right. Let's drink to our good fortune in being men and not women! Let's go...!

Peter: That's a superb idea. Indeed this raisin wine is already burning my throat...

John: Are you coming with us, Jesus?

Jesus: No, but go if you want... I'd like to see this girl...

John: Which girl?

Jesus: The daughter of Jairus. I know her father. He's a good man. He and his wife must be very worried about the girl... if she's that bad...

James: Bah, do it next time, Moreno... We're tired.

Jesus: Tired?... Ah, I thought you never got tired. You don't have to go if you don't want to. But I'm going.

Peter: Okay, okay, let's go there...

We grudgingly decided to go with Jesus. As we were leaving the inn, Melanie, the fig vendor was there again...

Melanie: Figs, figs, buy my delicious figs, they're as sweet as honey...!

James: There you go again with your figs! We're sick and tired of them, don't you understand? Out of our way!

Melanie's deep and brilliant eyes turned to Jesus.

Melanie: How about you, stranger...?

Jesus: I already told you I didn't have money. I'll buy from you next time.

Melanie: Wait, stranger, I was told you have healed many people, that you have the hands of a doctor... I...I'm sick... if you could...

John: Let's go, Jesus, don't mind her! Go away with your basket of figs and leave us in peace!

Peter: Hey, what's that noise?

The mourners of Capernaum, those women hired to weep for our dead, hurriedly crossed the street grieving, with their hair loose. People came out of their homes when they heard their cries and gathered in the street.

A Woman: Jairus' daughter has passed away! His daughter died!

Jairus was one of the caretakers of the synagogue in Capernaum. We all liked him, and when we

learned what happened, the whole barrio rushed to his house. We went too. Melanie, the fig vendor, went too, and she was following us closely... In front of Jairus' house, people were all squeezing to get in...

James: This woman has been following us from the pub, Jesus, haven't you noticed?

Jesus: Yeah, I know.

James: She's a bore, I tell you!

Jesus: She's a brave woman, James. She's not intimidated, even if people laugh to her face. She knows what she wants.

James: And what's it that she wants?

Jesus: She wants to get cured. That's it. She has no husband nor children. At least, she wants to have good health.

While we were waiting in front of Jairus' house, Melanie pushed her way towards Jesus, and from behind, called him.

Jesus: Hey, who's pulling my cloak?

James: Who else?... Look at her... the disgusting woman!

Melanie finally succeeded in getting near Jesus. She looked at him full of hope...

Melanie: You can cure me! I know you can cure me!

Jesus: What's your name?

James: They call her the "the bleeding woman"! Ha, ha... That's how she's known here...

Jesus: From now on, nobody will ever call you by that name, Melanie.

For many years, the woman hadn't heard her name uttered with so much respect and affection. And for many years, she hadn't felt as much life in her body, worn out by sickness and suffering. As she stood up, she felt like a tree that wakes up from lethargy ready to share her flowers in bloom....

Jesus: You may now go in peace, woman.

We saw her pass through the crowded street, with her head high and in such great hurry, as if she had wings.

John: What's happened to her Jesus? Has she gone crazy or what...?

Jesus: No, John. We're the crazy ones. A woman's life has as much worth as a man's in God's weighing scale... but we men have tipped that balance. Come on, let's go see the girl!

We went inside Jairus' house. The mourners' cry and the smoke from the newly-burned incense filled the little air that we could breathe....

A Man: In a way Jairus is lucky, he still has the boys. If someone had to die, better to be the girl. What do you think?

James: Between two evils, the lesser one.

Peter: Let's get outta here, Jesus. We'll all choke to death here... Besides, once a person is dead, he's dead. Nothing can be done about it, except to weep. There are already enough women weeping here.

Jesus: I wonder why they're crying, Peter. This girl isn't dead. She's just asleep.

The people who were near us heard Jesus and they began to laugh...

A Man: Hey, listen to this man... He says the girl is just sleeping!...

Slowly, Jesus inched his way to the room where Jairus' daughter lay. Peter, James and I, followed him. The mother was weeping beside her daughter, scratching her face and tearing her garments. Jairus was leaning against the wall, and raised his face when he saw Jesus enter the room...

Jairus: Jesus... Here she is... We thought she was going to live, but now, she's gone...

Jesus: Don't cry, Jairus...

Jairus: It's okay. Men weep too. People console me by saying that I have three boys left, and that women should weep for women. After all, she's only a girl... but I... I loved her very much...

Jesus: God loved her too, and understands you, Jairus. He weeps too, as much as when He loses a daughter as when he loses a son.

Jesus moved closer and gently looked at the girl. She seemed to be sleeping. No one would think she was dead... Jesus leaned over the girl and took her hand...

Jesus: Come on, young lady, wake up... get up...

And, as if waking up from a long sleep, Jairus' daughter stood up and smiled...

According to the civil and religious laws, as well as the customs of Israel, woman was inferior to man. The civil laws relegated her to the place of a slave and a minor, who needed a man as master. A woman's testimony was not valid in court for she was considered a liar. From the religious point of view, she was also an outcast. She could not read the Scriptures in the synagogue, nor could she bless the food on the table. An important detail in the language: The Hebrew words to mean "pious," "just" and "holy" do not have a feminine form. It is therefore believed that a woman could never be what these words denote. There was a prayer recommended for men to recite everyday, which went like this: "Praise the Lord for not having made me a woman."

Woman's exclusion from social life was even more common among upper class society and in the big cities than on the farms and small towns. Nevertheless, in the whole country the little importance granted to the woman was attributed to her ability to perform domestic chores. She was appreciated basically for her fecundity. A barren woman was practically worthless. She was naturally appreciated more if she gave birth to a boy than to a girl. The birth of a girl was sometimes cause for indifference or sadness, as the popular saying goes "Woe to him whose children are girls" would attest. Nurtured by this environment from the time of infancy, Jesus' disciples were therefore male chauvinists who despised women, more so if the woman was someone like the fig vendor in this episode.

Selling was a common occupation among poor women. In the case of Melanie, it was her only way to survive, and her non-dependence on a man made her even more destitute than most women. Her sickness – the gospel says it is "hemorrhage" – is Menorrhagia. It is an irregular form of menstruation characterized by continuous bleeding. Aside from the inconveniences and bodily weakness caused by the disorder, Melanie was perennially considered "unclean" as all women were considered during their menstrual period (Lev 15:19-30). The fig vendor's case was, for several reasons, an extreme case of social discrimination: first, because she was a woman; secondly, she was sick; finally, she was sterile and all alone. This also explains why she was shy to ask Jesus' help. Melanie's healing and the miracle made on Jairus' daughter are indications that God does not discriminate between sexes, that man and woman are equal in the eyes of God. The gospel is feminist, since it vindicates the fundamental equality and dignity of both before God (Gal 3:28). This is one of the revolutionary aspects of the message of Jesus.

Only if we take into account the basic chauvinist character of the society in which Jesus was part can we fully appreciate the novelty of the gospel's message, the profound amazement caused by Jesus' attitude toward women. In many countries, male chauvinism is a very important social component. The Kingdom of God shall come to the fullest only when women are appreciated as equals of men and given the same opportunities and rights. Only then can a woman develop herself to the fullest as a human being, without any social, economic or religious impediment.

(Mt 9:18-26; Mk 5:21-43; Lk 8:40-56)

A QUESTION FROM THE PRISON CELL

John, the prophet of the desert, continued to be a prisoner in Machaerus. King Herod dared not kill him for fear of a people's revolution. Neither did he set him free for fear of Herodias, his wife. Thus, John remained imprisoned for months without seeing the light of the sun, where he rotted in a dark and humid dungeon near the mountains of Moab....

Matthew: Pssst!... Jailer!

Jailer: It's you again?

Matthew: We wanna see the prophet.

Jailer: Who do you think you are, huh? You can go to hell and leave me in peace!

Thomas: Wwe-wwe... we wanna bring some food to the pro-prophet, John.

Jailer: It's not allowed. The law is the law.

Matthew: What about five?

Jailer: Five! Puah! Risking my life for five filthy dinars!

Thomas: Ufff... We'll mmm... mmm... make it seven. Is that okay?

Jailer: Damn you! Okay, gimme the money. Hey, you, watch out! Anytime they'll cut off half the tongue you have left! And you better hurry, huh? I don't want any hassle!

Matthew: John, John, what a joy to see you!

The Baptist: Thomas... Matthew... what a surprise! How did you get in?

Matthew: Don't worry. Somehow, we always find a kind soul...

Thomas: Hh...hhow do you feel, John?

Baptist: Not so good, Thomas. This sickness is consuming me inside. I spit a lot of blood.

Matthew: We brought you something to eat. Look... It's not much, but... and this syrup from fig leaves, according to a friend of mine, is very good to loosen up the lungs.

Baptist: Thanks. What would happen to me without you?... I think even the Lord forgets us prisoners....

Thomas: Don't talk that way, John. Tt...tt...tell us what you need and w..w..we're gonna do whatever possible to get it.

Baptist: Yeah, I want to ask you a favor... something very important to me. I need... I need to know if I'll die peacefully.

Matthew: What're you talking about, John? Have faith. Herod will set you free soon. He's gotta do it. The people are protesting a lot and...

Baptist: People forget what they don't see. They haven't seen me for a long time.

Matthew: You'll be outta here soon, I'm sure. You'll go back to the river and the people will come to listen to you and you'll continue to baptize in Israel.

Baptist: No Matthew, no... This sickness is killing me. I feel terrible. My days are coming to an end...

Thomas: Don't say that, John.

Baptist: I'm not afraid to die, Thomas. When I began to preach justice, I already knew it would end... this way. No prophet perishes in bed. But it doesn't matter... I did what I had to do.

Matthew: Speak up, John. What do you wanna ask from us?

Baptist: Down there at the Jordan, I met a Galilean who came to be baptized. I wanna know what's happened to him. His name is Jesus, and he's from Nazareth... Have you heard anything about him?

Matthew: Yes, news about him has spread as far as Judea and even Jerusalem.

Thomas: Ss...ss... some say he's a healer.

Matthew: Others claim he's a sorcerer. Or even an agitator...

Thomas: Still others ss...ssay he's another prophet.

Baptist: It doesn't matter what people say, but what he says. I need to know what he's doing, what he

thinks...

Matthew: Do you want us to see him and bring you news about him?

Baptist: Yes, that's what I want. Please go to Galilee, but let no one know. It would be dangerous for him and for you.

Thomas: I think hh...hh... he lives in Capernaum.

Baptist: So go to Capernaum. And tell this on my behalf: John, the son of Zechariah, is asking you: My days are numbered. Will I die peacefully? I have sown the seed: Will somebody water it? I had an axe in my hands. Will someone give the necessary blow? I have set the light... Will someone blow the flame and kindle the fire?... Please tell him I'm sick, that I hardly have the strength to speak. I shouted and bellowed, announcing the coming of the Liberator... has my voice been lost in the wilderness?

Matthew: Anything else, John?

Baptist: Yes... Ask him if we gotta keep on waiting or... if the one who was to come has already come. I hope my dreams haven't been in vain!...

Thomas: Ww...ww... we'll journey to Galilee right now.

John: Be off soon. I promise not to die before you return.

Thomas and Matthew were part of John's group of disciples when the prophet was preaching by the riverbank. Now they were staying in Jericho and they went to Machaerus whenever they could to visit him. That same morning they started their journey to the north, to the Galilee of the gentiles, to comply with the wish of the imprisoned prophet...

Thomas: Ww...ww... we have to be very cautious, Matthew. Things are getting worse.

Matthew: You bet. The truth is, I wouldn't want to end up like John and rot in a prison like that...

Thomas: Nn..nn... neither would I. We mustn't be seen talking often with this Jesus. Let's keep a distance from him.

They passed the night in Perea and then in the Decapolis. On the third day, they reached Tiberias. They passed through the lake and went up to Capernaum...

Matthew: Pssst... Friend, would you know where this man Jesus, the one from Nazareth, lives?

A Man: What, what do they say?

Matthew: Don't be afraid. We can be trusted.

Thomas: We wanna know ww..ww..where..the Nazarene lives!

Man: You, you... yo, yo..... you.

Matthew: Let's go Thomas. This fellow is worse than you.

By asking here and there, they finally found our house. My mother Salome told them that Jesus was on the wharf, and would be every afternoon, waiting for our return from fishing... Thomas and Matthew approached Jesus from behind...

Matthew: Pssst.... Hey, you...

Jesus: Who... me?

Thomas: Yes, yy..yy..you...

Jesus: Why?

Thomas: Who're you?

Jesus: That's what I wanna know: Who're you?

Matthew: We're looking for a certain Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus: Well, you already found him. I'm Jesus.

Thomas: Aa...aa... are you sure?

Jesus: As of this moment I'm sure. I dunno if tomorrow I'll change my mind.

Matthew: At last we've found you. We came from the South...

Thomas: Yes, ff...ff..from Jericho....

Matthew: To be exact, from Machaerus.

Jesus: From Machaerus?

Matthew: Ssh! Don't shout. They might hear us. Things are very bad, and since the Passover is near, there's more vigilance than ever.

Jesus: But, are you sure you came from Machaerus?

Matthew: Yes we're sure!

Jesus: Are you John's friends?

Thomas: Yes, we saw John in his prison cell.

Jesus: How is he?

Matthew: He's fine, no, he's sick. He's very pale, like a worm who hasn't seen light for several months. He used to be tall and sturdy like a cedar, but now, he's as limp as a rag. They've finished with him.

Jesus: Is he very ill?

Matthew: Yeah, he is. He spits blood. He won't last long...

Jesus: I've got to see him before he dies. Is there a way?

Matthew: You won't be able to get through. They will easily recognize you as Galilean. The Galileans are blacklisted.

Thomas: We bribed the jailer so we could go near him and talk to him briefly.

Jesus: I have to go there. I need to talk to John and ask him a few things.

Matthew: John also wishes to ask you something.

Jesus: Did you bring any message from him?

Thomas: Yes. John ww...ww... wants us to tell you: "My days are numbered. Ww..ww..will I die in peace?"

Matthew: He also told us to tell you: "I shouted out the coming of the Liberator. Has my voice been lost in the wilderness? Shall we keep on waiting or has he come, the one who was to come?"

Jesus became pensive and stared blankly at the black stones of the wharf...

Thomas: Ww..ww... what do you want us to tell John?

Jesus: Tell him that... things are going fine... slowly, but fine. We have started here in Capernaum. We're still a small number, but... we proclaim the Kingdom of God, we fight against injustice, and we try to do something so that things will change.

Thomas: And hh...hh..how do the people take it?

Jesus: They're beginning to open their eyes. Those who were deaf are beginning to hear. Those who were oppressed are becoming hopeful, and they're beginning to rise and move on. Even the poorest, those who are starving to death, share whatever little they have, and they help one another. The people are getting on their feet, yes, they're waking up.

Matthew: Who have joined you?

Jesus: A lot of people, especially those who were left behind, of course. Tell John that in the Kingdom of God, the last shall be the first to enter; those who have no place anywhere: the sick, the prostitutes, the publicans, the lepers, the most trampled upon... these are the people who'll have a place with us...

Thomas: Don't you have pp..pp..problems with the bigwigs?

Jesus: Yes, of course. That's obvious..

Matthew: So... what now?

Jesus: Nothing... We'll move on and continue to announce the good news of liberation to the poor, that God is on our side; That it breaks His heart to see this world twisted and He wants to straighten it...

Matthew: John will be very happy to hear this... I assure you he will.

Jesus: Yes, and tell him, for my part, that the axe has not lost its sharp edge, the fire has not been extinguished, that the seed he has sown shall bear fruit in time. John will understand. He is one of those who understands the way of the Lord. He's got a keen sense of smell for this. I'm sure he won't be disappointed with what we've been doing up until now, and what we shall still do.

Peter: Hey, Moreno, we're back.

Matthew: Who're they?

Jesus: They belong to my group.

Peter: Dammit! Who're these guys, Jesus?

Jesus: The truth is, I haven't asked them who they are...

Matthew: My name's Matthew.

Thomas: My name's Th...th... Thomas.

Jesus: You know what, Peter? They're able to talk with the prophet, John, in his prison cell.

Peter: Oh, really! Hey guys! Hurry up! We've news from the prophet John!

Matthew: For God's sake, don't shout! The guards might...

Peter: To hell with them! Let's have some hot soup first, then tell us what you know about the prophet. Long live the movement!

Andrew came and then James. The rest of us on the other boat followed with the old man, Zebedee. All of us went with Thomas and Matthew who told us of the happenings in the south and in the prison cell of Machaerus....

Very little is spoken of Thomas in the gospels. It is John who occasionally mentions his name, and who calls him "the twin." He is known as the "incredulous." Matthew is known throughout the book of Acts of the Apostles, and he was chosen to take the place of Judas to fill up the group of the twelve apostles after Jesus' resurrection. In this episode, Thomas and Matthew appear as John the Baptist's disciples, who later on join Jesus' group. Thomas stammers, but he is ingenuous, a little stubborn and a coward. The character of his friend, Matthew, is less defined.

John the Baptist, the prophet who influenced Jesus and inspired him decisively in his initial activities in Galilee, wants to know from his confinement in the dungeons of Herod's palace in Machaerus, what the Galilean whom he had met in the Jordan is doing. Jesus' reply to his messengers shows his awareness of being the heir of the prophetic tradition of his people and, with the help of his friends, of setting up the Messianic Kingdom which John himself and the rest of the prophets had announced.

It was in the synagogue of Nazareth where Jesus proclaimed the message of liberation to his countrymen for the first time. On that occasion, Jesus described the signs that accompanied such liberation. Now, after a period of activity in Galilee, he sends the message to John that what has been proclaimed is beginning to be fulfilled. Up to that moment, Jesus' activity would have been what we would refer to nowadays as a task of "conscientization." Through words and signs, Jesus inspired among the poor of Capernaum and the neighboring villages, hope for freedom and an awareness of their dignity. The Kingdom of God starts precisely when a person is assured in his or her heart that all people are equal and that inequality among people is contrary to the will of God. With this as a starting point, people find strength to fight for a just and free world. Before engaging in any act of liberation, the Christian must carry this message at heart since this is essential to the gospel. There cannot be a liberating act without a prior liberating conscience.

The prophetic text of Isaiah on which Jesus based his mission (Is 61:1-2) spoke of the blind, the deaf, and the dead... An interpretation reducing the signs of the Messianic Kingdom to simple and isolated healings with which Jesus manifested the power he had, would distort the gospel. The blind were those who could not see and whose sight, Jesus – in his capacity to make people overcome – recovered for them. But a blind person is also one who, wallowing in injustice and becoming its victim, cannot rise from this situation and becomes blind to any opportunity to get out of it. A deaf person is one who refuses to hear in spite of having ears. Worse is the poor creature who hears not the voice that speaks of liberation, as pain has numbed sensitivity to hope for things to change. He or she is deaf who is passive and fatalistic. Dead are those who have never lived like human beings, those who have wept and sweated, and been oppressed by others who have treated them like animals. When the blind begin to see, the deaf begin to hear, and the dead rise from their tombs of misery, then the Kingdom of God is near. The gospel is the good news of

liberation, a complete liberation which will come from beyond this world to free us from the same death. It has already begun on this earth.

(Mt 11:2-6; Lk 7:18-23)

46

THE KIND OF FASTING GOD WANTS

Thomas and Matthew, the messengers sent by the prophet John from the prison cell of Machaerus, stayed in my house. Many people came that afternoon. We were all anxious to hear their news. Later, at night, the group stayed for dinner. With crossed legs, we sat on the mat spread on the floor while we waited for Salome to bring in the soup....

Peter: Hmm! The soup smells good!

Salome: Dip the spoon down to the bottom to get the good pieces of fish!

Salome put a big boiling pot in the middle. The smell of the soup pervaded the entire house...

Salome: Zebedee, old man, mind your manners! Let the guests serve themselves first...!

Zebedee: You're right, lady... I'm hungry, you see...!

Salome: C'mon guys, Thomas and Matthew, don't be shy....

Matthew: No, after you. You start and we follow.

Thomas: Ain't you gonna b..bb..bless the food?

Zebedee: Hell, that's right. C'mon James, give the blessing...

James: God of Israel, give us food and appetite, and bless this food, amen.

All: Amen!

Zebedee: C'mon fellas, let's all enjoy a good piece of fishtail, so you too can also lay claim to what everyone knows in Galilee: that there's no better salmon than what we have here in Capernaum!

Matthew: You better start, Mr. Zebedee...

Zebedee: No, Matthew, no. You start. Not that there's enough, but at least the soup is hot.

Thomas: No, no, you f..f..f..first...

James: Maybe our guests don't like fish....

Thomas: Yes we do, b..b..b.but we can't eat it.

Salome: You can't eat it?... Are you sick in the stomach?

Matthew: Oh no, it's not that... it's just that we can't eat it.

Peter: But why? Who told you not to eat it?

Matthew: We ourselves did.

James: You did?

Matthew: Well, Thomas and I made a vow not to eat fish nor anything that comes from the sea if we got back safe and sound to Judea after this trip.

Thomas: We had to make some p..p..pe..p..enitence.

Peter: Oh, of course, of course... now I understand... dammit!

Zebedee: Well, man, that's no problem. You're my guests. Salome, old lady, go and kill a chicken and hurry...Get some olives so we can have something to munch...

Salome: Right away, old man, right away...

Zebedee: Just be patient. It will be done in a minute!

Matthew: No, please don't do that, Mam Salome!.... Don't bother... Hold it please...

Thomas: N..n..nn..neither....

Zebedee: How's that again?

Thomas: N..n..ne..neither can we eat meat..

Peter: And why can't you eat meat?

Matthew: Because we're fasting. We promised not to take a bite of meat until the feast of the Passover...

Thomas: W..w..we must make some penitence.

Everyone remained silent, with our eyes fixed on the boiling pot that made our mouths water. But no one dared extend a hand to help himself...

James: Well, fellas... So... so we can shift from food to something to drink, what do you think?... That's it, old lady, bring us some jugs of wine to celebrate this meeting and... don't you drink wine either?

Thomas: We swore not to taste a drop of wine until the p..p..prophet John is free from jail. We must make some p..p..pe..pe...

Zebedee: Penitence, of course. One must make some penitence... Now I understand why this fellow's tongue has dried up... for not having drunk nor eaten anything...

Salome: Shut up, Zebedee, don't be rude. They're our guests.

Zebedee: Of course, of course... and in my house, the guests call the shots...

The atmosphere became tense. With bowed heads, we all started to fiddle with our fingers, or to scratch our beards or even to nibble our fingernails... It was Jesus who broke the deafening silence...

Jesus: Hey, Salome, the soup's getting cold, isn't it?... Hmm... It smells so good!... Let me see how it tastes... "The best salmon can only come from Capernaum"... Oh yeah, it's delicious, dammit... it's super delicious...!

Jesus dipped the spoon inside the pot, took some fishtails and filled a plate of soup to the brim. Then he took a slice of bread and began to eat just like that... We were all stunned. My father, Zebedee, who was at the other end of the mat, gaped at Jesus' plate, his eyes green with envy...

Jesus: Can I have a little wine...?

Jesus reached out to where Salome was, who was waiting, like a statue, with a jug of wine in each hand...

Jesus: My throat is so dried up... Ahhh....! "The best wine, the wine from Capernaum," one ought to say this, too... Serve me a little more wine, please, Salome.... Thanks...

That ended my father's patience...

Zebedee: To hell with all of you!... What're we supposed to be doing here, huh?... Are we gonna eat or not?

Jesus: Are you hungry, Zebedee?

Zebedee: Of course I am! I'm already feeling pains and stomach cramps... and what're you doing, eating so calmly, devouring all the fishbones that you can get hold of!

Jesus: Well, then you eat, too, man. What's keepin' you from doing so?

Zebedee: Nothing, but since this guy here has come up with his "one must make some p...p...penitence so that the prophet, John, can be released from prison" then that's it.

Jesus: Thomas, do you really believe that this fox, Herod will set him free simply because you have refrained from eating fishtail?

Thomas: Herod, no, b..b..but God...

Jesus: God?... God's already happy seeing you come and go to and from the prison cell visiting the prophet and bringing him necessities...

Thomas: That's not enough. God also punishes the body in order to p..p..pu..purify the spirit.

Jesus: Are you sure he commands that?... I don't know, I think you're imagining a very, very... serious God.

Salome: And how do you imagine God, Jesus?

Jesus: I dunno... a happier one... How shall I tell you?... Yeah, that's it, a joyful one. A very happy God. Tell me, Salome: what's the happiest thing on earth?

Salome: For me, it's a wedding.

Jesus: Well then, God is like a bridegroom in a wedding. He invites us to his party. Then you come and say: "I don't dance, I don't eat, I don't drink, I don't laugh." Hey, what did you come to my wedding for? What boring guests have come to my house!

Zebedee: Well said, Jesus! You took the burden off me!

Peter: Therefore fellas, come and get it!!

Thomas: Wait a moment, wait a moment!... It's not as s...s...simple as that.

Zebedee: What's it this time? For heaven's sake, what's happening now?

Matthew: Do whatever you please. But John, the baptizer, said it very clearly, as clearly as the water from the sea: "Be converted, repent and sacrifice!"

Everyone froze. Peter, with raised spoon. Andrew and James, with their hands in the air, extended towards the pot of soup. Old Zebedee, who had already chewed a fishtail, and was about to swallow it, felt a lump in his throat...

Thomas: If we don't make sacrifices, we c...c...can't be lifted up to God.

Jesus: Do you think so, Thomas? How about the trees that grow and reach out to heaven?

Thomas: I d...d...don't understand you, Jesus.

Jesus: Look, I'm gonna tell you a story that happened to me when I was a little boy. I had sown some orange seeds in front of our house. The seeds took root and the bush began to grow. But I was impatient. I wanted to see the orange blossoms soon and gather the ripe oranges...

Rabbi: But Jesus, my boy, what're you doing?

Boy: Pruning the leaves.

Rabbi: Can't you see it's a very young plant?

Boy: Of course, Rabbi. I'm helping it grow.

Rabbi: You're doing it more harm. You'll only kill it by pulling its leaves. Just leave it alone. Oranges don't need to be taken care of... C'mon, go to bed, it's already late, and God created night for us to rest...

Jesus: And so, while I slept and worked, the bush grew up to be a tree that bore flowers and fruits in due time...

Peter: So...

Jesus: So, I think the Kingdom of God is like a seed that grows and grows without pressure from us: fasting, promises, penitence... Don't you think all these will end up choking the plant?

Salome: To my mind, Jesus, this life's already full of too many sacrifices. We can't have more.

Zebedee: Yes sir. Let Mr. Eleazar and all the rich men do the fasting. We've been fasting throughout the year for their sake. Yeah, guys, dip the spoon into the pot before the soup gets cold!

Thomas: One moment, one moment! I'm not yet c...c...co...convinced...

Zebedee: Look, stutterer, let's finish this once and for all, because you're getting on my nerves. Will you or won't you let us eat? What the hell's the matter with you, huh?

Thomas: I say t...t...th...that....

At that time, Dimo, the blind man, peeped through the door...

Dimo: God bless the food and all those gathered here. Mam Salome, could you spare an extra piece of bread for this poor creature?

Salome: There's enough of everything, old Dimo. What do you want? ...bread, wine, fish?... Take your

pick...

Dimo: Whatever it is that you wish to give...

Salome: C'mon in Dimo and join us... I'll serve you some good soup...

Dimo: Thank you, thank you... The truth is, my children, I'm starved...

Zebedee: Not as much as I am, old man. But at any rate, enjoy your meal...

Dimo: Thank you, m'son, thank you....

Zebedee: Funny, the outsiders sit at the table and eat, while we are all dependent on what this stutterer has to say. That does it, fellas. I'm going to the pub.

Jesus: No, Zebedee, you wait. There's no need for you to go. Can't you see? You have already complied with your fasting. Look at old Dimo; he's the kind of fasting that God wants: "by sharing your food with the hungry and receiving the homeless into your house" ...God doesn't want us to starve, he wants us to struggle so that others won't be hungry. This is what the prophet and the rest of the prophets preached. Am I not right, Thomas?

Thomas: Well, it's b...b..be..because...

Peter: So, why don't we all help ourselves to the food now?

This time, everybody dipped the spoon into the big pot. Jesus had another serving of the soup for that day, he had worked hard and therefore felt hungry. Matthew and Thomas ate fish and drank wine and shared a good laugh with old Dimo who started to tell stories when he was a fisherman on the lake...

In the Bible, fasting was considered a kind of human humiliation before God. It was practiced to make prayers more effective, in moments of danger and trials. The religious law specified days of fasting, during which people should refrain from eating in remembrance of the great national calamities and to ask for divine intercession. Fasting was also done as personal devotion. In Jesus' time, the practice was given even greater significance. The Pharisees and the rest of the religious fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. John the Baptist, a truly austere prophet, must have probably inculcated the need for fasting among his disciples. That is why Matthew and Thomas appear as faithful observers of this custom in this episode. Fasting, like other religious practices, was severely criticized by the prophets of Israel. They had become a kind of spiritual blackmail through which unjust people thought they could win God, neglecting what is essential in the religious attitude: justice. In their worship, in the use of incense and prayers, and severe forms of penitence, they sought merit before God in order to save themselves. The prophets protested against this caricature of God and religion and clearly pointed out the kind of "fasting that God wants": Freeing the oppressed, sharing one's bread, opening prison doors (Is 58:1-12). Jesus certainly acknowledged this prophetic message.

A mistaken notion about religion might make us believe that God loves us more or grants us more favors if we make sacrifices. Sometimes there is nothing wrong with this. When a person feels sick or is confronted with a serious problem that cannot be solved, when a person is scared, then he or she turns to heaven. Since people believe that their fate depends on God, they seek to satisfy God. Out of these beliefs come promises (pilgrimages, use of special clothes, prayers...), sacrifices (fasting, other corporal mortifications, hair shirts, flagellations...) generally these practices reflect the idea of a horrible God: God must be a sadist who is appeased by our pains, who softens only with our sufferings. This God is not the God of the Bible, not Jesus' God. Let us remember those idols of stone before which primitive people sacrificed animals so that the smell of blood would pacify their ire. The God Jesus speaks about, the God he calls "Papa" does not want to see us suffering and scared; he wants to set us free, he understands and waits for us. He is a God who cannot be bought, who wants us to love him. He only asks justice and humility from us: He does not want us to feel superior nor inferior to anyone. (Mic 6:8).

In order to rid Thomas and Matthew and the rest of this commercial concept of merit in order to win God, Jesus tells the parable of the seed that grows alone. It is a way of telling us to be humble, that salvation does not depend on us. We go to sleep peacefully, with the assurance that God watches over our lives. This is not in contradiction with the work that God entrusts to us to change the course of history. Our

work is an indispensable complement. We need to work, but not to the point of exhausting one's self, trusting that God is most concerned that we succeed in our work. To avoid egoism, we must not worry about our fate as much as we do about the fate of our brothers and sisters.

In the first Christian community, the practice of fasting was accepted as a preparation for the selection of Church leaders (Acts 13:2-3). Fasting is not mentioned in any of the letters of the apostles. Later, through the centuries in Christian civilization, the custom was imposed. One must take into account that fasting was a common practice in many Oriental religions, as a form of hygienic measure or health practice. It is believed that fasting once a week could be beneficial for the body. A lot of doctors recommend this practice even today. Abstinence (refraining from eating meat and substituting fish instead) a practice that has persisted to the present time, traces its origin more to the economic rather than the religious aspect. In the XII century, great quantities of salted fish were marketed; the fish were stored in the monasteries which had the monopoly of this product. From here came the religious law of abstinence. These are only two examples, indicating that we must always analyze and try to find out how these practices of penitence came about. Not one of them can be traced to Jesus. The message of the gospel is demanding, but not in this respect. It demands justice, equality, and freedom. Jesus brings out God's mercy for the sinners and his special affection for the oppressed, never his fastidiousness with respect to merits that we can do. Jesus was a joyful man who was accused of being a wine drinker and a glutton by those who engaged in fasting. Jesus told us that the Kingdom of God was like a banquet, a wedding and a feast. Yes, and this is what is authentically Christian.

(Mt 9:14-17; Mk 2:18-22 and 4:26-29; Lk 5:33-39)

47

OUR DAILY BREAD

Thomas and Matthew stayed the whole night talking to us about the prophet John, the maltreatment he was receiving in the prison cell of Machaerus and the lung disease he was afflicted with... We were all fuming mad at Herod, the tyrant who had had the prophet locked up for several months and who had been the people's oppressor for many years... When it was past midnight...

Peter: Well, fellas... it's very late... Don't you think it's time for us to go to sleep now?

John: Hey, Peter! Save a place for me in your house, so that Thomas and Matthew can sleep here.

Peter: Of course, John, come... There's always a place for everyone! Shall we go, Jesus?

Jesus and I went with Peter and Andrew to spend the night in their home. Jesus did not utter a word along the way. He looked extremely worried...

Peter: Goodnight everyone! Sleep well and don't snore a lot!

Since the house was small and there were many people inside, Jesus and I slept on a mat by the door...

Jesus: Ufff...

John: What's wrong, Moreno?

Jeter: Nothing, John... I just can't sleep...

John: It must be the heat...

Jeter: Yeah, maybe. Know what? I'm gonna take in some fresh air.

Jesus went outside the house. The entire city was dark and quiet. Above him the stars were sparkling bright, like little lamps hanging from the sky... Jesus breathed deeply to take in some air, and went down

the street leading to the wharf...

Only the rhythmic rushing of the waves could be heard, as well as the soft and routinary breathing of the sea, as if the Lake of Tiberias was also asleep at that moment... Jesus looked for a piece of stone to sit on. He stayed there for some time, his gaze lost in the darkness around him...

Jesus: Father, you are in heaven as well as on earth, with us. Blessed are you. In your name we rest our hope. May the day of our Liberation come soon. May your Justice from heaven be fulfilled on earth too. Provide for our food tomorrow. Give us today the hunger to struggle for tomorrow's food. Forgive us our sins and teach us to forgive. Let not fear overcome us. Free us from our oppressors. Free the prophet John from prison. Free our people.... Make us all free, our Father!

After a while, Jesus returned to Peter's house. He lay down on the mat, by the door and slept at once. Then it was dawn...

Rufina: Get up guys, the cocks are already crowing!... Wake up, grandmother Rufa, c'mon... hey, Peter... it's time to get up!... Jonas, father-in-law.... Jonas!...I know you're awake, huh!... Little Simon, m'son... put on your sandals now... Shh! you might wake Mingo up!... Andrew, for heaven's sake!... Hey, you two, move fast!

John: Hmmm...! Hell, I could have slept the whole morning!

Rufa: My dear, have you seen my sandals?

Mingo: Mamma, I want some milk.... I'm hungry!

Rufina: Peter, for God's sake, get up and milk the goat!..

Peter: Right away, woman, right away...

Rufina: John, on your toes, and wake Jesus up. We can't open the door with him lying there...

John: Leave him alone, Rufina. He spent the night outside, that's why he's sleeping like a log now...

Peter: Hey, you, Jesus, move over, 'cuz no one can pass through that door... Jesus!!

Jesus: Hmmm... Leave me alone, Peter... I'm sleepy...

Rufina: Of course, after having spent the night bummin' around the whole town of Capernaum, who would wanna get up this early...

Peter: And what the hell was this fellow doing during the night, huh? Searching for bats?Hey, Rupphi, get me the broom so I can hit the sleepyhead... You'll see how fast he'll get on his toes!

Jesus: Okay, okay, Peter, I'm gettin' up... Hmmm...! But you'd better be ready tomorrow, for I'm gonna wake you up with a bucket of cold water in your face!

Peter: Now, may I know what you lost that you had to go out on the street at midnight?

Jesus: Nothing, Peter. I felt warm, so I went out for some fresh air. Then I prayed.

Peter: You prayed? At that time of the night?

Rufina: How's that?... Is there anything wrong, Jesus?

Jesus: No, woman. I was just praying.

Rufina: But one prays when one has many problems, doesn't he?

Jesus: Well, I guess it's the prophet John who has a bigger problem in his prison cell, don't you think so? I was praying for him, that the Lord may help him and give him strength. Haven't you prayed for John?

Peter: Yes, yes... Well, no. The truth is, it never occurred to me.... What about you, Rupphi?

Rufina: Oh, Peter, you know I have a lot of things in my head...

Peter: The truth is....

Rufa: The truth is, we've forgotten all the good customs in this house, and nobody prays anymore. I dunno why everything gets lost in this house. Look at my sandals, where the hell are they, huh?

Rufina: Here they are, Gran'ma, and stop complaining. I'm sure Mingo hid them under the stove...

Rufa: Imps...!

As always, that was a day of hard work. When it was dark we would get together at Peter and Rufina's house...

Peter: Say, Jesus, tell me something... are you gonna pray for the prophet John again, tonight?

Jesus: Why not...?

Peter: I just thought, we could pray for him together... What do you say?

Rufa: That's a good idea my son. They say that when you pray at home, God's blessings enter...

Rufina: Hey men, all of you move over here and let's pray!

Everyone was amenable to the idea and so, one by one we seated ourselves, forming a small circle on the earthen floor of Peter's small house. A small lamp was burning in a hole in the wall...

Jesus: Gran'ma, we shall pray together for the prophet John, that God may release him from prison. Will you start the prayer?

Rufa: What did you say, m'son?

Jesus: That you start with a prayer that you already know.

Rufa: Oh yes, m'son, I know a lot of prayers that my mother taught me. Let me see... let me think... a prayer to release somebody from prison... I think the best will be Psalm 87. Here goes... Ehem... "Oh Lord my God, day and night I ask you to hear my prayer, incline your ear that you may hear my plea. My God, I lift up my hands to you, why do you reject me, why do you hide your face from me?"

Peter: One moment, mother-in-law, one moment. Go slow, dammit, is there a fire somewhere that you have to do it that fast?

Rufa: If I don't do it that way, I won't remember the last part of the prayer.

John: Well, I got stuck in the first part. I don't even remember the number of the psalm.

Rufa: It's Psalm 87, about the prisoners. Well, if you want I can also pray Psalm 88, but that is an intense prayer. You gotta be careful.

Jesus: What do you mean, it's an intense prayer? What's it about, Gran'ma?

Rufa: Well, it's really... a strong prayer. It doesn't fail; it asks God for seven curses against the enemy. Do you see? Of the seven, if one doesn't apply then the other one does. My mother taught me that every prayer has its own intention. If you wanna earn money, you pray Psalm 64. For a safe trip, it's Psalm 22. For chest pains, the prayer of the four angels. When there is a storm, it's Psalm 28. Businessmen pray Solomon's prayer... and so forth and so on.

John: Midwives pray Psalm 126 in reverse, otherwise, the baby is a breach!

Rufa: Hey, what are you laughin' at?

Jesus: Nothing, Gran'ma. You speak of prayers like they were kitchen recipes.

Mingo: Papa, lemme have some bread!

Peter: Again? Haven't you eaten yet?

Mingo: But I'm still hungry...

Peter: You better shut up, we're praying.

Rufina: C'mon, Gran'ma, continue praying.

Rufa: You continue this time. I've lost my concentration.

John: Go ahead, Rufina, it's your turn.

Rufina: You see... I don't know any prayer by memory. I just invent my prayers.

Peter: Well, that's better, Rufina. C'mon, begin.

Rufina: Okay, let me think... "Oh God, Oh King, Almighty and most Holy Lord, most admirable and most powerful Judge of the high heavens...!"

Peter: If you keep on going up, Rupphi, you might fall!

Rufina: Hey, Peter, be a li'l more respectful, will you? We're talking to God.

Jesus: That's right, Rufina, but you don't have to exaggerate... God prefers simple things, don't you think so? Talk to him like a friend, like you were face to face with him...

Rufa: Take care not to get burned, son. Look, God is like the sun: you can't look at his face. One can't see God's face because He makes your eyes small... and you die!

Jesus: You believe that, Gran'ma?

Rufa: At least, that's what the sacred books say...

Jesus: I dunno, but for me, whoever wrote it didn't know God very well, because... with God, you can be trustful.

Rufina: Yeah, but neither should you abuse that trust. After all, God is God.

Jesus: After all, God is our father. You can always trust your father.

Mingo: Mamma, I'm hungry, gimme more bread...

Rufina: Quiet, Mingo!... Can't you see we're praying?

John: C'mon, Peter. It's your turn now... At the rate we're going, the next cocks will be sitting by our side.... Hmmmm...

Peter: Okay... It's my turn now.... Ehem...

Mingo: Papa, I'm hungry...!

Peter: Quiet, I said!

John: C'mon, Peter....

Peter: Hold it, John...I dunno where to begin...I can't think of anything...

Mingo: Papa, gimme some more bread, I'm still hungry!!

Peter: My goodness, how can you pray with these little brats around!... Go get another piece of bread, and shut up.... These kids are really getting on my nerves!

Jesus: Look Peter. I'm beginning to think that Mingo knows how to pray a lot better than all of us.

Peter: What did you say, Jesus?

Jesus: Mingo never stops asking you and Rufina for a piece of bread, and he succeeds in getting it. You have granted his wish just to get it over with. The same is true with God. If we, whose hearts are smaller than this fist, give the best to our children, how can God not grant us the best too... He whose heart is greater than the sea?

Peter: So...

Jesus: So we can pray with all confidence and say to him: Our Father, in heaven, holy be your name, your kingdom come...

That night, by the Lake of Galilee, Jesus taught us how to pray....

Sleeping on a bed was a luxury in Israel. Only the rich had beds, but these were not exactly like the ones we have at present. On some occasions, these beds served as dining tables during the day. The country folk slept on mats or straw mattresses which were laid on the ground and people covered themselves with blankets.

On several occasions, the gospel refers to Jesus' custom of praying in silence at night (Lk 5:16). In all probability, Jesus complied with the traditional prayers of his town: At dawn, at dusk, before meals, in the synagogue on Saturdays, and so forth. But he did not confine himself to "what was mandated." He talked to God in a personal manner, outside the bounds of liturgical laws, when he felt the need, when he was confronted with a problem, when he had to make a decision. He did not pray out of obligation, but simply because his relationship with God was such that he had to talk to him as if he were a father.

In teaching the Lord's prayer to his disciples, Jesus veers away from the customary. The prayers of the Israelites were in Hebrew. The Lord's prayer, on the other hand, is an Aramaic prayer, the common language spoken by the people. Jesus calls God "Abba," an informal word in Aramaic. This shows that Jesus prayed to God in his mother tongue. And when he taught his friends how to pray, he taught them a community prayer in Aramaic. With this, Jesus took the prayer from the sacred and liturgical milieu, and situated it within the familiar and daily life of the people.

In Jesus' mother tongue, the Lord's prayer sounds like this: "Abba, yitqaddas semaj, tete maljutaj...." Jesus teaches his friends to invoke God as "Abba," as "Papa," "Daddy." He uses the same words that children used to refer to their father. "Abba" by its origin, is a typical first utterance of an infant. In Aramaic, the baby begins to speak by saying "Abba," "Imma" (Papa, Mamma). In Jesus' time this word was used not only by little children but by grown-ups also as a sign of their close affinity to their parents.

For Jesus' contemporaries, it was inconceivable to address God in such a familiar manner. For them it was impolite. We must not think, therefore, that for Jesus, "Abba" was a vulgar word. On the contrary, it was a very significant word. When he tells his disciples not to call anyone Father (Mt 23:9), he is not referring to the carnal father, but that he tells us not to abuse such an important word. "Father" "Abba," must be reserved only for God.

The Lord's prayer, more than a fixed formula, includes all that speaks of an attitude of life. From the two versions of the gospel (Mt 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4), that of Luke is an older version and retains the more original words of Jesus. The Lord's prayer underscores the attitude of complete trust in the Lord: We can call God "Abba" because we are certain we are his children and that he loves us. (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).

The idea of forgiveness is foremost in the Lord's prayer, because the entire prayer leads the heart toward the future: toward the Kingdom that is to come, toward God's justice on the last day of judgment, toward that final bread of life that will satisfy all forms of hunger. At that time, only God and his forgiveness could save people. By forgiving one another, we move forward to that day. By sharing our food as well. All prayers seek the coming of the kingdom of equality, justice and freedom, the Kingdom of God. A mere repetition of the Lord's prayer without undergoing a profound change in attitude distorts the very message of Jesus, which is so opposed to the routinary prayers uttered by the lips but not by the heart.

In this episode Jesus prays for the release of John the Baptist. Praying for others was very important in this prayer of Jesus. This appears on several occasions in the gospel (Lk 22:31-32; Jn 14:15-16). Although it may not seem so at first, it is very significant. In Israel, praying for others was not a common practice. Interceding for others was typical of the prophet, of the man who, in a special way, felt he had the responsibility for and the concern for the problems of his people. Jesus' manner of praying shows the awareness that was gradually developing within, that he was getting closer to the legacy of the Jewish prophets. In this episode, the way Rufa and Rufina prayed and Peter's vacillation reflect the praying customs of the simple folks of Israel. In general, God was viewed in their prayer as a remote king. Praying was considered a manner of rendering homage. As if everything must be done like a ceremony, like what customarily was done in the presence of kings. Thus, the tendency to employ fixed and solemn formulas, set forth by ancient traditions. Naturally, prayer was also associated with the idea of merit. It was believed that prayers helped in obtaining favors from God. If community prayers were at all recommended, it was because they reached heaven with greater impact. When Jesus looks into the child's spontaneity, his simplicity and his trusting insistence to serve as our model for prayer, he is in fact revolutionizing prayer for Israel and for the religions of other nations.

(Mt 6:5-15; Lk 11:1-4)

48

THE THIRTEEN

The feast of the Passover was already near. As happened every year, every full moon of the month of Nisan, all of us children of Israel would look toward the direction of Jerusalem, desiring to celebrate within its confines the great feast of liberation of our people. Caravans were organized in all provinces throughout the country, and in every town pilgrimages were formed to visit the Holy City.

Jesus: Why don't we go together this year, guys?

Peter: I like the idea. When do we leave?

Jesus: In two or three days would be fine, don't you think so, Peter? John, Andrew, what do you say?

John: There's nothing more to say. We all go.

Peter: How about you, James....?

James: There will be many of us Galileans going to the feast. That might mean trouble, don't you think? Things get heated up during the Passover.

Jesus: That means five of us already.

The following day was market day. Peter went to see Philip the junk dealer...

Philip: So you're going to Jerusalem. What for? To look for trouble and incite a revolution... or to pray? C'mon what is it?

Peter: Philip, we're going to Jerusalem, that's it. Are you coming or not?

Philip: Okay, okay, big nose. I'm going. You can't just leave me out.

Peter: That makes six of us!

And Philip informed his friend:

Philip: Nathanael, you've got to go!

Nathanael: But Philip, how can I leave my shop? Besides I'm still suffering from this corn that I got from our trip to the Jordan.

Philip: That was a great trip, Nat. And this will be even better. Make up your mind, man. You'll regret it for the rest of your life if you don't come.

Nathanael: Okay, Philip, I'll go. But bear in mind that I'm doing this for Jerusalem and not for you!

Philip: So that makes seven of us!

In those days our friends from the zealot movement were passing by. They were Judas of Scariot, and his friend, Simon... They were also persuaded to go to Jerusalem for the feast... With the two, we became nine...

John: Hey, Andrew, I heard that Jacob of Alpheus and Thaddeus were planning to go to the capital those days. Why don't we ask them to join us?

With Thaddeus and Jacob, the two farmers from Capernaum, that made eleven of us...

Jesus: Hey Matthew, are you going to Jerusalem for the feast?

Matthew: Yes, why do you ask?

Jesus: With whom are you going, Matthew?

Matthew: With myself.

Jesus: So you're going alone.

Matthew: With myself is enough.

Jesus: Why don't you come with us? We're planning to go as a group...

Matthew: Puah... And who will form this "group"?

Jesus: Andrew and Peter, Zebedee's sons, Judas and Simon, Philip... Come with us too...

Matthew: I don't like those friends of yours. The feeling is mutual, I guess.

Jesus: We're leaving tomorrow, Matthew. If you make up your mind, be at Peter's house tomorrow at dawn. We'll be waiting for you.

Matthew: You better wait for me sitting down so you don't tire yourselves... Know what, you're nuts, the nuttiest person I've ever met in my damned life!

Thomas, prophet John's disciple, was the last to learn about the trip. His friend Matthew had already gone back to Jericho while he spent a few more days in Capernaum...

Thomas: I am a..a..al..also going with you. I.. I..I..like the idea.

That first trip to Jerusalem together proved to be very important for all of us. But how different our ideas were then from what Jesus said about the Kingdom of God!

The sun had not yet peeped through the mountains of Bashan, but we were already causing a stir in the

neighborhood. We were going to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. A number of pilgrim groups had already left from our barrio. A lot more would be travelling in the next few days... One after the other, with our sandals well secured for a long journey, we gathered at Peter and Rufina's house...

Peter: Look who's coming, guys... Philip!... Hey, big head, don't tell me you're going to Jerusalem with us?

Philip: Of course, Peter. Here I am. Uff, I'm a little late, because of my cart. Its wheels are not oiled.

James: Why did you bring it? Are you going to Jerusalem with this damned cart?

Philip: Well yes, red head. I'm like a snail that carries his house wherever he travels.

Peter: Are you out of your mind, Philip?

Philip: I'm as sane as you are. During these journeys, is when business is brisk, fellows. People take along their savings to Jerusalem. Very good. I carry my wares. I sell while you pray. A piece of comb here and a necklace over there. As far as I know, I won't be molesting anyone.

James: No, way, Philip. We're not going with you and this trash. The cart stays here.

Philip: It goes.

James: The cart stays here.

Philip: Then I stay too!

John: Jesus, why don't you convince this guy, Philip? He listens to you.

Then Jesus winked at everyone, a sign that we might just play along with him....

Jesus: Philip, why don't you leave your cart and your junk here? The pearl is worth a lot more.

Philip: The pearl? What pearl are you talking about?

Jesus: Shh! A fine pearl, this big. You have a flair for business. You would be interested to be part of a business group, wouldn't you?

Philip scratched his enormous head and looked at everyone with a look of connivance.

Philip: Speak up clear, Moreno. If we need money, I'm willing to sell my cart, even my sandals, if need be. Then let's negotiate for that pearl and get a clean share of it. How much are they asking for that pearl?

Jesus: A lot.

Philip: And where is it, in Jerusalem?

Jesus: No, Philip, it's right here with us.

Philip: Here?... Of course, I understand... a smuggled piece. Do you have it, John?... You do, Simon?... Okay, okay, I promise to keep quiet. My lips are sealed. Okay? You can trust me. But tell me, how did you get it?

Jesus: Listen: Thaddeus and Jacob are working on a farm. While they were plowing it, they came across a treasure hidden in the ground.

Philip: A treasure? And what did they do with it?

Jesus: They hid it again. They went to see the owner of the farm and they bought it from him. They had to sell everything to be able to buy the farm. So, the treasure remained with them.

Philip: But what was the treasure they found?

Jesus: The same pearl that I told you before! They discovered it.

Philip: The pearl? But pearls are found in the sea, not in the earth. What's all this mess I'm getting into, Nazarene?

Jesus: Listen, Philip. The truth is, it all started in the sea, as you say. Peter and Andrew set sail on the sea and cast their nets, pulling them back full of fish. And when the fish were all sorted, they got the big surprise of their lives because...

Philip: ...Because it was there where they found the pearl.

Jesus: Yeah, and they left everything, the nets, the boats, the fish. And they kept the pearl which was worth a lot more!

Philip: And so, the treasure from the farm... Ah, of course, I understand. And then.... Wait. I don't get this.

Such a big head, Jesus, but little brains. Explain this business to me.

Jesus: Philip, we have abandoned all our things, our fields, our nets and homes for the pearl. Leave your cart behind, too.

Philip: Okay, okay. But at least, show me the pearl, so that....

Jesus: The pearl is the Kingdom of God, Philip. C'mon, leave all your junk and come to Jerusalem with nothing in your hands. Forget about your combs and necklaces for a few days, and celebrate the Passover with an open mind.

Philip: You, band of rascals, if you keep on pulling my hair, I'll end up having less hair than Nathanael! Alright, alright, I'll put Salome in charge of my junk until my return.

Matthew arrived when we were just about to leave. Although it was still very early, he was already half drunk...

James: Have you left something behind, you stinking guy?

Jesus: Welcome back, Matthew... I knew you'd come.

John: What?

Jesus: Matthew is coming with us. Didn't I tell you?

James: Did you say he was coming with us, or maybe I didn't hear right?

Jesus: You heard it right, James. Matthew is coming with us.

James: To hell with you, Moreno! What do you mean by this?

Jesus: That the feast of the Passover is for everybody. And the gates of Jerusalem, like the gates of the Kingdom of God, are open to all.

Jesus' words and Matthew's presence infuriated all of us. James and I were about to hit them both when Simon and Judas pulled us apart...

Judas: You shut up, red head. Stop that yelling. Do you understand?

James: What? There's nothing to understand here. Jesus is an imbecile.

Judas: You're the foolish ones. Jesus has planned this thing very well.

John: What'dya mean, huh?

Judas: The frontier of Galilee is very well guarded, John. They fear a popular uprising. We're all blacklisted, especially Jesus. With Matthew around, it's different. We get more protection, do you understand? Matthew knows all the swine guarding the frontier.

John: Do you think it was for this reason that Jesus invited Matthew?

Judas: And why not, you tell me? Jesus is astute. He thinks of everything.

John: And why is Matthew playing along?

Judas: Matthew is a drunkard. Give him more wine and he will follow you like a meek lamb.

James: You're right, Scariot. Every time I get more convinced that we shall go far with this Nazarene. He's the man we need! C'mon guys, let's go!

Thomas: W..w..wait a w..w..while.

John: What's it this time, Thomas? Have you forgotten something?

Thomas: No, no, it's not that. Have you n..n..no..noticed how many we are?

James: Yeah, we're thirteen. With this swi....., I mean, with Matthew, we're thirteen.

Thomas: T..t..they say that n..n..number b..b..brings bad luck.

Peter: Bah, don't worry about that, Thomas. If one of us gets his head cut off, then we shall be twelve, a round number, like the tribes of Israel. C'mon, guys, let's go, Jerusalem is waiting for us!

We were thirteen, Peter, the stone thrower, led the group, his sun-burnt face always carried a smile. On his side was Andrew, the skinny one and the tallest of all. He was the quietest also. My brother James and I, were imagining Jerusalem like a battlefield where all the Romans would be destroyed by the strength of our own hands. Philip, the vendor, tied around his waist the horn with which he used to advertise his wares. From time to time he blew his horn. He did not want to part with it. Beside him, as always, was Nathanael.

The morning sun shone on his bald head. He walked very slowly, already tired even before they started to leave. Thomas the stutterer was looking on both sides with eyes full of curiosity. He did nothing but talk with his half tongue about the prophet John, his master. Matthew, the tax collector, his eyes red with alcohol walked with wobbly steps. Jacob and Thaddeus, the farmers from Capernaum, walked together. Simon, the tough freckled guy was with Judas of Scariot, who was wearing a yellow scarf around his neck, a present from a grandson of the Maccabees. We were twelve; thirteen, with Jesus of Nazareth, the man who dragged us into this adventure along the roads of our town to announce the coming of God's justice.

Number twelve has a special meaning in the old Orient. Probably because the year is divided into twelve months. In Israel, this was an important number, signifying totality. It synthesized the entire people of God, using only one number. Thus, Jacob's sons were twelve, who became patriarchs that gave names to the twelve tribes that inhabited the Promised Land. A very ancient tradition in the gospels recalls how Jesus on various occasions chose the twelve disciples, as the nucleus among the many who followed him. These twelve disciples spread his message after the Passover and carried forth his cause. In the texts of the New Testament, "the number twelve" refers to the twelve individuals – whose names we have – yet at the same time, "twelve" designates a representation of the new community, heir of the people of twelve tribes. The nucleus twelve is particularly preferred in the book of the Revelation; it appears in the measurements of the new Jerusalem, in the number of the chosen: 144,000 (12 x 12 x 1,000 – totality of totalities), etc.

This numerical stereotype "twelve" is transformed in the episode about "the thirteen men." It is a way of indicating Jesus' integration into the group. Jesus was not an "outsider" from the heavens who was linked to history or to any people. He came from a town, from a social class, and worked with his brothers and sisters side by side, in order to create a community where God was to be the only Lord and everyone else would be equal.

Thrice a year, on the feast of Passover, Pentecost and the Tents, it was the practice of the Israelites to travel to Jerusalem. A huge number of foreigners from the neighboring countries also travelled to the capital. The feast of the Passover attracted the greatest number of pilgrims every year. Since it occurred in spring the trip was made easier, as there were no longer any rains in February or March, and thus, the roads were more passable. Looking for a companion on the road was an essential part of the preparations for the trip. There were more bandits during this period and no one dared travel alone. This explains the existence of great caravans for the feasts.

In the episode, the announcement to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover passes from one mouth to another, thus, the twelve get together to go with Jesus. One and another become convinced for various reasons. Jesus calls them, and they, too, call one another. God has called us through Jesus, the new human, so that we shall also become renewed men and women, capable of giving life for the sake of others as artisans of peace and justice. But God's call, this vocation, never comes to us from above as if words of invitation were blown into us. God invites us through the community. The Christian community, where Jesus is part, is the one calling us, teaching us, and receiving us; it is the one forgiving us, helping us to overcome our fears, our limitations and strengthening our hope. One goes to the new land of Jerusalem in community. Jesus' group was not homogeneous, of one stripe. All came from the popular class, but the story and motive of each one was different and maybe, even, contradictory or at least in conflict. Jesus united all of them, as happens when a leader coming from the community is capable of achieving unity amid diversity, thus making the group move together. In the Christian community, the members are not herded into groups, nor are they called to render the same service. Variety is a value that must be nurtured. The same happens in society. When the day of justice comes and everyone is given the same opportunity to develop self as a truly free person, then we shall see the beauty there is in variety.

Jesus convinces Philip to join the trip by telling him two parables: That of the pearl and that of the treasure in the field (Mt 13:44-46). Hidden treasures are a favorite theme in Oriental stories. In those times, they also had a historical basis. The innumerable wars that shook Palestine through the centuries

forced the people, during their moments of escape, to bury all their valuable property until their possible return which never came. Pearls were much-coveted during ancient times. They had a highly symbolic value, especially related to fertility. They were the precious fruit of the water, which grew hidden in shells and developed like a human embryo... The skin divers would collect them in the Red Sea, in the Persian Gulf and in the Indian Ocean, and they were often used in necklaces. Through these parables, Jesus seeks to emphasize the important value of this attitude of surprise in life.

One is surprised if suddenly and unexpectedly one finds a treasure or a pearl of enormous value. He or she naturally is surprised and becomes extremely happy. Jesus wants to tell us that when a person finds the meaning of the Kingdom of God, the great joy of this discovery can bring one to the deepest experience, just as the "treasure" made one lose interest in everything else in life. No price seems too high to preserve what was found. The love for the Kingdom of God is a passionate and enthusiastic love. Philip leaves his cart behind and forgets about his merchandise. Others will leave their apathy and get to work for the sake of others. Still others will rid themselves of their egoism and will learn how to form a community. Still others will forget even their life and will risk it over and over for the sake of justice. This trade-in of values without regret and with utter joy is a sign of the Kingdom of God.

(Mt 10:1-4; Mk 3:13-19; Lk 6:12-16)

49

IN THE CITY OF KING DAVID

It was very early in the morning when we set out on our journey. Behind us the sun began to caress the circular blue lake of Galilee, showing signs of its first light of dawn. Alongside was Capernaum, lazily shaking off her drowsiness. We did not even turn our backs to bid our city goodbye. But only set our eyes for Jerusalem. The joy of the Paschal feast filled our hearts and there was really no time to look back...

Peter: Hey guys, be sure you have your sandals well tied and your canes in order, 'cuz we have three days ahead of us on the road!

On our first night we camped out in Ginae. Then we took the road toward the mountains up to Gilgal... We then passed through the arid and yellow lands of Judea... Our eyes were fixed on any sign of the holy city as we climbed from hill to hill.... Suddenly, everyone gave out a loud cry...

John: Run everybody... we can see the city!!

On one of the roads, on top of Anathoth, the city seemed resplendent to us. The walls of Jerusalem shone above Mount Zion. Their white palaces, their strong gates and their massive towers sparkled... At the center was the holy temple of the God of Israel, its most precious gem.

Peter: Long live Jerusalem and all her pilgrims!

Jerusalem, the city of peace, was the treasure of all Israelites: the capital of our country, conquered by the astute arm of Joab a thousand years ago, where King David entered dancing, as he carried the ark of the covenant and where King Solomon constructed the temple made of cedar, gold and marble, admired all over the world... For the last leg of our journey, we joined the caravans of pilgrims from the north, from Perea and Decapolis, to partake of the Paschal lamb in Jerusalem. We entered through the Gate of the Fish. Beside this was the Antonia Fortress, the building most hated by all of us: it was the headquarters of the Roman garrison and the palace of Pontius Pilate whenever he stayed in the city.

Peter: Spit on it and let's get away from here! The mere sight of the eagle of Rome upsets my stomach!

John: Swine! If only I could kill you by squeezing your necks!

Jesus: Don't kill anyone now, John. Right now we gotta look for a place for ourselves. With so many people, I'm afraid we'll all end up sleeping in the open air!

Peter: Follow me guys! I've got a friend who lives near the Gate of the Valley. He's like a brother, you see. His name is Mark.

Peter: Dammit, Mark, we meet at long last! Friend, my dear friend, gimme five, man!

Mark: Peter?!... Peter, the stone-thrower, the biggest rascal in the whole of Galilee! But what are you doing here, bad man? Herod's men must be after your head, ha, ha, ha!

Peter: We've come to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, like faithful followers of the law of Moses, ha, ha, ha!

Mark: Tell that to the marines, Peter. You must have smuggled something from Capernaum!

Peter: Well, yes, I have smuggled a dozen friends. Hey guys, this is Mark. I love him more than Cleotilde, my boat! Mark, you can trust all of them! We've formed a group. We're planning to do something. This Moreno here is Jesus, the noisiest of the group and this freckled fellow is Simon...

Mark: Well, well, let's have the introductions later. Now let's go inside. I've got a half barrel of wine, earmarked especially for a dozen Galileans to drink!

Peter: Now? Are you out of your mind? We just came!

Matthew: So what? We're all tired from the journey... We can... we can have a little toast, since those thieves from Samaria made it difficult for us!

John: To hell with you, Matthew. You only think of drinking!

Peter: You'd better tell us where we can spend the night.

Mark: Well, let's go to Shiloh's inn! You can stay there for a couple of days! The place is big enough, and the smell will suit you Galileans. C'mon, let's go there! But always stick with your group! With so many people around, it's so easy to get lost in the crowd.

On the days of the Passover, Jerusalem seemed like a huge cauldron teeming with 40,000 inhabitants from the city, 400,000 pilgrims from all over the country, plus herds and herds of lambs filling up in the atrium of the temple, waiting to be sacrificed on the altar stone....

Thomas: One moment, one moment! Before we look for an i..i..inn, why don't we all go the temple of God. First things f..f..first. He who doesn't visit the temple when he comes to Jerusalem, gets his r..r..right hand paralyzed and becomes m..m..mu..mute.

John: Thomas is talking from experience...

Peter: That's right, fellas, let's all go to the temple and say hello to the angels!

John: Let's give thanks for having gotten here safe and sound!

Jesus: That's it. That the Lord of Israel may bless all of us who have come to celebrate the Passover!

Thousands of pilgrims shoved each other just to pass through the arches of the famous Temple of Solomon. There was shouting in the air, prayers and promises, merging with the pervading smell of burned fat from the sacrificed animals. A number of money changers stood by the walls as several junk dealers shouted out their merchandise... It was like the tower of Babel all over again.

Mark: Damn these vendors! Their screamings could bust your eardrums...! Let's all go to the atrium of the Jews! They must be going up the steps now.

John: Who're they, Mark?

Mark: The penitents. They're here to fulfill their vows during the year... Look, there they are now!

A group of men in sackcloth, and pouring handfuls of ashes on their heads, were climbing the steps of the atrium. Thick rosaries of amulets were hanging around their arms and necks. Their knees had become rough from having knelt on stones...

Peter: Why're they doing this, Mark?

Mark: They fast for seven days before the feast and now, they present themselves before the priests.

Jesus: And these priests haven't told them that God prefers love to sacrifices?

Mark: That's exactly my point. So they want to fast? Well, why don't they hide it so that nobody gets to know what they're doing, isn't that right, Jesus... C'mon, let's go up...

We climbed the steps. There, in one corner, in front of the priests' atrium, was a group of men, whose faces were covered with the blank veil of prayers. They were praying ceaselessly, the psalms of the congregation of the pious. They were the best Pharisees of Jerusalem...

Peter: Well, look at them.... They're like parrots, repeating the same thing all over. I wonder if their tongues don't get twisted by this...

Mark: They claim to be praying to God, but through the corners of their eyes, they're spying on everyone...

Jesus: That's what they want: for people to look at them. If they wanted to seek the Lord, they would pray in private.

Mark: Hey, look who's coming...!

When we were about to cross the Beautiful Gate, the sound of trumpets was heard and the crowd moved to one side... All of a sudden there was a long line of beggars by the Gate's ark. Then four Levites carrying a sedan chair appeared. They stopped beside the beggars and put the chair down on the ground... They opened the curtains and Joseph Caiphas, the high priest of that year, dressed in white tunic, descended slowly... With the eyes of an owl he looked nervously on all sides. He wanted to flaunt his almsgiving to the people, yet he did not want to take any chances. During the feast last year, a fanatic had thrown a dagger at him...

Matthew: What a first-class scoundrel we have run into!

Thomas: Don't say that, Ma-Ma-Matthew. He's God's h..h..high priest.

Matthew: What a priest! His kind is only interested in making people adulate him...! Look what he's doing...

Caiphas went toward the beggars and gave them denarii like he was distributing candies to children... He gave the alms with one hand, while the other hand displayed a golden cord, a symbol of his authority, which the beggars were kissing as a gesture of gratitude....

Jesus: If I were God's high priest, I wouldn't allow my left hand to know what my right hand is doing. He's no more than a hypocrite.

Peter: Nathanael, Jesus, Andrew... Let's go! It's gettin' late and we haven't a place to sleep yet!

Mark: Don't worry too much about the inn. If there's no place in Shiloh, you may go to Bethany. The Galileans have an encampment there. Meantime, you gotta finish the half barrel that I'm offering you, otherwise, I'm gonna report you to the police!

Mark: I toast to the thirteen countrymen who came all the way from Galilee to visit the house of this humble merchant of olives!

Peter: Wait a minute, Mark. We didn't come here to visit you, rascal. We came for Jerusalem... I toast the holy city of Jerusalem!...

Mark: Don't believe that, Peter. This city's no longer as holy as you think it is. "The temple of Jerusalem, the temple of Jerusalem...!" Do you know why? Because anyone who visits the temple loses his faith and leaves it there! If it were only the temple....! Look, do you see those lights?... They're from the palaces of the rich barrio... Then go and look at the huts from the Ophel and the shanties beside the Gate of Trash... Then the swarm of farmers coming to the city to look for a job... And what do they find... nothing but misery and black fever. This city stinks, I tell you, I know this city through and through.

Jesus: You're right, Mark. It's built on sand, so it'll collapse.

Thomas: They say that Jerusalem's foundations are of p..p..pure rock.

Jesus: The only solid rock is justice, Thomas. And this city is built on ambition and inequalities...

Mark: Well, guys, we'd better head for Bethany now. Let's go!

The streets were jammed with people and animals. The smell of baked unleavened bread pervaded the air, competing with the perfumes of the most popular prostitutes of Jerusalem. Early during the day they could be seen displaying themselves and their well-painted faces... In every corner of the squatters area, there were bets on dice and other games. All pubs were full of drunk men as the children snuck away with the left-overs from the tables... We passed through the walls of the Orient. We crossed the stream of Kidron, which in spring was overflowing... We ascended the Mount of Olives, until we reached Bethany, where the Galileans always found shelter to spend the days of the Passover... Behind us was Jerusalem, full of din and lights. Hunger, injustice and hypocrisy sleepily, yet happily guarded the walled gates of King David's city.

The trip to Jerusalem, during great pilgrimages of the Passover, was done on foot. Capernaum is separated from Jerusalem by about 200 kilometers. Jesus and his fellow pilgrims in caravans probably took this route in four or five stages on the road. When they were close to the holy city, the pilgrims would sing the so-called "psalms of ascent" (Psalms 120 to 134). Among the most popular was the one that is still being sung today: "I rejoiced with those who told me: "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"... And now we have set foot within your gates, O Jerusalem..." (Psalm 121)

Jerusalem (which means "city of peace"; peace = "shalom") is one of the most ancient cities in the world. It is built on a rocky plateau, flanked by two deep valleys: the Kidron and the Gihon. A thousand years before Jesus' birth, Jerusalem was conquered by King David from the Jebusites and eventually became the capital of the kingdom. In the course of history, Jerusalem was either totally or partially devastated on more than twenty occasions. One of the most terrible destructions occurred five hundred eighty six years before Christ, when the Babylonians razed even its foundations to the ground. Still another took place seventy years after the death of Jesus, this time, at the hands of the Roman troops in their desire to suppress the insurrection of the zealots. Jerusalem was – and still is – a city surrounded by walls, which were opened by a dozen doors. The numerous wars and destructions experienced by the city explain why in the present Jerusalem there are recent establishments superimposed on old constructions. Nevertheless we can count on innumerable authentic memories of happenings during Jesus' time. Since the time of the prophets up to the writings of the New Testament, Jerusalem was the symbol of the messianic city, of God's abode, the city where at the end of time, all people would congregate for the feast of the Messiah (Is 60:1-22; 1-12; Mic 4:1-5; Rev 21:1-27). Jerusalem is also known as Zion, for having been built on top of a mount bearing this name.

Jerusalem was the country's capital and the center of political and religious life of Israel. It is estimated that in Jesus' time, approximately 20,000 persons lived within the walls of the city, and a total of about 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants dwelt outside the city. (The total population of Palestine was from 500,000 to 600,000 inhabitants.) A total of about 125,000 pilgrims flocked to Jerusalem during the feasts of the Passover, overflowing the city with people. The multitude of visitors – national and foreign – was a boon for trade and profit, encouraged disorders and trouble, making the city a real sea of humanity, where people from the small towns and countryside converged, stunned and confused.

Within the walls, among the great establishments of the city, the temple stood out. It was a magnificent and elegant building whose area was equivalent to one fifth of the area of the entire walled city. This would give us an idea of the impressive construction which was the center of religious activity in the country and the seat of economic power of the first order. Along the northern part of the temple was the tower of Antonio, a walled fortress that served as a garrison during Roman domination. From this fortress, the soldiers religiously watched over the temple's vast expanse to which the Tower was joined by two staircases. This vigilance was intensified during the Passover, when there were more people than usual. Mark is mentioned for the first time in the book of the Acts of the Apostles (12:25) accompanying Paul on his trip from Jerusalem to Antioch. He was Barnabbas' cousin, another companion of Paul on his trips. On different occasions, Mark – his complete name was John Mark – is seen together with Paul and also with

Peter, who was very fond of him to the degree that he called him “his son” in one of his letters, (1 P 2:13). Through some details of the New Testament, we learn that he was from Jerusalem, where his mother lived, that Peter became a family friend, and that the first Christians regularly met at his house (Acts 12:12). From the Second Century, he was considered to have written the second gospel. On the basis of this, Mark appears in the episode as a resident of Jerusalem and Peter’s friend. He is frank, happy and practical. Around the temple of Jerusalem, one could always see, particularly during the days of the Passover, men and women fulfilling their religious vows, beggars, and a multitude praying or doing penitential acts. What Jesus taught about almsgiving, fasting and praying in this episode could be summarized in a simple manner: A rebuff of exhibitionism, at scandalous words, at the desire to flaunt one’s religiosity. It was the practice for example, to announce the time of afternoon praying by the sound of trumpets. Some Pharisees saw to it that they were in the middle of the street, by chance, when this happened so that they could pray before the eyes of everybody. In this manner, people would see their religiosity. In his criticism of hypocrisy of this type, Jesus talks of praying in the secrecy of one’s room, of subtle fasting, and almsgiving without the knowledge of anyone.

Jerusalem was a big, beautiful city, whose elegant buildings were known in the ancient world. But in the midst of all this luxury, and side by side with the houses of the powerful traders and rich families, were the poor peoples’ huts, the houses of the low salaried whose jobs were looked down upon, and who therefore lived miserably. Let us not even discuss the beggars who filled up the streets and the periphery of the city. Jesus, in this episode, compares this Jerusalem of the very rich and of the very poor to a city that is built on sand (Mt 7:24, 27). God cannot tolerate inequality. If there is no justice, there can never be a firm foundation; and a corrupt society will have its downfall from below. Jesus rejects the important people responsible for this situation: The chiefs, the priests, the religious who alienate people with their false idea of God just to maintain their situation and privilege.

(Mt 6:1-18)

50

BETHANY’S PUB

A little distance from Jerusalem, at the other side of the Mount of Olives, is Bethany, a small white town surrounded by date trees. The name means exactly that: the land of date trees. We Galileans always ended up looking for an inn in one of the pubs of Bethany, everytime we went to Jerusalem...

Lazarus: Martha, why don’t you take a look at the bread in the oven. I think it’s burning!... And you, Mary, you’d better stop talking and have six more sleeping mats ready...! La, la, ra, la, ri! This is the best time of the year, yes sir! Jerusalem is bursting with pilgrims!

Mary: And my kidneys are going to explode too, from too much bending and standing, preparing these sleeping mats... Listen, brother, the place is already full. You can’t even drop a needle here. If anyone comes around looking for a place, tell him there’s no more space.

Lazarus: You listen, young lady, don’t you know that refusing a Galilean brings bad luck? You become mute and worms start coming out of your ears. I know, we can still take in twenty. I know this inn better than the palm of my hand!... Hey, Martha, give me a hand with this soup, the customers are already waiting!

Martha: I’m coming, man! I only have two hands, you know that!...

Lazarus’ inn at Bethany was called “The Beautiful Palm Tree.” It was full of people, camels and mules during the great feasts of Jerusalem, celebrated thrice a year. The feast of the Passover was the most

popular of all. At that time the inn was teeming with people and animals, and the air was thick with the smell of wine, sweat and cow dung. Lazarus was happiest during this time of the year...

Lazarus: What can you say about my soup, huh?... Go ahead, have another serving... we still have an extra pot of soup! I don't want anyone to feel hunger in my house! Here one eats well and sleeps well... You can tell all about it when you go back north!

Lazarus was a big, fat man whose long beard ended on his big belly. He was born in Sepphoris in Galilee and left for Judea at a very young age. Since then, he managed his own business. He never married and when asked, would say that he was married to his inn, licking his black beard with gusto as he said it.

Lazarus: Martha, go and prepare four heads of lamb!... These countrymen of ours want to taste the specialty of the house!

Martha: You know it takes time to do it. I can't be everywhere at the same time...

Lazarus: That's alright, woman, there's really no hurry...

Martha: Yeah, you're not in a hurry, but these people are hungry. I don't like people waiting for me...

Lazarus: C'mon, do as I say, and be quiet. If they don't like it, then we ourselves will gobble it up!

Martha: You just had lunch, Lazarus! You seem to have bats in your belfry!

Martha, Lazarus' elder sister, was a strong woman, with robust arms and agile legs. She had been working in the tavern ever since she was widowed. She was very hardworking and Lazarus was very fond of and trusted her. Since Martha started working at the inn, business became brisk... Mary, his other sister, was very different...

Mary: Oh, Lazarus, oh...!

Lazarus: What's wrong, Mary?

Mary: Do you know what Salim, the camel driver, has been telling me?... He said he saw a dozen thieves in Samaria. They were carrying knives in their mouths and were sliding like scorpions, crawling underneath the stones...!

Lazarus: There you go again with your stories...

Mary: But Lazarus, what if one of those who came last night from the north is one of them!... like this one-armed person, for example... I don't like him at all...

Lazarus: If he lacks an arm, how can he be a thief, Mary?

Mary: He's got the other hand, Lazarus! I tell you, I find that man strange. I was searching in his bag and I saw a brilliant object... Couldn't he be one of the group? This camel driver I've been telling you about told me that the thieves were in search of jewels...

Lazarus: Well, if that's what they're after, then they'll leave empty-handed. Here they'll find nothing but pots of soup and mice!

Mary: Lazarus...

Lazarus: Yes, Mary... You won't scare me with your stories of thieves.

Mary: No, I don't mean that... Look, this camel driver I'm telling you about... I think he would make a good husband for Martha, don't you think so?... He seems an honest man... And he's got big strong hands. He would know how to protect her...

Lazarus: Protect her from whom? Martha can take care of herself!... Go... stop the small talk. Have you prepared the sleeping mats?

Mary: Oh, I forgot...! It skipped my mind while talking to that camel driver...

Lazarus: Hell, you always forget everything! Hurry and prepare them now! C'mon!

Mary was Lazarus' other sister. She had big eyes but was a little cross-eyed and ugly but very cheerful. One would suddenly notice the smile on her lips. She was abandoned by her husband a few months before, and since then, also worked at the inn with Lazarus.

Martha: Mary, go and prepare the sleeping mats as I told you! There are more Galileans coming!

We arrived at the Beautiful Palm Tree at past noon because we had been told in Jerusalem that we could get some space at that inn. We were all tired dirty and hungry from the journey. As we neared the inn, Lazarus came to receive us at the door...

Lazarus: Say, how many are you?

John: Count... everyone you see here...

Lazarus: Six, eight, twelve... thirteen: they say this number brings bad luck.

Thomas: I told you so.

Lazarus: But for me, a Galilean has never brought me bad luck! On the contrary!... You're all from there, aren't you?

Peter: Almost all of us. Well, except this guy with a yellow scarf and the freckled one.

Thomas: I come from Judea t...t...too.

Jesus: Very well, my friend, is there a place for us or not?

Lazarus: But of course, Galileans! If there is room for seven sheep, then there is room for the entire herd, don't you think? Besides, you just came in time to feast yourselves on some lamb heads that are being prepared. What? You don't smell the aroma?... They were intended for our other customers but they simply didn't have enough patience to wait... It was written in the book of heavens that these lambs heads would end up in your bellies. C'mon in!

When we entered Lazarus' inn, Martha was cleaning up the extra food that was served earlier to four dozen countrymen. Some were still left at the corners of the spacious yard, drinking and playing dice. Goats were chewing crumbs of bread on the ground, while a camel was slowly passing before our eyes...

Lazarus: Hey Martha, you might as well cook a pot of chick peas! Then, have some wine ready!... We have more customers coming in who are hungry!... And you, Mary, come over here, quick!... Sit down, friends... the food will be served any minute now... Well, now tell me, what's the news about Galilee? When will you cut off Herod's head? Where have you come from?

John: From Capernaum. We met together there so we could come and celebrate the Passover.

Peter: And tell us what's happening here in Jerusalem. We've seen a number of soldiers everywhere...

Lazarus: That has been so every year... But this year there're more guards than mice... They put in more reinforcements every year... So you've got to be extra careful!

Mary: How many have come, Lazarus?

Lazarus: There are thirteen of them, so you'd better prepare thirteen sleeping mats.

Mary: But Lazarus, do you know what that means? They'll be stepping on each other...

Lazarus: Go, when will God make you understand, Mary? You'd better attend to our countrymen while I go get something over there... Don't mind this sister of mine. If you do, you might get involved in a hassle you can't escape...

Mary: Where do you come from? You're a Galilean, right?

John: Yeah. I live in Capernaum.

Mary: Oh, in Capernaum! I met a fellow there by the name of Pamphilus... He told me a lot of things!... He said that Capernaum is a very beautiful city, with more gardens than Babylon. It's so huge one needs two pairs of sandals to be able to go around the city. He also told me about the big fish in the lake, which are of four colors – praise the Lord – as well as the tall palm trees, whose leaves can be used for protection against the sun... Goodness, how I'd love to travel through the north and see that place...! But being tied up to this tavern, how could it be possible? Ah, when I get old, I'd really go around the country, even on this camel. Then I'll go to Capernaum, where Pamphilus is from...How about you... Are you also from that place?

Peter: No, I come from further north, from Bethsaida.

Mary: There was a man from that place who fell in love with me... But he was cross-eyed, like me. Well, he was worse. We couldn't understand each other. When I looked at one side, he looked at the other... it was such a mess! Two cross-eyed people can never get married!... Hey you, where are you from?

Jesus: From Nazareth.

Mary: From Nazareth? Oh, I have never heard of that place in all my life!

Jesus: Neither have I, Mary, until I was born there.

Mary: And where's that place, huh?

Jesus: Far, so far... that when the devil shouted three times, nobody heard it.

Mary: Oh, that's funny!

Jesus: Nazareth is a very small town, unlike Capernaum. But small things are important too, and you've got to believe it. Consider this riddle for example: It's as small as a mouse but it guards the house like a lion. One, two, three: Guess what it is!

Mary: Small as a rat...and...it's a key! I guessed it, I guessed it!

Jesus: Listen to this one: It's as small as a nut, has no feet but can climb a mountain.

Mary: Wait... a nut going up the mountain...a snail!...Ha, ha, ha, tell me another one!

Jesus: You won't guess this one right. Listen well: It has no bones, it is never quiet, with edges sharper than scissors.

Mary: It has no bones... I don't know...

Jesus: It's your tongue, Mary, which never rests!

Mary: Oh, that's not counted... that's funny!... Hey, what's your name?

Jesus: Jesus.

Thomas: They call him M...M...Moreno.

Mary: Do you have a bad throat? If you wait, I can give you a prescription: two measures of water and two herbs that have been soaked for three days. Gargle with this concoction and you'll see how your tongue will loosen up.

John : You must have taken too much of the same solution, is that right?

At one end of the tavern, Martha was getting impatient...

Martha: Lazarus, Lazarus! Don't you know that Mary does nothing but chat and leaves all the work in the kitchen to me?... Why, tell her to give me a hand!

Lazarus: Damn these women! Why don't the two of you work it out together?

Then Martha went to where we were all seated. On top of her striped dress she was wearing an oil-stained large apron that smelled of garlic and onion.

Martha: If you'll excuse me, but there's much work to be done and this sister of mine does nothing but chat. Stop talking to her please, so that she can give me a hand. Otherwise, we'll never get done...

Mary: Martha, listen to this: "as small as a rat but guards the house like a lion"...Huh?... It's a key!

Martha: C'mon, Mary, for God's sake, we'll never finish anything...

Jesus: But Martha, why do you worry so much. We're all hungry, and we can eat anything. There's no hurry, really... Listen to this other riddle, Mary! It's as small as cucumber but it keeps on shouting along the road...

Mary stayed a little while to chat with us. We had a good laugh together. Her cheerfulness was contagious and we needed it a lot more than our need for bread and salt. At any rate, when Martha brought us the heads of lamb that Lazarus had flaunted, we gobbled them all up in a jiffy. I remember we didn't leave anything on the table, not even the bones were spared.

In Jerusalem, lodging was a big problem during feast days, because of the multitude of pilgrims present. The size was reflected in a saying of the period that one of the ten miracles performed by the Lord from his temple was the fact that all of the people could fit into the city. It was impossible, though, that everybody could be housed in inns situated within the walled city, and a number had to go to neighboring towns for their accommodation. On the other hand, it was also improbable that people camped out in the open air, as the nights in Jerusalem during these feasts were extremely cold. So that particular group

stayed inside the capital, while other pilgrim groups had their specific lodgings somewhere else. It was presumed that the Galileans encamped toward the western part of the city, where Bethany was situated. Bethany is a small town situated about six kilometers east of Jerusalem, beyond the Mount of Olives, leading to the road to Jericho. To Lazarus' mind, it was also called El-Azariye. In the basement of a church dedicated in honor of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, one can still see a big olive press which was well used during Jesus' time.

In the relatively big Jewish city there were lodging places for transient pilgrims or trading caravans. These inns – the hotels during that period – had a big yard surrounded by a fence, with small rooms where people as well as animals sought shelter for the night. At present, there still exist inns of this type in other Oriental countries, called “kans” (caravansaries). In Israel, there is an ancient construction in the port city of St. John of Arce (Akko), a historical place during the time of the Crusades. It is in one of these inns, very disorganized and messy due to the continuous flow of people, that we find this episode about Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. Although the gospels give us few details about them, religious tradition introduces them as a middle class family, on the way up, who received Jesus into a comfortable and quiet house, who in turn would see them as spiritual advisers when he was tired and weary of having mingled with people. This picture has no basis whatsoever in the evangelical texts. On the other hand, historical data on the existence of inns located along Bethany puts them in another light: Townsfolk working for a living, with no refinements. Their friendship with Jesus was the result of frequent contact with him and his friends everytime Jesus travelled to the city with his friends. In the episode, Lazarus appears like a strong and generous man who is happy with his work. He drinks and eats a lot. Martha is a widow, a practical woman, serious and hardworking. Mary, the younger sister who was abandoned by her husband is cheerful, talkative, spontaneous and confused. The three work hard to maintain “The Beautiful Palm Tree,” which is their business and their home.

Luke's text, which serves as basis for this episode, has been utilized on many occasions, to compare (and contrast) prayer and action, contemplative and active life, to the point of restricting the message of these words to the religious group: those living an active life vis-à-vis a cloistered life. In the episode, there is a deliberate attempt to elude a similar opposition that has nothing Christian in it. There is no double alternative for a believer. While one discourses on prayer and action as opposed or contradicting realities, the other develops faith from life. And this is not based whatsoever on Jesus' actuation nor on his message.

The challenge to the Christian who fights for the liberation of his brothers and sisters consists of putting prayer into action. One does not pray on one side and act on another, rather a person prays within the same process of liberation, of seeing God where He is: in the faces of the poor. The courage necessary in order “to give life” for the sake of the people and the patience needed to lead the poor towards the path of freedom find maturity in prayer.

(Lk 10:38-42)

51

TWO COPPER COINS

That early morning we went up the temple to recite the Passover prayers, according to the custom of our parents. Crossing through the gentiles' atrium, we reached the Beautiful Gate. Alongside, as always, was a line of beggars and sick people, begging for alms with their raised hands...

A Beggar: For the love of God, please help this poor blind man! God will reward you for this, countrymen.

God will reward you for this!

Woman Beggar: Strangers, take a look at my wounds, and have pity on me!

Judas from Scariot was the first to give a couple of coins to the woman showing us her wound-infested legs.

Woman Beggar: May God reward you with long life and good health!

Judas: C'mon, Nathanael, don't be stingy. Give this poor man something too.

Nathanael: It's not that, Judas. My heart bleeds everytime I see such misery, but...

Philip: But what? C'mon, Nat, loosen your pocket. We're in a tight fix too, but these unfortunate ones are worse.

Nathanael: I know, Philip. But that's not the problem?

Philip: So what's the problem?

Nathanael: Tell me, what do we solve by giving a couple of coins?

Philip: Less, if we don't give anything.

Nathanael: To whom shall I give alms, Philip? To this woman with rotten legs, or to that man who is bloated like a frog or to that blind man over there or...?

Another Woman Beggar: For God's sake, take a look at my wounds and have pity on me!

Philip: Don't think too much anymore, Nat. Get a dinar and give it to this poor woman, so she can take something hot for her stomach.

Nathanael: Yeah, that's for today, Philip. What about tomorrow, huh?

Philip: Tomorrow, someone'll pass by who'll give her another dinar.

Nathanael: And what if he doesn't give...?

Philip: Well, what can we do. One.....

Nathanael: We'll all be sleeping peacefully, while this poor one is dying of hunger.

Philip: Okay, okay. I'm convinced. I'll give him two dinars...

Nathanael: What about the day after tomorrow, Philip...?

Philip: You go to hell, Nathanael! You can't even part with your copper and here you are pestering me! I'm not heaven's treasure-keeper!

Judas: Hey, what's the matter with you?... Hurry up!

Nathanael: We're coming, Judas, we're coming...

We passed through the Beautiful Gate and entered the women's atrium where the Temple's treasury was located. There, beneath a small door could be found the bronze chests where we Israelites put in our tithes. Voluntary offerings from people were also collected in these boxes. During the Passover, a number of pilgrims gave alms for the cult and for the maintenance of the Temple. When we got there a rich businessman with a red turban and a pair of silken sandals was dropping a handful of silver coins... one by one in the box.

Rich Man: That our Temple may always shine, as these silver coins, amen!

A Woman: Psst, neighbor! Do you know that man? He's one of the nephews of the old man, Annas! He lives along the coast and raises cattle for business... Look at his ring! With the price of that ring, he could feed all the poor ones waiting by the gate.

Another Woman: Look at the man beside him... the one who's dressed like a Greek....!

Woman: Isn't he the son of the merchant Antonino?

Woman: Exactly. That one is a good man, yes sir.

Woman: A what? Hah! You just don't know him! That guy treats his horses better than his servants!... What a man!

A Man: So that the altar of God will never run out of incense, amen!

A Woman: Did you hear him? Here, what's needed is bread to feed the hungry poor!

Another Woman: Shut up woman! How can you say that? I think you're beginning to lose your faith. I've got a feeling this boyfriend of yours is putting strange ideas into your head...

We also gave some donations to the Temple's treasury...

Philip: What a line!

Judas: I think this'll take forever and we won't be able to leave.

Philip: What with this heat! Hey, Nathanael, why don't you cover your bald head with a piece of cloth?... You might suffer from sunstroke!... But... who's pulling my hand...? What's happening here...? Don't push, dammit, we can't even move here!... This fellow's hair is almost in my mouth...! But who the devil is tickling me...?

Nathanael: Philip, it's this woman who wants to squeeze herself in...

Widow: Let's see, let me pass, m'son... c'mon, yes, let me pass...

Philip: Hey, old woman, why don't you fall in line like everybody else, and stop pushing...

A Man: But look at this hag! Who does she think she is?

Widow: Be a good boy, m'son and let me pass, yeah... my grandchildren are waiting for me at home.

A very thin old woman was pushing her way among us. She was probably a widow, as she was dressed in black and her face was covered with a black veil. Unmindful of the protests among us, the woman made her way to the offering box...

A Man: Damn that old woman! She came last but wants to be the first!

A Woman: Well, if she was able to get away with it, at least she could hurry up...!

The widow started to look for her handkerchief where she kept her money...

Widow: Wait a minute, m'son... where did I put my money?

She searched all her pockets, her belt and her chest... but could not find her handkerchief. People were getting impatient.

A Man: Well, grandmother, did you come to give alms or to pray before this chest that they may take pity on you?

A Woman: Hey, you, get that hag out of here! We can't stay here waiting for her the whole morning.

Widow: But, where did I place my money, m'son?... Could somebody have stolen it from me?... There are so many bad people in the city now, and too many thieves!

A Man: And what can they steal from you, skin and bones? Not even the devil would be interested in you!

Another Man: If you don't know where the hell you kept your money, you'd better cool it first and come back when you find it!

A Woman: Get that witch out of there!

The voice of protest got more intense. Nevertheless, the widow kept her cool. She continued to look for her handkerchief which she finally found in one of the sleeves of her dress...

Widow: Here it is, here it is. That's why my father used to say that money that is well kept is sure money.

A Man: Hurry up, old woman, finish it up and go away....!

The widow carefully removed the knot of the handkerchief and there appeared the two copper cents that she wanted to offer...

A Merchant: What a big fuss over two miserable copper coins! Beat it old woman, and don't stain the Temple's treasury with your filthy coins!

Widow: What did you say, child? Speak louder, 'cuz I'm a little hard of hearing.

Merchant: Better for you to swallow those filthy coins! We don't need them here!

Widow: What are you saying, m'son?... One day a grandson of mine swallowed a coin, and his part here got swollen and...

Merchant: Go to hell, damned old woman! You're testing my patience! Go away, go away!

Widow: But m'son, I...

Merchant: Out of my sight, I say!

The man grabbed the widow by the arm and pushed her outside the door. The two cents rolled onto the floor.

Merchant: Why don't you stay by the door with the other beggars... that's where you belong!

But the widow bent to the floor to look for the two cents that fell...

Jesus: Over here, there's one, grandmother...! Take it.

Widow: Oh, thank you, m'son... With these eyes of mine, I'm as blind as a bat...!

Judas: Here's the other one!

Widow: Oh, how can I ever thank you!... What good-mannered boys you are!...

Jesus: Save your thanks, grandmother... you're already out of line. Hey, you, hurry up a little.

The widow went near the offering box, accompanied by Judas and Jesus, who recovered the copper coins for her...

Widow: M'son, let me pass, give me some space...

Merchant: You again?... I told you to stay away from here, you wicked old woman!

Jesus: And why, may I ask, does she have to leave?

Merchant: Because she made me lose my patience!

Jesus: She's here to give her offering to the Temple, like you and everyone else.

Merchant: She's here to give the measly amount of two cents, which is worthless, do you hear?

Jesus: Well, look here, this wicked old woman, as you say, is giving more offering than you are...

Merchant: Oh yeah? Don't tell me that. Do you know how much I'm going to give?

Jesus: No, but I'm sure you give from your plenty, while this poor widow gives what she has to live on. Her offering is more worthy in the eyes of the Lord.

Merchant: You're a funny man, Galilean! All you can say is in the eyes of God, in the eyes of God!... But don't forget that the altar curtains and cups, as well as the priests vestments are not paid for by the widow's cents but with lots of silver and gold.

Judas of Scariot went near the merchant...

Judas: The walls of the temple of God are covered with gold and marble, while God's children are dying of hunger outside... Don't you think something is wrong here?

Merchant: I say that's none of your business. The temple is a holy place and there's little that's done to embellish it. God deserves a beautiful place and much, much more.

Jesus: People are the true temple of God. God doesn't live amid stones, but in the hearts of those who cry out of hunger by the gate.

Merchant: Now look who's talking! Can't you show any more respect for religion and sacred things?

A Man: What's going on here, dammit! First it was the old widow, now it's you! Will somebody call for a Levite to impose some order here!

At that moment, a priest was passing by the offering boxes...

Priest: What's this chatter all about, huh? If you have nothing to give as offering, then go somewhere else and don't make trouble!

Jesus: C'mon, grandma, drop your coins and go home!

Widow: How's that, m'son?

Jesus: I said, drop your coins and go back home!

Widow: Why, of course... the coins... heavens, where did I put them? ...You have given them to me, haven't you?... Wait a minute, m'son, let me look for them...

Jesus: If you want, don't drop them here. You may just give them to those beggars by the gate...

Widow: Speak louder, m'son, for I'm deaf and I can't hear you well.

Jesus: No, you're not, grandma. We're the deaf ones who refuse to hear the cry of the many dying of

hunger, while the coffers of God's temple are full.

Priest: Go, go, don't delay, there are many people waiting!... Praise God for the generous souls who help maintain the temple and the splendor of its sanctuary!

The widow finally found her copper coins and dropped them in the Temple's treasure chest. Then, slowly, she moved away, as she passed through the street of the weavers and proceeded to her rambling house in barrio Ofel.

In Jesus' time, Jerusalem was a center of mendicancy. Since almsgiving in Jerusalem was considered specially pleasing to God, this practice all the more encouraged a great number of beggars. They concentrated themselves near the temple, though many of them could not get inside if they were afflicted with diseases which were considered an impediment to be in God's presence. They were the lepers, the crippled, the insane, etc.

For the Jewish religion, almsgiving was a very important deed. Jesus was not opposed to almsgiving. On the contrary, on various occasions, he spoke of selling one's own riches so that one could give the money to the poor. (Luke 12:12, 33).

What Jesus frowns upon is the attitude of those who give alms as a show, or to cover up the injustice committed by the employers against their laborers. In the entire ancient world, almsgiving and charity towards the poor were ways of encouraging equality among people. At present, in this economically complex world we live in, almsgiving, charitable works, the so-called "development aid" may be a beautiful smoke screen to cover up the injustices at the roots. When almsgiving becomes a substitute for justice, it must be rejected. When almsgiving stunts the growth of the receiver as a human being, it is not Christian. Acts of charity will always be needed in times of emergency, but if it fails to attack the cause of the structural injustice which explains why there are poor people, this "charitable act" accomplishes nothing but the perpetuation of poverty. This is not the kind of almsgiving that our Lord wants.

Beside the atrium for women was the so-called "treasury" of the temple, in which the Israelites gave their offerings. On the exterior facade of the atrium, there were 13 wooden boxes in the form of trumpets, which were used to collect the compulsory as well as the voluntary contributions. The tithe was a compulsory contribution paid annually to the temple by all twenty-year-old male Israelite. In Jesus' time, they were two drachmas (two dinars, equivalent to two days' work). There were other types of money which were compulsory offerings for cult: for incense, gold, silver, turtledoves, etc. Voluntary almsgiving took several forms: for the atonement of sin, for purification, etc. During holidays, a large crowd gathered around the treasury as people from all over the country came to fulfill their religious duty of giving their support to the cult. The temple's treasury was always known for its luxury and opulence. Here, the powerful people of the country left their wealth of incalculable value, in kind and in cash. Several families deposited their wealth, especially those of the aristocracy and the religious group. This made the temple the most important financial institution in the country. The building symbolized wealth and power. Passing through any entrance, one would have to cross large doors coated with gold and silver. All this makes one appreciate what Jesus said about the widow's offering. She dropped a few coins into the treasury box which was not even enough to pay for a day's meal. In magnifying the widow's generosity, Jesus, faithful to the tradition of the prophets, denounced the luxury of the so-called house of God, and more so, the assurance with which the rich thought of buying with their money the Lord's benevolence. (Jer 7:1-11).

The true God cannot be pleased with money. God's temple is human beings (1 Cor 3:16). The best tradition of the Church was always critical of the wealth of the temples. "The Church is not a showcase of gold and silver... Do you really want to honor the body of Christ? Do not allow him to be naked, nor honor him (in the temple) with silken clothes, yet, let him feel the cold and nakedness outside..." (St. John Crisostomo, homily L, 3 and 4).

(Mk 12:41-44; Lk 21:1-4)

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52

THE TEN DRACHMAS

Peter: Get up, guys, it's daytime already! Hummm... Hey, Philip, Thomas, Judas!... C'mon, Nathanael, don't hide under that mat!... And you, Jesus, stop pretending you're asleep, 'cuz I know your ol' tricks already!... Up, up, everybody, and double time!

James: Damn you, Peter, you never let anyone sleep! At night, you're even worse than a pig when you snore, and now you get up ahead of the cocks!

Peter: Stop grumbling, red hair, and get up now!

Peter woke us up when it was hardly dawn, while there were still a few stars roaming the sky. Grudgingly, we lazily stretched our limbs, then headed for the fountain at the corner of the yard, so that we could freshen up. Although it was still early, Lazarus' inn at Bethany was already bustling with hundreds of pilgrims... As we left the yard, we passed through the inn's kitchen. There was Martha, Lazarus' sister...

Martha: Good morning, boys! So, did you sleep well last night?

Peter: Very well, madame! Now, we're a little bit hungry... or better, we're starved....!

Martha: Well, why don't you get yourselves a handful of dates from that barrel? That's precisely why they're there, to appease a grumbling stomach...

Lazarus: Uff... This Dorothy gives more milk than the late Ingrid who fed all the children of Bethany.... Here, take it, Martha.... How are you, my friends? Do you want to try this milk? It's still warm and creamy! There's nothing better than goat's milk. God bless her teats!

Peter: And our bellies! Yeah, why don't you serve us some so we can try.

Martha: Serve them yourself, Lazarus, 'cuz I gotta get the bread ready. It's getting late and I haven't kneaded the flour yet...

Lazarus filled a pot with milk and gave it to us. The fresh goat's milk passed from one mouth to another amid words of admiration... Meanwhile, Martha, with her striped sleeves rolled up, kneaded the bread, sinking her agile fingers into the flour. When the last of the thirteen guys raised the pot of milk, licking it with relish, Mary, Lazarus' other sister, appeared in the kitchen, with tears coming down her eyes...

Mary: Lazarus! Martha!... Ay, ay, ay... ay! Oh, you won't believe what just happened to me!

Lazarus: But is this the time for waking up, silly girl? Oh God, of heaven, why did you give me such a sister! You overslept again, didn't you?

Mary: Oh no, Lazarus. I was awake at the first cock crow and I started to work... But... you know how hard work brings bad luck... Oh!

Martha: What's happened, Mary? Tell us!

Mary: Martha, help me look for it... I can't find it anywhere... Oh!

Lazarus: What the hell are you missing?

Mary: One of my drachmas, one of my ten coins... I was bringing in fuel for the kitchen stove when I found out... I only have nine of them! I'm missing one of my coins!

In our town, the women would hang from their ears or on the tip of their scarf in front, ten coins, a remembrance of the dowry given to them by their parents on their wedding day. For all the women of Israel, those coins were of great value. Some, like Mary, from Bethany, never parted with them, even when sleeping.

Lazarus: Don't cry anymore, woman, you'll find it again...

Mary: I must have dropped it while gathering firewood from the woodshed... which is too dark... one hardly sees anything... Oh dear! What a misfortune, what bad luck!

Lazarus: What a pain in the butt you are!... When you're happy, you're like a whirlwind and when you're sad, you're like an earthquake... I don't know which is worse.

Martha: Stop crying now, Mary... Later, we'll sweep that corner and you'll find that lost coin of yours... But first, let me finish with this flour. I've already put the yeast...

Mary: Oh my money!.... Oh my money!

When we left the inn, Mary was still weeping disconsolately over her lost drachma, while Martha was kneading the bread. We crossed the Mountain of Olives and entered the great city of Jerusalem, which as always, was bursting with people...

Peter: There are no more olives, fellas!.... Here goes the last one!

James: But there's still some wine to last us for a while!... Well, unless this drunk, Matthew, finishes it off in just one gulp...!

Matthew: Will you mind your own business and leave me in peace!

Nathanael: Let's buy some more olives... or cheese, perhaps...

Peter: Of course, Nata. C'mon, loosen up your pockets... and give your share!

At noontime, we went inside a tavern in the fullers' street, to have lunch. The days in Jerusalem were passing rapidly, and we had a few days left before going back to Capernaum... Besides, we had little money left...

Peter: How 'bout you, Philip...?

Philip: What d'ya mean?

Peter: Let go of your money... C'mon, don't turn your face aside... Don't you feel hungry at all?

Philip: Yes, but...

Matthew: But as always, you haven't got any coppers to share, is that right?

Philip: Well, the truth is, yesterday, there was a rogue who held me up in the street and took away the little money I had... Damn, if I could only grab him by the neck...!

Jesus: Oh, a rogue, really, huh? What number did you bet on, Philip? C'mon, tell us the truth....

James: It's even worse than that, Jesus. Do you know what happened to this fat head? Seeing how stupid he was, they lured him into this doves competition in the square...!

Nathanael: How is it possible, Philip? Even nursing children know it's all a hoax!

Philip: Well, they told me I was going to win a fortune...

James: And they stripped you naked of your money instead!

Nathanael: Don't you come to me and ask for even a single centavo, do you hear? I don't feed stupid people like you!

Philip: What do I do now, Nata!

Matthew: Why don't you look for that coin Mary lost? At least you would have something for tomorrow's breakfast!

Philip: Hey, don't talk to me about that fool! Yesterday she made a big fuss about a rat and now, her coins. I don't know how this cross-eyed woman manages, but she's always in for trouble or involved in a mess...

Jesus: If I told you what she said last night, you wouldn't believe...

Peter: Who, Mary?

Jesus: Yeah, she was asking a lot of questions about us and I was taken aback when she expressed her desire to do something for the Kingdom of God.

James: And you told her just to play the flute somewhere.

Jesus: No, I told her we hadn't thought of it, but it wasn't a bad idea, after all.

Peter: What was it that we hadn't thought about, Jesus?

Jesus: That Mary should come with us.

Peter: Are you out of your mind, Moreno? Putting women in our group?

Jesus: Why not, Peter? What's wrong with that?

Peter: No, no, no, this is going too far!... Since when can a woman take part in mens' affairs?

Jesus: Not one, but two, because Martha is also very enthusiastic about joining. There's no question about Lazarus. The three could help us a lot here in the South.

Peter: With Lazarus, there's no problem. But the women, no. The women's place is the kitchen, dammit, that's where they belong.

Jesus: What do you say, red hair?

James: Well, Adam took his siesta at a bad time.... We could have had one rib more and less problems... I don't want to have anything to do with women. What can these two dishwashers do, tell me?

Jesus: They can work for us, they can give us their opinion... In the Kingdom of God, everyone is needed.

James: Their opinion!... Listen, Jesus, this crazy woman, Mary, what does she know that we don't know?... And this chubby-cheeked Martha, what new things can she teach us?... No, no, Moreno, get back your senses, and forget it.

Jesus: And what do you say, Matthew? Don't you welcome the idea?

Matthew: All I can say is that with or without women, this group is going to fail. Yeah, and I say this not because I'm drunk. Open your eyes, you guys: we're a handful of good for nothing guys amid a multitude with problems. What the hell can we do, huh? Tell me.

Jesus: Look, I guess Martha could answer your question. Didn't you see her this morning? Didn't you see how she prepared bread?

Philip: How else, Jesus? As every woman knows: with water, with flour, oil and...

Jesus: ...and a bit of yeast. Martha knows how, with that piece of yeast, the whole dough rises, and this, she can teach us very well.

James: And what has it got to do with us, Jesus?

Jesus: We're like that yeast, James. God is like the woman who kneads the dough.

Philip: Therefore, God is the baker. I've never heard of this before!

Jesus: A male baker, no. A female baker, yes. The women's hands are made for the kitchen.

James: Watch your tongue, Moreno. As far as I know, God is a male!

Jesus: Oh yeah? And when have you seen him to find out if He's a male or a female?

Nathanael: At least, the Scriptures say that God is male.

Jesus: What I remember is that the Scriptures say that God created us in his own image. And He made us as man and woman. If man is God's image, then the woman ought to be too.

Peter: Okay, okay, what the Scriptures say is one thing, and Martha's legs are another!

Philip: And the other worse thing is Mary's tongue!... Don't tell me God is also as scatterbrained as she!

Jesus: Well, look.... well, yes! Listen, Philip: didn't you notice how desperate Mary was, over her missing coin?

Philip: Right, Jesus. That woman is always restless.

Jesus: And so is God. This is where they are alike. God also despairs when a child of His gets lost. He looks for her everywhere. Just like Mary, who is not content with her nine drachmas. She loses one, as if she had lost everything. She doesn't want to lose a single coin.

Peter: Hey, Moreno, has the wine gotten into your head?

We left the inn when we had consumed everything, the wine, bread and the olives. We went around the city four times, and then, returned to Bethany, at sunset.... When we were near Lazarus' place, we began to hear the unmistakable voice of Mary. As we went inside, she welcomed us, dancing...

Mary: Hey, guys from Capernaum!... Look!... I've found my coin!... Look at my missing drachma!

Jesus: Where did you find it, Mary?

Mary: Over there in the woodshed. I had to light some lamps and sweep the place well... And I found it! That's why I tell the good news to anyone who enters through that door!

Peter: Well, one doesn't have to go through any door to hear you... Your voice can be heard from Bethbasi...!

Jesus: See what I mean, Peter? Look how happy she is! God also leaps with joy for the life of each of His children, He dances for us, like it was a feast day. That's also true of Mary.

We slept very late, when only cricket sounds could be heard all over the yard of the Beautiful Palm Tree... The creamy light of the full moon of the Passover slipped through the cracks of every roof...I think, that night, everyone thought that for the first time, we all slept on the huge lap of our mother God...

In Jesus' time and even at present, in several Arab territories, the women adorn themselves with coins. These were sewn to veils that covered their faces or hair, or they were embedded in various head ornaments or they simply wore them as necklaces or earrings. On several occasions, these coins were given to them as dowry by their parents on their wedding day. That is why they considered these coins as their most precious property. Some women would not even part with them at any time, not even when sleeping. That the ornament – the dowry – consisted only of ten drachmas was a sign of poverty. This was the case with Mary in the episode. There are Oriental headdresses where hundred of pieces of gold or silver coins are used. For an Israelite woman, losing a coin of the dowry brought great pain, largely because of its sentimental value. The woman of Israel had no role in public life, with respect to participation, decision making and responsibilities. Her responsibilities at home were also secondary in nature. Her training restricted her role to domestic chores: She learned how to sew, how to weave, and how to cook. Generally, she was not taught how to read. In the farm and in similar situations, the woman worked side by side with the man in harvesting crops, selling them, etc. Vis-à-vis her husband, her father or her brother, her category became that of a servant. "The woman – as a Jewish historian said in Jesus' time – is, in every aspect, of a lesser category than man".

This discrimination against woman, this "machismo" in the Jewish society, was justified in many ways. One was along moral lines, given this kind of thinking: The woman is weak and dangerous at the same time, and therefore, must situate herself within the margin of public life, for she may provoke temptation, or man may abuse her, when overcome by his passions. When there is too much insistence on woman's debility, with respect to man, just as her ability to tempt is highlighted, then a radical inequality between the two sexes was established. Jesus, in his words, and much more in his attitude toward different types of women, had on several occasions, shattered this idea and this false morality, in an absolute way. That was how he came to accept women in his group because – from his vision of life – man is not a mere pawn of his sexual instincts, but can have full control of the same. It is not merely an ascetic control of his instincts, of repression, but is something that is born out of a new scale of values: Men and women are indeed brothers and sisters because they are equal in the eyes of God. The kingdom of justice is capable of touching man and woman in similar ways, and in so doing, of transforming their lives. Even one's looks can be purified (Mt 5:28). In no other sphere of social life during his time has Jesus shown his obviously radical attitude as in the manner by which he treated women.

In doing so, Jesus not only elevates the position of women, but also puts them on equal footing with men. This act gives us a new image of God. In the parable of the lost drachma and that of the yeast, Jesus presents two women as his protagonists in the analogy, and the ending appears surprising. In the story of the lost drachma, the parable simply means: God is like this. This is how He becomes happy and worried. Jesus compares God's feelings with those of a woman. It is a way of saying that God has no gender, that He reveals Himself through a man as well as through a woman. In the parable of the yeast, Jesus talks of what happens in the Kingdom of God: From the smallest – a bit of yeast – God takes the greatest: Too much dough for a growing bread. That is to say, by making use of a group of poor men and women, God will create a new history of humankind. In the parable, this process starts with a woman, the mediator of that transformation of the mass (dough) is a woman baker in this episode, Martha. The two parables are an indication of Jesus' enormous freedom as he speaks of the realities of the kingdom. The woman is part of the same, just as the man is. If all this is characteristic of the gospel, then we can affirm, parting from this same freedom, that God is our Father and our Mother as well. In so doing, we not only find inspiration in Jesus, we also find basis for it in the Old Testament, where God's love is compared to that of a mother, on several occasions. (Is 49:14-15; 66:13).

In a number of countries, there exists, side by side with marked "machismo" in dealing with women, (as well as the social opportunities afforded the women,) a profound love for a mother. For many men and women, to say that God is Father, is, either not to say anything or to give a more or less negative comparison, represented by a paternal figure in some families, of a father who has abandoned his family or been guilty of violence. While, to say that "God is mother" may evoke, for a portion of our people, images of an immense affection, an absolute surrender, a great concern. All these are theological realities of the first order, in our understanding of God.

(Mt 13:33; Lk 13:21 and 15:8-10)

53

BESIDE THE SHEEP GATE

We left Lazarus' inn at Bethany before sunrise, and took the road to Jerusalem. We crossed the Cedron Stream until we came close to the walls surrounding the temple. At that time, through one of the gates of the north called the Sheep Gate, passed herds of sheep for the Passover sacrifice....

Peter: Hey, what's that noise? They bellow a lot, more than sheep!

Philip: It's coming from there, from the pool...

Peter: Let's go find out what's going on there...

Very close to the Sheep Gate was the pond of Bethesda, meaning House of Mercy. It had two large swimming pools surrounded by white columns and five entrance doors.

Praying Woman: Oh, most Almighty God, please make a miracle! Make a miracle! Lord of the heavens, send forth your angel! Send him soon, Lord!

Peter: Hey, James, what's with that woman? Is she crazy?... Look, look how she dilates her eyes, look...

James: Don't be stupid, Peter, Can't you see, she's blind?

Philip: Too many sick people around here! The ten plagues of Egypt have all gathered together here!

A Sick Woman: Hey, you stinking one, spit on the other side, 'cuz your filth turns me off!

A Sick Man: I will spit where I please, you, crippled by the devil!

Another Sick Woman: Have pity on me, holy God, have pity on me, holy Lord, have pity!

Peter: Hey, Jesus, James, Philip... let's go inside, c'mon!

While crossing through one of the gates, we saw the pool of Bethesda. It was surrounded by dozens of sick men and women. The crippled, the blind and the lame were milling around the curb of the pool. The air reeked intensely of urine, pus and sweat. And the flies, inebriated perhaps by all that dirt, formed a black cloud over the sick...

James: What the hell is going on here? All the sick are looking into the pool... waiting for what?

Jesus: Hey, guys, come here... tell me, why are there so many.....? Oh heck, he doesn't even care. Look, countryman, could you tell me what.....? Uff....!

Philip: It's impossible, Jesus. We won't find out, with this great commotion.

Peter: No one can even stand the stench. Let's get out of here! There's too much shoving around, and we might end up being pushed into the water...!

Then we went back to the gate. The old woman followed us there, her eyes turned towards heaven, as she called for a mysterious angel.

Praying Woman: Oh, most Almighty God, please make a miracle! And make it soon!

Philip: Guys, why don't we ask this woman?

James: I told you she's blind, Philip. She doesn't know what's happening before her.

Philip: She may not see, but she hears, and smells. She should be able to know everything through her sense of smell.

Praying Woman: Miracle, I want a miracle! Holy God, holy strong God, please make a miracle! Make it move, even a little! Make it move, make it move!

Philip: Hey, old woman, will you stop for a while!.... Please tell me, who's to move around here?

Praying Woman: Who're you? You've interrupted my praying!

Philip: Tell me, old woman, what miracle are you praying for?

Praying Woman: Come over, m'son, and let me touch your face... You're not from here, are you?

Peter: No, and neither this group.... We're not from this place...

Praying Woman: Of course, that's why you ask... that's why you don't know... I'm referring to the great miracle of the angel of God! They say he's coming down...

Philip: Who?

Praying Woman: I told you, the angel.

Peter: What's he coming down for, old woman?

Praying Woman: What else! To stir the water in the pool! Then whoever throws themselves into the blessed water gets cured and cleansed of any disease forever and ever amen.

Jesus: So, why do you stay here by the gate instead of immersing yourself in the water and have your eyes cured?

Praying Woman: Oh, my boy, you don't know how people shove each other just to get into the pool! They bite each other, pull each other's hair, scrambling like mad just to get into the pool first. And poor me, since I can't see anything, I just content myself sitting still here, and calling the angel, that he may hear my plea.

Philip: But you'll never get cured this way...

Praying Woman: That's true... But at least I keep my little business... Look, whenever anyone gets cured, and since I am the one who prays and prays here, we have agreed that I should be given a little tip for the effort, do you understand?

Jesus: And they have given you a lot of tips, old woman...?

Praying Woman: Somehow I receive something, m'son, but... God and the angel forgive me, but I think this dirty water doesn't cure. On the contrary, whoever plunges into it catches all the diseases. It's so filthy, one spits into the water, while another swallows what she spits... As for me, countrymen, I'd rather believe than question it... Miracle, miracle, miracle! Oh, most Almighty God, make a miracle! Lord of the heavens, send forth your angel soon, and soon!... If you'll excuse me, I must continue praying so that God will listen to me... Touch the water, move the water, Lord!

We went inside the pool again. The sick were fighting their way in, looking jealously at each other.... Sometimes, one would plunge himself into the pool, imagining that the water had stirred, only to surface once again, drenched and sad, for not having been cured....

Philip: What'dya think, fellow? Do you buy the story of the angel touching the water?

James: Why don't you prove it, Philip? Why don't you join in the uproar and get yourself soaked?

Peter: These people are crazy, believing the story of the angel...

James: If you make up a story about an archangel or a whole battalion of seraphims in heaven, they would believe it too. Hell, they're so gullible, they'd easily believe you... what a bunch of stupid fools!

Jesus: No James, the people aren't stupid. The people suffer, which is different. When one is in suffering, one grabs even a burning nail.... or an angel's plume...

Sick Woman: Hey, you, swine, I was here first, stay back!

A Sick Man: Dammit, you wretch, you do nothing but scream! May your two legs be crippled forever!

Sick Woman: Look who's cursing, why, you drag yourself around like a serpent!

Sick Man: Go to hell, you bitch!

A little way from this swarm of sick people, we saw an old man lying on a stretcher. His skin hung from his bones, his hair was white as flour, and his small eyes, resembling those of a mouse, moved continually from one side to another. As we passed by him, he grabbed Peter's tunic and stopped him...

Peter: Hey, what d'ya want, old man?

Sippho: Nothing, I just see you going around and I'm wondering what the hell you're looking for. You're not sick people....

James: We will be soon, if we stay here much longer...

Sippho: You don't like this, do you? Neither do I, dammit! Here, everyone thinks only of himself!

Philip: If you don't like it here, then why do you come?

Sippho: You're a funny guy! Why, I've got to think of myself too! There's no other choice!

Peter: Oh, look how they kick the hunchback...

Sippho: You know, guys, when they announce the coming of the angel, it's the end of it! People shove each other, bite and kick each other.... What can we do? If there's only one bone for several dogs, then we've got to fight for it, to see who'll eat it... This little angel is our only hope. I, for one, don't believe in doctors anymore. They're a bunch of ignoramuses...

Jesus: For how long have you been sick, old man?

Sippho: Make a guess and you'll be surprised.

Jesus: I don't know... maybe ten years?

Sippho: Add ten more to it, and another ten, and you're still short by a few years. For thirty-eight years I've been like this, paralyzed. I've grown old waiting for that day when I could be healed. I've lost all my teeth already, but my hope has always been there... I've never lost it.

Jesus: So, your faith is as great as that of our father, Abraham.

Sippho: Son, there's no other choice but to hope... even if one gets disillusioned with everything, with the angel, for example, who makes us fight one another. Here, no one helps anyone, there's no charity here. If you're not careful, they break your head so there will be one less in the line...

Sick Woman: Wretch! Get away from here or I'll split your head open!

Sick Man: And I'll break your bones for being a meddler! Here, take this, this will teach you a lesson....!

Sippho: That woman is very quarrelsome... and the man always takes her challenge... Huh! We spend the day grumbling against those up there, because they squeeze our necks. Know what? We're all starved to death here, but we keep on doing the same thing... One gets disillusioned, you know. Here, there's no mercy. I'm an old man and I have seen a lot of things happen before my eyes.

Jesus: But when you were young, did you do the same thing, like did you push people too?

Sippho: Of course, I couldn't do otherwise. But I'm old now. Do you think one of those young men will help me to the water? ...Never. Since I can only leap like a frog, I never get to be the first in the line... Since

this angel won't come to me, I really don't know what to do...

Jesus: Do you want me to help you get close to the water?

Sippho: No, my son. Look, if you want to help me, then get me out of here. I don't think I'll ever get to see that angel. Angels are early birds and now it's very late... I better leave and take something for my stomach. The smell in the air simply whets my appetite....

Then Jesus went toward the old man and held him by his arms...

Sippho: Careful, young man, for my bones might break into pieces!

Jesus: Don't worry old man. You may go away now. C'mon, stand up...

Sippho: What did you say, m'son?

Jesus: I said, you stand... no, no, stand by yourself.... Let's go...

The old man cast a strange look at Jesus. Then, he stretched his legs and he discovered that he could stand... Meanwhile, the sick continued quarreling and shouting at each other by the pool... The old man looked at Jesus again, then seized his small bed, and without saying a word, left – running...

Sippho: Old woman, old woman, I've been cured! I'm cured!

Praying Woman: What do you say? ...Let's see... let me touch your legs... you're not Sippho, the cripple from the fruit vendors' barrio?

Sippho: I'm the one, old woman, I'm the one!

Praying Woman: The angel has come down! The angel of the Lord has come down to earth, Oh Holy God! It's a miracle, it's a miracle!

Sippho: Tomorrow, you'll receive your tip, that's a promise!

Praying Woman: Wait, Sippho, don't go away. Tell me... How did the angel look? Did you see him?

Sippho: Of course I did! He was a very strange angel. He was bearded and had brown skin. I'll tell you about this tomorrow! I'm coming back tomorrow, old woman, to bring you two dinars! Or even four! I'm cured! I'm cured..!

After this, we immediately left the pool of Bethesda and disappeared among the multitude milling in the narrow streets of Jerusalem. Sippho, that sick and poor old man who, for thirty-eight years had been waiting by the pool, spread the news through the entire city that an angel had cured him. The whole Jerusalem knew that something strange had happened that morning by the gate of the sheep.

The Sheep Gate was located along the walls north of Jerusalem. The sheep to be sacrificed in the temple entered through this gate. Beside this gate was a pool. It was called by two names: Bethesda (House of Mercy) or Bezatha (The Pit). It had five doors for entrance and was divided into two by a row of columns. The ruins of this pool were found near a church dedicated to Saint Ann, Mary's mother. At present, there is hardly any water in the place.

In Jesus' time, Jerusalem was a city suffering from an acute water shortage. Water was bought and sold. In the city, there were two big pools or ponds: Siloam, outside the great walls, and Bethesda ("of the sheep" in Greek). It was in the Pool of Bethesda, which was situated very near the temple, where the sick gathered. Many of them were prevented from entering the temple precisely because of their illnesses. In this pool, they hoped to find God's mercy, which was denied to them by the religious laws, thus bringing them away from God's presence. It was a well frequented place for healing. Seventy years after Christ, votive offerings could still be found in the pool's excavations. Bethesda could therefore compare to those Christian sanctuaries or those of other religions where the sick went in search of miracles that would cure their illnesses. Along these places sprang false stories, and good businesses thrived as a consequence of people's gullibility.

Poverty, necessity and desperation over illness can likewise nurture egoism. When a person is forced to survive more than to live, it is sometimes difficult to be generous with other people. There is a mechanism that is very common in human relations. The powerful oppress the poor, who in turn – (since

this is the only form of treatment known to them) – oppress those below them: a weaker companion, a wife, the children... A chain of servitude is thus created. One is made to believe that he or she is not a “somebody” if they have no one under them to oppress and to take advantage of. The unjust structure of society only underlines and multiplies this model of relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, the master and the slave. The oppressed majority of our society keep in their hearts a remnant of this oppression inflicted on them by the real exploiters. The road to people’s complete liberation and that of the society cannot merely set this aside. But this is not to forget that the same oppressed people whose hearts are filled with more or less egoism, are the very ones whom God privileges with his love. God prefers the poor not because they are good, but simply and plainly because they are poor.

The episode of the Pool of Bethesda is mentioned only in the gospel of John. Through his own style, the evangelist is able to point out the special importance of some details. The sick around the pool cannot enter the temple.

Jesus approaches these neglected people who are waiting in vain for “miracles.” The paralytic who, for thirty-eight years, (forty years, in biblical language would mean an entire life) was almost on the brink of death, was cured by Jesus so that he could walk with his own feet and decide his future. The miracle that Jesus made on Siphso is a sign that before God, those who are rejected by the official religion, the “last,” shall be the first.

(Jn 5:1-18)

54

THE PROPHET’S HEAD

For several months, the prophet John saw the days and nights pass slowly in the dark and humid prison cell of the fortress of Machaerus, where king Herod had locked him up. That voice shouting in the desert, preparing the way of the liberation of Israel, was gradually fading away within the filthy walls of his cell. One day the prison door was opened and Matthew, one of the prophet’s friends, came in. He came from Galilee after seeing Jesus...

Matthew: John, John, I’m back! How’re you?

John the Baptist: I told you, I’d only die after you came back... I kept my word... Where is Thomas?

Matthew: In Jerusalem. He went there to celebrate the Passover with that guy from Nazareth, Jesus, and his group. He’ll be back after the holidays.

Baptist: Tell me about Jesus. Did you see him? Did you give him my message?

Matthew: Yes, John. That’s why I came... to tell you that...

Baptist: I can die peacefully?

Matthew: Don’t say that, John. You won’t die. Look, I brought you some medicines...

Baptist: Tell me what Jesus said. I’d like to know.

Matthew: Jesus wants you to know that in Galilee the people are beginning to open their eyes. The people are beginning to rise and move. That the poor are beginning to listen to the Good News. That the Lord is on our side and... and that he expects you to be happy about this, John.

Baptist: Of course I am, Matthew. In a wedding, the groom remains with the bride. But the groom’s best man, who is present, is also very happy... Now it’s Jesus’ turn... He has to grow while I fade away...

Jailer: Enough of that silly talk. Your time’s up!

Matthew: I’ve got to go, John, but I’ll be back soon, whenever possible.

Baptist: I’ll be waiting for you. If you see Jesus again, tell him to grip the plow well, and not look back. If ever I get out of this hell, he... he can count on me.

Matthew: I'll tell him, John, I'll tell him....

Jailer: C'mon, you've been talking with your prophet for too long.... Beat it!

Matthew and the jailer passed through the narrow stairs leading to the patio. John dropped himself on the dirty straw mat, and stared at the leaking roof. He fell asleep, recalling the brown face of Jesus, that peasant from Nazareth whom he had baptized in the Jordan just a few months before.

In those days, a celebration was held at the palace of Machaerus, because it was Herod's birthday. The luxurious halls of the palace were filled with the king's guests: Roman officials and captains, merchants from Jerusalem, desert chieftains of the Bedouin tribes... everyone wanted to greet the Tetrarch from Galilee...

A Man: May King Herod live one hundred years more!

A Woman: Good health to the sovereign of Galilee!

Herod: I welcome everyone to my house! Let's begin the party!

A Woman: Did you notice the huge bags under his eyes?

A Friend: They say the king has been experiencing terrible nightmares ever since he had the prophet imprisoned...

A Woman: Well, he'll be worse when he finds out. They say that this John is never quiet, even in jail. He has revolutionized the other prisoners. He even incites the jailers.

A Friend: Really? I can't believe it...

Woman: You better believe it, my friend. I tell you, if the king does not watch out, this long-haired man will give us a hard time. Let's just hope that the king silences him soon....

Woman Friend: If the king can't decide, then the queen should push him into it... Ha, ha!

Herodias: What's with you, Herod, my love? You look worried since this morning... Or, are you bored?

Herod: Leave me alone...

Herodias: Hmm... What's wrong with you? Come, come... Ha, ha...! Why don't you have a shot of this liquor?... It will lift your spirits... Come...

Herod: Herodias, do you think this noise will be heard down there?

Herodias: Down there....? What are you talking about?

Herod: Down in the prison cell, where else?

Herodias: There you go again! Of course the noise will be heard, so what?... Are you afraid of that scabby prophet?... Of course he hears everything!... Let him die of envy! That prophet!... wasn't he always involved in trouble?... Well, this serves him right!... Let him rot and eat his heart out!

Herod: Don't talk that way, Herodias. It could... it could bring bad luck.

Herodias: How I wish this damned prophet would be dead. I'm sick and tired of seeing you worrying about him everytime. Don't be stupid, Herod, either you forget about that good for nothing prophet, or have his head cut off. You'd better decide!

Herod: I can't do that, Herodias, I can't... I can't!

Herodias, Herod's lover, was Philip's wife, the brother of the king. She loathed John because he confronted Herod to his face with all his crimes and his adulterous affair with her...

Herodias: Salome! Salome!... Come here, my dear!

Herod: What did you call your daughter for?

Herodias: Just a minute, you wait there...

Salome: Yes, mom...

Herodias: Look, child, the king is worried, and I thought that perhaps you could drive away his worries...

Salome: What do you want me to do, mama?

Herodias: Dance for him the seven veils. You know what I mean...

The music was heard in the prison cells of the palace...

Jailer: Hey, you wretch, do you hear the noise coming from up there? It's our king's birthday!

Baptist: Your king. I've got nothing to do with him.

Jailer: There's so much food, the most expensive wine, and music... There's a great splurging all over!

Baptist: Let them... They are all getting fat like swine for the day of the massacre....

Jailer: You've got such a sharp tongue. That's why you're locked up here. If only you could shut your mouth for once, then probably the king would set you free.

Baptist: If he did, then I'd shout all the more.

Jailer: Then you're doomed, my friend... Listen, I'm a cruel soldier, but not with people like you... How I admire courageous men like you...

Baptist: I don't need your admiration. It's all silly talk. But you can do something. Why don't you tell your friends that we're all brothers and sisters and so don't lift a sword against each other...

Jailer: You want me to say that... and have my tongue cut off, huh?

Baptist: So you wouldn't dare do that, would you? But there's something else you can do. You can set me free and let me talk to them.

Jailer: Huh! That's even worse. If I let you go, then they'll be after my head, instead of my tongue. No, no, I don't want to get involved in this mess. I'm a soldier and I have to obey orders. My chief commands me to keep close watch on you.

Baptist: Don't follow the orders of an unjust man. Why don't you rebel, my friend?

Jailer: What're you telling me? Are you out of your mind?... I'm a soldier, and I'm here to obey orders. The law is the law.

Baptist: The law of Herod is crime and violation. God's law is freedom. Open up this jail and set the prisoners free. Now's the time to rebel, friend!

Meanwhile, Salome was dancing...

Herod: Very good, Salome!... How well you move your legs, young lady!... Ha, ha! You make me drool over you... You deserve a reward. Ask me anything... bracelets, silk, gold, silver, perfume... and you'll get it. You deserve half my kingdom!

At that moment, Herodias, who was reclining beside the king, looked at Salome and winked at her... Everything was planned before the dance.

Salome: My Lord: there's one dish missing on this table.

Herod: What? You want to eat more? I wouldn't want you to get fat, young lady, you're okay as you are now! Ha, ha...! Don't you think so? Tell me, what do you want?... more sauce, chicken, a lamb's head...?

Salome: No, I want the head of the prophet, John.

Herod: What?

Salome: I want the head of the prophet on a platter, for my gift.

Herod: But... but, do you know what you're saying, Salome?

Herodias: You heard her, Herod.

Herod: This is a trap... Damn you! I can't do that.

Herodias: You swore in front of many people, Herod... There are many witnesses... So the Tetrarch of Galilee does not keep his word!

There was great silence in the hall, interrupted only by the clinking of glasses. The guests who were drunk did not know what was happening. Herod's lips were trembling when he gave the command...

Herod: Aquila, go down to the jail and comply with this young lady's request.

Aquila, who was one of the king's bodyguards, obeyed the order. John did not say a word. His eyes remained open just as when he was in the river, staring at the horizon, awaiting the coming of the Messiah.

When Matthew and his friends learned about this, they took his body, which was hardened by the desert sun and buried it. All Israel mourned the death of the prophet, John, he who prepared the way for the liberator of Israel.

During the time of kings, about a thousand years before Christ, the prison emerged as an institution in Israel. In general, some sections or portions inside the palace served as the same. In Jesus' time, the prisoners could be visited. They were usually put in chains, and as a punishment, their feet were put in shackles. John the Baptist languished in jail for a number of months in the dungeon of the palace which Herod had in Machaerus, near the Dead Sea.

Herod the Great, father of the Herod in this episode, did not have Jewish blood. He was the son of an Idumean and a woman descendant of a sheik. The customs of his court were influenced more by foreign and Hellenistic customs than by the strict Jewish morals. Herod the Great maintained a harem, held orgies where his luxury in clothing and abundance of food were known in the neighboring countries. He was fond of animal fights, the theater, and gymnastic games... The court of his son, Herod Antipas, the King of Galilee during Jesus' time, similarly adopted this style of life. In Machaerus, – a fortress and a palace in one – a number of these parties were held. Herod's birthday was an annual celebration. Herod Antipas was a politically corrupt man. His personal ways were not exemplary either. Because of his greed for power, he married a daughter of Aretas IV, an Arab king. Later, when he travelled to Rome, he became a lover of Herodias, who was married to Philip, one of his stepbrothers, leaving the daughter of Aretas out in the cold. This sparked a war between the Arab king and the Galilean king, in which, Antipas apparently emerged the winner. Since then, Herod lived with Herodias, together with her daughter, Salome. The objection posed by John to this adulterous union and his criticisms of the crimes and abuses committed by the king, earned for him the ire of this woman, who, in the end, devised the death of the great prophet of the Jordan. Herod – super-stitious and coward that he was – would never have decided for himself.

In the episode, before his death John the Baptist incites to rebellion one of the soldiers he has befriended in jail. He dares him to make a de-cision to choose between an unjust law, ordering the killing of a brother, and the law of God which is life and freedom. The most ancient Christian tradition has taught us that in cases like this, one must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:27-29). Up to these days, this prophetic cry of subversion has reached us in the final words delivered by the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero in his cathedral in San Salvador: "God's law must prevail over an order to kill one's brother, which says: Do not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is against the law of God."

John's death was, at that particular moment, the consequence of the king's drunkenness, and the calculated astuteness of his lover. But this is just an appearance. Although John reached his goal in silence, in the darkness of history, his end was an equally glorious one. It was the ultimate price of long fidelity. The prophet often has to pay with his life for his criticisms and his rebellion against authority. It is in this consistency, up to the final consequences, where the true prophet becomes known. He is not an opportunist who goes with the tide when it suits him, who is courageous only because he hopes to be applauded, who says this now, but sings another tune the next day, and who does all this well, simply because he is a good actor. A prophet is one who follows one line and sticks to it, even if it costs his life. This is John the Baptist, from the time he enclosed himself in the Monastery of the Essenes or during his popular days in the Jordan up to that day when an unknown soldier cut his head off in the dungeon. He lived a life of fidelity for the cause of justice.

(Mt 14:3-12; Mk 6:17-29)

55

AN EYE FOR AN EYE, A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH

The whole Jerusalem trembled upon learning of the death of John, the prophet of the desert, beheaded like a paschal lamb in the prison cell of Machaerus. Many wept for him, as if they had lost a father and become orphaned. The news spread from house to house. Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, ordered that

security be tightened in the streets of the city to prevent any peoples' uprising. But the zealots were never intimidated by the event...

A Zealot: Comrades, the blood of the son of Zechariah must be avenged. Herod beheaded John. May the heads of all Herodians fall!

The revolutionary zealots had their daggers hidden under their tunics. That night they went to the barrio of the silversmiths, near the tower of the Angle, where Herod Antipas had his palace and where the Herodians, followers of the King of Galilee, lived.

Herodian: Agghhh...!

A Zealot: Less one... Let's go, hurry...!

The following day, dawn greeted the people with the heads of four Herodians balancing between the arches of the aqueduct...

Woman: Damn! And next they'll behead our children!

Another Woman: May God protect my neighbor, Ruth. She has a son who is imprisoned in the Antonia Tower. The retaliation of the Romans, instigated by the courtesans of King Herod, took place immediately... At the first hour in the afternoon, when the sun was at its height, and the black and yellow flags waved atop the Antonia Tower, ten young Israelites, sympathizers of the zealots, were crucified at the Skull, the macabre hill where political prisoners were executed...

Man: Damn these Romans! You'll all pay for this someday.

Another Man: Shut up, imbecile, or you'll be nailed like these unfortunate ones...

In front of the ten who were condemned to death, a cryer, cupping his mouth with his hands, was yelling for others to hear him and be forewarned.

Soldier: This is how those who rebel against Rome will end up!... Your sons will suffer the same fate if they continue to conspire against the imperial eagle!... Long live the emperor! Death to the rebels!

Man: Someday, you'll pay for this, sons of bitches!

The ten crucified men remained agonizing that whole night. Their desperate cries and curses could be heard from the walls of the city. The victims' mothers were pulling their hair and scratching their faces beside the crosses, pleading clemency for their sons, in vain.... Jerusalem could not sleep that night....

Zealot: Listen, Simon. We shall meet at Mark's house at nighttime. Is that okay with you? Tell Jesus of Nazareth, and the rest of the group. Don't come together so as not to arouse suspicion. Hurry up.

Judas Iscariot, and Simon, the freckled one who had contacts with the zealots of the capital, brought us the message. Barrabas' group had a plan and they wanted to know if they could count on us...

Jesus: What's wrong with you, Philip? Are you afraid?

Philip: Afraid, no, but horrified... Uff... Who ever asked me to come with you to this city?

Jesus: He who doesn't risk himself accomplishes nothing, fat head. Right, friends? Let's go and find out what they want from us.

When the sun hid itself behind Mount Zion, we left by twos and passing through different streets came to Mark's house, Peter's friend and a sympathizer of the movement who lived near the Gate of the Valley...

All lights were out so as not to call the attention of the soldiers patrolling ceaselessly, even to the last nook of the city. Greetings were made in silence. Then we sat on the ground. And this way, amid shadows, Barrabas, the leader of the zealots, began to speak...

Barrabas: A tooth for a tooth, comrades. Herod beheaded the prophet, John, in Machaerus, and we shall avenge his death by beheading four traitors. We have hardly cleansed our daggers and now we have to use them again. They have crucified ten of our best men.

A Zealot: May their blood spill on Pontius Pilate's head! God's curse be on him and Herod Antipas!

Barrabas: Pilate thinks we'll be scared. Well, he'll have all the wood cut from Phoenicia for the cross of every man in Israel, for all of us, when the moment comes!

Barrabas had been imprisoned before. Twice he had been trapped by the Romans and twice he was able to escape when he was about to be executed. He was still the object of their manhunt in Perea...

Barrabas: Okay, what now, Galileans? Can we count on all of you?

Philip: What for?

Barrabas: What else! To get rid of a dozen Romans and a number of treacherous Jews in our midst. We can't allow these henchmen to overcome us... So, what do you say? Can we count on you or not?

Jesus: Then what?

Barrabas: What did you say, Nazarene?

Jesus: I said, what happens next?

Jesus' inquiry somehow surprised us....

Jesus: I don't know, Barrabas.... After hearing you speak, I'm reminded of the shepherd on top of the mountain who throws a stone, pushing another stone as it rolls down, and the two stones push down another pair, then four and then ten, until finally no one can prevent the avalanche... The violence you're talking about is dangerous, like a stone thrown from the mountain top.

Barrabas: Enough of your stories, Jesus. It's they who are violent, do you understand?

Jesus: Of course I do. Yes, they beat us, they destroy us, and they are the ones who sow death. But we shouldn't allow ourselves to be influenced by their thirst for blood. The height of all this would be that they succeed in making us clones of their own image, people who know nothing but revenge...

Zealot: Okay, okay, fine, so what do you want now? Shall we just throw out our arms in surrender?

Jesus: He who crosses his arms plays along with them, too. No, Moses didn't fold his arms in surrender before the Pharaoh.

Barrabas: Moses said: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

Jesus: That's right, Barrabas... but whose eyes and teeth? Those of Herod's men whom you beheaded yesterday? Who were those men, tell me?... Were they the ones who killed the prophet, John?... Were they responsible for all the injustices in our midst?... Or were they poor creatures, like you and me, who were simply dragged into fighting against us by powerful men?

Barrabas: Oh damn, why do you talk that way, you, of all people? Have you forgotten about the death of your father, Joseph?

Jesus: That's it, precisely, Barrabas. I suffered from the pain of seeing my father beaten like a dog, for having hidden a few countrymen during the uprising in Sepphoris. I also felt in my flesh the desire for revenge. But no. Now I think this road will bring us nowhere.

Zealot: Is there another way, Nazarene? Our country needs a way out. And the only way is through the use of force.

Jesus: Are you sure? I dunno, but you from the movement want a people's rebellion. The way I see it, the people are still reticent about it. We still have blinders on our eyes. Don't you think we should do something first, to make the blind see and the deaf hear?... What do we gain from all this bloodshed if the people don't understand what's really happening?

Barrabas: We're the people's guide. They go where we lead them.

Jesus: Don't you think that would be nothing more than changing the yoke?... The people ought to stand on their own two feet and learn to walk their own way. We must find our own way out, the only true way that will set us free.

Barrabas: You talk like a dreamer. But God is not as much of a dreamer as you. It is God who seeks revenge. In the name of God, we'll all end up overcome by our enemies.

Jesus: You behead Herod's men in God's name. And they crucify us in the name of the same God. Tell me, how many gods are there, anyway?

Barrabas: There's only one, Jesus. The God of the poor. If you are with God, then you're with the poor. If you're with the poor, then, you're with God.

Jesus: You're right, Barrabas. I, too, believe in the God of the poor, the one who set our ancestors free from slavery in Egypt. He's the only existing God. The rest are idols created by the Pharaohs, so they could continue abusing their slaves. But....

Barrabas: But, what?

The waning moonlight creeped into the cracks of the house, shedding somber light on the serious faces of the zealots...

Barrabas: But what?!

Jesus: You must learn to love them, too.

Zealot: Love them?... Love whom?

Jesus: The Romans. Herod's followers. Our enemies.

Barrabas: Is that meant to be a joke or... or we just didn't get you right?

Jesus: Listen to me. And forgive me if I can't make myself clear. But I think God makes the sun rise everyday not only for the good but also for the bad people. We who believe in the God of the poor must follow God's example. We mustn't allow ourselves to fall into this trap called hatred.

Barrabas: I can hardly see your face in the dark, Nazarene. I don't know if it's really you talking to me, the one they say is the prophet of justice, or if you're simply a crazy man pretending to be a prophet.

Jesus: Look, Barrabas. If we fight for justice we shall have enemies, that's for sure. And we'll have to fight them, strip them of their wealth and power, as our ancestors did while getting out of Egypt. Yeah, we'll have enemies, but we can't do what they're doing, we can't be dragged into this evil act of revenge.

Barrabas: Okay, once and for all, let's finish this off. All these are bedtime stories. Tell me if you're willing to kill.

Jesus: No, I'm not, Barrabas.

Zealot: And so they'll kill you, imbecile. Then, everything will have gone to perdition.

Jesus: When do you win and when do you lose? Can you tell me?

Barrabas: To hell with you, Jesus of Nazareth. You're a crazy man, a real crazy man. Or probably, you're a good for nothing coward, I dunno. And the rest of you, do you also think the same way as he, or are you as crazy as he?

Peter was about to respond, but at that moment, all of us almost froze to death....

Zealots: Soldiers! The soldiers are coming!

Another Zealot: The guards of Pilate! They've discovered us!

Another Zealot: Damn! We're all doomed...!

Barrabas: Hurry! Flee through the garden....

Jesus: Peter, pass through that door.

Peter: What about you, Jesus?

Jesus: Go ahead. I can hold the soldiers back until you get away from here.

Peter: You're out of your mind, Jesus. They'll kill you....

Jesus: Go away, go away fast...

Peter: What'll you do?

Jesus: The same thing that David did to the Philistines...

The soldiers were already banging the door....

One Soldier: Hey, who's there?! Open the door!

Jesus: Go, go....!

Barrabas' men ably leaped over the walls facing the other street. We slipped through the garden of Mark's house and disappeared in the shadows. Jesus was left alone. He was trembling with fear as he

opened the door...

One Soldier: Why is there so much noise around here, huh?

Jesus: Agu, agu, agu...! Ha, ha, ha...he..he!

Another Soldier: Who's this creature?... Hey, you, what are you doing here?

Jesus: Down with the soldiers, up with the captains, down with the centurions, up with the generals! Ha, ha, ha...!

Jesus was beating over the door's frame with his fingers and looked at the soldiers with a blank smile, as saliva dripped from his mouth over his beard, while he continued to tap the door with his palm...

One Soldier: Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You big, stupid fool! Here, take this so you'll learn...!

Jesus: Give it to me on the other cheek too! ha, ha!

Another Soldier: This man's crazy. As if we hadn't enough of his type in Jerusalem! Let's get out of here!

Jesus: Ha, ha, he, he....! Ufff... What we should free ourselves from....

It was still dark when the group met at Lazarus' inn, at Bethany. We were still talking, when the cocks crowed. King David acted like a fool in order to save his skin. The Moreno used the same trick, and saved all of us that day. Yeah, at times, it was better to be astute than to resort to violence.

Although the Zealots concentrated their activities on Galilean lands, the seat of the movement, they were also mobilized in Jerusalem. Pilgrimages during the holidays served as occasions for them to establish their links in the capital, where they also had groups of sympathizers. Among the revolutionaries influenced by the Zealot movement was the notorious group of assassins – terrorists armed with daggers – who found it more convenient to conduct their attacks at the height of the holiday celebrations. Zealots and assassins kidnapped important persons, assaulted landed properties and houses of the wealthy, and laid siege on the city's armory. They considered their struggle as a kind of “holy war.” The jealous God who tolerates no other gods (money, the emperor, the unjust laws) gave them their name: Jealous, Zealots. The punishment for all political crimes against the Roman empire was death on the cross.

Barrabas (an Aramaic name that means “son of the father”) appears in the gospels only in the books of the passion, as a political rebel who killed a Roman soldier in an uprising. In the episode, he appears as one of the important leaders of the Zealots in Jerusalem. He ought to have heard of Jesus because he was then a popular man whom the city's poor people listened to, putting their hopes in him. Since the zealot movement was of the people, it would be but natural for Barrabas to identify himself with Jesus and his group.

The so-called “law of retaliation” (Ex 21:23-25): “Eye for an eye...” should not be interpreted simplistically as a law of revenge. There have been efforts to oppose the God who gave Israel this “savage” law, with Jesus who was all love and mercy. But such opposition is wrong. The law of retaliation in a world of four thousand years or more, was a law that respected life: an imposition of penalty that corresponded equally to the offense, in fact sought to put a limit on revenge to stop violence. The ancient world, recipient of this law, was a bloodthirsty one, with people overpowering each other by force, and not because it was a right. All this must be taken into account in order to understand the position taken by Jesus and the Zealots as well. The latter were not terrorists thirsty for blood. They were faithful to an old legal tradition, which, in a sense, was valid in their time. Jesus came offering them another way, removing all barriers for a possible co-existence of all humankind, speaking no longer of restricted revenge, but of other values like strength in weakness and love of enemies.

Jesus was not a Zealot. The Zealots were intolerably nationalistic people. They wanted Israel's freedom from the Roman yoke, but they remained there. Jesus was patriotic because he loved his country, but he was not nationalistic. His mission did not recognize barriers nor discrimination. The Zealots were profoundly religious, but their God was exclusively for the chosen people of Israel, who in his kingdom would take revenge on the pagan nations. This was never the God of Jesus. The Zealots ardently defended

the strict compliance of the law. Jesus differed from them on this point, as he advocated total freedom before the law and the authority, notwithstanding their Jewish character. Nevertheless, to absolutely oppose Jesus and the Zealots is to overlook some significant realities: Jesus related with them without reservations – in all probability some of his disciples were Zealots. Jesus shared with them many social concerns, and expressed a common desire for the coming of the kingdom of justice. Jesus' association with this popular movement cannot be dismissed categorically. Perhaps what is most certain at this point is to affirm that what Jesus proposes is a lot more profound, and goes beyond revolution as envisioned by the Zealots.

On the question of tactics, Jesus differed from the Zealots in his stand regarding violence. In his words, as well as in his attitude, Jesus questioned the use of violence as a means. This topic is too complicated to discuss in just a word or two, nor can it be affirmed simplistically that Jesus was a non-violent man and that the gospel condemns violence in any form. One must first take into account that there is violence in the act of killing as well as in a situation where one is not allowed to live. There are not only acts of violence but also structures and situations of violence. There are violent people, but it is even more dangerous to experience violent societies, where, because of injustice, many perish from hunger, unemployment, disease and misery.... On the other hand, Jesus was also violent when he faced the authorities. His words were intensely violent. He showed violence on some occasions, especially when he figured in that forceful act in the temple's courtyard. Nevertheless, Jesus killed no one; they killed him, instead. He never encouraged people to use any form of violence, neither did he resort to armed resistance in order to save himself, when he could have very well done so. In this Jewish context, the violence advocated by the Zealots had no hope for success; it was doomed to fail. It was an excuse for the Romans to unleash their powerful repression against the people, as happened in the year 70 after Christ, when Jerusalem was devastated by the Romans in a war against the Zealot subversives.

It is evident that before such power of arms, the Christian principally opposes with the strength there is in weakness, hidden in the true word and in the freedom one has in the struggle by not being attached to anything and therefore, with nothing to lose. Certainly, if we respond to violence with violence, we shall end up being as violent as the one we are trying to fight. On the other hand, we must not forget that starting from the Fathers of the Church, St. Thomas, up to Paul VI, the Church has defended the right to an armed revolution in a situation of prolonged injustice and when all peaceful means to overcome it have been exhausted.

Bearing this in mind, Jesus speaks of loving one's enemies. Without taking this phrase in context, we run the risk of missing it, transforming it into a sweet formula that is bereft of meaning. In the episode, Jesus utters that difficult phrase about loving one's enemy, basing it on his own experience. Perhaps only he who is tempted to hate his enemy can truly love. Only he who suffered from the hatred of his enemy by torture, humiliation or death, can forgive him. The one who preaches pardon and love by lip service has little authority to speak about it and is never convincing. The evangelical word about loving the enemy must be taken seriously. It cannot be overused, nor must one abuse it. In a way, the gospel does not tell us that we should not have enemies; but in having them, we must be able to love them. That is to say the gospel is not shunning conflict. It does not create conflict, neither does it encourage it. It accepts it and aims to direct it toward love.

In this episode, Jesus does not say that one has to offer the other cheek, but he himself gives it. He does it, getting his inspiration from what King David did in the land of the Philistines in order to escape from his enemies (1 S 21:11-16). It is a prophetic gesture, and therefore, a liberating one. Through his action, he saves his companions. It is a way of saying that if giving the other cheek is viewed as a form of passivity or resignation, then we are not being faithful to the gospel. However, if we consider non-violence as a manner of looking for efficacy, a strategy, astuteness, then we are very close to understanding the meaning of non-violence in the message of Jesus.

(Mt 5:38-48; Lk 6:27-36)

THE WAILING OF THE WIND

James: Hey, guys, better get to sleep early, 'cuz tomorrow you've got to rise at dawn!

Peter: Oh, my feet! Long journeys like this are never my cup of tea!

Mary: Why don't you stay a couple of days more? There's room in the inn, especially now that people are beginning to return to their towns.

Peter: No, Mary, we've got to go back to Galilee. D'ya know why? Because we've already run out of money. We haven't even got a copper coin.

Mary: Bah, that's no problem. My brother Lazarus has grown fond of you. If you can't pay now, you can do so later, on your next trip here. You're coming back, aren't you?

We were gathering the trinkets and things we bought during the feast of the Passover in Jerusalem while saying goodbye to Martha and Mary. It was already night when Lazarus, the innkeeper, came back, running....

Lazarus: Pshh! Is anyone of you carrying hot items back north?

Peter: Hot items? Are you crazy? They're very strict in the customs nowadays. Why do you ask?

Lazarus: Because you've got a visitor. A bigwig. One of the seventy magistrates from Sanhedrin... He's there outside, with a couple of bodyguards, and he's asking about you. I thought you were carrying smuggled goods.

Mary: If they do, then they conceal them very well. They're not Galileans for nothing!

Lazarus: Go upstairs, guys, somebody's got to go and face them...!

James: Then I'll go and ask them. Will you come with me, John?

My brother James and I went to see who was looking for us. There at the door of the Beautiful Palm was a tall man, with a long white beard, waiting for us. He was wrapped in an elegant purple cloak, and was accompanied by two Ethiopians with shaven heads and daggers at the waist.

James: Let's see now, what can we do for you, Sir?

Nicodemus: I'd like to speak with your leader.

James: With our leader? Here no one is a leader of anyone. We're a group of friends...

Nicodemus: I'm referring to this guy named Jesus of Nazareth. The man who accomplishes "things."

James: What "things?" Please make yourself clear.

Nicodemus: I came not to talk to you but him. Please call him.

James and I went back to the inn....

Jesus: He wants to speak with me? What does he want?

James: I don't like the looks of him. He's an important Pharisee, you know. It's rather strange that he should come here at this time... There must be something else....

Mary: Don't be long, Jesus. You haven't finished your story yet.....!

Jesus went out to the garden where the mysterious visitor was waiting for him.....

Nicodemus: Damn, finally I find you, Nazarene! I'd like to have a word with you, alone...

Jesus: That's alright. If you're looking for hot items, then you're wasting your time. The only thing I'm taking from Jerusalem is a hanky for my mom, because here they're very cheap.

Nicodemus: No, nothing of that sort, young man. Let me explain. Hey, you two, wait for me over there...

The two Ethiopians distanced themselves about a stone's throw...

Nicodemus: There must be some place here where we can talk...

Jesus: We'll be fine under that palm tree. Let's go!

From the kitchen stove, we saw Jesus heading for a corner of the garden. The clouds moved swiftly in the sky, pushed by the night winds moaning amid the trees...

Jesus: What is it?...

Nicodemus: My name is Nicodemus, Jesus. I'm a magistrate in the Supreme Court of Justice. My father was the illustrious Jechonias, the senior treasurer of the temple.

Jesus: What does an important man like you want from me?

Nicodemus: I know you're quite puzzled by my visit, although you already have an idea as to why I'm here.

Jesus: I must have very little imagination, because, frankly speaking, I have no idea what you want from me.

Nicodemus: I don't need anything from you. As a matter of fact, I'm here to help you.

Jesus: To help me?

Nicodemus: Let's say it will be a mutual cooperation. A mutual benefit, do you understand?

Jesus: I don't get it. Please make yourself clear.

Nicodemus: Jesus, I know a lot about you... Look, what you did in the Bethesda pool has already spread throughout the city... Yeah... C'mon, don't put on that face. I've heard about the paralytic you made to walk, just like that... I have also heard about similar things that happened in Galilee: a madman, a leper... they even say that you brought a dead girl back to life at the height of the wake. These rumors have gone as far as the Sanhedrin...

Jesus: Uff, how fast news spreads in this country, huh?

Nicodemus: As you can see, I have been following you. And I congratulate you, Jesus.

Jesus: I still don't understand where you came from and what you want from me....

Nicodemus: Oh, c'mon, don't deny it. Tricks must be performed well, for them to become tricks, I know that... Don't tell me those were miracles... you don't have the face of a saint... That's okay, that's okay. You don't trust me, I understand. But let's get to the point. After all, I don't really mind whether they are tricks of yours or God's miracles... or if it's the devil who's behind all this... It doesn't really matter. The people can't distinguish one from the other. They have been suffering enough and they need something to entertain them. You're a master in amusing the people... In other words, I have a business proposition, Jesus of Nazareth. We can be partners and we share the profit equally... Or if you want, I can give you a fixed rate, say for example... 50 dinars. Is it too small?... Yeah, I know, but... how about 75.... Some more?... I think that's too much for a peasant, since after all, you'll just spend the money drinking in the pubs. Anyway, I have found you to be a nice guy, I can raise it to 100 dinars... and the deal is closed. Now, let me explain what I want you to do.... Hey, what are you laughing at?

Jesus: Nothing. I just find it funny...

Nicodemus: Yeah, I know. You Galileans are known for your cunning. Fine. I think 100 dinars is a salary good enough for a magician... but, that's okay, name your price. How much do you want?... Believe me, man, more than anyone else, I'm very much interested in your craft.

Jesus: Yeah, I see that, but... I don't think I'm the right man for you, Nicodemus....

Nicodemus: How's that?..... Why? I can give much money, you know that, and I mean it.

Jesus: No, it's not that.

Nicodemus: Then, why?

Jesus: Well, it's because... you're very old.

Nicodemus: That's it, precisely, young man. They say that the devil is wise because he's old, and not because he's the devil. With my experience and with your ability, we can go very far.

Jesus: No, Nicodemus. I must tell you that I need young blood.

Nicodemus: Well, I may be old, and that's true, but... my health isn't that bad. I'm still quite strong....

Jesus: Nicodemus: I need children.

Nicodemus: Children? C'mon, Jesus, leave the children alone in school and let's talk about serious things.

Jesus: I'm serious, Nicodemus. I need children. If you want to get involved in this matter, then, you would have to... to be born again. That's right, be a child again...

Nicodemus: They told me you joke a lot, Nazarene. Well, since you know a lot of tricks, maybe you can put me back in my mother's womb, that I may be born again... Anyway, let's get back to our deal. As I was saying, this has something to do.....

Jesus: You've gotten old amassing a lot of wealth, Nicodemus. Your heart has grown calloused and you've become hard of hearing. That's why you don't understand. That's why you don't hear the wind blowing.

Nicodemus: Hey, I may be old but I'm not deaf. Of course I hear the wind. But I don't understand a word of yours. What are you trying to tell me?... Aren't you interested in making money?... Is that it?... Oh, you young people are hopeless cases... You sing the same tune. Of course, money becomes the least of your worries, after all: "Daddy is just behind us!" ...Then, when the fruit becomes ripe, you realize that with money, you can buy almost anything in this life... However, if you are not ambitious at all, then, I'll keep my money. That'll be the worse for you.

Jesus: No, don't keep your money. I didn't tell you to.

Nicodemus: Ah, you smart guy, I knew you would take in the hook. I knew you would be interested in my proposition... Look, we could start with a presentation in a theater... or in the hippodrome, where we can take in more people... or... well, what's the matter with you? ...Are you shocked, or something?

Jesus: Nicodemus, don't you hear the wind?... It brings in the moanings of the suffering people, those who die calling the Lord for justice to prevail on earth. How can you keep your money and be so deaf to the wailings of the wind?... Listen... It's like a woman crying while giving birth... She's bringing to light a new human, one who lives not for money but for others, because he or she would rather give than receive.

Nicodemus: Now I don't understand a thing you said.

Jesus: Of course, because if you want to understand, then you'll have to choose.

Nicodemus: Choose what?

Jesus: You can't serve two masters at the same time. Choose between God and money. If you choose God, you will hear the wailing of the wind and it will bring you some place that you haven't imagined in your whole life. If you stick to your money, you'll be all alone by yourself.

Nicodemus: Really, I don't understand a thing you're saying.

Jesus: You ought to know. You're a learned man, with so many titles to boast of, can't you understand what's going on? The people are claiming their right. We want to be free like the wind. We want to be happy. We want to live.

Nicodemus: Jesus of Nazareth, now I know what you are: a dreamer! But this world you're dreaming of will never come!

Jesus: It has already come, Nicodemus. God so loves the world that he has already done it. The Kingdom of God has already begun!

Nicodemus: Get down from your pedestal, young man, and be more realistic... Take this advice from an old man. In the first place think of yourself, and in the second place, too. Then, think of the deluge to come. Things are as they are and they will always be so.

Jesus: No, Nicodemus. Things can change, in fact, they are already changing. In Galilee, we have seen very poor people sharing what little they have with others. You wanted to see miracles, didn't you? Well, get down from your master's chair and go to our barrio. I assure you, Nicodemus, you'll learn how to make the greatest miracle of all, that of sharing what one has.

Nicodemus: Of course, you're a crazy man. There's no doubt about it. But knowing you speak....

Jesus: Look up, Nicodemus... don't you see it?

The full moon of the month of Nisan was as round as a coin, and spread its immaculately white light over the garden of the inn...

Jesus: Look at it... it's as bright as your money. But, do you know what Moses did in the desert? He took the bronze coins and created a serpent to stand in the middle of the camping site. Those who looked at the serpent were cured from the snake bites... The snake from the money has bitten you, Nicodemus, and you've got the poison inside you.... If you want to be cured...

Nicodemus remained silent, as he stared at the moon... The handful of coins he had in his pocket became as heavy as a bundle. He felt he was older and wearier than before, as if his life had not been more than water flowing through his hands...

Nicodemus: Do you think there's still... hope... for old men like me?

Jesus: Of course, there is. Water cleanses and the spirit is renewed... if you wish...

The wind continued to blow among the trees. It came from very far, dragging along the words of Jesus coming from afar, toward the far away mountains. When Nicodemus left the inn on his way to Jerusalem, the wind kept him company on his return journey.

Nicodemus' name is mentioned only in the gospel of John. He is one of the few persons belonging to the religious institution who maintained a friendly relationship with Jesus. He was a Pharisee of the Sanhedrin group. The Sanhedrin was the supreme council of the Jewish government. It also functioned as a court of justice composed of seventy members who were profoundly knowledgeable of the Scriptures, in order for them to be able to pass judgment. Specifically, the Sanhedrin members of the Pharisee's party – like Nicodemus – had occupied the administrative positions of the council and they wielded great influence. The Sanhedrin members were highly privileged persons in society: Masters of knowledge and all power which gave them the authority to interpret the laws. Besides, they were generally rich. In the gospel of John, reference to the “chiefs of the Jews” pointed to men occupying religious-political posts of this type. A well-placed man like Nicodemus would have had vague intentions in approaching Jesus. In this episode, he appears interested in “lucrative” business. He wants to capitalize on the religious for his own benefit. Among the members of the Sanhedrin, such an attitude ought not to be thought of as unusual. In Jesus' time, the Sanhedrin was a body with corrupt political, social and economic power. To a man with this type of orientation, Jesus offers a basic alternative on the true religious attitude: God or money. To choose God is to be converted to the Kingdom. To go for the money is to be excluded from God's plan.

In the dialogue between Jesus and this influential Pharisee, as told in the fourth gospel, John employs a series of theological themes: the water and the Spirit; what comes from above and what is of the earth; light and darkness... He likewise makes use of symbols: Moses' serpent, the wind... This tells us that he does not confine himself solely to a real conversation, since such would be improbable. Rather, he deals with a theological explanation. Jesus speaks of freedom (the wind blowing where it will) to this man dominated by the law and he brings up the possibility of being born again, of starting a new life of conversion.

The idea of “a new person” as expounded in this chapter is basic in understanding the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. This, in the end, is what the whole conversion is about: The transformation toward life, toward what is new, toward the future. The new human that Jesus proposes to Nicodemus in this account is one whose attitude of sharing gets first priority over personal benefit. He is a person for others vis-à-vis the individual. This is difficult, as it demands a youthfulness of heart. The theme of the new human is frequently found in the letters of Paul (Col 3:9-11; Eph 8:2-10 and 4:20-24).

The consequences of Christian baptism have been traditionally expressed in the manner by which Jesus dealt with Nicodemus: to be born again by water and Spirit. Water, which is the symbol of life, and Spirit (in Hebrew, spirit and wind are expressed by the same word: “ruah”), the symbol of freedom, are the marks of a Christian. A Christian must be that new person who will always choose life and defend freedom before any form of servitude. Baptism makes possible this new human whose disposition will be to choose the God of life in all commitments and all actions.

(Jn 3:1-21)

FIVE LOAVES OF BREAD AND TWO FISH

When King Herod killed the prophet John in Machaerus, the people were filled with rage and fear. We were then in Jerusalem. After knowing what had happened, we hurriedly returned to Galilee by way of the mountains...

Nathanael: Ay, Philip, I can't stand it anymore... my feet are swollen!

Philip: Stop complaining, Nat. It won't take much longer.

Nathanael: What'dya mean it won't take long? We haven't reached Magdala yet...

Philip: Man, I mean, it won't take long for us to be beheaded like John the Baptist. By then, we won't feel the pain anymore. Not even the corns on our feet!

Nathanael: If that's meant to be a joke, it's not funny.

Finally, after several hours on the road....

John: Hey, fellows, I can see Capernaum! Look over there!

Peter: Long live our Lake of Galilee!

Philip: And long live these thirteen crazy men who will dip themselves into it again!

After three days of walking on the road, we returned home. We were happy, in spite of the long journey. As always, Peter and I started to run the last mile, to see who arrived first....

John: Damn you, stone thrower, you won't be first this time...!

When we got to Jerusalem, Peter's family, ours and half of the barrio folks were all out to receive us and to find out how things were in Jerusalem...

A Neighbor: Hey Peter, is it true what they say, that Pontius Pilate stole the temple's money again for his damned aqueduct?

Peter: Not only that! All the prisons are overcrowded. From the temple's atrium, you could hear the shouts of the tormentors in the Antonia Tower.

Another Neighbor: Swine!

John: Before we left, they crucified ten more Zealots. These were ten young men who were full of life and were ready to fight!

Zebedee: Yeah. They even took Linus and Manasses prisoners, including the son of old Sixto.

Salome: They were after the husband of your friend Chloe, and he had to hide in the lepers' caves. Gideon, the Sadducee, reported him.

John: What a traitor!

A Neighbor: A group of ironsmiths protested against the latest tax imposed on bronze, and presto!... all of them ended up in jail.

Salome: And were all beaten!

Zebedee: It's been six days now, but they haven't been released yet.

Jesus: What about their families?

Zebedee: As you might expect, Jesus. They're all suffering from hunger. What else can they do? Before, it was the beggars and the farmers who lost their harvest. Now it's the prisoners' children. This leaves Capernaum in a pitiful state.

John: We've got to do something, Jesus. We can't just take it sitting down.

Philip: That's exactly my point. We went to Jerusalem, and now, we're back from Jerusalem. Now, what?

Peter: Since all thirteen of us are here, we can plan something.

Salome: Don't make trouble, Peter, if you want your head spared. Herod's policemen saw four men in the inn, and accusing them of conspiracy, arrested them.

Jesus: Let's stay outside the city, so as not to arouse suspicion. Yeah, tomorrow we can go and look for a quiet place where we can discuss this... Do you all agree?

Nathanael: Right, tomorrow morning will be fine. But if it's in the afternoon, better. I'm too dead tired to go even one more step. My kidneys are killing me!

The next day – in the afternoon – James asked old Gaspar to lend us his big boat. All thirteen rode toward the direction of Bethsaida. It was spring and the lakeshore was teeming with flowers and the grass was very green....

John: Hey, you Peter! Did you bring along some olives to fill up our bellies?

Peter: Here, grab them... olives and bread!

Philip: Why are those men along the coast? Could anything be the matter?...

John: They're probably drowning. The water is rough along those bends...

Man: Hey, you on the boat, come over here! C'mon!

Nathanael: I guess we're gonna be the ones to drown. Look, Peter, these men making signs at us, aren't they the twins from the big house?

Peter: Exactly... How come they're here?

John: Gaspar must have told them we're coming this way... so they came ahead of us...

A Woman: Peter!... Isn't Jesus coming with you?!

Peter: Yeah, is there anything wrong with him?

A Man: With him and with all of you!... Things are bad in Capernaum. Haven't they told you about it yet?

A Woman: We're starving here!... Our husbands were taken prisoner and we have nothing to feed our children!

A Man: We who are free can't find work and can't even earn a single, lousy dinar.

Peter: Well, what can we do, we're even worse off than you.

Another Man: C'mon, c'mon, why don't you fasten your boat here!... C'mon!

John: Say, Jesus, wouldn't it be better to proceed to the other side?... There are just too many people here!

Jesus: The people are desperate, John. They don't know what to do, nor where to go. They're like a flock without a shepherd.

There were several people waiting on the shore. Some came from Bethsaida. Others, from the hamlet of Dalmanutha. There were also a number coming from Capernaum...

A Man: You always claim that things are getting better, that we shall finally lift our heads... but look what happened, when the prophet John raised his head, they cut it off!

A Woman: Now we have no one to vouch for us. What hope is left for us, huh?... We're doomed!

Jesus: Please don't say that, Mam Ana. God won't abandon us. If we ask, God will give it to us. If we look for a way out, we'll find it. Didn't you know what Bartholomew did the other day, when some relatives of his came to visit him at midnight?...

A Man: Bartholomew? Who's Bartholomew?

Jesus: Hey, don't you remember that man who was shouting at the synagogue?

A Woman: Oh yeah, and what happened to that rascal?

Jesus: Well, he kept on asking, in order to feed his visitors. Poor man, he had no other choice.

Jesus, as always, ended up telling stories to be understood better. We all sat down, one by one. It was green all over the place...

Jesus: Well, the other night Bartholomew was visited by his relatives. He had nothing in the pot to offer to them, so he went to his neighbor: "Neighbor, open the door!... Do you have leftover bread from

dinner?" ...But this neighbor was already snoring, deep asleep. He went to another neighbor: "Neighbor, please!" Another neighbor shouted from his bed: "Will you leave me in peace! Can't you see we're all in bed now?" ...But Bartholomew continued knocking at every neighbor's door until finally, a neighbor relented, stood up and gave him pieces of bread, just to get rid of him.

A Woman: And so?

Jesus: God's like that. If we knock at God's door, God will open it for us and help us out of our difficulties at that moment. Don't you think so?

When Jesus finished his story, a thin woman carrying a basket of figs on her head and wearing a soiled apron, came near us...

Melanie: Please pardon my boldness, rashness, but... I don't know, I think sometimes, things happen the other way around. Many times, it's God who knocks at our door. We're the ones sleeping very soundly. God comes and bangs on our door so that we can share our extra bread with those who have nothing.

Melanie's words, the fig vendor, surprised us all.

Melanie: Isn't it true what I'm saying, countrymen? Yeah, it's good to be asking the Lord, but as far as I know, no manna comes from heaven anymore. It used to, before, when our ancestors were walking through that desert. But now, miracles no longer happen...

Jesus: This woman's right. Listen, my friends: The situation is bad. There are several families suffering from hunger in Capernaum, in Bethsaida and in all of Galilee. But if we had unity, if we put together the little we have, then things would go better, don't you agree?

John: I agree with you, Jesus, but it's just too late. Let's stop this and let's all go. Yeah, fellows, it's quite late, don't you see? Let's go back to Capernaum...

A Man: No, no, you can't leave now. We've got to settle the matter of the prisoners' wives and how the jobless are going to eat.

Peter: We'll talk about it some other time. It's getting dark... and frankly...

A Woman: And so you must. Good Lord, if we leave now, we'll surely pass out along the way!

Jesus: Hey, Philip, isn't there any place here where we can buy something?

Philip: We can buy a few pieces of bread at Dalmanutha, but we would need two hundred dinars to feed so many people!

Jesus: This is how it is, friends. You're hungry, and so are we. We brought along some olives, but they're not enough for everyone. Maybe some of you don't want to share the bread that you have under your tunic, so you can't bring it out!

John: Right on, Jesus, and look, here's a boy who has brought along some food.

Jesus: What've you got there, little boy?

Boy: Five loaves of barley bread and two fish.

Jesus: Listen, neighbors, why don't we do as Melanie said a while ago...? Let's all think as one family and share what we have with everyone? Perhaps there'll be enough for all...

Man: Very well then. Hey, little boy, bring your five loaves of bread over here! I've got two or three more!

Jesus: Peter, take out your olives and put them here in the middle for everyone... Has anybody got anything else?

Another Man: We have a few pieces of salmon over here! Two from this little boy here, and probably a few more from others...

Melanie: Here's my basket of figs, countrymen. Whoever is hungry may eat them free of charge...

It was so simple. Those who brought bread shared it with everyone. Cheese and dates were likewise distributed to all. The women improvised a few bonfires and cooked fish... And so that night everyone ate, by the shore of Lake Tiberias....

A Woman: Hey, if anyone cares for some more fish or bread, we still have some here... How about you, Peter?

Peter: No, I've eaten a lot. I'm more bloated than a hippopotamus!

Another Woman: Little boy, go and collect all the pieces of leftover bread. We can still make use of them!

John: And now fellows, everyone to the boat! We've got to go home!

A Man: Just a minute, guys, don't leave yet... We haven't settled the problem of the prisoners' wives yet... oh, well, of course, I understand. All that we have to do is...

Melanie: Share what you have.

Jesus: Right. You share today and tomorrow too. In this way, there'll be food for everyone.

All thirteen of us got into Gaspar's boat and paddled our way to Capernaum in the middle of the night... While crossing the lake, I had been thinking that a miracle, a great miracle had taken place right before our eyes that afternoon.

About three kilometers from Capernaum, very near the Lake of Galilee, is Tabgha, where, according to ancient tradition, Jesus ate bread and fish together with a multitude of his countrymen. Tabgha is the Arabic contraction of the Greek name "Heptapegon," which means "Seven Fountains." The church that is presently visited in Tabgha is built on the one that used to exist there one thousand four hundred years ago. The Mosaic tiles on the floor of the so-called "church of multiplication" belong to the ancient temple. They are of great artistic and archaeological value. One of these very ancient tiles represents a basket with five loaves of bread with two fish on the sides. Since ancient times, the bread and fish have been a Eucharistic symbol, in reference to the text in the gospel where what is essential in our celebration of the Eucharist takes place: a community sharing their faith, their hope and their bread in the presence of Jesus.

In the episode, Jesus tells his countrymen the parable of a friend who asks for help in the middle of the night (Lk 11:5-8). Jesus wants to point out the trust we ought to have in the Lord, because He listens to the voice calling out to Him for help. Sooner or later, he will open the door for us. On the other hand, Jesus presents to us a humorous story with a practical lesson. This tenacity in asking, that stubbornness, that oriental perseverance in knowing how to insist, that astuteness of one who has nothing in getting what he wants, all these are values one must understand, in building the Kingdom of Justice.

Bread was the staple food in Jesus' times. It had been so until lately for the majority of countries in the world. Some uprisings and revolutions were caused by a lack of it or by its increase in price, making it unaffordable for the poor. Lack of bread – which is tantamount to saying hunger – has, on many occasions, sparked rebellion among the poor. Through the writings of the period, we can more or less approximate the price of bread in Jesus' time. A daily consumption for one person was equivalent to $\frac{1}{12}$ of a dinar, that is, $\frac{1}{12}$ of the daily wage. For the majority of jobs, it was common to earn one dinar a day. Bread was eaten in the form of flattened rolls, buns, a little thick perhaps, like what continues to be eaten in oriental countries. An adult consumed at least three of these torts for a meal.

God does not feed people directly. The most palpable proof of this is the prevailing hunger all over the world and experienced by the majority of humankind, a hunger not willed by God. The hungry need not wait for the solution of their misery from heaven. The gospel gives us an alternative: by sharing. It is not necessary to "buy" – as the disciples proposed. It is enough to "give," share in common what each has. Thus, there will be enough for everyone. This would be the greatest of all miracles. If everything is shared, "everyone will be satisfied" and there might even be an excess.

The mission of the Christian community in a world dominated by injustice and where the rule of money and accumulation of wealth prevails, will always be love. It is not love expressed in words, in beautiful speeches, but in the act of sharing. God is generous and wants everyone to eat, live and be happy. This desire of God can only be a reality through the generosity of the community. And this is the message that the community conveys and celebrates when they get together in the Eucharistic sharing of the Bread.

(Mt 14:13-21 and 15:32-39; Mk 6:30-44 and 8:1-10; Lk 10-17; Jn 6:1-14)

IN FRONT OF THE SYNAGOGUE OF CAPERNAUM

It was Saturday. Like all Saturdays, we would get together in the synagogue of Capernaum. In the assembly were several of those who had eaten with us in Bethsaida, where we had shared the fish and the loaves of bread. The prisoners' relatives were also present, as well as a number of beggars.... After the ritual prayers, Phaniel, one of the wealthiest proprietors in the city, stood up to render the Scripture reading...

Phaniel: "Then a small thing, like a grain, similar to frost, appeared in the desert. Moses told the sons of Israel: This is manna, the bread of God that nourishes us. This is what the Lord commands: that each one gets what he needs for him and his family to eat. The children of Israel thus obeyed. However, some got more than what they needed and so the others got little. So they divided it equally among themselves so that everybody would have only what they needed. Moses likewise said: no one is to keep the manna for the next day. But some did not obey him and they started to hoard food, which became infested with worms and became spoiled. Moses had commanded each one to get only what was necessary for his subsistence..." This is the word of God in the sacred book of the Law!

All: Amen! Amen!

Then Eliab, the Rabbi, in his usual shrill voice, addressed himself to everyone in the synagogue...

Rabbi: Brothers and sisters, who among you wants to explain the text?... Come on, feel free to comment on the holy word that we have just heard...

Amos: The one who read it ought to feel ashamed of himself!

Amos, one of the laborers in the property of Phaniel, broke the silence...

Amos: I don't want to comment on anything. What I want is to shout at the face of this greedy man: comply with what you've just read!... All of you, please listen and be the judge: Phaniel hasn't paid me a single cent for four months already. I work myself to death on his farm, and yet, he never pays me... Thief!

Rabbi: You shut up and bring out your grudges somewhere else! This is not a tribunal, but the House of God!

Amos: If they don't listen to me in the Tribunal, where do I go, huh?

Rabbi: Shut up, I said!... I repeat: Is there any brother of ours who would like to comment on the word of God?

Simeon: Yes, yes, Rabbi, I'd like to comment on it!

All eyes turned to the hunchback, Simeon, a poor man living near the market...

Rabbi: What have you got to say?

Simeon: Well, actually, I've got nothing to say... Moses said it all. You heard him, didn't you? No one is to have more and no one is to have less. No one is to have excess bread, and no one is to be wanting in it. That's the law of Moses. I'm a son of Moses, ain't I? That man, over there, Mr. Eliazir, is Moses' son, too... Then why are his barns bursting with wheat and barley while I'm here dying of hunger, huh?

Rabbi: You shut up too, silly man! What you're saying has nothing to do with the word of God. If you want to discuss politics, then go to the tavern.

Simeon: I'm not talking of politics, Rabbi. All I'm saying is that my children haven't got even a piece of bread to eat.

Rabbi: Eat! Eat! That's all that you can think of brothers and sisters, we are in the house of God. For a moment, let's forget all these material concerns and talk of matters of the spirit.

A Woman: Of course, you can say that because you always have hot meals everyday! If you were starving like us, you would sell your spirit for a plate of lentils!

Rabbi: Get this scandalous woman out of the synagogue! I'll never allow anyone to desecrate this holy place!.... Hmm... Now let's talk of sacred things, the divine bread, the manna. As the reading says, manna fell from heaven over the Israelites..

Woman: But what falls on us are the beatings of the guards! My two sons have been imprisoned for a week and beaten like dogs! Do you know why? Because this swine of a Sadducee denounced him! Yes, Gideon, you did it and don't you turn your face, for everyone knows, you traitor..!

Rabbi: What's going on here, huh?... What have you come here for, to pray or to pester others in the community?...

Amos: Brothers? How can this usurer be my brother when just yesterday he grabbed me by the neck and forced me to pay the damned interest? Stop playing dumb, Reuben, it's you I'm referring to!

Rabbi: Stop it! That's enough! You are in the house of God and you are here to pray!

Simeon: But Rabbi, don't you understand what we're telling you? How can the lion and the sheep pray together? The lion prays for the sheep to fall asleep that he may eat him up. The sheep prays for the lion to sleep that he may cut off his mane!

Amos: Well said, Simeon! How can I pray together with Eliazir when I don't even have a handful of soil to cover my dead body? This place is too small for the two of us!

Another Man: Old Berechiah robs you of twenty and then bribes the judges, who rob you of twenty more! How can I pray with him under the same roof?...

Another Man: Yeah, this must be said loud and clear for everybody to hear!... Look at his pious face... The wheat you keep in your barns could feed forty families in this town! Your wife's jewelry could repair all the houses in this town! So, you've got to choose between them and us!

The noise heightened like a tide. Accusing fingers were raised and we spoke fearlessly, denouncing the abuses of the mighty people of Capernaum.... Then Eliab, the Rabbi, red with fury, took to the lectern and began to shout...

Rabbi: You are too much, damn it! You, who have no respect for the word of God, you who only want to make politics! Yes, yes, I know what's happening here! Just like last time, in the wheat farm. An agitator filled all your heads with dreams. I know this man well. He's here with us. But this, let me say for the last time: Either you shut up or I'll drive you all out!

Jesus: That's not necessary, Rabbi. We're leaving. One of us is excess baggage here.

Jesus stood up, gave a half turn, and left the synagogue.

Rabbi: Damn you! It's all your fault! You have divided the community! You'll pay for this, rebel!

We, of the group, left too and followed Jesus. The farmers, Eleazir's laborers, Phaniel's unpaid workers, the prisoners' wives and many others, left the house of God in silence... soon there was only one left inside the synagogue, the Rabbi, who was walking to and from the lectern, with clenched teeth and fists. Friends of the landowner as well as the usurers remained too. There were some who, for fear of the Rabbi's reprisal, dared not leave. In one corner of the square outside, all of us surrounded Jesus....

Old Woman: Hey, you from Nazareth... have we done something wrong by leaving the synagogue?!

Jesus: No, don't worry, gran'ma. Even the prophet Jeremiah had to set his foot against the doors of the Temple, to expose that the House of God had been converted into a den of thieves.

A Man: So, what now, Jesus? What's gonna happen?

Jesus: The usual thing, neighbor. They throw stones at us and hide their hands. Then, when we protest, they'll accuse us of inciting trouble and sowing discord in the community. Meanwhile, they pretend to be like meek lambs... but don't be deceived by their guise, for deep inside them, they're wolves with sharp fangs. All they want is to snatch everything from you and get away with it.

A Woman: What do we do now, Jesus?

Jesus: The opposite of what they're doing: share. God is asking this from us. That's exactly what Moses wrote: no one is to have more nor less. This is the sign that the Kingdom of God has started with us. Listen, my friends: why was there enough bread for everyone yesterday? Because what we had, we shared with each one. This is the will of God. If we share our bread in this life, God will share eternal life with us. If we share the bread of the earth, God will give us bread that's even better, the bread from heaven, like that manna that fell into the desert.

A Man: Tell me, where do we get this bread from heaven?

Jesus: Never mind that now, Simeon. First, you've got to share the bread of earth, don't you think so?

While Jesus was talking outside, Eliazir the landowner, left the synagogue and headed for our group, threatening us with his fist...

Eliazir: Hear this well, all of you. We can't tolerate what you've done. With the Rabbi's consent, I'm reporting all of you to the police, specially you, Nazarene, the leader of all this agitation!

A Woman: It's obvious who got hurt the most!

Eliazir: You can laugh all you want, fools! Let's see how you laugh when the soldiers come and put you in prison, when they grab your sons, beat them at the pillar and crucify them on the Roman cross. Don't tell me I didn't warn you!

The silence that ensued was heavy with ill boding. Eliazir's threats froze all the laughter on our lips, for they were serious. The Romans never spared anyone. Everyday, new crosses stood all over the country to drown the cry of protest coming from the poor of Israel...

A Man: Well, companions, maybe we should stop this dialogue for now, what do you think?

Another Man: Yeah, besides it's a little bit late.... so, goodbye everyone!

Amos: I must go too... I'll see you next time...

One by one, the people proceeded to their homes, just as they had left the synagogue moments before....

James: Cowards! They're all a bunch of cowards...!

Jesus: Of course, James. We all feel scared at the moment of truth. No one likes to risk his life. But one must do it. We've got to share our bread, but we've also got to share our body and blood too. Many of us will break our bodies like we're breaking bread. A number of us will shed blood like we're spilling wine... When we've offered our lives for our country, then we'll be worthy of the Kingdom of God.

John: Well, those words are easily said, Jesus, but... very hard to swallow.

A Boy: The soldiers are coming! Run, run, they're carrying lances and clubs!...

Many scampered away when they heard the soldiers coming. We, too, started to look at each other with anxiety.

Peter: Well, Jesus,.... so.... so.....

Jesus: What's wrong, Peter? Do you want to go too? Go ahead. What about the rest of you?...

Peter: Well, if we want to go – yes we do.... Ufff... That's okay, Moreno, we'll stay with you. You're right. The truth simply gets stuck in one's throat, like a fishbone.

Jesus: Now we're thirteen. Anyone of us may falter. That's why we've got to support one another... May God give us the strength to share with everyone... even fear itself!

Peter: The soldiers are here, Jesus!

One Soldier: Hey, all of you, disperse, disperse...! We want no trouble.... C'mon, c'mon, on your feet... And you, stranger, watch your actions. We're aware of everything, do you hear? You and your group are blacklisted... Go now, go back to your homes...

Fortunately, the soldiers paid little attention to Eliazir's complaint. They let us go that time. All this happened on a Saturday, a rest day, right in front of the synagogue of Capernaum.

The ruins of Capernaum during the time of the gospel were not discovered until the end of the last century. About six hundred years after Jesus' death, Capernaum was destroyed and all the locales of the gospel were gradually reduced to rubble. One of the tasks undertaken with great care after the discovery was the restoration of the synagogue. It was not the same synagogue that Jesus knew, but was built over the one which existed during his time. The present building belongs to that of the IV Century, very spacious, with thick columns and beautiful decorations on the walls. It is very near Peter's house.

During the worship rites celebrated every Saturday in the synagogue, which Jesus customarily attended in the company of his countrymen, an excerpt from the Scriptures was read and the members present commented on it. Neither the reading of the text nor commentary were specific tasks of the Rabbi. The women ordinarily never spoke publicly in the synagogue, although in this episode, their participation is understandable, considering the flow of discussion among the neighbors.

In the episode, the text read is taken from Chapter 16 of the Book of Exodus. Manna or "bread from heaven" was the food the Israelites found in the desert in their long journey to the Promised Land. The norms given by God in gathering the manna aimed at preventing the accumulation and inequality in the distribution of food so that everyone would have enough.

No matter how the Jewish worship in the synagogue differs from that of Christians, and how the former's Saturday worship cannot be at a par with the Eucharistic celebration on Sunday, in this episode, a certain similarity is found, in order to focus on the basic theme of worship-justice.

The theme of Eucharist-justice is a problem as old as Christianity. Paul affirms that wherever a glaring inequality exists, then there can be no celebration of the Eucharist, but an act condemned by the Lord. His denunciation in this sense is strong (1 Cor 11:17-34). During the first centuries of Christianity, there was an evangelical consciousness to capture the relationship between the Eucharist and justice. Only those who shared their wealth with their brothers and sisters celebrated the Eucharist and broke Bread. Furthermore: It was the Bishop's obligation to watch out for those who gave offerings during the mass. If these were oppressors of the poor, then the latter were prohibited from receiving anything from them. (Apost. Const. II, 17, 1-5 and III, 8 and IV, 5-9). This was so strictly enforced that the "Didascalia" of the Third Century provides that if there is no other means to feed the poor but to receive money from the rich who commit injustice, then the community might as well die of hunger, rather than receive help from the oppressors (Didasc IV, 8, 2). Provisions of this type proliferate in the writings of the Holy Fathers and Churches from various places through the centuries. Another example of how radical this was is shown by the Bishop of Milan, Saint Ambrose, who, having been informed of the massacre of thousands of persons, for which Emperor Theodosius was responsible, not only criticized the latter, but also threatened him with a letter that "the Bishop will not offer the Sacrifice of the Mass in his presence" (Epistle L1, 13). At the start of the 9th Century, the official Church got rid of this practice and concentrated solely on the theme of Christ's real presence in the bread and how such a sublime mystery could be explained and understood. Thus, the other dimension of the Eucharist was lost.

The prophets of Israel are in this line also. At the very doorsteps of the Temple of Jerusalem, a place much more "sacred" than the synagogue of a town of fishermen, prophet Jeremiah "scandalized" the religious people of his time and their own king, by criticizing the false security of those who sought protection in cult, but were remiss with their obligation to be just (Jer 7:1-15; 26:1-24). With this sense of freedom, characteristic of the great prophets, Jesus puts justice before worship, and in the sacred place he expounds on what is more sacred for God: the life of people, and justice among all. No one is to bring offerings to the altar if another person has something against him or her. The person must first be reconciled with the other (Mt 5:23-24).

In the Eucharist, we believers celebrate the One whom they killed because He was faithful to God, and who became God by resurrecting from the dead. In the Eucharist, we celebrate this common faith, extending through history by living this same faith. We celebrate a common hope that things will change toward life, equality and community among people. We celebrate love that compels us to share, to risk our lives for this cause and to create our community. The celebration of the Eucharist – the word of the

prophets as well as Jesus', the bread that is broken and shared – sustains this faith, this hope and this love.

(Jn 6:22-71)

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THE GHOST BY THE LAKE

It was a dark night over the great Lake of Galilee. The moon, a slice of orange hanging in the sky, hardly illumined our faces. There were six of us, including Peter, in his old green boat. The others were in the other boat manned by Andrew.... Jesus was not with us that night. When the twelve of us got into the boats, he said he wasn't coming, and left in silence towards one of the dark streets coming from the wharf...

Peter: Fellows... this is strange... Why did he stay behind, huh? Why?

Thomas: Jesus is a...a...afraid of the water at n...n...night. Could t...this be the r...r...eason?

James: Nonsense, Thomas! It must be something more serious. Fear of the water, no. That's stupidity. Fear, yeah. Jesus is scared. I can see it in his eyes.

Peter: Fear of what, James? What's he scared of?

James: Things are getting worse, Peter. The Moreno's being watched each day. The pharisees hate him and are after him. Something smells rotten here....

Peter: What are you talking about? That can't be. Jesus is a very courageous man. He's shown it. How can you be so sure of what you're saying?

James: No one's certain of anything, Peter, anything... We're just talking. But you can't deny that he's acting strange today, and he's left us alone...

Thomas: Maybe he r...re..remained to pray. Jesus prays a lot.

Peter: But why would he pray there? No, Thomas, that doesn't explain it...

James: Could he have betrayed us...? He might be joining the other group and hasn't the guts to tell us.

Peter: Why would he do such a thing, red head? Jesus is a very upright person!... You're crazy. No, that can't be!

Philip: I've got something else in mind... Listen, fellows. I think Jesus is sick and tired of all this... He's tired of saying that the Kingdom of God is near, that it's coming... although it'll never come. He proclaimed himself a prophet, he's used up all his energy saying that things are heading for change... as you can see, things have remained the same! And then....

Peter: Then what?! What do you mean by that, Philip?

Philip: That one of these days – today, for example – Jesus will say: “To hell with you, bitter world!” All these things about justice, the Kingdom of God, even the group, and everything, are baloney!... Then he'll go away, passing through a dark road like he did tonight and we'll never see him again, ever.

Peter: What're you saying? Where the hell did you get that crazy idea, huh?.... Jesus would never do that to us! He's not what you think!

James: It's okay, Peter. He's not so. But why the hell didn't he join us tonight, huh?

All words uttered during the conversation that night pierced through the heart like the cold wind inflating the sails, and stirred the tranquil waters of the lake. On the other boat, Andrew, Judas, Simon and the rest were talking of the same thing, with the same words and asking the same questions. After a while, everyone remained silent... only the increasing murmur of the wind could be heard...

Peter: Hell, will you say something, at least! I'd rather we have a storm than see all of you mum like you're dead!

Then, as if in response to Peter's cry, the wind began to jostle the two boats furiously. The clouds started flashing lightning rays and thunder over the lake, previously darkened in the clouds' dark bosom.

Peter: Damn! I already knew a storm was coming! Get a good hold of the sails, John!

Thomas: W..wh..what's all this?

Peter: What else, Thomas! You don't think there's gonna be a party, do you?

Thomas: Then we'll all d..d...dr..drown....?

James: Yeah, dammit! We'll all drown! And you'll be the first to drown if you don't shut your big mouth!

Andrew: Hey Peter, let go of the sail a little!... Peter!

Peter: Stay apart a little, dummy! We'll collide!

The waves, like gigantic mountains, broke over our heads; we were drenched again to the bones. The boat, manned by Andrew, was caught in a whirlwind, and was getting close to ours, spinning furiously like a top.

Peter: Damn you, James! Release that sail some more! We'll get smashed!

James: Out of here, Thomas!... Hold tight, John!... Harder, c'mon, harder!

The keel was creaking like a soul in torment. The boats, lifted up by the waves, suddenly crashed down on the waters' surface. While Philip and Nathanael were hastily bailing out the water that entered through the boat's sides, Thomas gave out a terrifying cry, spread his arms and fainted. He fell over the stern's ropes...

Thomas: Ayyy...!

James: That's one head less!... Hold tight, John!... Careful now, careful....!

James and I tried to control the sail. But then, the wind caused the mast to crack, and it split right down the middle.

Peter: We're doomed! We'll all go down to the bottom of the lake! That's why Jesus left us all alone: he knew it! He abandoned us!... We'll all die!!

When our boat was almost filled with water on all sides, Andrew screamed louder than thunder...

Andrew: Hey, all of you, look over there! Look over there! Toward the shore!!

Philip: It's a ghost! The ghost of the lake! It's heading toward us!!

Peter: What's that, James? Do you see it too?... And you, John?

James: Of course I do!... It's coming here!

Philip: Go away, ghost, go away!... Wait a minute, I know of a prayer against ghosts... Let me see, how does it go now... Ah, yes!... "Ghost, I'm telling you, the Lord is with me! I'm telling you, Ghost, the Lord is with me!"

James: Don't be silly, Philip!

Walking over the stormy waters of the lake, a white and luminous figure was slowly heading toward our devastated boats. The moon suddenly extinguished its dying light. The sea was a huge dark mouth, all too willing to swallow us all up. Thomas, who had regained consciousness, trembled as he held on to that piece of mast that was left after the split. We were all terrified, and couldn't make out the mysterious shadow... All of a sudden, the ghost spoke...

Jesus: Don't be afraid!... It's Me!... It's Me!..

Thomas: And w..w..who is this "Me"?

Philip: Stay away, Ghost, God will not leave me! Stay away. Ghost, God will not leave me! Go away, Ghost, God will not leave me!

Jesus: Hey, guys, It's Me!.. Don't be afraid!

James: Peter, that's Jesus' voice. It's him, it's him!

The waters of the sea grew calm. The wind ceased to blow when we recognized Jesus. Once again, our boats began to sway gently over the waves...

Peter: Jesus, if it's you, tell me to go where you are!..

Jesus: Come, Peter, come!

When he heard the command, Peter jumped from the boat and started to walk over the lake to meet Jesus...

Peter: Look... I can walk over the water!... Look!... Let's see, with one foot!... then with the other foot!... Yippee!... I'm the smartest guy in the entire Capernaum and the whole of Galilee!... Yippee!.. Look at this, guys!

Peter was doing some pirouettes over the waves as he approached Jesus, when, suddenly, a thunder split open the sky's huge dome and the wind began to batter the waters in turmoil... Peter, terrified, began to sink slowly...

Peter: Give me a hand, Moreno!.. Jesus, save me, I'm drowning!... Ahgg...!

Jesus, walking calmly over the waves, went near Peter and held him by the hand...

Jesus: You man of little faith, Peter! Why were you afraid? Why did you get scared?..

Peter: I got scared because I was drowning! I was drowning! I'm drowning... I'm drowning... I'm drown....!!!

Rufina: Peter, Peter, what's the matter? You'll wake up all the boys!... Look at how you rolled yourself up into that mat; you rolled up like a snail! Wake up, man!

Peter: Ah... the mast... it was horrible... Ay Rufi, it's you... pff!, what a relief! He saved us, Rufi, he saved us!

Rufina: Take it easy, man. And stop screaming , 'cuz Grandma Rufa is a light sleeper...

Peter: Ay, Rufi, what a relief... We're saved!.. Rufina, tonight I understood everything. He's the man.

Rufina: What on earth are you talking about?

Peter: Rufi, look, we were on the boat. Then came a terrifying storm. We were so afraid. We were alone. Our sail was broken, and our mast split into two... We all lost our faith. We were doomed, until he came...

Rufina: But, what the hell are you talking about?

Peter: I'm talking about Jesus, Rufi. When I was drowning, he held me by the hand, and saved me. The storm stopped. And the fear was gone too. We were saved.

Rufina: Beautiful, that was very beautiful... You were having a good time the whole evening, weren't you? And may I know, you rascal, at what time you got back, as I didn't hear you anymore?

Peter: But Rufi, don't you understand? That was a sign! Jesus is the man!

Rufina: What man, Peter? What's all this mystery about?

Peter: Listen to me, Rufi. Open your ears well and keep this to yourself only. I think Jesus is the Messiah.

Rufina: What the hell are you talking about? Are you okay?

Peter: I've never been so happy in my life! The storm is over, Rufi. And the fear is gone!

Rufina: Don't scream, damn! Look, forget about it, straighten the mat, and go back to sleep. Tomorrow you'll be yourself again.

Peter lay down on the mat. But he sat up again, as if pushed upward by a spring.

Peter: Rufina! What if this isn't a dream? What if it's something else?

Rufina: Of course it's something more than a dream... It's a nightmare...

Peter: No, Rufi. In all my life, I have never seen such a terrifying storm, such an agitated sea. In my life, I was never so scared, nor did I feel so secure when he took me by the hand... As if this wasn't a dream... Hey, Rufina, are you still there?

Rufina: Of course, I'm here... but my eyes are getting heavy...

Peter: But, are you sure?... Don't you think it's at this moment that we're dreaming?

Rufina: Listen, Peter. You heard the first crow. Forget all that crap and get some sleep. And let me get some too... I'm groggy...

Peter: Okay, but I'll continue telling you what happened, tomorrow... and don't tell anyone... I think this isn't a dream... I think....

Rufina: Hmm... certainly you'll tell me tomorrow.... tomorrow.

Peter closed his eyes and fell asleep again. Later, after many years, he told me everything. Then, he still couldn't tell me what happened that night. But he remembered it so vividly. It was as vivid and warm as Jesus' hand that held him so he would not drown in the troubled waters of the lake.

In the Lake of Galilee, because of its geographical characteristics, sudden storms are so frequent that sometimes they come with the strength of a real hurricane. The fishermen would ordinarily set sail even if it was still dark since the last hours of the night and the first hours of dawn were the best times to find schools of fish. In Galilee, as in any part of the world, the fisherman is an early bird.

Throughout the Bible, the dream appears as a space where God is revealed to people. In telling us about the dreams of those whom God used as instruments to make known his plans, the Scriptures provide a reflection about life that is common in Israel and in the majority of the ancient countries. It was likewise the belief that God could reach out to people and vice-versa, by way of dreams. In the Old Testament, dreams revealing to people God's wishes for them are significant (Gen 28:10-22 and 37:5-11; Num 12:6-8). We must not interpret them as superstitious or infantile. Even today, they provide us with some truth if we can discern their meaning, as the wise men of Israel advised (Ecl 34:1-8). We are not supposed to believe our dreams to the letter. Rather, we should open our hearts to the endless realities in life. Great experiences within us are as real as what is without. Or as real as a plate of food that we eat, although we are not able to express these experiences in exactly the same manner. The limits of our conscious and unconscious state are likewise difficult to define. It is also possible, by way of the unconscious, to discover some truths, to experience intensely some lasting feelings that include important decision-making.

One must bear in mind that the evangelists used various styles in their writing. Thus, we find in the pages of the gospel historical narrations of the Old Testament, catechetical schemes, accounts based on the stories of the Old Testament, and symbolic accounts... This text about Jesus walking over the water contains a symbolic message. The sea, according to the Jewish mind, was a prison where the devil and the evil spirits, overpowered by God at the beginning of the world, had to go. Among them figured the powerful Leviathan, a monster very dangerous to people. This negative idea about the sea spans the entire Scripture up to the last Biblical book. When the Book of Revelation describes how the world will be in the future, the Kingdom of God, it does not mention the sea (Rev 21:1). Naturally, God has power over all the spirits of the sea, and Leviathan is like a plaything for Him (Job 40:25-32). Jesus possesses this power as well, since God gave it to him. He has given it not to a sage, nor to a theologian, nor to an exorcist, but to a lowly worker. This text, therefore, is the proclamation of Jesus as God's Messiah. This is exactly what Peter thought.

Like the rest of the disciples, Peter was beginning to see in Jesus the prophet that revived the people's hope (faith) in the God of Israel, in the Messiah whose coming was proclaimed for many years. This was for him, as for all the rest, the result of a process: the process of knowing Jesus, understanding his message and above all, committing one's self to follow him. It is something we obtain not in baptism nor in times of prayer, nor in our community reflections with our brothers and sisters. It is a long process.

(Mt 14:24-33; Mk 6:45-52; Jn 6:15-21)

TWO BY TWO

Peter: Very well, all is said and done: we'll scatter ourselves, like ants spreading after a downpour, through the entire Galilee!

It was during the first few days of summer when we decided to leave Capernaum and undertake the journey to other cities of our province, in order to announce the Kingdom of God. We were then just a handful of nobodies. But Jesus always countered that a little salt was enough to give flavor to the food. That a small lamp on top of a table could brighten up the entire house...

Philip: Just a minute, adventurers. Forget about the fun and teach me what to say. I can promote my wares, like combs and brushes, but not this job of delivering a divine speech.... well, the truth

Jesus: Listen, Philip: it's very simple. Besides, you don't have to talk much. All we've got to do is gather the people and teach them how to share what they have. Remember what we did with the loaves of bread and the fish?

Philip: Yeah, but... what if they don't want to get involved?

Peter: Well, shake the dust off your feet and go somewhere else. You can't force people to share if they don't want to.

Thomas: That's what I'm saying, that in the K..K..ingdom of G..G..God, n..n..nobody enters by f...f..force.

Philip: Not if we're pushed by soldiers who catch us gathering our countrymen and inciting them to rebellion...

Matthew: Don't worry about that, Philip. We'll bring you some soup in jail!

James: And if an old usurer cuts our throats, then we go straight to Abraham's lap!

Jesus: Well, we're all ready. James and Andrew will go to Bethsaida... Thomas and Matthew, to Chorazin... Philip and Nathanael, to Magdala...

Philip: And together we perish!

Jesus: John and Peter will go to Tiberias... Simon and Judas to Sepphoris... Jacob and Thaddeus, to Naim...

James: So when do we leave?

Jesus: On the first day of the week, each shepherd to his own flock!

Matthew: When do we see each other again?

Jesus: Well, within a month everyone must be back here in Capernaum. Okay?

We left by pairs for the neighboring towns... The truth is that in those times, each one of us imagined the Kingdom of God in his own way. No one had a clear idea of it and our knees trembled a little at the thought of it. But we kept on encouraging one another in announcing the good news among our countrymen...

After a month, we all went back to Capernaum as agreed upon, and we met in Peter and Rufina's house as always...

Peter: Hey comrades, help yourselves to some wine. We must thank the Lord for allowing us to return and still be in one piece!

James: That's very well said, stone thrower! After all those skirmishes, the group has become more known to them. At least they have me and the skinny one blacklisted... They know us better than David knew Bathsheba... It was a miracle to be able to escape from that place...

Peter: So let's all have a toast to celebrate this. Hey, Matthew, ...what's wrong?

Matthew: Nothing.

Peter: Why don't you make a toast with us?... Don't you love wine?

Matthew: If I take a shot, then I don't stop until I end up with the entire barrel... I know myself quite well....

James: And so?... Have you changed after the trip?... What happened?

Thomas: It so happened that one day, w..we w..were...

Matthew: That's enough, Thomas. It's just that I've lost the desire to drink much. I had the appetite for it before. But now, it's the opposite. That's it.

Thomas: No, it was because of s..s..so..something they told him: shoemaker, re..re..pair your shoes f..f..first...

Thomas: One day, in Tiberias, we were at the corner of the square. This M..M..Ma...Matthew was talking a..a..about unity and c..c..co..conversion...

A Man: You don't know what you're talking about! You're drunker than Noah by the grapevine!

Another Man: We'll listen to you when you have purged yourself of all that wine in your belly, rascal!... Let's go, guys; this man doesn't even know where his moustache is!

Matthew: That happened one day. Then another. What a meddlesome bunch! They made me sick, you know!

Thomas: B..b..but they were right, Matthew. First take the plank out of your own eye, before you can take the speck out of anyone else's eye.

Jesus: So, you don't drink anymore, Matthew...

Matthew: Well, the truth is there are days when I can't bear it and... other times, I grab my two hands very tightly to control myself... dammit... give me a few days more, but... its something... Isn't it?

Peter: So this other shot is for Matthew, who has stopped drinking!

Matthew: Bah, to hell with all of you!

Jesus: And what was the mess you got yourselves into, skinny one and you, James? C'mon on, tell us what happened...

James: Ha! Or better, what didn't happen. You all know Bethsaida, where Onesimus is, who thinks he's the pharaoh of Egypt because he owns the boats. But the fishermen are not dumb. They're alert...

James: Listen, countrymen, my grandfather always repeated that saying of the wise men: it is more difficult to break a three-threaded rope.

A Fisherman: Make yourself clear, my friend.

James: This means that when a poor creature fights for his rights alone, he's easily defeated. But if there are three of them, then it's more difficult. If there are thirty of them, that's much better indeed. Do you understand? It's necessary to braid a thick rope from among all the threads.

Another Fisherman: This red head's right. The ones up there are advantaged in many ways. But we're more than they. That's where our strength lies.

Another Fisherman: Trouble is, we're not united. Each one thinks only of himself.

James: God wants all of us to look in the same direction. Where there's a group pushing as one, God also lends a hand. This is what we've done in Capernaum.

A Fisherman: Things are a lot easier in your town. You're well organized and you defend one another. Here, it's old Onesimus who controls everything.

Another Fisherman: All boats and nets are owned by Onesimus. Therefore, he gets all the profit. While we, we've got nothing but our arms.

James: And so? What else do you need? Hear this, my friends: Without your arms, those boats will not move, nor those nets be cast, is that right? Onesimus wouldn't earn a single cent.

A Fisherman: Yeah, of course, but... what can we do with our arms?

James: Cross them. That's it. Cross them and tell that bloodsucker that no boat will be rowed nor will a single net be cast; nor a hook thrown until the wages go up to two dinars!

And so it was. The following day, the wharf of Bethsaida was like a funeral parlor: everyone was silent with arms crossed... Onesimus, the patron, was fuming mad...

Patron: Two dinars! Two dinars! Are you out of your mind? Tell me: who's the instigator here? Yeah, I know, that red-head from Capernaum and the skinny one. And that man called Jesus is behind all this. You damned agitators! I'll have your tongues cut off! I'll have them cut off!

James: And look, fellows.... Ahhh.... It's still here in one piece! But the best part of it is that we've won the battle! That scoundrel, Onesimus had to increase the wages!... The news spread like wild fire. We were told that the fishermen of Gennesareth are doing the same thing, with crossed arms and demanding two dinars!

Jesus: Let's give another toast for James and Andrew who knew how to work in justice's name. They have their names written in heaven!

Matthew: As well as in the police blotter of Bethsaida!

Peter: Well, Philip, it's your turn now. Let's see, what have you and Nathanael done in Magdala? How did you fare in that place?

Philip: Badly, yes and very badly. Your enemy was Onesimus, while ours was God. Who can go against him?

Jesus: What'dya mean...?

Philip: Well, God no, but those strange ideas of the people about God, which turn out to be more difficult to scrape than scabies. Here's our story. When we arrived in the city:

Philip: Over here, everyone!... Listen, companions!... I'm not here to sell my wares today... Look, I didn't even bring my cart... My bald friend here and I are here to bring you the good news.

A Woman: Well, do it quickly and let's see if its better than the lipstick I bought from you last week!

Philip: Listen well, my friends!... Unplug your ears... I mean, one ear of yours, so that what enters through one doesn't come out through the other.... Today, the Kingdom of God has come to this city of Magdala!... Yeah, that's right, just as it sounds, The Kingdom of God!

Another Woman: Look here, fat head, stop these stories. The only thing that has reached this place is the kingdom of worms!

Philip: How's that again?

Woman: You heard it. All the orchards of Magdala are infested with worms: all tomatoes, eggplants... everything is worm-infested. It's God's punishment, his sacred wrath! The worst thing is, if God doesn't cool it, even my melons will be damaged; the worms are on their way to my melons!

Philip: What are you talking about, ignorant woman? What has God to do with your melons?

Woman: Why, don't you know? Go and ask the Rabbi to tell you! This worm epidemic is a punishment from heaven, for the many sins of this perverted city!

Another Woman: And tell him out loud, that God must be more enraged here than when he was in Sodom! Why? Because the devil runs loose here. All one can see here are taverns and drunkards and women who wink at you from every corner. That's why God must be taking his revenge.

Woman: We rightfully deserve it, don't you think so, stranger?

Philip: Ehem... Well, I think... God is not as terrible as you imagine.

Woman: God sent us this misfortune and must be preparing something worse.

Philip: Oh no, woman, don't say that. God is good and doesn't like to pester people.

Women: I told you so! First, the worms... and now, some madmen have come!

Philip: Not even my horn could pacify them... They were all there, so obstinate with this punishing God. Pff... You know what, Jesus? If things must change, then one of the first to change should be this crazy idea that people have of God.

Peter: We had the same idea before, Philip. Or don't you remember anymore? Only a few months ago, we also viewed God as an executioner with his axe raised high. Now, that's a thing of the past. Now we see God like a... father.

Philip: But Peter, you dunno those Magdalenes. They're so stubborn. The more we explain to them...

Matthew: Well as they say, a stone gets a hole by the constant dripping of water. I'm talking from experience.

Jesus: Well said, Matthew. All of us start this way and gradually, God melts our hearts.

Philip: I hope so, Moreno, but the truth is, they're too much...

Jesus: But God's on their side, damn! This is what matters more. What about a toast for God our Father

who has wished to be revealed to the humble and be hidden from the arrogant! Look at all of us, Philip: there's no one among us learned or great. The Kingdom of God grows from below, as the trees do.

Philip: Well, brace yourself, Nat. We'll have to go back and visit our countrymen from Magdala... and their worms!

Jesus: That's exactly it, Philip. This thing's not finished in one day. Look, why did we have to go by pairs, like the asses when they pull the plow? Because the yoke can't be carried alone, but with another. One alone gets weary and disappointed. With someone along, the burden is lighter. There's still much terrain ahead.

James: But now is the right time and we must take advantage. There's always work to be done. Everywhere the poor are lifting up their heads and strengthening their knees. The day of liberation is at hand!

Jesus: Many prophets wanted to see that day, but didn't live to see it. Many wanted to hear these things but heard not...

Peter: And many would have wanted to taste Rufina's soup, but couldn't, as she has it reserved for all of you! Yes, sir, a soup with two drops of oil can restore the life of a dead person!... Hey, Rufi, why don't you serve the pot of soup, in celebration of the return of this group of crazy men!

That summer, we went from one town to another, through all of Galilee. And the Kingdom of God that came to us, for free, we also announced to our brothers and sisters. Free.

The sending of messengers by pairs was a deeply-rooted custom in Israel. They were messengers bringing news – as there was no mail then – or on a mission of assistance or trying to understand better, according to specific situations. Generally, they always left by pairs for two reasons: for protection, since the trips were long and much danger could arise. On the other hand, this had something to do with the compliance of a norm found in the book of Deuteronomy (Dt 17:6 and 19:15), which in the beginning only applied to judicial processes. Later, it became applicable to other areas as well. According to this law, only the testimony of two witnesses could be given credit, and although only one would speak, the other ought to be present in order to confirm the testimony, thus giving it validity.

Reading in the gospel the instructions Jesus gave to his disciples, before sending them to announce the kingdom of God, one observes how incomplete they were. Jesus was not a moralist. The gospel is not a collection of norms for every situation in life, as if it were enough to face life's reality with the application of formulas or slogans. The messengers of the gospel are not handed a set of instructions; they are given a spirit. Their whole life must be a sign of new values. They must proclaim them with the word, but above all, live them. In this episode, Jesus' disciples find themselves in situations not described in the gospel to the letter, but rather, the spirit with which they are lived and overcome. This is what the group is to learn eventually, as they are inspired by Jesus' word.

Like Jesus, the disciples addressed themselves to the poor as the privileged recipients of the good news of God. The gospel must be announced to them, the least ones, so they can start to live; knowing that as far as God is concerned, they are the first.

The liberation proclaimed in the gospel encompasses everything human, and all people, and consists necessarily of phases and mediations. One of them is the organization of the poor. God does not want masses of men and women submerged in ignorance or in apathy, men and women who are passive and submissive. God wants a nation of free people. God came into history precisely to make of the oppressed Hebrews, enslaved by the Pharaoh, an organized and fighting nation. From servitude, God gave them passage to freedom. Liberation has, during one phase of the process, this period of awareness and organization, in which the poor bind themselves together by a common ideal and discover their dignity as children of God. A free person cannot imagine a punishing God who makes children suffer, who demands an accounting of every small sin in order to take revenge... People must be freed of this false image of God. A profound evangelization, though not intended directly, always bears as a consequence, people's liberation from erroneous ideas about God and the relationship of God with people and history.

As Jesus has shown us in his life and in his words, there exists no conflict between action and prayer, between love for God and for one's neighbor. We must not pose any opposition between the work of evangelization and that of promoting humankind, as if such a task of promotion were of a lesser category for a Christian by being "political." The task of evangelization however is sometimes taken as superior, more pure, for establishing our direct relationship with God. Such opposition is false, since there is a continuous relationship between evangelization and the promotion of humankind. To evangelize people is to proclaim the good news of people's dignity as the sons and daughters of God. In the name of this infinite dignity, human beings must be freed from hunger, from ignorance, from economic dependence... To promote people is to bring them to all physical, intellectual and political fulfillment... One must likewise be open to the reality of faith, since the religious dimension is essential to being human. There exists no contradiction. Both endeavors are profoundly related. Thus, the bishops who met at Puebla recalled again: "The situation of injustice... makes us reflect on the great challenge faced by our pastoral people, to help them overcome situations that are less humane and to find themselves in more humane conditions. The profound social gaps, extreme poverty and the violation of human rights in many parts are challenges to evangelization. Our mission to bring people close to God likewise implies the construction here of a more fraternal society." (Puebla, 90)

Jesus makes a toast to the Lord, gives God thanks for the return of his friends. The act of thanksgiving occupies a significant role in Jesus' manner of praying. The wise men of Israel claimed that in the world to come, only the act of thanksgiving would remain. It would no longer be necessary to ask for forgiveness nor favors, nor confess our sins. We would only be grateful to God. With his manner of praying, Jesus anticipates the world to come: the Kingdom of God.

(Mt 10:5-15; 11:25-27; Mk 6:7-13; Lk 9:1-16; 10:17-24)

61

A DINAR FOR EACH

Foreman: Ironsmith! Ironsmith anyone? I can shoe your five mules! Ironsmith!

Woman: Hey, you one-eyed man, how much will you charge to fix a barn door, huh?

One-Eyed Man: Lemme fix it first, then we talk about the fee.

Woman: No, tell me how much you charge first.

One-Eyed Man: Look, Madame Frissy, just let me do it and I can do it for free. Let's go!

Every morning, people looking for work gathered in front of the synagogue in Capernaum Square. Even before sunrise, some of them were already there, sitting on the steps or leaning against the wall, displaying their tools: the bricklayers with their small shovel and plane, the carpenters with their hammers, and the farmers with their calloused hands...

Daniel: Hey guys, why don't you work in my vineyard? There's so much to harvest!.... Yeah, all of you!.... A dinar at the end of the day! C'mon, hurry, and take advantage of the day's yield!

A group of men stood up and followed Daniel... Everyday, Jesus also roamed around the square, with his nails and shovel, hoping to find work...

Neighbor: Hey, Moreno, you look sleepy...!

Jesus: I came late yesterday, so I didn't get any work... Let's see if I'm lucky today.

Neighbor: The early bird catches the worm. Look, just before you came, Daniel was hiring some men for his vineyard. It's harvest time and the harvest seems good.

Jesus: How much is he gonna pay them?

Neighbor: A dinar, as always. A dinar each and Daniel means it. When he says he'll pay, he does it. Daniel is okay. He can be trusted.

Foreman: A bricklayer, for two-days work. I need a bricklayer to work for two days.

Jesus: Hey, I'm your man..... Shall we go?

Foreman: Let's go! You receive one dinar today and another tomorrow. Okay?

Jesus: Alright! See you, Simeon!

Neighbor: Goodbye, Jesus! I told you, the early bird catches the worm!

Neighbor: The Moreno's lucky. He's hired at once.

Nato: You bet. I've been coming here for three days, but nothing. This is not the time for shearing the sheep, damn! Everyday I sharpen my shearing knife, but what for... One day I'll end up cutting my head off with it.

Neighbor: Is that what's bugging you?

Nato: I'm just sick and tired of doing the same thing: everyday I come home bringing nothing for my starving children... "It's only this piece of bread for today, son. Tomorrow... tomorrow, there'll be more." Tomorrow comes, and it's the same as today!

Neighbor: Times are hard, Nato, very hard...

Nato: I'm not coming home without a single dinar. I can't bear to see my children starving to death. Really, I can't!

At nine o'clock in the morning of the same day, Daniel came back to the square' when the sun's warm rays had spread all over the square....

Daniel: Hey, guys!... I need more men to work in my vineyard... Anyone interested?

Neighbor: Let's go, Nato. This is a sure job. Your children will surely have something to eat with the money you'll bring home...

Nato: Let's go, Simeon!

Simeon, Nato and a few more, went to Daniel's vineyard. Soon, the square was again filled with men looking for jobs... At this moment, the children were playing and jostling each other all over the area:

Boy: I'm an ironsmith! Do you need horseshoes for your mules?

Another Man: I'm the mule!

Laborer: I'm a mule too, son...

Titus: Why do you say that?

Laborer: Because that's what I am... a mule... no more, no less. You're no less than a mule too. And so are the rest. We're all mules here and the only thing we haven't got is the tail.

Titus: C'mon, there you go again.

Laborer: But it's the truth. I think we were born simply to engage in back-breaking work. Day in and day out, we do the same thing! Doesn't this get on your nerves, Titus, huh?

Titus: What can we do, man? Is there anything we can do?

Laborer: Nothing!... It must've been written some place... that the poor like us came into this world to do hard work and have lots of children who'll follow in our footsteps: that's right, to continue doing hard work and with empty bellies... Look at these children... They'll take our place here, when they're grown-up, expecting to work, like mules, in order to live...

Wife: There's nothing yet, Samuel?

Samuel: Nothing, woman. There's nothing yet.

Wife: What shall we eat now?

Samuel: A piece of boiled stone, perhaps!

Old Woman: A little alms for the blind... Have pity on this poor blind woman!

Wife: Old woman, I haven't seen you around the square for sometime...! What happened?

Old Woman: Oh, child, look at my skin. Those who see me say that my skin has become more yellow than

an egg yolk.

Wife: But... what happened?

Old Woman: I'm dying, child, of an illness that's sapping my life. Look at me... blind, lame... and now, this!

Wife: Oh, Grandma, I dunno what to say!

Old Woman: Child, you don't have to say anything... really, if I could only write all about my misfortunes, I would come up with a book longer than Moses'!

Wife: Well, you should thank the Lord for having made you blind. At least you're spared of seeing ugly things around here... What the hell! If only the waters from the Lake of Galilee dried up, we would fill it up again with our tears!

Daniel: Hey guys, what's wrong with you?... Hurry up and don't waste time!... Come with me to my vineyard, for there's much work to be done! Let's go!...

A group of men stood up and went with Daniel to his vineyard... At three o'clock in the afternoon, as the sun's rays penetrated through the walls of the square, several men remained squatting on the steps, still waiting for a chance to be hired for a job...

Samuel: I was told that Daniel is hiring half of the entire Capernaum to work in his vineyard... I hope he'll come around again...

Another Laborer: His grapes are ready for harvest. Otherwise, the rains will destroy them...

Samuel: That's nice! First you harvest them, then you bring them to the grape press, and have them fermented in the vats... for.... yeah... what for, anyway?

Laborer: What do you mean, what for?.... so we can have a good shot of wine to wet our throats, dammit! Isn't that enough?

Samuel: Just enough to wash out blues away. But after that, when the wine has come down from our heads, life goes on the same... bah!

Laborer: And what do you want, man?

Samuel: What do I want?....

Laborer: Yeah, you... what do you want...?

Samuel: I... just want to be happy, that's all.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, Daniel was back looking for more workers in his vineyard. There were men still waiting, as always, with crossed arms, and heads looking down at the ground....

Daniel: Hey, what're you doing here yawning and idling time away? I need men to work in my vineyard!... Anyone coming with me?... There's still a couple of hours to work! Let's go, let's go!

At five o'clock in the afternoon, Daniel went back to the square...

Daniel: Good Lord, there are still some of you looking at the clouds!

Samuel: There's no one to hire us. So, here we are, waiting for our luck to change...

Daniel: No luck will ever befall you here. Why don't you come with me to my vineyard? After all, the sun hasn't set yet!

When the moon's silhouette shone over Daniel's vineyard, and darkness was beginning to envelop the place...

Daniel: Guys, it's time for you to stop working...! You may now collect your dues! Come, come, so that I can pay you!

So Daniel called for his foreman:

Daniel: Cyrus, pay each one a dinar. See you another time, fellows!

One-Eyed Man: Just a minute, Daniel. How much did you say you were going to pay us?

Daniel: One dinar for each one. Anything wrong?

Nato: It's just that.... these four men just came an hour ago, while there are some of us here who have been working the whole day under the heat of the sun and...

Daniel: And so? Didn't I hire all of you for one dinar a day?

One-Eyed Man: Yeah, but it's unfair to pay us the same amount that you'll pay those who came last...

Daniel: Oh, really? And why is that?

Nato: Well, because... because...

Daniel: You've got children, haven't you? And you need money to feed them. That's why I'm paying you your dinar. This fellow who came last has got children too, and needs a dinar to feed them. Where's the injustice there? Each one did what he could.

One-Eyed Man: But we worked longer on your farm!

Daniel: Or better, they waited longer than you did in the square... You can't complain, my friend. Tomorrow, when you're the last one to come, you'll be happy to receive one whole dinar. Everybody needs a dinar in order to live.

Salome: My friend and neighbor, Leah, told that today her husband and some men have been working in Daniel's vineyard... You know something, Jesus? Some were hired early in the morning...

Jesus: Yeah, I was there when Daniel came.

John: Hey, the Moreno woke up early, isn't that a miracle!

Salome: Then, at nine o'clock he went back and took more men along. He did the same at twelve o'clock and at three o'clock. They say he was still looking for men as late as five o'clock, to work in his vineyard... But this rascal gave everyone one dinar each. Everybody received the same amount, do you understand? Whether he came early or worked for only an hour....

John: He's always like that... He says that everybody needs something in order to have something to eat.... And everyone gets paid the same amount...

Salome: This Daniel is a crazy landlord!

Jesus: Why do you say that, Salome?.... On the contrary, he's the best landlord here in Capernaum. D'ya know what I think? When God hires workers in this world, he does the same as Daniel.

John: I don't get you....

Jesus: Just as Daniel said. We need a dinar in order to live. A dinar of bread. And a dinar of hope, too. All of us are seated in the square, hoping to be happy.

Salome: Of course, that's what all of us want, but...

Jesus: But we become green with envy when some of us get up from here ahead of us... even if sooner or later, our turn will also come. Similarly, God will do as Daniel has done: He'll see to it that we are rightfully paid our salary: Everyone receives equal share, which is the best form of justice... Yeah, I'm certain that at the end, when the square is finally empty, we shall get the same dinar, enjoy the same happiness that we have long been waiting for.....

The lights in the fishermen's village were slowly fading away, leaving the streets and the whole square empty and dark... Capernaum, tired and weary, went into a deep sleep, in anticipation of the light of a new day...

The parable of "the workers in the vineyard" has been generally interpreted as an example to show one's vocation in different stages of life (the so-called youth, adulthood and old age...). However, because of the profound meaning given this story of Jesus, it can be justifiably called the parable of the "good master."

In this episode, the parable not only appears as one with a moral lesson, but it can also be taken as a fact of life. Jesus had to draw this story from the life of the poor, at a time when the spectre of unemployment kept haunting them. In any town, the square is a place where people get together. The story had to take place in Capernaum, for people looking for work. In those times, there was an abundance of casual workers who were hired by the hour, for a few days, at harvest time. This was more common in small towns, on the farms, than in Jerusalem. The workers did not have any security; they did not enjoy

any rights like the laborers do at present, nor was there any labor union nor any specialized labor. Because of this, life for the poor was totally precarious. The Roman domination even aggravated the situation in what was a typical primitive economic system. In Galilean lands the imposition of taxes led to a common proprietorship, favoring at the same time the concentration of arable lands in the hands of a few. The forced selling of lands by small proprietors suddenly converted them into wage earners. A great number of disorganized laborers seeking work wherever possible constituted cheap labor. Not being hired to work for several days would constitute absolute misery for a worker and his family. This situation is actually experienced by various families in many countries. And in this harsh condition of the poor who live "by the day," Jesus becomes their companion.

Jesus, as a poor worker, shared this situation. It is important to point out that he did manual work, that he was a laborer, not an office worker, educated, estranged from the daily reality of earning one's daily bread by the sweat of his brow. His calloused hands could handle rough tools better than office papers. His origin also taught him to do whatever odd job was given him. When the gospel tells us what his occupation was, we must not refer to him solely as a carpenter. The word employed by Mark (Mk 6:3) is the Greek phrase "tekton," which originally meant "builder" and "artisan." It was used in reference to the carpenter as well as to the ironsmith and the mason (bricklayer). A man from the barrio, like Jesus, was by necessity a jack-of-all-trades. Besides, he had to learn masonry. On various occasions, he spoke in detail about putting up a house, comparing it with that of building the kingdom of God (Mt 7:24-27; Lk 14:28-30).

The grapevine is one of the most typical plants in Palestine and in all the neighboring countries. Grape harvest begins toward the middle of September and may last up until mid-October. At any rate, it must be finished before the autumn rains set in, because the cold nights may destroy the fruit. Daniel had a good harvest and wanted to gather the fruit before it was damaged.

A laborer in Jesus' time ordinarily received one dinar. In some cases, food was included in the day's wage. In small towns, it was often paid in kind. The dinar was the official currency in Israel during the Roman rule. It was a piece of silver and on it was engraved the face of the emperor who ruled the provinces from Rome. It was equivalent to the drachma, also a piece of silver, which was officially used during the time of the Greek domination, about two hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

Daniel was a good master. Although some had to sweat it out for twelve hours while others worked for less hours, he knew that everybody had a family to care for. That is why he pays them the same wage. He does not pay more than what is usual, yet, he does not allow that anyone should be wanting in necessities for the day. It does not matter if the last laborer was slack in the work or did not start early enough. Everyone must eat and feed their children. If he got paid only for an hour of work, then it would not be sufficient for his family's needs. Daniel was not arbitrary, unfair nor capricious. He was a good man. His heart understood the plight of a jobless laborer, disgusted over life's uncertainties. Such is Daniel, the good master. And such is God: This story is God's profile.

Beyond the strict justification of the corresponding wage, Jesus likewise expounds the theme of happiness in this episode. Deep inside us, behind all our actions as human beings, we are constantly pursuing one and the same goal: happiness. All the jobless men in the square and the neighbors of Capernaum were constantly in one way or another seeking their happiness. Well then, this happiness, as Jesus said, will come to all and God will not fail in the promise of being the good master. The history of humanity, with all its injustice and sorrows, shall be saved by the love of a liberating God. The intimate history of every human being, replete with tears and difficulties, shall likewise be rescued. For God's plan is for us to be happy today and always. This is the certainty of our faith. (Rom 8:31-37).

Many people react indignantly and bitterly before this parable. Theirs is a commercialized mentality: equal pay for equal work; equal reward for equal effort, and what comes out of this is unjust. God, however, is not a banker; neither is he an efficient capitalist. God has a heart. Gestures of generosity are bothersome to the wretched mind. Thus, this story will always scandalize the people who only think of

merits that will “guarantee” heaven for themselves.

The first Christian community reiterated the gesture of the good master: each was given in accordance with his or her other needs, not with what was produced (Acts 2:44-45). True justice is more qualitative than quantitative, it seeks unity and not uniformity. It aims to develop each one as he or she is, in every way, so that each may live.

(Mt 20:1-16)

62

THE YEAST OF THE PHARISEES

Eliazir: Well, I'm here. I have long wanted to talk to you...

Josaphat: Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Eliazir. This cushion has been waiting for you, ha, ha, ha!

Eliazir: And where is Abiel, the teacher? Hasn't he come yet?

Josaphat: He must be on his way now. You know him, when he prays, he forgets everything... ha, ha, ha!...

A few moments later, the scribe Abiel arrived at the house of his friend Josaphat, the Pharisee. There they met that morning with Eliazir, the powerful landlord of Capernaum. They wanted to talk about something that had been worrying them for quite some time.

Eliazir: We can't tolerate this. Ever since this man came to Capernaum, everything has become a mess. There's no respect for the law, for religion, there's no respect for anything! And it's all his fault! That mob he goes with is capable of anything. With this man around, stirring the people with his ideas, we're all in danger. Listen to me: That includes you too...

Abiel: Are you therefore proposing, Eliazir, that...

Eliazir: Yes, and with full force. Let there be formal charges against him before the Roman authorities. After all, aren't they here to maintain order and put troublemakers in jail? No one can beat him! What happened in the synagogue the other day topped it all...

Josaphat: Well, you saw it, Eliazir; the Romans came but they didn't do anything.

Abiel: Bah, the Romans don't take us seriously. They despise us. They let us do our own thing, as long as we don't bother them.....

Josaphat: Besides, if we accuse him, they'll bring the case to King Herod. Herod's a superstitious man, and will wait at least a year before he orders him beheaded, like he did with John the Baptist. I think we'd all like to finish this case soon...

Eliazir: Well, why don't we pressure him to face the Romans directly?

Abiel: He won't do it. Let me tell you this, Eliazir: He is as wise as a serpent.

Eliazir: So...?

Abiel: I've got another idea. Let's leave Herod and the Romans in peace. Maybe we don't need them. Probably he himself doesn't want to get involved...

Eliazir: What do you mean, master Abiel?

Abiel: Every human has a price. Jesus of Nazareth ought to have it too, don't you think so?

Eliazir: What do you intend to do?

Abiel: We'll throw him a good bait... and the fish will bite it... I'm sure he will....

Peter: James, listen to me: Salome went to the wharf a while ago. According to her, Josaphat the Pharisee was looking for Jesus in your house this morning.

James: What did that sly old fox want?

Peter: To speak with Jesus about something important. Salome went to look for the Moreno in the big house. There he was nailing a door in place.

James: Hey, that gives me the creeps. There's always a rotten carcass where the vultures gather....

Jesus arrived in Josaphat's house before noon...

Jesus: Well, here I am, ready to listen to you...

Abiel: Nice of you to have come, Jesus. It'll be better that we go direct to the point...

Josaphat: It's about your future, Jesus. A man like you matters a lot. You can ease people's burdens with just a few well-chosen words coming from you. You're a man who can go very far....

Abiel: We know that your father died a few years ago, that you are an only son and that your mother lives alone in Nazareth.

Jesus: I see you know a lot about me...

Abiel: What will become of your mother if you insist on the road you're taking? Whom will she turn to if anything happens to you?

Jesus: I thought we're going to talk about things clearly. What's my mother got to do with all this?

Josaphat: We want to help you, Jesus, and your mother too. Since you came to the city, you have never had a regular job. Maybe a few odd jobs here and there, then you always pass away your time in the pubs.... This is really sad for a man like you...

Abiel: We could help you obtain something better. A sure job. You wouldn't have to wait in the square every morning waiting for nothing. We'll give you work... not much work, ha, ha.... but something easy and interesting... We've got connections, you know that.

Jesus: And what's the price for this favor? I guess you wouldn't do that for free.

Abiel: Look, Nazarene, let's get to the point. You have created a lot of trouble in Capernaum. Everyone knows this, even the Romans. It wouldn't be difficult to make them see that you're a menace to Rome. You know what happens next... they will cut off your tongue. But... there's still time.

Josaphat: If you keep your mouth shut, we'll leave you in peace. And to prove to you that we know how to appreciate your worth... we'll in turn give you a good post, and you could earn plenty of money...

Abiel: Yes, of course we know that money is not everything... but in this job people would be at your beck and call... I'm sure that will encourage you... You are an ambitious man, and you don't settle for less. Look, Herod wants to revamp the administration in Galilee. He needs intelligent and capable people... like you...

Josaphat: Think about it, Jesus... It would be good for you to accept it...

Jesus: And if I refuse....

Josaphat: Well, in that case... your life might be in danger, you see... And not only yours... but also that of your fishermen friends..... poor fellows.... They're still young and can defend themselves well... but your mother can't... and people could make things difficult for her.....

Abiel: Try to understand, Jesus... Set aside all these idle dreams from your head. They're like clouds that appear at one moment and disappear in another. Put your two feet on the ground, young man, and stop looking at the clouds...

Jesus: No, I can't. I've been doing it since I was a little boy. We farmers can hardly read from books, and that's why we learned how to read what the clouds and the sky have to say....

Abiel: Talk to us clearly this time, Jesus.

Jesus: That's very clear. Like me, you also know how to read the clouds. If the sky becomes red like blood in the afternoon, that means we'll have a fair weather, isn't that so?... And if the clouds hide themselves and the southwind begins to blow, what would you say's gonna happen?

Josaphat: Ha, ha.... That's a sign of a warm weather...

Jesus: And you, Master Abiel, what happens if the clouds gather along the west?

Abiel: There's gonna be a storm...

Josaphat: Enough! Where are you leading us, anyway?

Jesus: Hypocrites! How come you know the signs from above, yet do not see those from below!.... Yes,

there's going to be a storm... from below!... Hypocrites! Aren't you aware of what's happening around you? The people are awake, but you continue to sleep. You call one crazy and a dreamer if you can't buy him with your money. Hypocrites! The prophet John did not eat nor drink, and you accused him of being possessed by a demon. On the other hand, when I go to the pub, you say I'm a drunkard and a glutton. You are like stupid children doing things at the wrong time: you don't dance at a wedding, neither do you cry at a wake. To think that you are the wise men and the priests of Israel! Hypocrites!...

Abiel: Just a minute, Nazarene, listen...

But Jesus turned his back and left the house...

Abiel: Imbecile! You'll regret this some day.

Peter: What happened, Jesus? What did they want from you?

Jesus: The usual thing, Peter. They've been after us since that incident in the synagogue.

James: You've got to be careful, Jesus. These people are dangerous.

Jesus: They say we're the dangerous ones, and not they.

James: Oh, yeah? So, they're afraid of us! Hell, I like that!

Philip: Well I don't... They also feared the prophet, John... see what happened to him...

Jesus: John had to end up that way... What was he? Not a bamboo that's jostled by the wind? No, he didn't bow before anyone.

Peter: Not even before King Herod himself, so to speak...

Jesus: That's why they cut him in the middle, like an upright tree. That was the only way to finish him off... He was also offered the good life of influence and money, but John never gave in to anything.

Peter: Okay, so what happened, Jesus? Why did they call you? To talk about the prophet, John?... Are they still afraid of a dead man?

Jesus: No, Peter, now we're the ones worrying them. They fear that people may open their eyes and realize that the religion that is taught them is nothing but a roll of human laws and precepts invented by themselves. That's why they want to keep our mouth shut, by force or cunning, whichever works best...

Philip: What'll they do?

Jesus: They'll have to use force, Philip. They're violent men. All the privileges they're enjoying were obtained that way, at the expense of others. Now, they want to buy the Kingdom of God through the use of force...

James: Did they offer you money, Jesus?

Jesus: Yeah, and a good job. Anything, just anything if we shut up. You know what I'm thinking?... From now on, we should keep an eye on the yeast of the Pharisees. A little of the old yeast is enough to spoil the whole dough. These people are rotten and can ruin everything....

James: They'll think of every scheme to use against us....

Jesus: Today they wanted to trap me. Tomorrow it could be Nathanael or Thomas or Judas... or anyone of us.

Philip: Well, the way I see it, this matter of the Kingdom of God is becoming complicated...

Peter: People must be warned. These people have spies all over. With a couple of dinars, they pay a squealer and can ruin everything.

James: Damned owls! That's what they are, lurking in the dark!

Jesus: Our job will be done in broad daylight. We'll announce all our plans and everything they do behind closed doors shall be revealed right from the balconies of our houses... If they think we are intimidated, they're wrong... We'll never give up.

Eliazir: So, Master Josaphat, were you able to scare him?

Josaphat: Scare him? That fellow is too proud to be scared!

Eliazir: What did he say?

Josaphat: He's crazy. He thinks he's a prophet!

Abiel: The only thing he knows is to eat, get drunk and hang around with his gang of rogues...

Eliazir: So, what do we do now, Josaphat?

Josaphat: Bide time, Eliazir. The fish is caught by its mouth, as the lake people say. Well, this fish will also perish through his mouth. He's so imprudent and arrogant. If he doesn't shut up, then it'll be the worse for him. You'll see, friend, everything will just be a matter of time... Let's leave him alone... He's putting up his own cross, ha, ha, ha...

Eliazir, the rich landlord, and Josaphat, the Pharisee, a teacher and faithful follower of the law of Moses, continued talking. Meanwhile, the clouds, whirling about the west, promised a strong storm coming....

The social groups wielding economic, political and religious powers in society were gradually banding themselves together against Jesus. In this episode, the first of these alliances has taken shape. On the one hand is Eliazir, the landlord. In Galilee, after Roman domination the agrarian structure became highly centralized in the hands of a few. These landowners were naturally opposed to any popular movement with social justification. Together with Eliazir are two Pharisees, teachers of the law. Although it was not always the case that the Pharisees came from the ruling class, a number of them belonged to the latter. They had religious powers: They "saved" and "condemned" according to their interpretation of the Law. For this group, Jesus – who was associated with the "damned" and had no respect for the Law – was extremely dangerous. He questioned everything about the mechanism of religion. These two powerful groups finally tried to involve the political and military elements of Rome, in order to picture Jesus as dangerous, because he awakened in the poor the hope of liberation. Bribery was one of the innumerable tactics of the powerful to counteract any resistance from the people. In general, before getting rid of a leader, first there is an effort to "buy him." Blackmail, a good job, money, or even threats are methods used to weaken commitment to a cause that demand sacrifices. Jesus, at this point in his life, was already very popular among his countrymen. He was a leader, and as such, must have been exposed to pressures of this type.

Jesus talked to his enemies of "the signs of the times," which they failed to read. Not so long ago, the great prophet, Pope John XXIII, frequently referred to what he called "signs of the times." He said we should be aware of what was going on around us in history in order to see the future and work for a better one for all. Just as Jesus awakened the people of Israel from their passivity, giving them hope through a community that shared and worked for the attainment of justice, in our times it is a sign for us as well. With Christian communities as a base, people's organizations multiply, mature and grow. These, too, are signs of the times. They shall determine the future.

For "decent" people of his period, Jesus was a notorious man and his life was a real scandal for them. The gospel retained what was said of him: "one who ate a lot, a drunkard, and a friend of the prostitutes." On another occasion, he was called "a Samaritan" (Jn 8:48), which was a strong insult, equivalent to "bastard," a "son of a prostitute." The entire gospel gives testimony to the fact that Jesus was not anti-social, nor a shy man, whose life had little to do with that of the monks, and the ascetics who inflicted self-punishment in order to free their spirit. Neither did he resemble the solemn and sober prophet, John the Baptist. Jesus was a man from the town. His natural environment was the square, the street and the barrio. For him his daily life was sanctified by people's joy, full of simplicity and without complication, the very way by which to reach out to God.

(Mt 11:7-19; 16:1-12; Mk 8:11-21; Lk 7:24-35, 54-56)

In those days, King Herod, the Tetrarch of Galilee, increased the taxes on wheat, wine and oil in order to maintain his style of life in court, and please the officials of the army.... The people's protests were to no avail. The prison cells of Tiberias, where the king had his best palace, were bursting with non-conformist young men and rebellious zealots...

Herod: Where have you put those men conspiring against me?

Jailer: Here they are, King Herod. Not one has escaped the vigilant eyes of your guards.

Herod: And neither will anyone get away from the axe of my executioner.

Jailer: This young man is Abiathar's son, the Pharisee.

Herod: So?

Jailer: Abiathar is at the palace door with two talents of silver as ransom for his son. He's pleading clemency for his son.

Herod: Clemency?... Did you say clemency?... Ha, ha, ha...! What's the charge against the boy?

Jailer: He and a group stole some weapons from the Arsenal of Saphir.

Herod: Really?... He has hardly grown his beard and he's already stealing swords! That's conspiracy against his king! Ha! Cut his right hand off with that same sword. That will teach him a lesson.

Young Man: No, no, have pity on me, my king, have pity on me...!

Herod: Take him and inform the executioner... And this stupid-looking guy here, what's his offense?

Another Young Man: I didn't do anything, my king, this is an injustice...!

Jailer: Shut up! Is that the way to talk to your king?...

Herod: What crime was committed by this imbecile?

Jailer: This guy gave us a hard time. He runs like a hare. Twice he escaped right under the noses of the guards.

Herod: Well, he won't escape the third time. Have his right foot cut off!

Young Man: No, no, no!!!

Jailer: This one's a spy, your Majesty. They caught him last week going over the records of our sales and purchases. He belongs to the zealot movement.

Herod: So you're a spy, huh?... Gouge his eyes out with a nail and throw them to my dogs... and let them feast on their favorite food.

King Herod Antipas was ruthless just like his father. It was better to die than be brought to the dungeons of his palace... where dozens of men and women rotted in dark prison cells... There was a rat-infested room, firmly shut, a dark and stinking dungeon where living cadavers and lice coexisted and rebels were thrown to die... There was a torture chamber guarded by four hangmen who were tasked to carry out the orders of the king...

Young Man: No, no, no, no, don't do this to me....! You're a man like me!.... You can't do this to me...!

They grabbed the boy, son of Abiathar, and pulled his right arm over a wooden wedge, where the blood of the previous victims flowed....

Young Man: For God's sake!... For God's sake!..... Don't cut off my hand!... No, no..... I don't want this..... noooo....!!

Jailer: Dammit, cover his mouth and hold him tight!

Young Man: No, no,ohhh!!!

After a series of interrogations and torture, some prisoners went back to their homes, ruthlessly mutilated in those prison cells of Tiberias....

Mother: Oh my son, my son....! What have they done to you?... My son...!!

Abiathar: Beasts, beasts..!!

Abiathar's son, tried to hide his right arm which ended in a worm-infested stump...

Adviser: Has your Majesty been informed about the new prophet in Galilee?... Prophets here grow like mushrooms.

Herod: Prophet? To whom are you referring, you crook?

Adviser: That man named Jesus, a tall, brown and bearded fellow. A peasant from Nazareth, to be exact.

Herod: Why do you tell me this, huh?

Adviser: Because the King must know what's happening in his kingdom. This Nazarene is everywhere. He's astute and organized. They say he wants to change everything, even religion! He's been going from town to town along the lake, with his group, two by two...

Herod: Tell me, what do they do?

Adviser: What everyone else is doing. Conspire against his Excellency, telling the people to rise up against the king, not to pay taxes, and....

Herod: Then why did you tell me he was a prophet? He's more of an agitator, like the rest.

Adviser: Yes and no. It seems this Jesus is a good magician. He makes miracles! His words seem like honey. People follow him and stick to him like flies... Some even say he could be the Messiah!

Herod: Ha! The Messiah!.... A good for nothing peasant, to become the Messiah!.... My prisons are already full of messiahs, and they still want more!

Adviser: They also say this Nazarene speaks with fire, just like the prophet Elijah!

Herod: That fire can be extinguished by filling his mouth with sand, until his belly explodes.

Adviser: He's said to be like King David who dances, laughs and frequents taverns....

Herod: Let's see if he can still laugh when he's in shackles.

Adviser: They also say... well, they say a lot of things.

Herod: Are you insinuating something? Speak out clear, man. What else do they say of him?

Adviser: Just plain people's gossip, my King...

Herod: What else do they say about this fellow? Dammit!

Adviser: That he's John the Baptist, who has come back from the dead.

Herod: What a big lie! John is dead. I myself had him beheaded!

Adviser: They say John's spirit left his body through his neck when his head was cut off. Then he went back to Machaerus seven times looking for the door. And when he found it, he fled in haste and...

Herod: And what? Finish it, man!

Adviser: And his spirit slipped into the Nazarene's body. This is true, your Majesty, because this Nazarene speaks exactly like Zechariah's son.

Herod: You're a big liar! Why do you deceive me?... Have you heard him speak, huh?!

Adviser: Personally no, my King, but they say....

Herod: I'll have you beaten for being a liar!

Adviser: Take it easy, your Majesty. You were the one who obliged me to inform you...

Herod: I want this man right away!

Adviser: Yes, my King.

Herod: I want to see his face, and I'll know what kind of a man is this Jesus. I've got acute senses, you know. If he's a fake, then I'll have his tongue pulled out. And if he's a prophet, I'll have him beheaded...

Adviser: What if he's the same John who resurr....

Herod: Shut up, rumor-monger! Shut up! You just want to scare me! And damn you, John the Baptist! Even in death you don't leave me in peace!

That same day, two men came to the house, asking for Jesus. They came from Tiberias..

Pharisee: Are you Jesus of Nazareth?

Jesus: Yes, I am. But, why do you speak in such a low voice? There's no one sick in this house!

Another Pharisee: There may not be one for the moment, but perhaps, there will be a dead man, and soon. King Herod has been looking for you, Nazarene.

Jesus: Really? How come you know that?

Pharisee: We're from Tiberias. We're friends of the king's adviser.

Jesus: And what does this fox want with me?

Pharisee: He thinks you're the resurrected John the Baptist and you want to avenge him. Herod is a very superstitious man.

Pharisee: Just a piece of advice, young man. Go away from here. Hide in any village in the mountains, and don't tell anyone, not even your friends, where you are.

Jesus: There's something I don't understand here. You're friends of a palace adviser, yet you're helping me flee from the king. Why? Aren't you so well-paid by Herod, that you need not look for other means?

Pharisee: No, no, it's not that, Nazarene. Last week, they cut off the right hand of a nephew of mine, son of the Pharisee, Abiathar. Tears rolled down my eyes when I saw that worm-infested wound of his, and I promised myself to help any Israelite escape from the claws of this assassin, whatever his ideas might be.

Jesus: I understand... What about you, why don't you say anything? Did you see the mutilated boy?

Pharisee: He's my son. I'm Abiathar, the Pharisee.

Jesus, enraged, clenched his fists and became teary-eyed...

Jesus: Criminal....!

Pharisee: Get away from here, young man, if you don't want the same thing to happen to you, or it might even be worse.

Jesus: No, I'm not going away.

Pharisee: Believe us, young man. Your life is in danger. Don't you understand?

Jesus: Yes, I do, and I thank you for having informed me. But I'm not leaving. When you go back to Tiberias and see that fox in his den of gold and marble, tell this on my behalf: that he can't stop me from doing what I'm doing now, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow; that I'm not scared of him nor of his threats, because until now no prophet has ever died in Galilee, but in Jerusalem.

Pharisee: Don't be crazy, Nazarene, and listen to us...

At that moment, my brother James and I came back from the wharf. Even our neighbors peeped through the house to take a glimpse at our visitors...

John: Is there anything wrong, Moreno? What seems to be the problem?

Jesus: Nothing. Herod is not satisfied with the blood that has been shed. He wants more. He wants to drink of the blood of all the children of Israel!

John: Scoundrel, that's what he is! Look what he's done with the taxes: he wants to drain all our pockets of the little money we have, for his mistresses' jewelry.

A Woman: The king is an adulterer. He lives with his sister-in-law, his brother Philip's wife. What a vicious man!

Jesus: That would be the least, neighbor. He can do anything he pleases with his life, but not with his neighbor's. That man is a stumbling block. There'll be no peace here while he's on the throne, robbing the people and torturing our children.

As usual, the barrio folks started milling in the street in order to listen to Jesus...

John: Jesus, let's go inside first.

Jesus: No, John. The people must know what's happening in our country. They had the right hand of this man's son cut off, do you understand? If it were your own hand, would you just keep quiet?

John: Okay, Moreno, okay, but there are lots of squealers around. You can never tell...

Jesus: Hey, all of you, listen to me! If anyone here is a friend of this fox, disguised as the king, tell this to him on my part: he who lives by the sword, shall perish by the sword... You cut off the right hand of Abiathar's son, God will throw you into the fire with your two hands. You cut off a foot of Manasses' son, the Lord will throw you into the fire with your two feet. You gouged somebody else's eyes with a nail, pulled out fingernails with a pair of pliers, castrated men and raped women in jail, or mutilated the sons of Israel. God will throw you and your whole body into hell, where the worms will feast on it. You had the prophet, John, beheaded. God will have a large millstone tied around your neck and have you thrown into

the depths of the sea. You and the rest of the criminals do not deserve to breathe the air nor step on this ground. Tell Herod all this on my behalf...

Jesus turned and went inside the house. He was so enraged. He sat on the floor, buried his face in his hands and remained quiet for a long time.

About twenty years before Jesus was born, King Herod established the city of Tiberias, on the left bank of Lake Galilee. It was named in honor of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. He then made it the capital of Galilee, instead of Sepphoris. Tiberias was the regular residing place of Herod Antipas, where he had his palace built. For many reasons it was a hated city, not only because of the king's presence but because it was built on a cemetery – and therefore, for the Pharisees, “impure” – and dedicated to the king of Rome. For this reason, the nationalists found it a despicable place. Today, Tiberias is one of the most populated and modern cities of Galilee, with several hotels, good restaurants and sports centers to boast of. (Water skiing and sailing are regular sports on this lake).

In the basement of the palace – as was common during the period – were the dungeons that served as a prison for Herod's foes. Although in Israel torture did not exist as a form of punishment for prisoners, Herod the Great employed excessive torture during his reign, in violation of the Jewish law. His son, Herod, the contemporary of Jesus, brutal as he was, followed in the footsteps of his father. His greed for power and the diminishing popularity of his reign, dependent on Rome, as well as the people's discontent, made of him a ruler capable of committing any crime in order to save his throne.

Torture has existed throughout history. Human beings, in degrading their condition, made others suffer in order to dominate, to subjugate and obtain information. Torture is almost always linked to the unjust exercise of power. We ought to know that even the official Church has engaged in torture. Only five hundred years ago, heretics were burned, non-conformists non-believers were horribly tortured, and all types of pressure were employed over the “enemies” of the Church. The theme of torture is “basic” to a Christian reflection. Its eradication, its rejection by any means is a Christian task, a matter of urgency and priority.

This text in the gospel that deals with the “scandal of the small people” has been often used to illustrate the theme of corruption of minors, child pornography and the like. In Biblical language the phrase “the small people” does not refer only to children. The small people are the poor, the disabled, the oppressed, the powerless who are crushed by people in power. For these little people, humans like the blood-thirsty king are a scandal, taken in the context of the origin of the word: stumbling block. That is to say, people like them are deterrents to poor people's growth, development and life. That is why it would be better for them to be hurled into the sea with a millstone tied around their necks. Wheat flour and that of other cereals were obtained by going through a mill. The mill was an instrument composed of two pieces of stone, one turning over the other. Mills were basic in a home. They evolved into different shapes through the centuries. In Jesus' time, the so-called “ass-mills” were utilized. The stones were so huge, only an ass (or a donkey) could turn the stone that was on top of one fixed on the ground. This was the kind of mill used by various families. Several of these very heavy stones were found among the archaeological ruins of Capernaum. Seeing the size of this piece, one can imagine the tremendous impact of the phrase used by Jesus, one that is “exaggerated,” according to the typical, oriental manner of speaking, reflecting Jesus' grave criticism of the exploiter of the poor.

(Mt 14:1-2; 18:6-9; Mk 6:14-16; 9:42-48; Lk 9:7-9; 13:31-33; 17:1-3)

TREES THAT MOVE AROUND

Bethsaida Square was lined with almond trees. Every morning Barnabas would sit under the shade of one, the shadiest of all. He was a poor old man who always wore a black thick mantle, stained and tattered, on his shoulders...

Barnabas: I think there's ice trapped in my body, woman. I'm always cold. Were it not for this blanket you have sewn for me...!

A Man: Hey, crazy old man, are you talking to someone?

Barnabas: Oh, I don't know. The truth is, I don't know what to do. If only for me, I would go away to a far place... But, what if these trees, you and you, tell them that I left...? Poor creatures, they'll have no company... I believe though, that I must go. Yes, and I'll have to do it...

Barnabas had been talking to himself for many years. For many years too, his eyes could not see the light of day. He became blind when a few pieces of ember landed in his eyes while his wife was cooking food from the kitchen stove. A year later, his wife passed away without having left him a child. Barnabas remained alone, with the memory of his dead wife, and living on alms as he sat beside the trees in the square...

Barnabas: Just a few alms, please, and God will reward you with good health! For the love of God, give me some alms!

A Boy: Here comes, Barnabas, the blind! Come, let's give him some "alms," ha, ha, ha!

Another Boy: Don't laugh too much, you fool, he might find out...! C'mon, let's go...

Barnabas: ...The trouble is, I can't go that far, woman. There are many stones in the road and my cane is not of much help... If you were here with me, then it'd be different....

Boy: See how he talks to himself? He's crazy! Look at his face...!

Barnabas: Just a few alms, for heaven's sake!

Boy: Here, old man, take it... these are my little savings... this will tide you over the whole week...

The boys, feigning their voice, put a small sack of cloth on Barnabas' hands. It was quite heavy...

Barnabas: But, lady, why do you have to give me so many alms?

Boy: It's alright, old man. We've got our eyes and you don't... all this is for you, so you need not come here everytime to beg... You've suffered enough...

Barnabas: Thank you, lady, thank you.... I told you, dear wife, there are still good people in this world...

Boy: Goodbye, old man, and God bless you...!

The boys, who were controlling their laughter, left the almond tree where Barnabas was, as he joyfully opened the small bag given to him....

Barnabas: But... but, what's this? Oh, what wicked creatures!

From the bag full of small and fine pebbles from the river, came a handful of cockroaches that started to run up his arms inside the folds of his mantle. The blind man slapped them away, while the boys doubled up with laughter, seeing him leaping and hurling invectives.

A Boy: Ha, ha, ha...! Old Barnabas has got eyes but can't see! Old Barnabas has got eyes, but can't see!

A Woman: Has anything happened to that crazy old man?

Boy: No, nothing, except that he's teaching the cockroaches how to dance...!

Woman: Well that beats everything! What else is left for him to do?... Well, at least, he gives us reason to laugh. Otherwise, of what use is this poor fellow!

Almost everyday something similar happened in the shady square of Bethsaida. Blind Barnabas was the laughing stock of the town. Everyone made fun of him.

A Boy: Hey, old man, guess who it is this time! Puah!

Another Boy: It's your turn now... Now! Puah!

Boy: Guess who it was, guess, Barnabas!

Barnabas: Wicked creatures! Rascals!

That morning, when we arrived in Bethsaida Square, a group of boys had the blind man tied around an almond tree with a rope. They took turns spitting at him, trying to hit him in the eyes with their saliva and asking him to guess who had done it... Some people gathered around, and joined them....

Jesus: What's going on here?

Woman: I dunno, stranger. This blind old man's gone a little crazy...

John: But... why are they spitting at him?...

Woman: Leave him alone, dammit! Poor man...! Well, it's a children's game, you know. They must amuse themselves with something, no?

Jesus: Of course, and the grown-ups are enjoying it too, aren't they?

Man: Look, stranger, you meddler, what've you got to say, huh? As far as I know, everyone can have fun with anything he pleases... am I right, or wrong...?

A Boy: Let me go! Let me go! It's my turn now!

All: Old Barnabas has got eyes but can't see! Old Barnabas has got eyes but can't see!

Jesus: Listen, friend, if you were blind, would you like people to do the same to you?

Man: I'm not blind, so what the hell do I care! If you're not enjoying the game, beat it man!

The game was over when we returned to the square at noontime. But old Barnabas still had his hands tied around the tree. He was panting and talking to himself, his face full of the boys' saliva...

Barnabas: ...and I'll take a ship, woman, you know, one of those that cross the lake... and I'll go away. There, on the other side of the lake, they say that people are different, that the boys respect you and people give you a hand...

Jesus: We're from the other side of the lake, old man...

Barnabas: Huh...? Who... who are you?

John: We got here this morning and we saw you in the square.

Barnabas: : You demons!... What... what will you do this time?... Go away! Go away and leave me in peace!!!

Jesus: We're here to untie you, old man... Don't be afraid. We never liked the game they played on you, old man...

Barnabas: Where are you from...?

Jesus: We came from Capernaum.

Barnabas: From the other side of the lake?

John: Right. Have you ever been there?

Barnabas: When I could still see, yes... But that was a long time ago. I can't even remember anymore...

Jesus: C'mon, John, let's untie him...

Barnabas: What will you do to me? Please, have pity on me!...

Jesus: Don't be afraid. We won't hurt you. Don't be afraid...

Barnabas: They're all a bunch of rascals!... They all laugh at me the whole day... and I... I'm helpless...

John: Cheer up, old man, you're free...

Barnabas: Free?... Tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, they will tie me up and do the same thing again... It's always the same.

Jesus: Have they done this to you before?

Barnabas: This and more. If they don't spit on me, they beat me, or they hurl cockroaches at me, making me flee... and this hurts me... Well, I've become used to it... and I don't care anymore.

Jesus: You don't care anymore?... So, why are you weeping?

Barnabas: Because it hurts everytime... No, I'm not used to it... I'm always hurt...

Jesus: Come old man. Let's get away from here.

Barnabas: You want me to go?

John: Sure, come with us...

Barnabas: But, are you out of your mind?... Where will you bring me?

Jesus: To a place far from here, old man, where no one will harm you...

Barnabas: But... but I can't simply do that... How can I go and leave the trees alone?... See what I told you, woman? I really don't know what to do now... These strangers want me to go with them, and if I do, who'll keep these trees company...? Well, if you want me to go with them, woman, then I go, but don't blame me later on.....

Jesus: Let's go, old man, here take my hand... hold on tight so you don't stumble.... Let's go...

So we left the square, passing through a narrow street that was lined with palm trees, and proceeded outside the city. Barnabas was supported by his cane and the brawny and calloused hand of Jesus. He was limping a little...

John: What's wrong with your foot, old man?

Barnabas: What else? A few days ago, they burned it with a lighted stick... "Guess who did it to you"... If I only knew!.... Rascals!

Jesus: That's all over. They won't harm you anymore...

Barnabas: Yes, because if they come back, they'll tie me up again, even if I don't do anything to them... so, why do they always pick on me and beat me, tell me?

John: Forget about these people, old man...

Barnabas: You can say that again, young man. Even my wife tells me to ignore them... But I can't, because... because I hate them, you know?... Before, when I could still see, I didn't know the meaning of this word, hatred... but now, I do. It's something that you keep inside your heart and it stays there... Yes, woman, this is an ugly word to utter, but I can't help it, because I feel it! Of course, you haven't experienced what I have....!

We continued walking, staying away from the city. The noonday sun scorched the road and made the leaves of the trees glitter.... Blind Barnabas could not see the light that was blinding all of us....

Barnabas: You know what, I think people are worse than the beasts. Beasts kill so they will have something to eat, but people cause you harm for the fun of it... and they make fun of you!... Do you know what these people do to me?... They spit on me... on my face... in my eyes... do you understand?

Jesus: Hey, old man, wait a minute.... Puah...!

Barnabas: What are you doing...? No, no, don't do that young man...no...no..., you don't...

Jesus spat on his hands and with his fingers wet with saliva, touched the blind man's eyes...

Jesus: Hold it, old man.... keep still... You know something? People are bad at times.... but God is always good...

Barnabas: Hey... hey, what're you rubbing in my eyes?

Jesus: Nothing, don't worry... C'mon, open your eyes...

Jesus removed his fingers from Barnabas' eyes...

Jesus: Can you see anything, old man?

Barnabas: I... I... yes, yes!.... I see a lot of trees... I can see you and your friend... They look like trees moving around...

Jesus went near the blind man and put his hand on his eyes again. Barnabas was weeping...

Jesus: What's wrong, old man? Why are you crying?

Barnabas: I can see the trees again, young man... There in the town square, the almond trees were my only

friends, you know... They have given me shade, and when it was time, their fruits... Now, I'll see them again... the people, no.... I don't want to see them....

John: But you're seeing us...

Barnabas: You... have been my friends... like the trees...

Amid his tears, Barnabas started to distinguish the road, the stones and the flowers. And there, from afar, the silhouettes of the houses of Bethsaida....

Barnabas: I don't wish to go back there.

Jesus: No, don't go back to that town. Better take this road. By afternoon, you will arrive in Chorazin. Stay there. Don't tell anyone what happened. Neither should you do to anyone what you didn't want others do to you.

Barnabas looked at us with his small and wrinkled yet, sparkling eyes. Limping, and with his long cane, he began to walk. As always, he was talking to himself..

Barnabas: You should have seen him, woman... He was a man, but he seemed like a tree... He could give you shade and support... You should have seen him, woman....

Old Barnabas moved away until he was lost in the horizon, illuminated by the huge red sun of Galilee....

Bethsaida, meaning "house of fish," was a small city on the northern part of the Lake of Galilee. Here were born Philip, Peter and his brother Andrew. Philip, the Tetrarch, called it Julia in honor of the imperial Roman family bearing this family name. No remains of this city can be found at present. It is believed that the floods coming from the River Jordan and leading into the lake buried the ancient fishing village.

Blindness was a common sickness in Israel in Jesus' time. The dry climate and the intense heat of the sun contributed to the disease. In general, blindness was prevalent all over the ancient world; it was often due to poor hygienic conditions and ignorance of disease. It was thought to be incurable and was believed to be a special kind of God's punishment. As a consequence of their ailment, the blind were outcasts.

The sick person does not always evoke in others a feeling of compassion and mercy. On occasion, they become the object of ridicule and maltreatment. A person who is inutile, different, abnormal, sometimes becomes the laughing stock of everyone. It happens in school, where one always finds a weakling, a stout one, an ugly one who is made fun of by others. It often happens in the towns, in the barrio, and at work. It is a rather frequent human reaction. When Jesus approaches Barnabas and gives him back his eyesight, it is a sign of Jesus' special closeness to the dejected and the ridiculed. God feels a special affection for them.

Although one may apply very critical norms in reading the miracle stories in the gospel – some are duplicated, others are extremely ornate, still others are based on similar accounts from other people, there always remains a nucleus which is absolutely historical. Jesus performed miracles that astounded his contemporaries. Basically these were healings of real diseases, though related with special psychological situations. Among them were the so-called expulsion of demons, madness, hysteria, epilepsy and the healing of lepers (within the wide gamut of diseases that this word encompassed) of paralytics and the blind. In modern language today, such healings would fall within that branch of medicine called "the therapy of transcendence."

Do unto others what we would want others do unto us: this is the so-called "golden rule of the gospel" (Mt 6:12). With this, Matthew summarizes the beatitudes pronounced by Jesus on the mount. Certainly, it is a very practical conclusion, since the entire Law can be capsulized in love – in deed, not in words – that we should have for others.

(Mk 8:22-26)

FOREIGN DOGS

In those days, we went up the country of Tyre (Tyrus). We crossed the border of Israel in the north, near the Lake of Merom, and went through the marine lands that were full of the forests of the Syrophenicians.

Peter: This is my first time to set foot on foreign land!

John: You're not the only one, stone thrower. It's the first time for everyone... How about you, Jesus. Have you ever been abroad?

Jesus: No, never. We from inland travel very little.

John: Well, since all of us are travelling for the first time, then we must all be careful. They say half of the people here are thieves and the other half are usurers. So, we've got to be alert!

Jesus: What I've heard, John, is that in business, there's no one who can beat these Canaanites.

Philip: Yeah, that's true. When it comes to those things, I'm in the know. If you want good textiles, get them from here. If you want quality glass, you'll find it here.

Peter: And if you want first class cheaters, they also come from here.

Philip: What these people sell you with one hand, they also get it back with the other... All our townmates who have been in this place know it....

Jesus: We must be coming close to Tyre... Isn't that what we can see from afar?

Tyre, one of the principal and most important ports of the country of Canaanites, was a white city built over rocks, by the sea. Here lived Salathiel, an Israelite friend of old Zebedee, who had invited us to go there...

Jesus: Where could the house of Salathiel be?

John: The Israelites' barrio is here, on the outskirts. We shouldn't be far from it...

Jesus: Let's ask someone....

Peter: Better if we can find it by ourselves.

Jesus: Why, Peter?

Peter: Because I don't trust these foreigners. To each his own. We go our own way and they go their own.

A minute later, the accent of people conversing in the streets told us that we were in the barrio of our Israelite countrymen. We asked an old man with a long gray beard for Salathiel's house, and he himself, limping and supported by a thick cedar cane, brought us to his house...

Salathiel: Welcome, countrymen! I was expecting you tomorrow, but old Joachim informed me of your arrival, ha, ha, ha!.... This is really a nice surprise!

Peter: We left one day earlier. Things are not so good in Galilee.

Salathiel: What? Its Herod again and his usual thing, isn't it? Everyone here knows what's going on there... But... well, please sit down. The wine will be brought any minute now, and that's what matters... Methelia, Methelia!... Bring in two jugs of wine, right away!... Oh, please pardon our wine.... Our wine here is no good.... It's dirty water tinged with purple!... And well, Jesus, Peter, John... I have long wanted to meet you... The news that you are agitating the whole of Galilee has reached us here. I want you to speak with my countrymen later. Even in this country, a lot of things ought to change, yes sir!

Philip: This place is quite big, isn't it? When we got here and crossed through the square, we couldn't even get through.

Salathiel: You came on a market day. Those foreigners are the first hawkers in the world!... Today they're all out in the streets, while we stay here at home... he, he, he! Yeah, we're together and not bothered!

Jesus: About how many Israelites live here, Salathiel?

Salathiel: Well, that's not difficult to know. Everyone lives in this barrio. I think we're about three hundred, excluding the women and children. We manage very well. These foreigners need us. Work is never scarce. The Canaanites may be astute businessmen, but without us, they would do very little, he, he, he! Wherever one of us is, business prospers and even stones are converted into silver, yes sir!

Salathiel explained to us how life was for our compatriots in that foreign land. He had lived there for many years. He was a sort of patriarch for his countrymen.

Salathiel: It's difficult to live among pagans, young men. These foreign dogs may be very knowledgeable about purple, but that's all they know. They're ignorant of other things. They have a god in every barrio, just imagine... Ah, only when you live far from your country do you realize to thank the Lord for having been born in a town like ours. God did the right thing in choosing our country as his own! Well, damn, the tongue also deserves a rest.... Aren't you hungry?

Peter: Yeah, Salathiel. The last time we got a glimpse of bread was when we passed through the border...

Salathiel: Well, in that case, let's all go and eat! In a short while, a group of our countrymen will be here to tell you what they're doing here in Galilee... Hey, Methelia, Methelia!

Methelia: Sir?....

Salathiel: Have the food ready. And hurry up, because we're starved!

Methelia: Right away, sir....

Salathiel: Ah, everytime I think that one of these Canaanites sleeps under my roof, it makes me sick to my stomach... he, he, he, but at least I'm consoled by the fact that she is under my orders....

Jesus: Has she been with you for a long time, Salathiel?

Salathiel: The husband abandoned her when they were newly married and left her with a daughter about... four... five years old. So I bought her as a maid. That was a good deal, you know. And she was cheap.... Ah, a bitch like that is not worth the dust from the sandals of one of our women.... Have you noticed how ugly they are...? No amount of ornaments can hide it...!

Soon, Methelia returned with a big pot of lentils and a tray of eggplants and put them on the table. In her young face the color of olives, like the rest of the Syrophenician men and women, could be seen those wrinkles, telltale signs of her tears and suffering....

Salathiel: Okay, let's pray to God that He may bless the food! "We praise you and bless you, God of Israel, who has placed our country above all nations! Remember, Lord, all of us who live outside the country, in the midst of pagans who know not your love and the foreigners who have no respect for your laws. Grant that we may again partake of the bread in our own land!."

All: Amen, amen!

Salathiel: Come and get it, fellows. Eat all you can and nothing should remain on the tray!

When we were almost through eating....

Salathiel: With you gathered at my table, I feel near my beloved Lake of Galilee!... But I'm not losing hope, no sir: one day I'll shake the dust off of my sandals right in the noses of these pagans and I'll return to my land!.... "Larara... Galilee, my beloved land..."

All: Fine, fine!

Salathiel: Hell, how nostalgic...!

Methelia: Sir, you wish nothing?

Philip: How's that...?

Methelia: You wish nothing...?

Philip: Hey, Salathiel, what the hell is this woman asking me? I don't understand a thing!

Salathiel: What is it, Methelia?

Methelia: You wish nothing, sir?

Salathiel: We want you to go and leave us in peace. Go to the kitchen, where you belong.

Methelia: And the wine, sir... I put here?

Salathiel: Ha, ha,... yes, “put it there” ...ha, ha... Did you hear? She doesn’t even know how to speak! Ha, ha... You’ll see... You’ll see... Hey, Methelia, tell my friend what you put in the soup for its nice taste....

Methelia: Sir, I put parle...

Salathiel: Parle! Parle!... It’s been five years and you haven’t learned the word “parsley!... Ha, ha, ha! C’mon, why don’t you tell them the name of the flowers I asked you to pick from the garden...

Methelia: Sir, they are lilies and dissies...

Salathiel: Ha, ha! Oh, I’ll die laughing....! I taught the word, but nothing!.... Ha, ha, ha!.... Heck.... Look, Methelia, do you see that bearded man in front of you? He’s a famous doctor, a healer... Ask him to do something for your “dafter” ...Ha, ha, ha..! C’mon, tell him, tell him...

Methelia, the servant from Canaan, looked at Jesus with a ray of hope in her deep, dark eyes...

Salathiel: This poor creature does nothing but weep for her daughter... for her “dafter,” as she says... Ha, ha, ha...! She cries the whole day.... Your daughter was born sick and not even the doctors nor your tears can cure her. Put this into your head and try to understand, Methelia!

Methelia: Are you a doctor, strangerr?

Salathiel: Ha, ha, ha...! Yes, he is a heallerr!... It gives a good laugh when I hear these Canaanites speak!

Methelia: Strangerr, help my dafter!

Salathiel: Here we go again....! C’mon, Methelia, beat it, I’ll call for you if we need something...

Methelia: Help her, strangerr....!

Salathiel: What a big bore you are! Now, leave. Mind the kitchen fire while we enjoy our lentils here!

But Methelia did not leave. Rubbing her hands on the dirty apron, and teary-eyed, she even went closer to Jesus...

Methelia: My sick dafter, help my dafter...! Curre her, you are a great prophet!

Salathiel: What do you know about this man?... Of course, eavesdropping behind the door. As always! Listening to gossip and poking your nose in everything is all that you know!

Jesus: Wait a minute, Salathiel, let her....

Salathiel: No, Jesus, I’ve lost all my patience... Pff, this is what I get for being too familiar... You give a finger and they take your hand... Peter, John, Philip.... I’m sorry..... C’mon, go away from here, and weep all you can in the kitchen...

Then Methelia threw herself at Jesus’ feet, sobbing...

Salathiel: Hey, what’s this? Have you ever seen such a brazen act? Jesus, why don’t you scare this bitch away!... Don’t waste your time on her... c’mon, c’mon...

Methelia: Please help my dafter, help her!!

Jesus stared at Salathiel, the Israelite, and smiled with sarcasm...

Jesus: Woman, how am I going to help you? I can’t waste my time giving the children’s bread to the dogs...

Methelia: That’s right, stranger... but even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master’s table.

Methelia, her head bent, like a beaten dog, remained on the floor...

Jesus: Get up, woman. Nobody should be at the feet of anyone... Get up and go peacefully... Your daughter will be well, I assure you....

When Methelia left to look for her daughter, Jesus turned to Salathiel, the old patriarch of the Jewish barrio of Tyre...

Jesus: You were born in Israel, and nurtured by the history of love of our God... but you understood nothing. For God, there are no barriers. He removes them from among all nations like dry grass.... For the

Lord, this is not a land of dogs but of people, like all the rest. No one is a stranger in the house of God.

Two days later, we returned to Israel, our country, passing through the road of the Phoenicians. We hardly felt that we were crossing the frontier because the land had the same color, the trees bore the same leaves and the birds, sang the same tune everywhere.

The Roman province of Syria was a foreign territory where a great number of Israelites used to live, and therefore, there was much contact between Syria and Palestine. More so, with the northern province of Palestine, Galilee, where Syria's frontiers were located. Within the territory of Syria were two important cities of the Phoenicians, Tyre and Sidon. The Phoenicians were great navigators and merchants of the ancient world. The ruins of Tyre and Sidon presently correspond to the territory of Lebanon, in the north of Israel.

Tyre was an important center during the time of the gospels and lasted for centuries. Its two ports were actively engaged in commercial activities with other Mediterranean countries, as well as industries such as metals, textiles, dyes (specially purple) and glass. A flourishing Israelite colony was established there. Since the Jews were well known for their business acumen, they succeeded rapidly in this undertaking. But since they were a nationalistic people – racist at times – they never mingled with the inhabitants of Tyre. In the gospel, they were known as Syrophenicians or Canaanites.

The gospels tell us that only on this one occasion did Jesus leave for a foreign country. Only with this Canaanite woman and with that Roman Centurion who had an ailing servant did Jesus show a sign of the Kingdom of God by healing non-Israelites. This act of Jesus certainly did not transcend geographical frontiers of Israel. He hardly had time to do it. But with his message, his words, Jesus absolutely rejected the kind of nationalism embraced by his compatriots. This was a novelty and a scandal for them at the same time. The group of Pharisees, the Essene monks and the people in general discriminated against foreigners in the much-awaited Kingdom of God. It was their belief that God would do likewise. Jesus completely destroyed this deeply-rooted nationalistic tradition.

Even in our time, there are nations today which feel a certain superiority over others and therefore feel they have a right to rule over them. There are also races who think they are more intelligent and more capable than the rest. In the name of this supposed superiority, they colonize, dictate laws, discriminate, persecute and kill. These ill-fated ideologies led, in Latin America, to massacres of indigenous inhabitants with extremely varied cultures, to the creation of encomiendas, as well as imposition of tribute. Eventually, it led to the enslavement of men and women of African origin, violently uprooted from their countries. The indigenous part of Latin America (more than 15% of the population) is composed of survivors of that historical crime. The 30 million blacks presently living in these countries are children and grandchildren of slaves brought to the continent like beasts, by white men who thought it was their right and even obligation, to enslave them. In doing so, they invoked the name of God, as they continue to do today, in order to justify racism and discrimination of any type.

Science has proven the absolute fallacy of the racist's mind affirming that some races are superior to others. Biologically speaking, each human group has distinctive physical and psychic characteristics, not necessarily better nor worse than those of the rest, nor more valuable than others. Above all, historically speaking, races and countries have had unequal opportunities in developing their own set of values and expressing them. On the level of racism, it is easy to discover the plan followed by the oppressors and the oppressed. What makes it more horrible is the fact that these oppressors are mostly nations with a long history of Christianity. The whole gospel rejects nationalism and racism. Christianity in its original form combats any form of discrimination: There is no longer a Jew, nor a pagan, nor a slave, nor a free man, nor a man, nor a woman.... (Gal 3:28). Neither will there be a black nor a white, an Indian nor a Latin, Mulato nor Mestizo.... We are all the same in the eyes of God. We are all God's children. Jesus makes use of irony with the Canaanite woman. He speaks to her, "one must not throw bread to the dogs." He is doing it to highlight Salathiel's lack of compassion and his glaring nationalistic arrogance. "Dog" is a word of insult in Aramaic as well as in Arabic language. The dog is considered a despicable and impure animal,

for being a stray and for eating rotten and unclean meat.

As a Christian one cannot talk about frontiers separating all peoples. A wrong concept of nationalism is no less than a collective expression of egoism or false pride. While respecting the culture of each nation, their history and peculiarities, the Christian must be (as has always been said) a “citizen of the world,” an “internationalist,” sensitive to the pains and joys of people of every country, who is in solidarity with the struggles and just gains of all nations. In the world we live in, where the fate of a nation can no longer be detached from that of her neighbors for better or for worse, this is not only an ideal theology but historical evidence. In this episode, the miracle of Jesus directed toward the daughter of a foreign woman, is a sign that before God there are no frontiers nor races. God gathers people from the four corners of the earth, and the only sign that will distinguish the citizens of that nation are freedom, life and justice chosen by those who comprise it.

(Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30)

66

POSSESSED BY BEELZEBUL

After passing through the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, we made a round through the various towns of Decapolis and proceeded once again to the Lake of Galilee. I remember we were almost at Chorazin when we came across a crowd of farmers running and screaming like crazy....

In front of the crowd was a man who was panting and stumbling every now and then. He was short and untidy, his tunic in tatters. Behind him was a group of men with boards and stones in their hands, running and cornering him like a beast....

Neighbor: Go away from here, Satan!... Go away, go away!

Woman Neighbor: Off you go to the desert! Demon! Outta here!

Another Neighbor: You're Beelzebul! You're Beelzebul! You're Beelzebul!

A stone flew over our heads and landed right on the neck of the poor creature. Whirling, the man fell to the street. He was motionless.

Neighbor: Seraphio is cursed! Seraphio is cursed!

Woman Neighbor: Don't get too close! This man is possessed by the devil!

Neighbor: Seraphio is cursed!

Jesus and I forced our way through the enraged multitude and finally saw Seraphio who was whimpering on the ground, his head supported by his two hands. He was trembling with fear...

Another Neighbor: Send for the Pharisee! Send for the Pharisee!

Pharisee: Here I am, dammit! Let me pass, you bunch of troublemakers!

An old man with his cloak of prayers hanging from his shoulders, appeared in front of everyone.

Woman Neighbor: This damned fellow needs special incantation.

Jesus: Hey, what's all this hassle, huh? Who's this fellow?

Neighbor: He's possessed by the devil. Can't you see?

Jesus: Why, what happened to him?

Woman Neighbor: What else could happen to him?! The devil slipped into his body, like he swallowed a fly!

Neighbor: The poor creature has been hiding for a week. If it hadn't been for old man Clete who found him this morning, we wouldn't have known what happened to him. Do you know where he found him? There, right inside the well, like a mouse trapped in his hole, dropping all his shit in the water that everyone drinks!

Neighbor: Damn! If not for Clete...! He took him out with a rope!

Another Neighbor: Say the prayer fast, Pharisee, and hurry! This man is dangerous! He's possessed by the devil!

Jesus: Are you sure he's possessed?...

Woman Neighbor: Of course. Look, this devil's gotta be really strong, he can't even hear or speak. He's tongue tied and his ears are covered.

The Pharisee was already preparing to pray, so he signalled us to keep quiet....

Pharisee: I want complete silence, so the Lord will hear our prayer! If anyone sees the devil leave this man, throw him at once to the ground to prevent him from entering another person's body....

We were all on tiptoes in order to get a view of poor Seraphio who was curled up on the ground. Then the Pharisee raised his hands and began to exorcize the deaf and mute demon.

Pharisee: Stay away from this man, Satan! Go away, get away from here, and leave the body of Seraphio!... I command you, in the name of the Lord!... Satan, filthy serpent, monster of broken hooves, beast with seven horns, get out!... Go away, stinking devil, leave this man, unclean devil, deaf devil, mute devil!... Beelzebul!... conqueror of man, temptation of woman, go away from here, drown yourself into the sea, burn yourself in fire, go back to hell!... This man is not moving... He does not even hear nor speak. He's got the devil all over him! But I'll get him, yes sir, I'll get the devil out of his body at any cost!

Woman Neighbor: Hey, Pharisee, why don't you try it with a candle? They say that the demon is like a scorpion that emits its own poison when threatened by fire.

Pharisee: Yes, let's try it with fire. You, four, tie his hands and feet. Make it tight so he won't kick. Then bring me a torch... We'll put the candle on his feet, to make him talk. The mute devil hates the candle...

The Pharisee took a burning torch and placed it near the sole of Seraphio's feet. He looked at us terrified....

Seraphio: Aaaaagghh...! Aaaaagghh!

The air was filled with the smell of burned meat. The deafmute twisted but could not escape from the four strong men that held him on the ground....

Seraphio: Aaaagghh...! Aaaagghh...!

Pharisee: He's a very powerful demon, more powerful than the candle... He has his tongue tied in four knots. But, don't worry, now we'll remove the cover from his ears. The deaf demon flees from boiling water. Hey, bring me the pot so I can remove the stuff from his ears.... Hold him tight and turn his face!...

The Pharisee poured the boiling water into Seraphio's ears who was kicking like mad...

Seraphio: Aaagghh....! Aaaagghh....!

Pharisee: Do you hear me?... Do you hear me?... Can't you hear anything, damn!

Woman Neighbor: Maybe, there are seven of them, Pharisee, that's why the ears don't melt...

Pharisee: Please wait.... Let's try the needles. My father exorcized not seven but seventy demons from a witch's body! No demon can ever stand the prickings he'll get in the groin!.... Hold him tight...!

Jesus, who was beside me, lost his cool and pounced on the Pharisee...

Jesus: For God's sake, stop it!... Do you wanna kill him? Is that what you want?

Pharisee: This man is possessed by the devil. We must get the devil out of his body.

Jesus: At the rate you're going, you'll soon be pulling out his soul. Leave him alone, dammit! Don't you

see he's already suffering?

Pharisee: Ha! This only proves you don't know him! He's got the deaf and mute demons inside him! Isn't that enough? I couldn't get them out with candle nor boiling water.

Jesus: I'm not surprised.

Pharisee: Why do you say that?

Jesus: Have you forgotten what the prophet Elijah found out in the cave of Sinai? That God was not in the fire nor in the hurricane, but in the soft breeze...

Pharisee: What do you mean?...

Jesus: This man doesn't need a burning torch but the warmth of a helping hand. He doesn't need boiling water. Just a small amount of saliva will do...

Pharisee: Hey, stranger, wait a minute, what will you do?

But Jesus was already inclining over the deafmute lying on his back on the ground, breathing irregularly and with a terrified look on his face...

Seraphio: Ahh... Ahh... Ay....

Jesus: Don't be afraid, brother, I ain't gonna harm you...

Jesus wet his fingers with saliva... Then he touched Seraphio's tongue and ears and gently blew over his forehead....

Jesus: Look... I told you, Pharisee.... The Spirit of God is like a soft breeze... This man's already cured....

Pharisee: This is all a hoax! How can he be cured?! I'm the only one here who knows about exorcism, do you hear? This poor creature's possessed by at least seven demons that make him deaf and mute....

Seraphio: You, you... are the seven demons...!

When Seraphio spoke those words from the ground, we milled around him all the more. Some of us even shoved one another just to get a glimpse of what happened to the deafmute... The stronger men threatened with their boards to maintain some order... Then the Pharisee spoke.....

Pharisee: My dear neighbors from Chorazin, as you can see, Satan takes to his kind. We wanted to get rid of this deafmute, but a greater evil is in his stead. This stranger who has anointed him with saliva is more evil-possessed than Seraphio!

Woman Neighbor: Why do you say that, Pharisee?

Pharisee: Why? Because only a nail can pull out another nail. If he was able to exorcize the devil out of this wretch, then he could've done it only through the power of Beelzebul!

Another Neighbor: How's that possible, Pharisee? If Beelzebul had driven away the same spirit, then he would have been crazy fighting his own self, don't you think so?

Pharisee: Shut up woman, or you might end up being possessed by the devil too!... Neighbors, this stranger drove away the devil with the power of the same devil. So, why don't you all stone him?... Did you hear me? This man is possessed by the devil!

But the farmers of Chorazin did not move to stone Jesus nor to hit him with their boards....

Pharisee: I repeat, the same Beelzebul has come in to our midst. He's right here before you!

Woman Neighbor: Well, I didn't know that the devil was a fine, young man!

Pharisee: Oh, yeah? So you're disobeying my command? Right now, I'll inform the great Rabbi, Josaphat, that all of you have been influenced by this devil of rebellion! Everyone's under the power of Satan! You are all possessed by Evil!

The indignant Pharisee shook off the dust from his tunic and left... The people were waiting for Jesus to speak.

Jesus: No, my friends, Beelzebul is not here. It's the Kingdom of God that has come! The devil is conquered, and he can't do anything! There's no more demon to fear!

An Old Woman: You can't say that, young man! No one can ever surpass the demon, whose tail is so long, it measures forty feet! They say that when the Lord puts him in jail, he opens the doorlock by using his tail. That's why the demon's always free!

Jesus: No grandma, that's not so. The demon is well tied up, because God's already cut off his tail. It's only God who's powerful. Truly, the devil can no longer slip into someone else's body. Don't be afraid. Only the Spirit of God can enter our soul, 'cuz he has the key to our being. The devil can't do anything before God, who is most powerful.

Neighbor: Look, stranger, Isaac, the Pharisee, has spent all his life pursuing witches and demons. When this thing happened to Seraphio, I told him: "You have more faith in the devil than in God. You never speak about God, but Satan and his hell."

Old Woman: Well, he's done a good job for him. Ha! This is what the devil wants, my son, that you don't mention the Lord, but him.... This I know for one!

Jesus: Don't tell me, Gran'ma, that you have seen the devil and his tail... Or have you?

Old Woman: Well, not really, but....

A Woman Neighbor: What about you, stranger, you who come from afar? Have you seen the devil?

For a moment Jesus became pensive as he rubbed his beard....

Jesus: As a matter of fact, no. I haven't seen the devil yet. But I've seen a lot of evil deeds. Yes, here in Chorazin and all over these towns. That's why, I tell you, the devil doesn't really have to exert too much effort here. He goes around with arms akimbo.... as we do everything for him with our evil deeds... Isn't that right, Seraphio?

Seraphio: Yes, yes!... You burned me.... you threw stones at me.... you're the devil.... all of you!

Seraphio, who had become a deafmute, pointed an accusing finger at all his neighbors who had maltreated him... and with his brand new tongue, repeated his accusation...

Seraphio: You, all of you are demons!

There might have been a lot of deafmutes in Israel, since in the book of Leviticus, there is a special law applying to this group. It is prohibited to throw a curse against these people, who, because of their handicap, are too helpless to defend themselves (Lev 19:14). As in the case of other ailments, this disorder was attributed to the devil and the evil spirits. It was likewise believed that in Messianic times, the deaf would hear and the mute would speak. (Is 32:1-4).

All diseases before, against which people felt specially defenseless, intensified beliefs in the power of the devil, and exorcisms – prayers, gestures, invocations – were practiced to confront these spirits and drive them away from the sick person's body. Oftentimes these practices turned out to be cruel and violent, thinking that the struggle was directed against the devil. At present, a number of people still blame the devil for the strange behavior of some people. Today, spectacular exorcisms are also performed with the purpose of winning the battle over the devil. Such a mentality needs to be overcome, and the gospel of Jesus is a help to rid one's self of such beliefs.

The gospel speaks of Satan (i.e. the adversary), one of the names of the devil, who is also called Lucifer, Beelzebul.... The gospel writers do this precisely to point out negative deeds which they know are not pleasing to God, yet which they cannot explain very well. In writing about the power of the devil, they appear as people of their time – with all the limitations in various fields of knowledge – manifesting their own bewilderment, their disorientation. In their texts, however, they try to express over and over again by means of symbolic language, what for them is decisive: that Jesus has all power over the devil and his complete trust in the Lord makes it easy for him to defeat the devil. The gospel aims to free us from fear of the demon, from this false idea, rooted in various people, of two gods: the good one, God; and the bad one, the Devil who has similar powers, yet opposite intentions. The whole life of Jesus is the joyful proclamation that the only God is the Father who loves us.

The traditional “faith” in the devil has been catastrophic. It has sown terror in people’s heart; it has made us believe that we are a plaything fought over by good and bad angels, with the stronger coming out as the winner. It is easy to blame the devil for an evil event of our own doing, and for what exists in the world in the form of injustice. In this sense, faith in the devil is absolutely contrary to Jesus’ message which is the word of liberation, a reaffirmation of God’s kindness. God embraces people and history and demands that each of us take to heart the responsibility for our actions. Other horrible consequences of professing “faith” in the devil were the persecutions which occurred against witches and those possessed by the devil. Witch-hunting and burning are among the dark chapters in the history of the Church in Europe. From the XI to the XVI Century, persecutions spread like famine through all regions of Europe, with victims estimated to reach millions. The majority were poor women farmers who were accused of being possessed by the devil, either because they were ugly or pretty, or were extremely happy or silent. They were tortured and burned. Yes – as Jesus said: “The tree is known by its fruits” – the tree of faith in the devil has given rotten and bitter fruits throughout history; and if only for this, it should be uprooted.

Jesus was accused of being possessed by the devil, precisely because of the enormous freedom he manifested before these and other false beliefs, and for his opposition to priests and other authorities enslaving the people by way of their beliefs. The powerful of this world always make real demons of their enemies, of those who denounce them. Calumnies and suspicions haunt those who struggle for a better world, depicting them as agents of the very same forces of evil. The mechanism used in the systematic defamation is the same as that one used against Jesus, a mechanism that aims at nothing else but to hide the truth. The “devil” is on the other side. The cruel person, the blood-thirsty and the unjust one – these are the devil, or in any case, his best accomplices. There is no need to resort to the devil to explain the evil in this world as long as there are still many unjust people, criminals and enemies of life.

(Mt 13:22-29; Mk 3:20-26; Lk 11:14-23)

67

THE MESIAH’S STAFF

In those days we travelled to the north, to the mountainous region of Caesarea Philippi near the springs of the Jordan. The farmers living there wanted to hear about the Kingdom of God that would bring justice and peace on earth.

Jesus:And if your son asks you for bread, will you give him a stone? Of course not... If he asks you for fish, will you give him a snake? Of course not, because he’s your son! Well, this is what we are proclaiming here, that God is our Father who loves us. We, his children, ask him to give us a hand. God will not fail us!

As usual, Jesus easily won the attention of the people. He joined one story with another and the residents of Caesarea never grew tired of listening to him...

Jesus: Friends, the Kingdom of God is at hand! Our liberation is here! The Messiah is at our door. When he comes, he’ll bring in one hand a balance for meting out justice and in the other, a staff to rule without privileges.

A Man: Very good! Long live the Kingdom of God!

A Woman: May we see the Kingdom of God soon!

Then, amid applause and shouts of the people appeared a huge man with sun-burned skin and a very long beard, like that of the ancient patriarchs. He was making his way through everybody until he reached

Jesus. He was an old Bedouin from the plains of Gilead...

Melchiades: Speak no more, brother. That's enough... I am Melchiades, a shepherd, grandson of Yonadab, of the tribe of the Rechabites, shepherds all, as God has commanded us. Crossing the desert, we have learned to read the sky and the eyes of people. Your eyes are dark like the night and brilliant like the stars. I can read through them...

The old Bedouin drew closer to Jesus and put a hand on his shoulder...

Melchiades: Listen, brother. Our tribes have been scattered for a long time, for many generations, for many years... We're like sheep without a shepherd. Thank you for having come. Here, take this: this is for you.

Melchiades, the Rechabite, held up in his right hand a long and knotted old staff...

Melchiades: With this staff I've pastured my flock since I was young. With it, I drove the wolves away and led my sheep through the plains. It belonged to my grandfather. Look: it's a shepherd's staff like David had in his hands when old Samuel found him and presented him before his people.

Jesus: What do you want me to do with it...?

Melchiades: It's yours. Shepherd your people. You're the man we need so that things may change.

Jesus: But, what're you saying, Gran'pa...? I...

Melchiades: Take the staff. Hold it tight with your hands so that the warmth of your blood will give life to the dead nerves of its wood.

And the old Bedouin handed to Jesus the staff which was yellow like a sick bone as a result of overuse.....

Jesus: But Gran'pa, I...

A Man: Very good, Melchiades! That was very well said and done!

A Woman: We're behind you, Jesus! You can count on us!

Man: Us too!

The thirteen of us remained talking late into that night. Soon the sky became flooded with stars. Up there at the far end was Mount Hermon, bathed by the soft moonlight.... The snow covering the slopes was just beginning to melt, as a welcome gesture to the forthcoming spring...

Jesus: This Rechabite shepherd must be crazy!

Peter: You're the crazy one, Jesus, if you don't take this chance. The people are excited about you!

Jesus: They are excited over the Kingdom of God.

James: And about you, too, Moreno!

Jesus: James, listen to me...

James: No, Jesus. You can't deny it. You've got the people in your hands, just like that staff. Just a word from you is enough to mobilize them.

Jesus drew some lines on the ground, with the long and knotted cane given to him by Old Melchiades that afternoon....

Andrew: The people expect much from you, Jesus. Don't disappoint them.

Jesus: And what can they expect from me, Andrew?

Andrew: A lot. They expect you to continue awakening them, to lead them so this country will mend her ways, which will end once and for all the abuses and they can live in peace.... This is what they expect.

Jesus: But, are they out of their mind? Who do they think I am?

Judas: A prophet, Jesus.

Philip: Do you know what a woman told me today? That when she looked at you sideways, you reminded her a lot of John the Baptist. She even bet five against one that the prophet John had resurrected and his soul had slipped into your body.

Thomas: Wh..wh..what a joke! Th...th...they might have his head cut off again.

Andrew: No way. I heard something else. They say that the prophet Elijah got down from his chariot and lent you the whip he used for his horses. You speak in the same way as the prophet from Carmel!

Jesus: Bah, this is plain stupidity...

Judas: The other day, they asked me if you have a wife... I said none.

Jesus: Why did they wanna know that?

Judas: Well, because the prophet Jeremiah also didn't get married. They say you look very much like him.

Jesus: Of course. I also look like the prophet Amos, who's also a farmer. And the prophet Hosea, since I also come from the north. Very soon they'll say I was swallowed by a whale which threw me out of his belly like Jonas. I dunno how people can make up these stories..

James: It's not the people, Jesus, it's not them...

Jesus: And who else?.... Tell me then...

Peter: Look, Moreno. We've been together for quite some time... for several months... and we've formed ourselves into a group... so, we can speak out what we think, right?

Jesus: Why of course, Peter, that's what friends are for... Okay, what's the problem?

Andrew: Jesus, you've performed things right before our eyes which... the truth is.... Well, and we don't have to go very far, you know. But the case of the deafmute of Chorazim....

James: And that girl, Jairus' daughter... who was dead.... I even saw her....

Philip: And the Roman captain's servant.

Andrew: How about Flor, the paralytic, and Caleb, the leper, and the madman, Triphon. And the...

Jesus: Okay, okay, that's enough... So what? God's the only one who has the power to cure. He takes my hands, or yours or somebody else's and does what he wants. A lotta people do even greater things still....

Judas: But that's not all, Jesus. It's the way you speak. Admit it: your words hit like David's when he hurled stones from his sling.

Peter: You smell like a prophet, Moreno, and not even alum can remove it.

Andrew: You have a way with people. You talk to them and they listen....

Jesus: The people, the people!... Today they say this but tomorrow, they say that. What do you say.... huh? Let's lay our cards on the table, now that all thirteen of us are here. What do you really expect from me?

Peter: What every one else expects from you, Jesus. That you lift the staff and lead the people!

Jesus: You don't know what you're talkin' about, Peter. Who am I to do that, huh? Who am I?

Peter: You? You're the Liberator that Israel has been waiting for!

Jesus: But, Peter, have you gone outta your mind? How can you say that?

Peter: I say it because I believe, dammit! And I'm just dying to say it. I already told Rufina and my mother-in-law. Even the two women think the same.

Jesus: Peter, please...

Peter: Yes, Jesus. Remember the other night? I saw it with my own eyes. We were on the boat, on my boat. Suddenly, there was lightning and the wind from the Great Sea blew. It was a horrible storm. And I saw you walking on the waves. The wind stopped. You gave me your hand and I took it and I walked over the lake, don't you understand?

Jesus: Yeah, yeah, I understand. If you don't stop dreaming, then, one day you'll wake up drowning....

Peter: You're the Messiah, Jesus! You've come to free our people!

When Peter said those words everyone became silent. We were waiting for Jesus to reply. All eyes were glued on him, who was nervously clasping the staff of the old Bedouin...

Thomas: Don't w..w..worry, Moreno... We're b..b..behind you.

Judas: You can count on us. That's what this group is for, don't you think?

Andrew: You gotta make up your mind, Jesus. If this comes from the Lord, then you have no way out.

Peter: It's not the people, nor us. It's God who has given you the staff of leadership.

Jesus looked at us, slowly, and one by one, as if asking permission to utter the words blocking his

throat...

Jesus: Yeah, you're right. You can deceive the people, but not the Lord. For many days and nights, I've been thinking about this. Ever since the prophet John died, I felt that something's changed, as if God were telling me: your time has come, the way's been prepared.

Peter: God doesn't give you a load that you can't carry! So, cheer up, Moreno! God will not fail you!

Judas: And neither shall we!

James: Remember what the old man Melchiades said? Lift the staff and hold it tight!.... With you, we'll all move on!

Then Jesus raised the long and knotted staff of the Rechabite, and held it tight with his two hands... and in one stroke, split it in the middle.

Philip: Hey, Moreno, what's the matter? Why did you do that?

Jesus: Because... because Elijah was persecuted, Jeremiah was thrown into a pit and John's head was cut off... Look at this, everyone... this staff is broken: that is the fate of all prophets; this is how the Messiah's life will end too.

Peter: Don't talk that way, Jesus. We'll defend you, dammit! Isn't that right, fellows?... By the good star of Jacob, nothing bad will happen to you!

Jesus: First, you're pushing me forward, and now you're throwing me the bait. No way, Peter. Let's settle this once and for all. They're gonna break my bones like this cane, but you're gonna have to fight to the end too. From now on, each one should carry his cross too, so that later, each one is ready for anything.

Peter: C'mon Jesus, stop talking that way. Be ready and have courage!

Jesus: You too, Peter. You'll be behind me.

Peter: What did you say, Moreno?

Jesus: Peter... Peter, the stone thrower.... Now they'll throw stones at you, but don't worry. You're a good piece of rock for foundation. They won't crush you, not even with hammer blows.

Judas: Well, well, let's not get sentimental... Now we're one and united, and that's what really matters!

James: And we're gonna move on, whatever the cost!

Andrew: Whatever happens, this group won't disband!

Philip: Well said, Andrew! Not even the devil with his fork can go against us, isn't that right?

Jesus: Of course, Philip. The friendship that we've formed here on earth, not even heaven can destroy. Do you agree?

Thomas: Of course! Just like a good lock with thirteen keys, each corresponding to each lock!

Jesus: Peter, you keep the keys so they don't get lost!

Peter: So, we'll work hand in hand, forever!

James: Hand in hand, fellows!

Dawn came at Caesarea Philippi. The night slipped from us as we continued our conversation and now we still had a couple of miles ahead of us... After stretching our legs we resumed our journey toward the south, to Capernaum... Mount Hermon was sparkling white behind us....

The city of Caesarea Philippi was founded by Philip, the brother of King Herod, about three years before Jesus was born. It was named Caesarea in honor of Augustus Caesar who was then the emperor governing in Rome. The city was situated up north, sharing the border with Syria. The River Jordan originates from Caesarea, and from there descends and passes through the land of Israel. The river is formed by three springs, one of which is the fount of Dan, thus giving it the name: Jor-Dan (that which descends from Dan). In Biblical language, it is common to hear the expression: "From Dan to Beer-sheba" to define the geographical boundaries of the Land Promised by God to Israel: From the north where the fount of Dan was, to the farthest end to the south, the Bedouin city of Beer-sheba. Caesarea of Philippi is presently called Banias.

The Rechabites were a group of Israelites, who, for many centuries, and out of loyalty to their religious principles, lived as shepherds, rejecting the life of sedentary farmers. They never drank wine, were zealous for their traditions and only entered the cities by chance and on special occasions. They represented opposition to urban civilization and the memory of the ancient tradition of the desert, when Israel was a country of wandering people (Jer 35:1-19).

Just as the time of his baptism and the proclamation of the good news in the synagogue of Nazareth are decisive moments in Jesus' conscience in relation to his prophetic mission, this episode of Caesarea Philippi marks a milestone in his life. Up to this moment, Jesus, driven by the Baptist's example and supported by his disciples, plus a continuous fluctuation between pain and hope from his people, has manifested himself before his compatriots as a prophet. As such, he has spoken and acted. He feels heir to the prophetic tradition of Israel and acts with such a conviction. In Caesarea, he takes one step further. In fact, the freedom with which he spoke about the Law and interpreted it, and the certainty with which he presented himself as emissary of the Kingdom of God who would change the course of history brought him closer to that awareness of being the Messiah. This "leap" in the conscience of Jesus takes place in Caesarea inasmuch as it's possible to determine a concrete place and time.

Jesus accepts his Messianic mission to the community. God chose Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, but the choice did not mean Jesus was to remain on the sideline with the people he was to serve. Similarly in the Church and the Christian community, no vocation should come "from above," nor should it be decided "singly." All vocation, charisma and service, if understood to be intended for the community, must be guaranteed by those who make up the community. Thus, we shall see the fulfillment in history of what was Jesus' ministry.

When, in the gospels, Jesus speaks of his passion that is to come, of his death, this ought not to be understood as a "prophecy" in the limited sense of this word, as if he were a reader of his own future. If understood this way, then the dramatic consequence of his life would not have been a historical fact. Everything would have been predetermined from the outside and anticipated from the beginning. What these words mean is that, at this level of his activities, Jesus was already anticipating a violent death. He had violated the Law of the Sabbath – the core of the system – and this was reason enough to be sentenced to death; he had been accused by the powerful priests of being possessed by the devil, which was also punishable by death according to the law; he had had encounters with the authorities and with the landlords; he associated himself with people despised by the powerful, awakening them to their real condition as exploited people; and with the others who were feared as subversives, the Zealots. He was actually instigating a real people's movement... The religious leaders as well as the political authorities considered him to be a dangerous element every time, a rebel... And he was all too aware of this. For this reason, Jesus never ruled out the possibility – it was almost a certainty – of his death, like the fate of all the prophets. His faithfulness to the mission entrusted to him by God and the people made him move on, whatever the risk. This growing awareness of his important mission did not alienate him from his friends. On the contrary, Jesus was a leader who inspired trust among his followers. He had a sense of humor and never considered himself important, nor set "a distance" from them. By being "one of them" he likewise revealed God's nearness to us.

(Mt 16:13-24; Mk 8:27-33; Lk 9:18-22)

In those days, Peter, James, Jesus and I were on our way to Nazareth. We took the route of the caravans bordering the Lake of Tiberias crossing through the valley of Aesdreton. The summer sun was a golden balloon, shining on the wheatfields which were then ripe for the harvest...

Jesus: You haven't scaled the mountain, have you, Peter?

Peter: Where, Jesus?

Jesus: The mountain... When I was a little boy, I used to slip out of the synagogue... There were three or four of us from the village who'd get together and hike to the mountain... We'd reach the top with our tongues hanging out, yeah, and our sandals half worn-out, but... it was worth the effort...

To our left stood Mount Tabor, round as a dome, separating the old territories from the tribes of Ishacar, Zabulon and Naphtali, the lone guardian of the fertile plains of Galilee....

John: Peter, James... tie your sandals well!

James: What's that, John?

John: I know this Moreno damn well... Can't you see he's about to go up...?

Suddenly we were going up the mountain slope toward its summit, inching our way among pine trees and turpentine trees abounding on the slopes...

Peter: For God's sake, I'm breathless... pfff!... I'm out of breath... Wait, Jesus...

Jesus: You gotta be getting old, Peter... Pff! I used to run up this mountain when I was a little boy....

Peter: Hey, John.... James.... come over here...!

John: Those sheep, where did they come from?

James: Where there's a flock, there must be a shepherd too... Oh, oh, the shepherd.... the shepherd!... Where is he?

Peter: C'mon, let's go on climbing!

There on top of the mountain was old man Joe, above a rock with his bamboo flute. His eyes were lost on the horizon....

Jesus: The shepherd!... The shepherd!

Joel: Here I am!... What do you want from me, or what do you have for me?

Peter: All we can do is greet you, old man! What about you?

Joel: I can spare you some cheese and all the milk you want!... Come, come, my countrymen, the milk from my sheep is purer than Susanna!

Jesus: Hey, are you the old man Joel?

Joel: Yes, that's my name. How did you know my name? Did a little bird on the road tell you?

Jesus: No, I used to scale this mountain when I was just a kid, and I used to see you around this place....

Joel: Of course, this is my home. Others build their houses, but not me. I have no hut of my own. I prefer the open air. The sky's my only roof... C'mon, try this goat's milk... it's gonna refresh your throat!

John: Thanks, Joel...

James: Doesn't this solitary life bore you, old man?

Joel: Music is man's best friend, don't you forget that... Look over the valley... Not even Methuselah with all his years had time to contemplate all this beauty... You who're from the lowland, who live in the cities and villages, learn how to read and go to the synagogue to listen to the Holy Scriptures... I know nothing about the written word, but that's not necessary, do you hear? This is my book... and this is enough for me...

Old Joel showed, with his calloused hand, the valley of Esdraelon which opened before our eyes into a green vast expanse of land....

Joel: Look well, young men... This is the land promised by God to our fathers, the land where milk and honey flow, the most beautiful land of all...!

Peter: Hey, old man, what's at the end of this... is it the lake?

Joel: Yes, the Lake of Galilee, round as a bride's wedding ring. They say God slipped it onto Eve's finger when she became his wife.... But look over there, countrymen: do you see?

John: Where, old man?

Joel: Over there, right behind all this... It's Mount Hermon, where snow continues to fall, white as the beard of our Lord! God blesses our land from there.... Now, look at the other end... where the lands of Samaria are found... where Mount Ebal and Mount Garizim seem to join the clouds... and right between the two was the city of Shechem, nestled like a locket in a woman's bosom. This is where our father Joshua reunited with all the tribes of Israel and made an alliance with God, a blessing for those who complied and a curse for those who did not...

John: Old man, what are these mountains nearby?

Joel: Ah, those are the mountain heights of Gilboa where the Philistines murdered Saul, the first king of our country, and Jonathan, his son and friend of David who was also a music lover, played the flute for his dead friend... Look over there, to the west... Do you see something like a green spur coming out of the land and sinking into the Great Sea....? That is Mount Carmel, Elijah's country, the first prophet who took the cause of the poor of Israel and defended their rights... Ah, Elijah!... His tongue was like a whip in the hands of God. He made the kings tremble and all those who oppressed the poor. And, when God took him in the chariot of fire, his spirit was scattered like sparks among the new prophets.... Do you understand what I'm telling you, countrymen? Each of these mountains you see from here is like a page of a book, where the history of our people is written.

Jesus: But that history traces its beginning to another mountain, old man, the greatest of them all, that which cannot be seen from here...

Joel: You're right, young man. Mount Sinai is very far from here, somewhere in the south, which only the eye of an eagle can reach.... It was in that wilderness that God felt he should call on Moses through a burning bush. From here, he was sent to Egypt to liberate his brothers and sisters. Moses faced the Pharaoh, took all the slaves with him, and crossed the Red Sea and the desert, bringing them to Sinai, the holy mountain, the one with two peaks on the summit, like the open knees of a woman about to give birth: and it was there where a free nation was born, our country, Israel....

John: Gee, old man, I get emotional, just listening to you....

Joel: My children, you're so young and you dunno... So many things have happened... and what is yet to happen, of course! God never keeps still. I'm sure he's in for something this time. Know somethin' countrymen? God is like a goat: he loves the mountain. Sometimes he's with Elijah in Mt. Carmel, other times, with Moses in Sinai. But he always fights for justice and defends the humble. Remember what our ancestors used to call the Lord? *El Shaddai*, the mountain God, because everytime he's not pleased with the way things are down there in the great city he goes up to the mountains. And from there, he laughs... That's right, God laughs at the kings and the Pharaohs. Great nations make wars and the powerful oppress the poor. They'll not sing victories, though. God'll send a liberator on Mount Zion. He'll be my beloved son, with whom I'll be pleased.

Up to this day, my eyes can still picture that moment: the blue horizon, the immense valley cut into cultivated lands like pieces of cloth of a hundred colors, the sun half hidden behind the clouds and the breeze coming from Mount Hermon seems to augur rains in Mt. Tabor... Jesus' reply took from Joel's words, like an abyss relating to another...

Jesus: You're right, old man.

It's in the mountain where the eyes are cleansed and the ears are opened to listen to the voice of God.

It is here where the God of Israel spoke in whispers to Elijah and where he spoke with Moses face to face.

Yes, God is alive and lets his presence be felt.

From each of these mountains he continues to pave the roads of people on earth, interweaving them

assiduously with the hands of a zealous woman.

Now the work is done, in God's time.

He comes to build his house on a high mountain, on the summit of the mountains, so that we, the children of Israel and all the other nations can climb up to it.

Because God is the God of all, whether near or afar.

He's not content in gathering only the dispersed tribes of Jacob.

No, because liberation abounds.

There's too much forgiveness and mercy for all children. And God's Anointed One, the Messiah, awaited for so long by our people, shall remain on top of the mountain to be the guiding light of the people, so that there will be salvation in all the confines of the earth.

Peter: That was great, Moreno! I told you, you inherited Moses' beard and Elijah's tongue. Keep on talking, don't be silent, the world's liberation is at hand, and there's no stopping it!

James: It's the storm that's coming soon. C'mon fellows, let's stop being poetic for this one minute and let's all go down, if we don't want to get drenched.

Peter: Hey, what's that nonsense you're saying, James? No, no way!... Didn't you hear what Jesus said? Everything's going fine!

John: Are you outta your mind, Peter? Don't you see the storm coming, and there's not even a hut here to shelter us.

Peter: Then, let's go make one, dammit! Let's build three, if need be!... But no one is to move from here, no one!

Peter, in all his excitement looked up the sky. The dark clouds were already touching our heads. In a few seconds, the first drops of rain fell...

Peter: Does the rain really matter, guys? Wasn't there lightning and thunder when God appeared on Sinai? The same thing happened on Carmel! This is because God roams freely in the mountains!... Yes, yes, and now, Elijah will descend in his chariot of fire, and Moses likewise, with a burning bush in his hand!

The clouds fell furiously over Mount Tabor, and we were drenched to the bones. The lightning rays crossed the sky like lances, illuminating with splendor the faces of the shepherd, Joel, my brother James, Peter and Jesus.

Peter: Well, and now.... now what? Is everything over?

Jesus: No, on the contrary. This is just the beginning.

Peter: What's gonna happen now, Moreno?

Jesus: Nothing, Peter. If you don't wanna catch cold, start movin' and let's go. Or would you rather stay here above and watch the lightning rays?

Peter: I dunno. I was expecting more... to see the Lord... even half way, but....

Jesus: Listen, Peter: God's in the mountains, that's right. But the people are down there. Look....

Jesus looked over the Valley of Aesdrelon, interspersed with small villages where the poor of Israel earned their daily bread with their sweat and tears....

Jesus: That's where we gotta go, Peter. That's where we gotta blow and kindle the flames in the people's hearts. Leave the burning bush and the chariot of fire alone, and let's all go down. This was what Moses and Elijah did: to show concern for their brothers and sisters, to work unceasingly in helping them to fend for themselves. So, move on!... and Hurry! Let's light a fire all over the earth and keep it burning!

Peter, my brother James, Jesus and I descended through the slopes of Mt. Tabor, which became slippery after the downpour. The old man, Joel, was left on top of the mountain, with his flock and his bamboo flute... Below were the fields and cities of Galilee, lying in wait for a change, a renewal, a transfiguration...

Mount Tabor is an isolated mountain in the northeast of the beautiful and fertile plains of Esdraelon. It has a round shape and is 580 meters in height. From the early days it was considered a holy mountain on account of its beauty and location within the territorial borders of the tribes of Ishacar, Zabulon and Naphtali. Although the gospels do not mention the name of the mountain where Jesus ascended with his disciples in this episode, tradition has always situated his transfiguration on the summit of Mount Tabor. The mountain is about 30 kilometers from Nazareth and boasts an abundant vegetation. In 1921, the grandiose Church of the Transfiguration was built on top of the mountain. The exterior part of the church reminds us of the silhouette of the three tents referred to by Peter in the evangelical text.

From the top of the Mount can be viewed one of the most fascinating scenes in Israel. At the foot of the Mount extends the plains of Esdraelon or of Jezreel (which means "God has sown it"), as if wanting to bring out the exuberant fertility of this land (Hos 2:23-25). Jezreel is an immense valley in the form of a triangle, surrounded by Mt. Carmel, the mountains of Gilboa and Galilee. It served as a connecting link between Occidental and Oriental Palestine, and therefore, was a frequent setting for important wars in the history of the nation. The old shepherd, Joel, viewing all the mountains from the heights of Mount Tabor, traces the important moments in the history of Israel. He refers to Mount Hebron, the northern border of the Land promised by God to his people as the guardian of the country. It is always covered with snow (Ps 133). Mounts Ebal and Garizim, located on Samaritan lands, were the setting of one of the most solemn moments in the history of the people (Jos 8:30-35). The Israelites were defeated by the Philistines in the mountain range of Gilboa, where Saul, the first king of Israel, was killed, as well as his son, Jonathan (1 S 31:1-13; 2 S 1:17-27).

Joel makes special reference to Mount Carmel, the mountain of the prophet, Elijah. Carmel (the name means "garden of God") is a very fertile mountain about 20 kilometers long, situated between the Mediterranean and the plains of Jezreel. Elijah performed some of the most spectacular signs here (Rev 18:16-40). At present, Carmel is called Yebel-Elyas, the "mountain of St. Elias," and thousands of pilgrims come to venerate the first great prophet of Israel in a cave that was excavated at the base of the mountain, the cave of Elias. Here they pray and come together in pilgrimage, where they sing and eat symbolic food.

Elias (his name means "Yahweh is God") lived about 900 years before the birth of Jesus. He was the great prophet of the kingdom of the north of Israel, when the nation was divided into two monarchies. His popularity was so immense that people wove all kind of legends about his person, converting him into an unforgettable myth. He performed great miracles and confronted the kings. He did not die, but instead, went up to heaven in a chariot of fire, and most important of all, would return to pave the way for the Messiah. All these were very vivid ideas in Jesus' time. Elias was always the prophet par excellence, and the proclaimer of the coming of Messianic times. Because of all this, it was but natural that in this episode of the transfiguration, which is replete with symbols, Elias should appear with Jesus, as a guarantee that his prophetic spirit was in Jesus; and more so, to become witness to the much awaited Messiah. (The story of Elias appears in the First Book of Kings, Chapters 17, 18, 19, 21 and in Chapter 2 of the Second Book of Kings. References to Elias are innumerable in the entire Scripture. Elias appears as a prophet of justice, in a special way in the episode of the vineyard of Naboth – Chapter 21).

The shepherd Joel, also makes special reference to Sinai, Moses' mountain. Mt. Sinai, also called in the Bible as Horeb, is the most sacred mountain of Israel. Here, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, and revealed his name – Yahweh. Here, He handed over the commandments and made an alliance with the people when they marched in the desert. Sinai is situated in a territory which now belongs to Egypt, on the Sinai Peninsula, in a plain desert, in an area inhabited solely by Bedouins. Sinai is endowed with savage beauty which cannot easily be compared with that of other countries. Moses, who lived one thousand eight hundred years before Jesus, was an exceptional figure for Israel. A father and liberator of his people who formed and led them to the Promised Land, this exceptional man spoke face to face with God. He was, above all, a legislator who gave the Holy Law to Israel. No biblical figure had as much worth and authority as Moses. That's why he must likewise appear with Jesus in the scene of the transfiguration.

When God started a new law with that peasant from Nazareth – the law of freedom, and a new alliance, that of justice and love – Moses was there as witness to Jesus’ being heir to the best traditions of his country. (The entire book of Exodus is important in knowing the story of Moses, especially Chapters 1 to 24.)

In Israelite thinking, the mountain, because of its proximity to the sky, was the place where God manifested himself. Other neighbors – the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Phoenicians – thought the same way. The mountain, therefore, is a holy place par excellence. Later on, another complementary idea emerges: God elects some mountains as his special abode. Thus, Mount Zion (in Jerusalem) is spoken of several times in the Old Testament as his dwelling place, as a place for banquets during Messianic times. Besides, there is an ancient tradition in Israel referring to God as El-Shaddai. God himself must have revealed this name to the old patriarchs (Gen 17:1-2). El-Shaddai means “God of the mountains.” The Book of Job mentions on many occasions, this beautiful name of God.

Taking into consideration all these elements – sacred mountain, Moses (the Law), Elias (the Prophets), the clouds (likewise a feature in the Exodus), resplendent light – the evangelists created a symbolic frame indicating up to what extent the prophecies of the ancient writings of Israel were realized in the person of Jesus. What is thus presented to us is the so-called “theophany” (God’s apparition), and this style is used in a number of these theophanies of the Old Testament: Exodus 24:9-11 (God appears to Moses and the ancients); 1 Kings 19:9-14 (God appears to Elias through the wind); Ezekiel 1:1-28 (God appears to the prophet Ezekiel in a chariot). In all these descriptions, there is always a series of symbolic elements whose culminating point is that moment when the voice of God is heard. In the transfiguration, God utters the words of Psalm 2: “You are my Son...” The ideas in this psalm provide the backdrop for the theophany of the transfiguration, as it appears in this episode.

Here, Jesus expresses himself in prophetic and poetic language, born out of the atmosphere of warmth that the shepherd has elicited through his biblical evocations. In his words, he puts together all prophecies making reference to the holy mountain, the Messiah, the day of salvation, and God’s plan of liberation (Is 60:1-4; 61:1; Mic 4:1-8). What Jesus announced was never “his” glory, “his” power, “his” transfiguration.

The Good News he brought us is not a cheap vindication of his greatness, like a superstar who, with marvellous gestures, seeks to dazzle an astounded public. The Good News Jesus proclaimed and for which he gave his life was the transfiguration of the world: A new world where the message of justice of the prophets could be a reality. What he has announced is the transfiguration of history. This history, which at times, seems wanting in meaning, absurd, bathed in too much blood, is one led by God toward the final consummation of the world – a history which the hands of the God of the mountains will one day rescue. Then it shall be transfigured history.

(Mt 17:1-13; Mk 9:2-13; Lk 9:28-36)

69

ISHMAEL’S QUESTIONS

At the foot of Mount Tabor is a small village surrounded by palm trees called Deboriah (in memory of Deborah, that courageous woman who fought for the freedom of her people). Ishmael lived in Deboriah. He had a leather shop and an only son, Alexander... That day, there was a celebration in Ishmael’s house. His son was engaged to Ruth, a young and beautiful neighbor. They were already planning the date of their wedding...

A Woman: This young lady is very fortunate, of course. Alexander is just the right guy for her.

Woman Neighbor: You bet! He's a fine young man, hardworking, whose father is very religious...

Woman: May God bless them and may they stay happy forever!

Alexander danced in the circle of men. His friends pushed him to the center, and started clapping, goading him to recite a few lines for his sweetheart... He was tall and strong, and full of vigor...

Alexander: "The stars in the sky / do not have as much joy / as I do, when I sing to you/ beloved....aa!

Then it happened. Alexander, as if struck by a lightning, fell on the floor, his mouth was foaming and he was kicking.... His friends rushed to him without knowing what to do to help him...

A Friend: Hey, go and tell his old man, Ishmael. His son is having an attack!

A Woman: He looks terrible!

Friend: For God's sake, let him breathe!.... Don't push!...

A Woman Neighbor: He's relaxed now. Come, Ishmael, help me to bring him inside... Poor guy!

Ishmael: He had it when he was a little boy... I thought he was already cured. Imagine, it happens again today, when he was about to announce his wedding...

Woman Neighbor: Don't worry, Ishmael. God willing, it won't happen to him again. Have faith in God.

Ishmael: Yes, I hope so. May God listen to you, Sarah, may God hear you...

Since then, however, his sickness became worse. The attacks kept recurring. Any moment, during mealtime, in the leather shop where he was working with his father, or when walking around town, when he least expected it, Alexander's eyes would remain wide open, he would leap like he was struck by a whip, then fall to the ground, gnashing his teeth. His body would twist forcefully, so that four men had difficulty subduing him... Then, he would get up, very exhausted, with no knowledge of what had happened to him....

Ishmael: Oh my God, please help me!... He is my only son, my only joy... Heal him, Lord... I beg of you, I implore you with all my strength... Is it true that he will never have these attacks anymore?...

Every night, he prayed the same prayer, and was disappointed everytime. Alexander's illness was getting worse...

Doctor: I'm sorry, Ishmael, but how can we tell you?

Ishmael: You who have studied should know of a cure, some herbs, perhaps..

Doctor: It's so terrible a disease, we don't even know its name. It's so bad, the devil himself must have invented it.

Ishmael: But, damn, you're a doctor...

Doctor: Ishmael, the disease was born way ahead of medicine. It always has an edge....

A Woman Neighbor: That's life. Be resigned to your fate, Ishmael.

Ishmael: Yeah, right, I must be resigned to my fate. It's so easy to say that, isn't it? Because he's not your son...

Woman Neighbor: That's okay, but, is there anything you can do? The more you rub it in, the more you get hurt.... You're not alone in your suffering, Ishmael... remember my friend Leah, whose son was born dumb. She's worse than you. What about little Reuben, who became blind after a stone hit him. And remember Rebecca, poor girl, who's got more humps on her back than a camel....?

Ishmael: Yeah, yeah, stop mentioning all the sick people in town. I know: Rebecca, the cripple; my friend's grandson, whose face is burned; Annette's son, the lame; the other, armless... And so? Am I to be consoled by this?

Woman Neighbor: Well, they say, that the illness of many.... gives solace....

Ishmael: To fools, yeah, to fools! That there are people worse than my son, Alexander, that suffer more than I do, doesn't solve anything. Their suffering in no way relieves me, neither is my sorrow any consolation to them.

Woman Neighbor: You ought to be resigned to your fate, Ishmael.

Ishmael: No, no, there's no way I'll be resigned to my fate! I can't bear to see my eighteen-year-old son limp as a rag. His friends have stayed away from him. They feel pity for him. His girlfriend has abandoned him. She's scared of him... Now, you say I must accept my fate, seeing my son abandoned on the ground like a mad dog?

Woman Neighbor: You must accept the will of God.

Ishmael: The will of God! Was it God, therefore, who sent this disease to my son? And may I know why?

A Friend: Because you're a sinner, Ishmael. God has punished you by hurting you where it hurts most. This is what happens.

Ishmael: Oh, yeah? So this is God's justice? The parents eat the green grapes, while the children bite their teeth. Let the Lord impose a penalty on me, but not my son who's done nothing wrong!

Friend: You can't say that. No one's innocent in the eyes of God.

Ishmael: Therefore, if nobody is innocent, then God should punish all of us, together. But why does God pick on my son and not yours? Tell me, why?

Friend: Because the Lord does what he wants. And what he does is okay. Who're you to exact an accounting from God?

Ishmael: To whom should I ask? Whose fault is it that my son should get sick? C'mon, tell me.

Rabbi: God isn't the culprit, my son. How can you talk like this about God? God is kind... He's our father, and seeks our happiness.

Ishmael: If that's so, then, why doesn't he cure my Alexander? I have prayed to him and asked him, day and night. He doesn't hear my prayer.

Rabbi: Yes, God hears you, Ishmael, but...

Ishmael: But what? Can't God do anything? Then, why not cure my son?

Rabbi: Sometimes, God takes something good from bad.

Ishmael: Wouldn't it be easier for him to take out the bad? Thus, he'd get done sooner.

Rabbi: We ourselves cause many of our ills and sufferings. Look at that crazy man, Saul, his intestines became rotten because he drank a lot. And now, his widow is blaming God for everything!

Ishmael: My son's name is Alexander and not Saul! And my son did nothing bad to make him sick!

Rabbi: Who knows what God is planning! The ways of the Lord are mysterious.

Ishmael: Of course, and because of this, you want to silence me. Well, I'm not keeping quiet, do you hear? God has no right to do this to my son. You say that God is our Father. Doesn't it hurt him to see many of his children suffering? What kind of father, then, is one who doesn't mind seeing my son suffer on the floor?

Rabbi: God doesn't suffer, Ishmael, because... because God is God.

Ishmael: Then he is nothing! To hell with him!

Rabbi: You don't know what you're saying, Ishmael. Take it easy...

Ishmael: No, and I know what I'm saying. I have prayed day and night, but God doesn't answer me. I lifted my face to heaven and said to him: Why, why do you treat my son this way? What's he done to you? If you're bad, then make me suffer, not him. But if you're a good God, why don't you cure him? What would it cost you if, indeed, everything was possible for you?... But God never answers me. He's deaf.

Rabbi: Come, Ishmael. Go home. Rest a little. I know this will pass.

Ishmael: Yeah, for me, this'll pass, but my son Alexander will continue to be sick. You'll go back to your work and to your own life. But Alexander will still be sick. God will continue to hear the angels sing above, while my son continues to be sick and embittered! Why, why, why?....

Rabbi: Be patient, Ishmael. This is all I can say: Have patience and more patience.

Ishmael: No, keep it all for yourself, because I don't need it. Don't worry, I won't be asking anymore, I got the answer already. Do you know why God doesn't cure my son? Do you know why?... Because he doesn't exist!... Yes, and don't look at me that way. That's the only excuse that he can give us, that he doesn't exist. That's the truth. There's no one in heaven. And when we pray, our prayer comes back and

falls flat on our face.

That day was market day in the village of Deborah. Peter and James, Jesus and I, passed by, after our descent from the mountain... In a stall, a man, quite old, with large eyebags as if he had wept a lot, showed us some leather shoes..

Ishmael: This is good leather, strangers, look...

Beside him was a tall young man with stunned eyes, who was showing us, through gestures, other items...

Ishmael: For two dinars, and you can wear them right away. C'mon...

Alexander: Ayyy..!

Ishmael: Alexander, my son... my son...!

Alexander: Aggg...! Aggg...!

In no time the boy at the fruit stall fell by the side. He was twisting amid spasms. Ishmael, his father, tried to open his mouth to insert a piece of cloth so that the boy wouldn't bite his tongue...

A Friend: Why do you have to bring him here, dammit? Why don't you leave him in the house, or lock him up! He's dangerous, dammit!

Ishmael: Don't you curse my son, for he's done nothing wrong. Curse God who is responsible for this!

Then Jesus went near the boy's father....

Jesus: For how long has he been suffering from this illness?

Ishmael: Since he was a little boy. For many years, he was okay, but now...

A Woman: Ishmael, this man who just asked you is the Nazarene that many are talking about. They say he's God's prophet and has cured a lot of people...

Ishmael: Prophet? You're a prophet? You speak with God? Please ask him on my behalf: Why is my son suffering, why, why...? Pardon me, stranger, it's just that... it's just that I can't anymore... I'm tired. Tired of praying, because God doesn't listen to me... If you're a prophet... if you can do something for my son...

Jesus: Do you have faith? Do you believe in God?

Ishmael: Now I don't know what to believe in...

Jesus leaned and sat beside the young man who was breathing laboriously, and wiped his face which was wet with sweat...

Jesus: There's hope after all...

Ishmael: Is that all?

Jesus looked at the young man's father for a long time. Like him, he was teary-eyed...

Jesus: If I told you that God is also suffering for your son, would you believe it?... That God also weeps seeing so many sick suffering... No, you're not alone, brother. God is with you, staying by your side and sustaining you... What more can I tell you?... Come, let's bring him home, lie him down, so he can rest... Let's go, he's more relaxed now...

Ishmael: Will he have another attack?

Jesus: Even if he will, there's still hope...

Jesus helped the old man, Ishmael, lift his son from the ground and accompanied him to his house. Then he supported Alexander by the shoulders and silently walked with him and his father through the dusty road crossing the small town of Deborah, beside Mount Tabor...

Deborah was located at the foot of Mount Tabor. It was a city that belonged to the Israelites of the tribe of Zabulon. This was named in memory of Deborah, a prophetess and "mother of Israel," who served as judge in the first periods of the history of the people when they were winning battles for the country.

Their victory hymn (Jdg 5:1-31) is one of the masterpieces in Hebrew Literature. At present, Deborah is still a small village inhabited only by Arabs.

Through the description in the gospel of the symptoms of this sick young man, we can deduce that he was suffering from epilepsy. Today we are aware that the cause of these attacks and sudden convulsions is generally a lesion in one part of the brain. While it cannot be entirely cured, epilepsy can be controlled. In Jesus' times, nothing was known about this and those afflicted with it were specially feared. Ignorance of the disease and what to do about it made the situation deplorable. Very often, its cause was attributed to the devil. It was also believed that it was a form of God's punishment for some hidden sin of the victim and his family.

In the face of his son's suffering, Ishmael, the father, prays, seeks, and asks questions. He does not resign himself and ends up rebelling, shouting to God for an answer, believing that God is the only one who can grant it to him. His attitude, his questions are parallel to those of Job. About five hundred years before Jesus' birth, an anonymous author wrote one of the most important and beautiful books of the Bible, the Book of Job which is about a good man who experienced all kinds of calamity. The pages of the book contain his reflections on sorrow, which he considers absurd, unjust and undeserving. He meets his three friends, who seek the reasons for his misfortune. Above all, he faces God, who is ultimately the one responsible for his ills.

This Job, who becomes rebellious in the face of suffering, and who implores God himself, signified an authentic revolution in the religious thinking of Israel. Until then, it was believed that while on earth, people already received the reward or the punishment for their deeds. A good person became happy and prosperous. A bad one experienced failures and sufferings sooner or later. The Book of Job radically contradicted these ideas. Its theme can be summarized in one important question: Why do the good suffer, what is the significance of the sorrow of the innocent? Throughout its 38 chapters, and in all possible ways, Job asks the same question again and again. After this book, the reflection of the people of Israel on sorrow, individual responsibility and God's plans, would vary substantially. Job's case paved the theoretical way to begin to understand the possibility of immortality, the transcendence of human life beyond earth.

Job – like Ishmael – is not convinced of the reasons offered by his friends. There were no valid “reasons” then, nor today, for the suffering of the innocent. It is an oversimplification to say that in suffering, God always consoles the one who suffers, since there are some who do not feel such consolation, who are desperate and embittered, unable to overcome the pain they experience in themselves or in the people they love. The suffering of the innocent is a mystery. That is why Jesus does not offer Ishmael any “reason,” he does not look for motives, nor blame anyone. He just makes his presence felt. He is there, beside the suffering father and the sick son. That's all. Christian faith does not give “convincing” answers to everything, much less to “absurd” pain. This is not to propose a resigned acceptance, because pain always ends up in mystery, where perhaps the only thing that we can do for others is to share with them their suffering (Rom 12:15). Obviously, there are pains and sufferings about which we can “do” something. Death by starvation, the suffering of people who are unemployed, the pain of women exploited by their husbands, the lack of education of numerous children, the lack of shelter, medical attention, etc. are sources of pain. Neither one's presence nor sharing is enough for this type of suffering. Christian faith compels us to do more in trying to get rid of this suffering, to combat and to fight against it.

It is another kind of pain that renders us impotent and demands of us Christians a faith and a hope that does not come easy. There are diseases that cannot be fought no matter what the means at hand. There are accidents that claim the lives of good persons, whose foresight escapes human control. There are children and young people who die before they have barely lived, and the cause of their death simply perplexes us because it is unexpected. There is likewise the pain experienced by the human heart (unrequited love, betrayal of friends, misunderstandings, failures, loneliness). At the end of it all is death, which is always painful even if it comes “in due time”... These are the pains that confront us in our limitations and helplessness. Faith is therefore, not a consolation, like aspirin. Perhaps it only serves as a

fragile support, knowing that God suffers when he sees us in pain, that the heart of a Father is touched with the pain of his children, that he will also take away our sufferings and that one day, God will wipe away all the tears from our eyes (Rev 21:1-5).

(Mt 17:14-21; Mk 9:14-29; Lk 9:37-43)

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WITH LIGHTED LAMPS

Rabbi: ...The same Lord had said: "It is not good for man to be alone." So He gave him a woman for companion. Raphael, take Lullina as your wife in accordance with the Law and the written commandment in the Book of Moses. Receive her and bring her as a family member to the house of your father. May the Almighty God always guide you and bring you peace!

That night, the fishermen's village of Capernaum was having a feast. Raphael, one of the twins of the big house, was getting married to Lullina, the daughter of an old boatman. The sounds of drums and zithers echoed through the village, inviting everyone to the dance in honor of the bride and groom....

Women: "The bride is like a lily / the groom, a carnation / who blushes like the flower / when his bride looks at him."

The women danced around Lullina and the men formed a circle around Raphael. After a while, we were served the food prepared by the groom's father... We sat on the floor, beside the trays of pastries and jugs of wine. The music played continuously.... Our faces, drenched with sweat, dazzled with great joy....

James: It's good to die at a wedding, fellas! If I have to go, then let it be when I'm dancing and feasting!

John: And drinking! Here's a toast to Raphael and Lullina, the newly weds!

Peter: And I drink a toast to those who have stuck to their wives for forty years!

A Man: And to those who are due to tie the knot but haven't made up their minds!

Peter: Hey, Jesus, that last toast is intended for you! Dammit, Moreno, how many weddings have you been to.... hasn't the fever gotten you yet, huh?

Jesus: As you can see, Peter, I haven't swallowed any bait myself yet..

John: I bet this wedding is a lot better than that of my friend Reuben...

James: Certainly! Wasn't it there where your tunic got burned, John?

John: Right. There was some delay among the participants to the wedding, and later, the hassle with the oil lamps. Remember that, Jesus?

Jesus: Of course, I do. I was with the groom and his friends in his house. Then we left together for a trellis nearby, and there we waited for the coming of the bride...

A Friend: Are you nervous, young man? This is the greatest night in your life!

Reuben: No, I'm not.... Brrr... I just..... I just feel cold and...

Another Friend: Gee, you don't talk of anything here, but love, man! And love is at its best with a shot of wine! Here's to your health, rascal!

Friend: Long live the groom!

Friend: Long live the bride!

Jesus: Right from where we were gathered, we saw a group of young ladies pass by, illuminating the dark night with their oil lamps...

Ladies: ...You stole my heart, my beloved husband, you stole my heart, with your look and your words of love...

Jesus: The young ladies accompanied the bride to the groom's house. Then they went out and stayed by the door, awaiting our coming....

Reuben: When all the stars shine in the sky, then it's time for us to go!

A Friend: Oh, we've got enough time! There's just a lone star up there.

Another Friend: There's no hurry, fellas. Let the ladies wait! We gotta finish this barrel yet!

Jesus: At the door of the house were ten friends of the bride, who were waiting with their lighted lamps....

Young Lady: You're gonna get your dress soiled if you sit on the floor, Annie. Don't forget you just borrowed it...

Annie: Don't tell me we're gonna be standing here all night.... I'm tired because of dancing, and my feet are hurting....

Another Young Lady: I'm sleepy. That's all.... Hmm... I guess we've had too much wine...

Young Lady: Hey, how foolish you are! Look what we've got here, one sleepyhead, and a sloppy one... Lousy, huh? Listen, why don't we sing, to keep us all awake! C'mon!

Annie: Yeah, let's sing some ballads... Hey, this lamp is running out of oil.... I didn't bring extra oil...

Young Lady: Neither did I, but I think this will get us through...

Young Lady: Stop arguing and let's go on with the songs!

Jesus: The bridesmaids began to sing to while away the time. We could hear their singing and their happy voices from where we were....

Young Lady: Here comes my love, through the field he comes / through the field he comes, I can hear his voice...

Jesus: And when the sky became studded with stars, the young ladies' songs became softer... the girls grew tired of waiting.... From afar, we saw that some of the lamps had stopped burning....

Young Lady: Hey, Annie, look at these girls, they have fallen asleep and their light is extinguished...

Another young lady: I heard they had run out of oil..

Young Lady: Well, that's their own look out... sleep tight, ladies!

Annie: Hmm...! Oh, Miriam, I'm sleepy too.... my eyes are getting heavy....! Hmm.....!

Reuben: Well, fellas, the barrel is empty and I guess this is the end of it. I gotta say bye-bye to my bachelorhood!

A Friend: Your time has come, Reuben! Be ready, for tonight you're the king of the party!

Another Friend: Hic! Let's drink the final toast to this man who will join his better half, at last!

Jesus: Then, when it was midnight, we headed for the house where the grand celebration was to take place: the meeting of the bride and groom... The bridesmaids were still sleeping by the door, one lumped over the other...

Friend: Hey, the groom is coming!... Ain't you gonna welcome him?

Young Lady: Oh, oh, the groom is here!... Wake up, Annie.... You too, Miriam!

Annie: Oh, the light from my lamp is gone!

Young Lady: And so's mine!

Another Young Lady: And mine too! What are we gonna do? Oh my God!

Young Lady: Try to fix them! I haven't got even a drop of oil!

Another Lady: This is what you get for being careless! Go and buy some oil at the store, and see if

they will give you a little! Hurry!

Young Lady: And don't be late for the party!

Young Lady: Run, Annie, run.... Oh God!

Jesus: So the five bridesmaids who did not bring enough oil hurriedly left to buy in the square. While they were away, we arrived at the house, singing and clapping with the groom...

Young Ladies: Open the door, my dear, for the groom wishes to enter!

Young Men: Open the door, my love, for your master is here!

Young Ladies: Open the door, lady, most beautiful one!

Young Men: Open the door, beloved, for outside, it is terribly cold!

Jesus: The other five ladies with their lighted lamps, opened the door for us and led us inside the house, where the bride was anxiously waiting. She was dressed in blue, with a crown of orange blossoms around her forehead...

A Man: Let's begin the great celebration!

Jesus: Then the door was closed. The dance began. There was much food, and every guest was happy... A few minutes later, the careless bridesmaids came back from the store, running...

Annie: Please open the door!... We're back!

Young Lady: Open the door, please... and let us in!

Servant: Who's banging the door, huh?

Young Lady: Our other companions. They forgot to bring enough oil, so they came late!

Annie: Please open the door and let us in!

Servant: Stop disturbing us, dammit! Get away from here! It's your fault. You were not vigilant. Who told you to sleep and be late?

Peter: Then what happened, Jesus? After having waited long enough, were they left outside the house?

Jesus: Well, Peter, the truth is these girls were not alert.

James: Serves them right, for being foolish and non-vigilant.

Peter: Okay, okay. The girls failed to do their part. But... the groom... what did he do, Jesus? Didn't he open the door for them?

Jesus: The groom did what every groom is expected to do, Peter. When he learned what was happening outside...

Raphael: Hey guys, are you having fun, tonight?! Did you like the pastries? What about the wine?

John: Everything is wonderful, Raphael. Here's a toast to you and to Lullina!

Raphael: And to all of you, my friends! A toast to all of you!

Raphael, the groom, went to where we were... He was radiant with joy...

Raphael: And who's up next, huh? Is anyone preparing to get married soon?

Jesus: No, not yet. It's a lot easier to tell stories about weddings! Say, Raphael, what would you do if tonight, five of your wife's bridesmaids came late for the party because they had run out of oil. When they came back from buying oil, they found the door of the house locked. Would you let them in or not?

Raphael: But of course, Jesus! How could I leave them out in the cold? My house is always open, it never closes at night. Today is the happiest day of my life, and I wouldn't want anyone to be left out in the cold of night. Well, guys, enjoy yourselves!

James: See you later, Raphael!

Jesus: You see, Peter? This was what the other groom did. All grooms do the same...

Annie: Please, let us in, please!

Servant: Don't bother us, dammit! Get away from here! It's all your fault. Who told you to sleep and

be late?

Reuben: But, what's going on here, Theodore? Whom are you quarreling with, with ghosts?

Servant: No, master. With five negligent young ladies who didn't come on time. Too bad for them. Let them wait outside. This is what is commanded of us: to close the door.

Reuben: Well, go ahead and open it, c'mon.

Servant: What was that again, Master?

Reuben: Open wide the doors! Let the five young ladies in. They must be very tired! They've waited for a long time! C'mon, hurry, open the door and let anyone in who wants to enter! Today is a joyful day and I want everybody to join me in the celebration! This is a wedding, yes sir, and the party is for all!

Jesus: That's right. All grooms do the same thing. The joy of a wedding fills the heart.... I believe God will also do the same at the end, at midnight, when we all get back to our homes with but little oil left in our lamps...

The sounds of drums and zithars echoed until dawn. Until then, we continued dancing and celebrating the great joy of that wedding feast, with doors open wide....

Weddings were celebrated with great joy in Israel. They usually lasted seven days and were spent eating, singing and dancing. Although the customs differed in several details from region to region, there was always a culminating moment: the meeting of the bride and groom. In the afternoon of the first day of the feast, they brought the bride to the house of the groom's father, where the banquet usually took place and a room was specially prepared for the new couple. The groom would go out to meet his wife with special headgear sewn by his mother: the "crown." His friends accompanied him. As a practice, a group of young men singing songs and carrying torches would leave the groom during the encounter, to get together later in the house where the feast was celebrated. The bride, who was beautifully adorned, appeared before her future husband, covered with veils. During the celebration, it was the practice among men and women to dance and eat separately.

The so-called "parable of the ten virgins" is narrated only in the gospel of Matthew. Here, the evangelist wants to make a catechesis to the community on the subject of vigilance. Those were difficult times, and when the hour of God's final judgment comes, no one should feel so secure. One must be ready with oil for replacement, one must be prepared; no one should rest on their laurels. On the contrary, one should be ever watchful. This is what Matthew wanted to tell us in this parable that dramatically ends with a closed door to indicate the seriousness of the topic he was talking about.

In this episode, without contradicting the catechetical meaning of the parable, the open door remains at the end. Of the many symbolic elements interplaying in this story, rather than highlighting those of the oil, or those of the night of vigilance, emphasis is placed on the others: the groom, the wedding. From the point of view of catechesis vis-à-vis Christians, one must insist on the first. From the missionary point of view, though, in order to show how God is, how mysterious his ways always are with people, then it is valid to focus on the rest. People must be watchful and must take this to heart, but God, in his love and mercy, will always surpass the heart (1 Jn 3:2).

Certainly, this parable speaks of the end of time, the judgment day and the reckoning. It is an eschatological parable. A unilateral kind of preaching has, for a long time, terrorized the people with regard to the end of the world. The fear of hell, fire and punishment, have been a perennial topic of preachers in order to make people mend their ways, "to convert them." To this day, it is a burden borne on the shoulders of Christians. Consequently, those bleak ideas have given us a lousy image of God: a policeman who takes account of our good and bad deeds, and much to our dismay, and to his joy, brings us death at the most inopportune time, hurling us into the cauldron of boiling oil. Christian vigilance is thus reduced to fear and the need to store up merits in preparation for the day (dying with the scapular on, having complied with the nine first Friday devotions, having earned indulgences, may save us at the last

hour from the whims of a vengeful God). In the light of all these, we have to open ourselves to the reality of the God of Jesus: a cheerful God, who is preparing a wedding banquet to receive us in the other life, who understands our foibles, wishing only our happiness, with a heart “always greater than ours.”

(Mt 25:1-13)

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WHAT GOD HAS JOINED

James: C'mon, I dare you deny it, now!

Esther: But, where did you get this silly talk, James? Tell me, who ever filled your head with all this gossip?

James: Oh yeah? So you call it gossip, huh? My good friend Zabulon told me! And he doesn't lie.

Esther: And may I know what this good friend of yours told you?

James: You've been in the market, haven't you?

Esther: Of course, I go everyday.

James: You bought some fruits, didn't you?

Esther: Yeah, what's wrong with that?

James: Nothing! But winking at the fruit vendor is something else!

Esther: That's it! You're jealous again! Oh God, what kind of husband have I got!

James: You were flirting with Ruffo, the fruit vendor. Don't deny it.

Esther: Ruffo, the fruit vendor is more than sixty years old. He's got no teeth left in his mouth!

James: You know that's not necessary!

Esther: Oh, yeah? So you think this old man and I....?

James: I'm not thinking anything. I'm positive! My friend Zabulon told me. You listen here: Don't you ever set foot in that market again, ever!

Esther: Really? That suits me fine... From now on, you'll have to do all the shopping for the family!

James: And don't you ever leave this house!

Esther: Why don't you get a watchdog to be sure?

James: I don't wanna be the laughing stock of all Capernaum, do you understand? I, the son of Zebedee, will never tolerate this!

Esther: Of course, but my mother's daughter has to put up with all her husband's idiosyncrasies....

James: Hell, I'm the man of this house!

Esther: And I'm a nobody here, is that it?

James: Shut up, insolent woman! And don't you ever shout at me!

Esther: Oh, my God....!

James: It's all over, do you hear? Gather all your trash and go back to your mother's house!... I don't need you here, understand?! I don't wanna have anything to do with you!

Esther: Now, you've awakened the girl with your screams!... Why don't you nurse her with your milk? Let's see how you do it...!

My brother James had been married to Esther, a lass from Bethsaida, for five years. During that time, they had three daughters, and more bickering....

Salome: James, son, I don't understand this. Esther is such a fine woman....

James: Esther is a whore, that's what she is.

Salome: Don't talk that way about your children's mother. Esther is your wife.

James: That's the end of it. I have no wife any more. I told her to pack all her things and get out!

Zebedee: Wait a minute, James. Let's not rush into this. Tell me what happened. Was she unfaithful to you?

James: If she was, I would've given her a good beating she'd never forget!

Zebedee: So what she done to you?

James: She's nuts, that's it. She winks at every man that comes her way.

Salome: That means there could only be very few, since you lock her up in your house like she was a leper. Poor creature! You don't even bring her over!

James: C'mon, Mama, stop defending her.

Zebedee: Okay, tell me: what really happened?

James: My good friend Zabulon saw her smiling at Ruffo, the fruit vendor. That's it.

Salome: For God's sake, James, what do you expect her to do? Spit in his face?

James: Don't be naive, Mama. Everything starts with a "simple smile." You turn your back and she plays around.

Jesus: Hey, who's playing around, huh?... How're you, Zebedee?...

Zebedee: Still alive, Jesus, which is still a big deal in this country!

Jesus:You can say that again!... What's up, Salome?... Hey, red head, you look so serious, is anything wrong?

James: Right, Jesus.

Jesus: Hey, what's happened?

James: I'm divorcing my wife. We're going separate ways.

Jesus: But..... why?

Salome: It's really nothing, Jesus. It's just that someone has whispered to this son of ours that his wife winked at the fruit vendor....

James: It's no gossip, Mama. It was my good friend Zabulon who told me!

Zebedee: And no one in all Capernaum can beat him as a rumor monger....

James: Not only that. Zabulon has also seen her in the square, and in the street of the tanners. The other day he saw her at the wharf...

Jesus: Say, couldn't it be Zabulon who is "after" your wife? Why, he follows her wherever she goes...

James: Stop kidding me, Moreno....

Jesus: After all, it's only a marriage of five years that's going to waste, all in the wink of an eye.

James: Yeah, that's right. It's better to be alone than to have a bad companion. And I've lost my patience!

Esther: Of course!

James: And look who's here....

Salome: Esther, my child, James told us about....

Esther: Oh yes, yes, what our friend Zabulon said.... Why don't you sleep with him tonight? After all, you like him so much!

James: There you go again, devil woman. I told you to pack your things and go!

Esther: That's why I came... to say goodbye to everyone...

Zebedee: Esther, child, take it easy.... Come, sit down here.... let's have a little talk...

Esther: Talk? What for? All that this son of yours does is yell and give orders like a captain... No, no, I can't stand this lunatic anymore.... I'm tired... and I'm leaving...

James: What did you say? You're tired? You're tired of what? Of sitting calmly all day long in the house, while I break my back out there on the sea? And now, you're saying you're tired!

Esther: So I do nothing but sit in the house, huh? Who takes care of the children, huh? Who cooks and goes to market, does the laundry and looks after little Mila? Who cleans the house and does endless things at home? You don't think I'm working at all, do you?

James: Yeah, and it doesn't include your gossiping in front of the house!

Esther: Then the master comes home, sits down with his arms folded, while I have to serve him his food

like a great king, since he never bothers to touch any plates!

James: So this is what I deserve to hear, after spending all day working like a horse for you and the children. Don't I deserve a plate of lentils for this?

Esther: Sure, a plate of lentils plus four jugs of wine in that damn pub where all your money goes!

James: You've got no right to question what I do with my money!

Esther: Yes, of course, while this slave does nothing but serve you, "gratis et amore." For five years we've been married, and yet, you never spared me a single cent to buy myself a hanky!

James: I'll squeeze your neck if you don't show me more respect!

Esther: The trouble is.....

James: The trouble is.... that's enough! You women are chatterers.... you've heard her talk, Jesus. Tell me, am I right or not, in divorcing this witch?... Answer me....

Jesus: Well, James, I think.... it's she who has the right to junk you.

James: What?

Jesus: You heard me. What I don't understand is how Esther has managed to put up with you for so long.

James: Oh, yeah....? So you're against me...? It's okay. You can all go to hell! You ought to be the first, Esther. C'mon, get out of here, so you can wink at that fruit vendor once more!

Jesus: It's funny the way we are... We men are very strict with women, and yet we don't realize how much they have to put up with us men; we make it difficult for them, as if we're making them swallow camels as big as this.....

James: Why do you say that now?

Jesus: Why do I say that? Look, James, we know ourselves very well.... It's better not to talk, isn't it?

James: Well, so what? I'm not a man for nothing, am I?

Jesus: Yeah, of course, of course... I've forgotten that God gave the commandments not to Moses, but to his wife....

James: Hey, Jesus, will you stop.....! It was Moses who gave men the right to abandon their wives and be divorced, for some reasons, don't you think?

Jesus: Yeah, of course, it was for some reasons. Like the brutality and callousness of men. Moses thought: "it is better for the wife to kick him out of the house; that way, at least he won't beat her to a pulp... But it wasn't so at the beginning, do you hear? God wanted the man and the woman to live together with the same rights and obligations for both. What God has joined, let no one put asunder anytime he pleases.

Salome: Well, I'd rather we talk than see you quarreling with one another. This is how people get to understand each other... What do you say, Esther?

Esther: We talk?! Your son isn't capable of talking. All he can do is shout while I bow down my head: that's his idea of talking.

James: Well, the husband is supposed to have the last say, don't you think so?

Esther: Sure, you have the last say, and the first and the middle too.

Jesus: God had the first say when he took out the woman from Adam's rib. He didn't take her out of the sole of his foot nor did He mold her from another clay. He took her from here, beside the heart... God didn't want to give him a slave, but a companion...

A Girl: Your blessing, Gran'ma!

Another Girl: Gran'ma, Gran'ma!

At that moment, Esther and James' three daughters entered the house. Mila, the eldest, was four years old, and had very long braids. Terina, the second, was holding Noemi by the hand. The latter, who was the youngest, could hardly walk...

James: Why did you bring the girls, Esther?

Esther: Why did I bring them? I'm taking them with me.

James: What?

Esther: I'm taking them to Bethsaida. They're my daughters, aren't they? I brought them into this world.

James: Oh, of course, and I didn't do anything? Is that it? A little angel who passed through the window did it... Look at their hair, it's as red as mine... The girls will stay with me. My mother Salome, will look after them. The girls stay here, do you understand? They stay here!!!

Jesus: That's enough, James, stop screaming!... You say their hair is as red as yours.... Don't look at their hair, but their eyes: Look at them.... Come, Mila, come... Look at her eyes, James. They look at you with fear, because, ever since your children were born, they've heard nothing but your screams and received nothing but beatings. You yourself have said before: it's better to be alone than to have a bad companion. That's true. It's better for your children to be orphaned than to have a father who's like a centurion. Go ahead, Esther, take your daughters with you. May God help you to be a mother and father to them at the same time.

James: Hey, what're you saying, Jesus...? That.... that can't be... Wait a minute, Esther, wait...

Esther: Now what?

James: I.... well, I...

Esther: You, yes, you, who always protest against the abuses of the rulers and of King Herod, are a tyrant, worse than they are to your family. James, the son of Zebedee, who talks about justice and sharing the world's wealth with others....! Yeah, yeah, but with your wife, you're incapable of sharing even your wages...! Is this the kind of justice you're talking about?

Jesus: Your wife is right, red head. We keep on saying that things ought to change in our country. I guess we have to clean our own backyard first, don't you think so?

James: But, I..I... what must I do in order to...? The truth is, I.... I....

Jesus: Forget about yourself! That's what you've got to do, James! Forget about yourself and think of your wife a little, of making her happy!

James: Well, Esther.... So I... say... you.... Pff.... If you want, we can..... Hell, how difficult it is to ask for forgiveness..... you know what I mean, what I ask of you... King David also made a mistake, and look, he ended up singing psalms.....

Salome: Well, whatever it is that you want to say, say it at home. These little creatures are already hungry, and it's time I serve the soup!

Esther's face was brightening up. The girls immediately left running toward home and as always, made a lot of noise. The truth is my brother James was a difficult and stubborn man. But he was different that day. And little by little, he and all of us learned how to treat others the way we would want others to treat us.

The gospels hardly tell us anything about the daily lives of Jesus' disciples. But as in any other life, they also experienced joys and sufferings and passed through difficult moments, whether great or small. Like anyone, they also had their bad moods, quarrels and silly moments. And like all people, they also had internal struggles to become better individuals. James' argument with his wife – a spat common among married couples – gives an occasion for Jesus to share with him and with the rest of the family, his ideas about marriage: ideas that were enormously novel in his time.

Jewish laws and customs regarding women were obviously pro-masculine. A daughter was under her father's care until she became twelve years old. After this, she could get married – very often, the father chose the groom for her. Thus marriage served as some kind of a transition of the woman from her father's custody to that of the husband. Once married, the woman had the right to be supported by her spouse, although her husband's rights were superior by far. The wife was obliged to perform household chores and to obey her spouse with an obedience that was understood to be more of a religious duty. She was virtually his servant. Above all, the husband enjoyed two rights which totally tilted the balance with respect to the non-existing conjugal equality: The right to have as many lovers as he pleased, if he could maintain them. He also had the right to divorce, which depended exclusively on him.

Divorce was practiced in Israel. And the "evil" that sprang basically from this practice was the fact that such unilateral dependence on man gave rise to a situation that was truly unjust for women. The Law

of Moses allowed for the repudiation of woman (Dt 24:1). But in his time, Jesus questioned the reasons for her rejection, and the legal motives for divorce. There were two ways of interpreting this old law. For some people, the granting of divorce could be justified only by grievous reasons (principally adultery). For others, flimsy reasons were sufficient: for example, the wife had burned the food, spent so much time idling and gossiping with neighbors, etc. In practice, and since society was intensely “macho”, the latter was imposed. Thus, there were divorces motivated by whatever reason. Because of the stigma she was carrying, the rejected wife was left in a situation of serious abandonment. Right from the start, she hardly had an opportunity to live without being dependent on a man.

What Jesus basically teaches us regarding matrimony has a lot to do with the customs of his country. The famous phrase “What God has joined let no man put asunder,” does not state an abstract principle on matrimony. “Man” must be read as “the male.” Jesus concretely rejects masculine arbitrariness. Let no “male” separate what God has joined. This means that the family should not be left to the whims of the man, and that the wife should not be rendered helpless because of the intransigency of the husband. In the face of confusing legal interpretations about divorce, which were always favorable to the husband, Jesus goes back to the beginning. The history of creation as told in Genesis points out the fact that God created man and woman in His image. Therefore, they are equal in dignity, and have the same rights and opportunities. This is not to say that if the woman is to decide the divorce, then separation becomes valid. No, the Christian ideal is, obviously, matrimony “forever,” since it entails responsibility and love between the couple, which is really what is desirable. This is viewed not only from the Christian angle, but also from the point of view of human maturity. The separation of spouses will never be a solution, a panacea for the disease. As in all medicine, it must be dispensed with precaution, only when it is really necessary, and when there is no other way out. It is a painful decision, with many social consequences – especially for children. Therefore it should not be taken lightly. The same applies as in medicine: An overdose can kill the patient.

(Mt 19:1-9; Mk 10:1-12)

72

THROUGH DIFFERENT ROADS

Beside the big square in Capernaum, in the fishermen’s barrio, there is a well they call “the whispering well.” Every morning when the sun rises above the horizon, the women gather by the well to fetch water...

A Neighbor: Have you seen the face of that girl? How deep her eyebags are!... She was so quiet. She didn’t even utter a word while she was here... And to think what a blabber mouth she usually is!

Old Woman: She’s too young to be sick. She’s in love... “She’s lovestruck”... Didn’t you hear how she sighed while she was leaving?

Salome: Good morning everyone! How’s everything this morning neighbors?

Another Neighbor: With much energy to work, Ma’m Salome. While I’m strong and healthy....

Neighbor: You can say that again.... Well, we’ve been talking about young Rachel...

Salome: What’s happened to her?

Old Woman: Haven’t you seen here lately? She looks very pale and stares with a blank look on her face...

Neighbor: You talk to her but she doesn’t respond....

Salome: She must be sick...

Neighbor: Nothing of the sort. She’s just in love. The girl’s in love.... And you ought to know this, because in a way it also concerns you....

Salome: What are you talking about? What have I got to do with the girl's being in love?

Neighbor: Ma'm Salome, how come you haven't discovered it yet? Rachel is interested in Jesus, of Nazareth.... Don't tell me you haven't noticed how she looks at him everytime he speaks...

Another Neighbor: And don't deny that she's been going to your house everyday this week... hasn't she....?

Salome: Well, the girl needed some salt and she came to ask me for some....

Old Woman: And the following day, she wanted a tomato...

Neighbor: And some flour the day after...

Salome: Well, yes...

Neighbor: Can't you see, Salome? She goes to your house hoping to see Jesus...

Neighbor: She also goes to the wharf like a crazy girl, goes up and down the street, and thinks she might see him with your sons... She's fallen for him. She can't deny that.

Salome: I wonder if what you're saying is possible.

Neighbor: Of course it is. Why don't you find out yourself.... and then tell us, huh?

Rachel: Good morning, Ma'm Salome!

Salome: Good morning.... Ah, it's you... Come in, come in.... What's up?... Do you need anything, Rachel, my child?

Rachel: Ma'm Salome, I need a little oil...

Salome: Why? Did you run out of oil?

Rachel: Well, I've got very little left, and I'm not sure if I'll have enough for tomorrow..... I'd better be sure...

Salome: Of course, of course... But, why don't you come in... don't stay there at the door....

Rachel: Are you... are you alone?

Salome: Yes, my child, old Zebedee and the boys are out fishing, as always.

Rachel: Yeah, of course, they're working...

Salome: One must work in order to eat, child.... God said that since the beginning; you must earn your bread by working hard...

Rachel: And... and... no one else is here, is that right?... Then, I'm going now....

Salome: What about the oil you needed?

Rachel: Gosh, I forgot... with so much work I have at home, I forget everything... and what with ten brothers to attend to...

Salome: Don't leave yet, child.... Why don't you sit for a while so we can chat....? That way, you can relax a little...

Rachel: Well, but...

Salome: Nothing. C'mon, sit here... That's right.... How I wish I had a daughter like you, that I could chat with.... But you've seen what I have... two boys... When you have your own children, ask the Lord to give you sons and daughters. Men are the breadwinners, while we are the molders....

Rachel: Oh, Ma'm Salome, how can I have children.... I've got a long way to go yet...

Salome: No, my child, you're of marrying age now... And... and I bet you often think of it too.... am I right?

Rachel's face became redder than the scarf she was wearing on her head. She was quiet. But her heart was about to burst....

Salome: Look, child, I... I want to help you. Tell me everything. You have no mother and somehow you've got to tell someone what's inside your heart...

Rachel: Ma'm Salome, oh, Ma'm Salome... it's been a month that I can't sleep and...

Salome: And at night, you think of him... you think of Jesus, don't you?

Rachel: How... how did you know?

Salome: Oh my child, love is like a bell. It creates a loud noise for everyone to hear.

Rachel: Do you think it's something wrong?

Salome: No, my dear, why would it be wrong? You're just in love. I'd be very happy if this guy found a girl and married her once and for all... With the kind of life he has, this Moreno should get married now...

Rachel: Do you think he'd fall for me....?

Salome: Well, child, this Jesus is a little weird, and I wouldn't know how to explain that to you... but, don't worry, I'll help you. He's been living with us for quite a while now and I'm beginning to know him... Yeah, let me handle this....

Salome: Old man, you've got to talk to Jesus. And talk to him clearly...

Zebedee: Sure, I'll talk to him. If you insist that this girl is deserving....

Salome: Rachel is a nice, hardworking and loving girl.... Besides, she's pretty. I think she loves him very much. What else would this Moreno want?

Zebedee: Ah, old woman, no one will ever know. Jesus is Jesus. Okay, I'll talk to him. Man to man, I wonder why this rascal doesn't get married. Everytime I see him leave for the square to work, I've always asked myself that question... and when he gets back at night... nothing!.... I think he's a little weirdo!

Zebedee: I'll get to the point, Jesus.

Jesus: Sure, Zebedee, to the point.

Zebedee: For several days, I've been trying to talk to you, seriously and candidly...

Jesus: Why, is something wrong?

Zebedee: Jesus, I'm talking to you as a father and as a friend... I'm very fond of you, young man. The truth is, and I'm talking to you as a man, I don't understand why.... you haven't gotten yourself a wife and have continued to be a bachelor, dammit!

Jesus: Oh, is that it...?

Zebedee: Yeah, that's it... Now, answer me.

Jesus: Well, I don't know... I thought you were going to ask me to forget all about this mess I'm into... and you got me there.... I wasn't expecting your question....

Zebedee: Listen to me, young man, life goes by fast. A man's strength wears off sooner than you'd expect.... You always talk about God, what he wants... Well then, if God had put in man the seed of life, it was for him to sow it in the woman, so that she wouldn't remain sterile. Is that right or wrong?

Jesus: Sure, it's right. The Lord wants to see all trees bear fruit.

Zebedee: So, why the hell do you remain single...?

Jesus: But I'm never alone, Zebedee. Ever since we formed our group and started to work for the Kingdom of God, I've always been surrounded by people...

Zebedee: No, no, you can't get away from me the way the flying fish do, rascal... I mean "alone" at night, without a wife, without children... You will always be surrounded with people, but one thing doesn't cancel the other... Don't you try to confuse me... Look, Jesus, when a man has no wife, all his energy goes up to his brains and tururu..... he ends up a crazy man! I wouldn't want the same thing to happen to you...

Jesus: Do I look like a mad man?

Zebedee: No, that's not what I mean, but...

Jesus: Look, Zebedee, now I remember something I heard once in the synagogue: that the solitary man is not a dead tree, because even single people have a place in the house of God.

Zebedee: There you go again... Say, Jesus, let's forget about those beautiful words and let's get to the point..... Don't you like women? Or are you gay?... Is that it?... No, no, don't tell me anything! I've never thought of that as a reason for your not wanting to get married.

Jesus: Don't talk that way, Zebedee. Gays are not filthy slobs.

Zebedee: Ah, no? So what are they?

Jesus: They are also people whom God loves. Neither are they dead trees.

Zebedee: C'mon, Jesus, don't defend them....!

Jesus: Neither should you criticize them, Zebedee. What do you know about them and their problems?

Zebedee: Okay, okay... You're not one of them... Why don't you get married then? Don't tell me you haven't found a woman of your choice....

Jesus: Well, I met a girl once... a couple of years ago... But I wasn't sure...

Zebedee: You'll be an old bachelor all your life! Is that what you want?

Jesus: Wait a minute, Zebedee. To be single is one thing and to be an old bachelor is another, I think.

Zebedee: Bah, a single man is half of man, and so is a single woman. The daughter who remains a virgin is a shame to her parents.

Jesus: One half a man is egoistic. There are egoistic people among both the married and unmarried.

Zebedee: Jesus, listen to me, there's a girl in town who is in love with you...

Jesus: So, that's where we have been heading, right, Zebedee?

Zebedee: If you can't see that someone is in love with you, then somehow you must be told about it, dammit!

Jesus: And who is she?

Zebedee: She's Rachel, the late Hagar's daughter, who has several little brothers.

Jesus: Oh, yeah, now I know. She seems to be a nice girl.

Zebedee: She's a very nice girl! She'd make a good wife for you!

Jesus: Yeah, that's possible, Zebedee, but....

Zebedee: No more buts, today, you're going to see her, talk to her, and then you can start planning things...

Jesus: Wait a minute, Zebedee. Don't rush.

Zebedee: What's the matter? Don't you like her? You prefer another one? Is that it? That's okay. Trust me, young man, this will be between the two of us only.

Jesus: I love all of them, Zebedee.

Zebedee: Lies! If you say you love them all, then you don't love anyone at all!

Jesus: Really, I love all of them! That's why I wanna be free to be able to help them.

Zebedee: Who do you think you are, huh? The protector of abandoned women?

Jesus: That's not it, Zebedee. The truth is I want to work for my people. You know how difficult things are now. Look what happened to the prophet, John. He was beheaded. How can one have a wife and support her in this anguished state? What will happen to the children? If they lose their father, who'll earn a living for them, huh?.... Really, Zebedee, I need to have free hands, more so at this time. God is so much in a hurry that even in my sleep, I have my sandals on.

Zebedee: You make things look horrible, Jesus. I didn't say you should put your arms up and do nothing. But, hell, can't you go on with the struggle and stay married?

Jesus: Well, of course, you can. Look at Peter who has his wife Rufina, his four sons and another one who was just born. There's James who is also married. John is single, but Andrew has a girlfriend and he's getting married anytime... There's a place for everyone in God's Kingdom, where everyone counts, whether married, widows or single.

Zebedee: But you... you....!

Jesus: What about me, Zebedee?

Zebedee: You haven't done anything in order to get married, damn!

Jesus: Nor have I done anything so as not to get married, damn!

Zebedee: So, what now?

Jesus: Nothing, Zebedee. Let each one take his or her own road and see what God asks. Look, God called Abraham from the north and Moses from the south. Through different roads, the two men arrived at the promised land.....

Only the gospel of Matthew takes what Jesus has said about "the eunuchs, the castrated, the celibates for the kingdom," and which provides support for this episode. For experts they fall within the "enigmatic" sayings of Jesus, in the sense that it is difficult for us to comprehend the exact meaning today as well as the exact historical occasion. They are likewise enigmatic considering how strange they must

have seemed to his contemporaries. Everything seemed to indicate that Jesus tried to explain with these phrases his personal situation to those who questioned him about it.

In Israel, neither virginity, nor the state of being single, nor celibacy, all which were understood to be stable situations, were of any value whatsoever. Rather, they were anti-value, a disgrace, and something negative. The virginity of a woman was most appreciated only before matrimony. Such virginity before marriage had to be protected. It was an honor not only for her but also for the family to bring it to matrimony. But a woman who does not marry and have children was a disgrace, a family stigma. This was also true for the man. An unmarried man, for whatever reason, was viewed as somewhat weird, and incomprehensible, unless he had made a special vow (some of the Essene monks, for example). The value was sexual relations and fertility. The rest did not figure in the set of values of the people. Therefore, they were understood to be contrary to the will of the God of life. All Scriptures highlight the importance of matrimony, the sexual union between the man and the woman, as something positive, beautiful, and an ultimate expression of human relation as the most appropriate image of the love that God feels for his people. Whatever contempt, disdain or rejection there is of human sexuality has nothing to do with the biblical message; it is in contradiction to the biblical message.

Jesus did not marry. Although this is not explicitly said in any text in the New Testament, we consider it as something historical. Given the same data, the same can be said of John the Baptist. Nevertheless, that Jesus did not marry does not mean that he was asexual, that sex meant nothing to him. Jesus was a man, not a woman. As such, he had a male sexual dimension. In this sense, it would not be out of place to think that there were women attracted to him. Nothing of this sort appears in the gospel, not because they did not exist in his life, but precisely because in the thinking of his contemporaries, it was somewhat natural not to write about the topic. Neither does it say that Jesus never sneezed nor suffered from stomach pains nor hummed a song. It is practically certain all these occurred. Textually speaking, Jesus refers to three types of eunuchs (the unmarried, the impotent, the men without wives). The first are “those who were born that way from their mothers’ womb.” There have always been males who, due to some physical defects – generally congenital – cannot have sexual relations with a woman. Within this group is included the homosexual. The other group referred to by Jesus was composed of those “who were made eunuchs by others.” These are the castrated boys and men. Throughout history – and even today – male castration has been institutionalized. In oriental courts, the kings castrated their men who served as guardians of their harems, in order to make sure that they did not have any relations with their women. In other countries, castration was done in order to obtain greater intelligence, for example, among the teachers. War, pleasure and power were considered to correspond to man, while delicate work, a certain knowledge, etc. were considered that of a woman – or “effeminate,” when done by a male.

In Israel, religious law did not allow the castration of men nor livestock. The castrated man could not enter the temple nor the synagogue, nor could a castrated animal be offered as sacrifice. However, there were several castrated men in the courts of the kings of Israel, influenced by other Oriental countries or because they were brought in as slaves. Finally, Jesus speaks textually of a third group of men: “Those who have been made eunuchs for the Kingdom of God.”

This is the type of singleness or virginity – the celibate “for the kingdom” – a new category that Jesus brings. After him, Christianity, presented an alternative to the panorama of sexuality, as it had been understood until then in the Old Testament. This is about a relational celibate. That is, celibacy is not a value in itself, but in relation to the Kingdom: For the Kingdom. That was Jesus’ option. He did not marry not because he was sexually abnormal, nor was he ever castrated; not because he was impotent, nor was he a type of “old bachelor” who was scared of women and shied away. Neither was he the type who sought a solitary life as a rejection of communal life or a life of co-existence.

Rather, he remained single, and rejected matrimony for the “sake of the kingdom.” Jesus profoundly lived the “urgency” of the Kingdom of God. He conceived of his mission as something tremendously important, which needed to be carried out in a short time. The time was short. And God’s time was passing and there was no time to waste.

The way he understood his vocation is at the bottom of Jesus’ option not to marry. To serve the

Kingdom is in essence, the justification of Christian celibacy. When commitment to the Kingdom is radically lived, one can be in a situation that is truly compatible with a normal family life. The celibate allows for a certain mobility, poverty and freedom, which in principle, marriage cannot offer.

Any stand on sexuality is valid before God. There is no need from the biblical nor Christian point of view, to categorize virgins and married ones as “better” and “worse,” as first or second class Christians, as perfect or imperfect. Much less are condemnations necessary. As regards homosexuality, the gospel – which does not mention anything explicitly – says it all in the context of the message, in proclaiming very strongly human freedom and the respect for people. In any case, society’s rejects – the ridiculed, the outcasts – are the privileged ones in God’s love. It is important to recall the beautiful phrase attributed to them by the prophet Isaiah and which Jesus remembers in this episode (Is 56:3-5). God so loves them and makes them heirs to His promise (Wis 3:14). Israel awaited the time of the Messiah, this generous welcome on God’s part, of eunuchs and the castrated, as citizens of the Kingdom and as everybody’s equal.

Everything mentioned by Jesus in Matthew’s text makes explicit reference to the male. Female sexuality, its characteristics and problems, are more recent understandings of science and psychology. Until very recently, it was thought that the only value in female sexuality was fertility. Woman’s pleasure in sexual relations was viewed as something suspicious, if not bad. On the other hand, since it was not a woman’s “decision” to marry or not, but her parents’, neither could the question of female celibacy be presented. Nevertheless, in other societies at present, and with the evolution of ideas, we can say that what is basic in Christian celibacy – greater freedom to live and die for the Kingdom – is equally applied to man and woman alike. They are equally capable of this option which they can fully carry out as members of society.

(Mt 19:10-12)

73

THE DEATH OF A GREEDY OLD MAN

Woman Neighbor: Holy God, have you seen how Manasses is suffering?

Another Neighbor: Poor man, he’s always been so good!

Neighbor: That’s life, woman, he’ll end up in the grave... But, what a misfortune!

For two days, old Manasses, one of the richest men in Capernaum, had been agonizing on his soft, wooden bed. And for two days, his neighbors flocked to his house awaiting the end....

Manasses: Oh, damn....!

Neighbor: What’s hurting you, old man?

Manasses: Everything!.... My whole body aches!... Oh, oh...!

Neighbor: Do you want anything, Manasses? Some water, perhaps?... or hot soup?

Manasses: I want nothing, dammit!.... All I want is to get up from this damned bed... and drive you all away from my house....

Neighbor: What’s keeping this old man from dying!

Another Neighbor: Only the good die young, don’t forget....

Neighbor: Poor Manasses, he’s been good, very good!.... Death is like a thief in the night.... it comes any moment...and it’s coming....

Manasses: Oooh!.... Damn..... Daaaamnn.....

Neighbor: Is he dying....?

Another Neighbor: Wait a moment... Let’s see... Yeah, I think so....

Male Neighbor: I guess he's passed away already! He's very pale!

Neighbor: Yeah, he's dead!

Another Neighbor: May he rest in the peace of the Lord!

Another Neighbor: May the angels take him to Abraham!

Neighbor: And let's see what we can take along with us!

Neighbor: I'll take the chickens!

Another Neighbor: But didn't I tell you that the chickens were mine?

Male Neighbor: Hey, don't quarrel! There's enough for everyone! The poultry yard is full!

Another Neighbor: Hey, Clete, take a look at that chest... and see what's inside!

Neighbor: Hey, Madame, this sack of flour belongs to someone already...

Woman Neighbor: Oh dear! After having waited since yesterday, do you mean to say that I'll be left with nothing? To hell with you! That sack is mine!

Male Neighbor: It's mine! And the flour too!

Woman Neighbor: Where do you think this old man hid his money, huh? That's more important!....

Manasses' neighbors ransacked the whole house for any loot, while the mourners intoned their mourning songs. The children, each one carrying three or four chickens, leaped over the garden wall. Meanwhile, their mothers searched thoroughly into the chests...

Manasses: Ooooh!..... I am not dead.... I am not dead and I don't intend to die yet!

Everybody, with hands full of the loot, stopped, scared stiff. Manasses, who was seated painfully on his bed, looked at them defiantly...

Neighbor: Who the hell said he's dead?

Woman Neighbor: Old Manasses has a long way to go.... Be patient!

Manasses: No,... no, I don't want to die... Go away, vultures!.... Go to hell, all of you!.... All you want is to rob me of my wealth.... everything is mine...! And it remains here!.... in my house.... oh, oh....

Woman Neighbor: C'mon, Manasses, take it easy.... that's it... that's it...

Woman Neighbor: Don't exhaust yourself.... Rest.... Just rest...

Manasses lay down again, his eyes closed... and... he was nearly out of breath.... Things went back to normal, while the old mourners pulled their hair but stopped weeping... At this moment, when even the chickens were running loose in the garden and the entire house was in disarray, the two sons of Manasses appeared at the door. They lived in Perea, which was a long way from Capernaum, and they had received the news about their dying father....

Joel: What the hell is all this mess?

Woman Neighbor: Look who're here, Joel and Jason!

Jason: What's happening here, huh? What're you all doing here?

Woman Neighbor: We're here to help your dying father...

Woman Neighbor: He's been in a lot of agony, poor man...

Joel: And you've been helping yourselves as well, to everything that you see in all corners of this house!

Manasses: They wanted to strip me naked of my wealth... damned vultures!... Get out of my house, I'm commanding you!.... Oh, oh, oh....!

Joel: Out, out, all of you! Get out of here!

Jason: Papa, poor Papa...

Joel: Out, out you go, everybody, dammit! And the mourners too!... And don't take anything from here, do you hear?!.... Not even a needle should be taken away from here!

One by one, with bowed heads, the neighbors left Manasses' place... The long hours of vigil had been in vain: the sons of the rich farmer, heirs to his fortune, had arrived in time....

Manasses: Are they gone...?

Jason: Yes, Papa...

Manasses: They wanted to strip me naked of my wealth...

Joel: But they have not succeeded... Oh, Papa, see how people can be so cruel. All they could think of is take possession of the wealth that you painstakingly accumulated!

Jason: We learned about your condition only yesterday... That's why we didn't come before...

Manasses: I... I'm dying, dammit!..... I'm ill... It's just that.... It's just that... Oh, oh, I feel so bad....oh.....

Joel: You'd better rest, Papa... let's see... make yourself comfortable... that's it... that's it...

Manasses: Oh, oh, oh.....

Jason: Where dya'think he's placed his money, huh?

Joel: How would I know?

Jason: Yeah, you know it, Joel! You know where he put it, don't deny it!

Manasses: Oh, oh, oh?

Joel: Sshh, don't shout, Jason; he might hear us!

Jason: He might hear us, he might hear us!... Well, let him hear us! What do I care? Half of that money is mine. You know that as much as I do!

Joel: You know fully well that all the old man's wealth belongs to me, and only to me. I'm the eldest son and according to the law, it belongs to me. The law is the law.

Jason: The law says that the younger son has a right to the inheritance.

Joel: Not if the inheritance is little. So, the money can't be divided. It can't be touched...

Jason: Do you know how much Papa earned? You say it can't be touched, because you want to have it all. Damn you, greedy man! You're already rich, yet you want to have more!

Manasses: Oh, oh, oooh....!

Joel: Yes, Papa, we're here beside you. Take it easy... Poor Papa, we know you're suffering!... Now let's see who's the avaricious one... Your wool business is going fine, isn't it?... What do you need the money for, huh?... To give alms to the poor?... You can't deceive me, Jason. You're more ambitious than an Assyrian king!

Manasses: Oh, oh, these pricking pains!

Jason: What's wrong, Papa?

Joel: Do you need anything?

Manasses: I... I... don't want to die....

Jason: Don't think of dying now, Papa... You're as strong as cedar from Lebanon.... You'll be alright... Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, you'll get up from your bed, I'm sure... And you'll continue working on the farm...

Manasses: This year... harvest has been so good... did you know?... There's no more room for wheat in the barns.... Ha, ha.... I'm goin' to tear down the old barns... and build.... bigger ones beside the house... and money will flow like honey.... yes, it'll flow like honey!... oh, oh, oh, it's painful...!

Joel: What does he need the money for... to hide it in a pit underground... What a miserly old man...

Jason: And you, what do you need it for? So that you can spend it all as you please?

Joel: How selfish you are, Jason... Papa is panting like a wounded dog, while here you are thinking only of the money....

Jason: And what's on your mind, you wretch? Your eyes have been sparkling like gold ever since you got here!....

John: Where are you going, Jesus?

Jesus: To old Manasses' house, John. Do you know that he's dying?

John: Yeah, but my friend Clete says he's got a long way to go. That old man is holding on to his life like a leech. Nothing can banish him from this world...

The house was almost dark when Jesus and I reached Manasses' house. In one corner of the room, were the two brothers who were whispering to each other....

Jesus: May we come in?

Joel: Who are you?

Jesus: We know your father...

John: They told us he was very ill and so we have come to visit him...

Jason: To visit him and to find out what you can get from him... Am I right?

John: Why do you say that?

Jason: Because all those who visit him have sharp fangs ready to take advantage of our poor Papa!

Jesus: You must be his sons who live in far away Perea?

Joel: That's right. We arrived a few hours ago...

Jason: So, you're our father's friends...

Jesus: Well, not really friends. Manasses never had friends, and that's the truth. He lived all by himself, ate and slept all to himself.... and in the end, he even talked to himself...

Jason: He may have talked to himself, and told no one where the hell he hid the money. He's dying and we'll have to demolish the house and dig into the entire farm just to find it!

Joel: We'll have to... we'll have to.... You won't be doing anything because this inheritance is mine, don't you understand, Jason?

Jason: Damn you, Joel, here you go again! I've told you a thousand times that half of that money belongs to me, to me! Let's see, please tell us if I'm right or wrong: our father saved....

Jason: Tell him, stranger, tell him that the law provides that he has to divide the inheritance with me!

Joel: Don't involve anyone in this! This is just between you and me!

Jesus: Listen, friend, who am I to meddle in your mess? I'm not a lawyer nor a judge...

Jason: Papa's money is mine, Joel!

Joel: It's mine, Jason!

Manasses: Papa's money... belongs to Papa! It's mine, mine and not even you nor anyone can take that away from me!.... Scoundrels! You, my sons, are also thieves who want to rob me of my fortune and leave me with nothing...!

Jesus: C'mon, old man, take it easy.... take it easy... c'mon... I'm Jesus, staying in Zebedee's place. And this is John... We came to visit you....

Manasses: You have come to see what you can steal from my house... But you'll leave with your hands empty... I don't intend to die... I'll have new barns constructed for my wheat this year... and for many years... oh, oh....

Jesus went near Manasses and gently closed his eyes...

John: He's dead.

Jesus: This is sad, isn't it, John? Old Manasses thought of nothing his whole life but to amass wealth. He had no time for anyone. He never wept for anyone, neither did he know how to be happy.... Of what use were all these things of his? Nothing. They were there for the moths to feed on... He came into this world naked and left this world naked. What's the use of piling up things if he has lost his life?... Let's go, John.

Jason: Where the devil could he have hidden the money, Joel?

Joel: The old man's money is mine, Jason, and don't you insist anymore!

Jason: Go to hell, Joel, I tell you.....

While the neighbors and mourners kept on coming to the house, old Manasses' sons started to search the whole house, hoping to find in some nook their dead father's savings. They were like two vultures tearing at a carcass....

The Roman conquest brought to Israel, among other things, a radical transformation in land ownership. Before then, it existed in two forms: The latifundium (or large landed estate) – which came about by expansion – and communal property, by lots and tilled by cooperatives or by families. The

collection of taxes imposed by the Romans led to the gradual impoverishment and indebtedness of farmers. Many were forced to sell their lands. This hastened even more the process of concentration into big landed estates. This system of landed estates was eventually imposed, because it turned out to be more profitable. The figure of the big landowner, the proprietor who continuously accumulated wealth, had huge rice granaries, and enjoyed profits “without having to work,” was very common in Jesus’ time, especially in the Galilean region. In the upper reach of the Jordan, along the banks of the river and largely, in the mountains of Galilee, the arable lands were already large estates. Some parables, like that of the “rich fool,” are told in the gospel in such a vivid manner, that it is believed that Jesus didn’t make up the story, but simply referred to a fact well known to his listeners. In the episode, Jesus appeared among those who were awaiting the death of the landowner, Manasses, and what he had to say about avarice, life’s meaning (Mt 16:26) and real wealth, were born out of concrete experience. Jesus was not alien to the history of his time. He came with messages and lessons about compassion for those who came to listen to him. His words, his good news, reflected his thoughts on everything he saw and experienced. They were the consequence of his observations and his having lived with the people. This is also true for us, as we form our own conclusions about life in this world, when we live and share our experiences with others. Jesus strongly criticized the rich and showed how he distanced himself from money. Wealth hardens the heart and alienates people. Jesus saw a serious danger in riches, since they become a supreme value in life and a substitute for God (Mt 6:24). Much as one claims to be maintaining faith, a person becomes an enemy of God through avarice, ambition and covetousness. This is because the values of the Kingdom of God – the full surrender of life, unity among brothers and sisters, loyalty, respect for others, the desire to share what one possesses, the drive to serve and construct a just world – are diametrically opposed to ownership and accumulation of wealth, which should be an important consideration for those who idolize the god of money.

(Lk 12:13-21)

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THE JUDGE AND THE WIDOWS

Peter: Look Jesus, this is ridiculous!... We’ve already used twelve pairs of sandals in announcing that things are heading for a change, and that justice and liberation are at hand. But what have we accomplished up to now, huh? Tell me.

Jesus: Be patient, fellas.

Peter: Yeah, be patient... You’ve gotta open your eyes, Moreno! This is getting us nowhere. It’s like moving a mountain.

Jesus: And it will move, Peter. The moment we really have faith in the Lord and in ourselves, we shall indeed move mountains and cast them into the sea. I learned this lesson from my mother...

Jesus: When I was a little boy in Nazareth, my mother, who was already a widow, worked on the farm of the landlord, Ananias...

Susana: What a rascal this Ananias is! How I wish this millstone would crush his kidneys!

Rebecca: For three weeks we have been gathering olives for him, and yet, he doesn’t want to pay us! No, this can’t be! I swear, by the trumpets of Jericho that the whole world will know of his brazenness, and this old man will have to pay us to the last centavo, or else...!

Michal: ...Or else, what, Rebecca?... No, woman, save your strength. What can we do if he doesn’t pay us? Nothing! If our husbands were alive, they would defend us... But, what can we do? We’re widows. Take the yoke upon us and work like beasts.

Jesus: My mother Mary and her neighbor, Susana, together with the other widows of Nazareth, had not been paid their wages after harvesting olives from Ananias' farm. They were furious, for this happened many times: the patrons took advantage of the single women, who were hired to gather olives, or tomatoes or figs... They got paid very little or nothing at all for the work...

Mary: We've gotta do something about this, neighbors! We can't go on like this, doing nothing, while our children go hungry!

Michal: Is there anything we can do "*Comadre*"? This is the fate of poor people like us, so let's just accept it!

Mary: What fate are you talking about? No Michal! I don't buy that. Do you know what Joseph, my late husband, used to say? May he rest in peace! He said that our destiny is in our own hands.

Susana: That's right, Mary, but we women are weak, don't forget that.

Mary: How can you say that, Susanna? Wasn't it Judith's hand that cut off the head of that giant whose name I don't even remember? When the men of Israel lost courage, who led the people against the attacks of the Canaanites? It was Deborah, a woman like you and me, in whose veins flowed blood and not water! And wasn't Queen Esther a fighter too?

Rebecca: Mary's right. The trouble is, the woman, for being alone, loses heart and end up hiding in a cave like mice do.

Mary: Well, then, let's get out of this cave and punish the cat.

Susana: Yes, sir, we've gotta do something for our sake, and for our children!

Mary: C'mon, let's all go to Cana and file a complaint against that old swindler. What are judges for, but to give justice, right? Let's see the judge right away, so he can take up our case in court.

Jesus: My mother and the other widows left Nazareth and headed north toward Cana where old Jacinth, the bald and fat judge, lived...

Rebecca: Judge Jacinth, Judge Jacinth!... Judge Jacinth!

Jacinth: What's going on here? Dammit! Who are you?

Susana: We are the poor widows from Nazareth! We're here to tell you something!.... Please open the door!

Jacinth: Some poor widows... What do you want? Why do you bang my door?

Mary: Because we were deprived of our three-week wages after having worked under the sun!

Jacinth: So what?

Rebecca: You're a judge, aren't you? Aren't judges supposed to give justice?

Jacinth: We put troublemakers like you in jail. I'm very busy now, so please stop bothering me.

Mary: Sir, please wait, don't go away. You see, this old leech Ananias, whom you know better than we do, hired us to gather olives for him. A week passed, but he didn't pay us. The second week and the third week came, but nothing. Do you think this is fair?

Jacinth: So what do you want now?

Susana: We want to sue him in court and we'd like you to give us justice.

Jacinth: Well, let's start from the beginning: If I defend you in court... how much are you going to pay me?

Michal: How's that again, Judge?... Please speak more clearly... we come from the barrio, you know...

Jacinth: I say, if I take up your case, how much money are you going to pay me, dammit?

Mary: Well, sir, as you can see, we're all widows... poor widows, at that. Besides, how can we pay you if Ananias doesn't pay us yet?

Jacinth: I understand... In that case... come back next time... I'm very busy today... That's right, come back next week... I'll see what I can do for you...

Jesus: So, from Cana, my mother and her neighbors walked seven miles back to Nazareth... After a week...

Susana: Please give us justice, sir!... Judge Jacinth, please!

Rebecca: We'll pay you something from what Ananias will have to give us, if you defend our cause!

Jacinth: Something... something... How much?... Tell me, how much are you paying me?

Michal: Well... we can collect ten dinars... or even fifteen... from all of us...

Jacinth: Dammit, fifteen dinars! I'll be damned! You're paying me fifteen dinars! You've come to ask me to confront the most powerful man around, who, by the snap of his finger can have me hanged... and in return, you're paying me fifteen filthy dinars! Puah!

Susana: Please understand, sir, that we're only poor...

Jacinth: Of course, I understand... and you too, must understand that I've got much work to do, and I can't attend to you... Ehem... That's it, come back next week and we'll see, ha, ha, ha...

Jesus: Seven miles of journey back to Nazareth. After a week, they again traveled seven miles to Cana...

Susana: But sir, until when shall we keep on coming back?...

Rebecca: Our children are skin and bones already!

Michal: See these breasts of mine, Judge! They've dried up! We're all desperate! We can't stand this anymore. Our children are dying of hunger, and they're getting sick....!

Jacinth: What have I gotta do with that, huh? I didn't give birth to those kids! So, why bother me? Why don't you settle this among yourselves? Go away and stop pestering me!

Mary: Fine, don't do it for our sake, if you don't want to.

Jacinth: And for whose sake, may I ask?

Mary: Do it for the love of God, Judge!

Jacinth: Ha, ha, ha...! For God? What do I care about God?... He's up there in heaven, while I'm down here on earth. Didn't you say that God gives justice to the poor? Why don't you go get yourselves a long ladder so you can reach him and ask his help? And stop bothering me!

Susana: Pff... What a sour character he is...

Mary: No, Susana, it's just that the fox in Ananias has gotten to him, do you understand?

Michal: What'll we do now, Mary? We're doomed.

Mary: Now, we'll keep fighting!

Rebecca: But Mary, are you out of your mind? How can we fight without even a stick as a weapon!

Mary: We don't need sticks or swords for this, Rebecca.

Rebecca: So what do we do, Mary?

Mary: All we need is patience.

Susana: What for?

Mary: To put an end to his patience. Remember what Moses did in Egypt? The Pharaoh had everything, including war chariots! Moses had nothing. Well, the only thing he had was a stubborn head... Moses gathered all the Israelites and tested the Pharaoh's patience: by turning the water red, infesting the houses with toads and frogs, and turning the city into total darkness...

Susana: But Mary, we're just a handful... Moses did it because he was a man and many people rallied behind him...

Michal: We're just like mosquitoes, while they're like elephants...

Mary: That's precisely the point, Michal. That was one of the ten plagues of Egypt, that of the mosquitoes. This I can assure you: a band of attacking mosquitoes can render sleepless all of King Solomon's elephants in the palace. Come with me; we're all going back to Jacinth's house!

Jesus: And so, the obstinate peasants, together with Mary, my mother who was their leader, went back to the front door of the fat judge...

Jacinth: You're here again! Dammit, I told you to go away and leave me in peace!... Are you all

deaf?... What are you waiting for?

Mary: We're waiting for the judges of Israel to give justice to the poor!

Jacinth: Well, you've got to do it sitting down, because it will take a long time!

Mary: That's exactly what we're going to do. Neighbors, let's all sit down!

Jesus: When my mother said that, all the widows sat at the front door of the judge...

Jacinth: To hell with all of you! Okay, you may stay there, until your asses get numb! Damn you, peasants; your heads are as hard as stones!

Jesus: The judge slammed the door. After a while....

Jacinth: You're still seated there? By Jove, have you all lost your mind?

Susana: No, it's you who's losing your patience, Judge!

Mary: We won't move from here until we get some justice...

Jesus: Then the judge shut the door again...

Rebecca: You'll bring your house down if you keep on banging the door!

Susana: Pff... What do you think, Mary? Will we achieve anything?

Mary: Our ancestors suffered for four hundred years in Egypt, until finally they obtained their freedom. We won't budge from here.

A Man: Hey, who're you? Are you begging alms from the judge?

Rebecca: We want justice, not alms.

Susana: We labored for three weeks gathering olives at Ananias' farm, and now he doesn't want to pay us.

Man: What a thief!... What about the judge... Has he done anything yet?

Mary: That's what we've been waiting for. But you see, Ananias has stained the judge's hand, who in turn, has smeared the captain's, and so on and so forth...

Man: Yeah, you're right. The powerful protect one another, while we keep on pushing each other... Hey, fellas, come on over here, all of you!

Jesus: That man started to call his friends who were idle in the square and inside the tavern... Soon, a great number of people from Cana joined the widows from Nazareth...

Jacinth: Well I'll be damned! What do you want? I'm not the governor of Galilee, neither am I here to give you candies or sweets! So all of you: get lost and leave me in peace, you fools!

Jesus: More and more people joined them at the front door. They were like a plague of mosquitoes...

Jacinth: That's enough! To hell with all of you! Come inside and let's settle this matter once and for all!

Susana: So the judge finally relented, huh?

Jacinth: I couldn't stand the scandal anymore. However, I want you to bear this in mind: I'm doing this, not for God's sake, not for you nor for your "starving children", but because I want to get rid of you and get you out of my sight.

Jesus: Judge Jacinth took the case to court and the landlord Ananias had to pay the widows' wages. Yes sir, they won the fight! That's how all wars are won: you fight until the end. It's the same thing with the Lord. We pray day and night, without ceasing. If we do, He'll never let us down. He'll give us justice!

Rufa: God bless your lips, Jesus, and God bless the woman who brought you into this world!

Peter: Very well said, Grandma Rufa!

Jesus: Yeah, even more, God bless all those who fight to the end, whatever the cost!

In many ways, the women peasants of Israel had more freedom than those in the city. The need to raise a family caused them to work side by side with the men on the farm. The women and men harvested the grapes together; sometimes the women were hired to work alone.

Being a widow in the Bible should never be taken as synonymous to being old. Many girls got married at the ages of twelve or thirteen years, and a lot of women became widowed at a very young age. Considering that when Jesus initiated his activities in Galilee, his father had already passed away, Mary was widowed at thirty or forty. Her social condition made her dependent on her son, whose duty it was to support her. Likewise, she certainly had to work. The parable of the “evil judge” or that of the “persevering widow” in this episode is told by Jesus to his friends as a real experience of his mother and some widows like her.

The administration of justice in Israel traces its origin from the people’s history, with the ancestors designated by Moses. However, in Jesus’ time, there were no exact data as to how justice was meted out, and the manner by which the cases were presented in court. The institutionalization of justice varied according to regions. Mary and her friends went to look for a local judge, who was residing in Cana, since Nazareth was too small a locality to have one. These judges decided less important cases in small localities. Sometimes, the rich would “buy” them off with gifts and so no real justice was delivered in their decisions.

The prophets of Israel always fought for justice for the poor. They identified God’s law with the rights of the poor. Among the poor were the foreigners, the orphans and the widows, who were defenseless and therefore, deserved justice more than anyone else. The prophets denounced the corruption in the courts, the briberies received by the judges and the injustice they committed against these unfortunate souls (Amos 5:7-13).

In the history of Israel, a lot of women became known for their active part in the peoples’ struggle. Deborah, the judge of Israel, won several battles (Judges 4 and 5); Esther, a very popular heroine, and Judith, who defeated the tyrant Holofernes were significant female figures in the history of Israel for their courage and cunning. Mary, Jesus’ mother, likewise left a mark in the history of Israel by helping establish the Kingdom through her work, her constant fidelity and her courage in the face of adversity.

Mary, the mother of the people, a peasant and a laborer, ought to serve as inspiration to women. There is so much in common between her and the women of our society. Mary lived in a male chauvinistic society. She engaged in manual work, and experienced the suffering of the poor: scarcity, insecurity and discrimination. She had a son whose commitment to the cause of justice put her own life in jeopardy. Without fully comprehending Jesus’ mission, she collaborated with him.

It is not enough that Mary is venerated. She is even “adored” – which, in fact, is what has happened. In the Magnificat, a hymn of faith in the Lord and a source of inspiration and hope for the poor, can be found all the elements necessary for a genuine veneration of Mary.

Like any child learning from his parents, Jesus learned the fundamental values in life from Joseph and Mary. He acquired Mary’s tenacity, her constancy, that typical peasant obstinacy that can “move mountains.” If the parable of the “evil judge” has been commonly regarded as an exhortation to the constancy of prayer, Jesus, in this episode, broadens its meaning: in prayer, we must also be as consistent, patient and insistent as Mary. Prayer and action go hand in hand; they are nurtured by the same spirit, and inspired by the same attitudes. Thus, Jesus presents Mary as a model of constancy of action.

There will be no freedom for women until men and women alike take part, hand in hand, in the construction of a world that is different from the present: a world that is free from discrimination of any type. Women’s liberation that focuses only on the sexual aspects (abortion, divorce, free union, etc.) is an importation from developed countries which has little to do with our own realities.

In this account, the widows’ strategy to win the sentiment of the unjust judge was tenacity, in the form of non-violence. They insisted, they journeyed several times, pressured the judge with their words and screams, and staged a sit-down strike... until they overcame the judge’s resistance... Their unity gave them strength and victory.

75

THE FEAST OF THE TENTS

Every autumn, when the barns are filled with wheat and the vineyards are teeming with grapes, all Israel travels South to celebrate the feast of the tents. For seven days, Jerusalem is dressed in green, and adorned with leaves. Hundreds of huts made from palm trunks and branches surround the walls of the holy city in remembrance of the tents where our fathers lived during their long journey in the desert. The wine from the new harvest is drunk in abundance; euphoria spreads through the narrow streets of King David's city...

A Man: I bet my five donkeys he's coming to the feast!

Another Man: I won't call your bet! He's a marked man... He knows that if he comes, the Romans can grab him anytime... That spells big trouble!

Man: I wish I could see him at close range... and listen to him! He's a prophet! Israel is never wanting in wine and in prophets! I drink to our country: the greatest in the whole world!

Another Man: Watch your tongue, big ear. Much more is said of Jesus of Galilee... John was a prophet, so they cut his head off. With Jesus, it's more. They say he's the Messiah....

Man: So, they'll have him beheaded too?

Another Man: On the contrary, he'll have the Romans beheaded, dammit! If he's the Messiah, he'll come with his sword this long and -zas! Down with the imperial eagle! Ah, that'll be the day of grand feasting in Jerusalem! I give a toast to the Messiah of Galilee!

On the first day of the festival, when the first star began to shine in the sky, the big torches in the Temple of Jerusalem were lighted. All night, the streets were crammed with singing and laughing pilgrims. Jerusalem jubilantly stood watch for a week-long festivity in thanksgiving to God for the fruits of the new harvest.

Meanwhile, in Nazareth...

Mary: So my son, aren't you going to Jerusalem?

Jesus: I dunno, mother, I still dunno....

Mary: Your cousins wanted to come along with you.

Jesus: I see. The problem is I don't wish to go with them...

When that year's harvest was over, Jesus went to Nazareth to see his mother. Some of his friends went with him. The wheat fields lay idle after a long harvest time. The grapes had been sent to the winepress.

Jesus: How 'bout you, Mama? Aren't you going to the festival?

Mary: No, son. There's a lot to do around here. My "comadre" Susana is sick, and so is Nepthali's wife. Someone's got to look after the children, you know.

Simon: You work so hard, cousin Mary. Maybe that's your secret in staying young. So, what now, Jesus? Have you decided yet? Are you going with us to Jerusalem?....

Jesus' cousins, Simon and Jacob, entered Mary's house with their walking canes in hand...

Jesus: No, I'm not going. I'm staying in Galilee.

Simon: What? But people keep on talking of the marvelous things you're doing. That you have the makings of a prophet... And now, what? Don't tell me that the prophets of today are hiding under the ground like moles... Since you can do such great things, come with us and perform these deeds in the

capital, for people to see you... Jacob and I shall be your barkers... “Hey, the prophet is here! He’s our cousin!” We’ll gather the people, you talk to them and we promise to applaud you, cousin, when you’re through...

Jesus: No, I’m not going, Simon. Save the applause and get goin’. The festival started last night, and you might be late. I ain’t goin’.

Simon: Bah, what a snob you are, Jesus. Go and join your friends in Capernaum. Let’s go, Jacob, and hurry up!

Jesus: Mama, tomorrow at dawn, I’m leaving.

Mary: Where to, son, to Capernaum?

Jesus: No, to Jerusalem. To the festival, with James, Peter, John and the rest of the group...

Mary: I knew you were going... Your lips were telling Simon and Jacob that you wouldn’t go, but when I looked at you, you couldn’t deny it... Jesus, my son, be careful. Jerusalem is not Galilee. The Romans are all around and they find out everything...

Jesus: Are you still afraid, Mama?

Mary: No, son, why should I be. But it’s no longer like before. Back then, I could scold you like a little boy. “Jesus, don’t do this, obey your mother”... No, now I know I can’t be a hindrance to you. Many times I’ve thought about the things you told me in Capernaum; do you remember, son?

Jesus: Of course, I do. And the truth is, I was a little harsh with you that day.

Mary: No, son. It was I who was arguing with God like our grandfather Jacob, who, one night, dared wrestle with the angel who subdued him in the end... The same thing happened to me, you know. I was telling the Lord: “Why don’t you look for somebody else? Why take a fancy to my son? He’s the only one I’ve got. Why do you want to take him away from me? Joseph is gone and I’m getting old. At least I’d like to see my son settle down with a decent girl, have a secure job, and maybe, I can even take care of my first grandchild...” This was all I asked. It wasn’t much, was it? But you see, God’s will prevailed, as always. He stretched out His hand to you and said, “You are the one I have been looking for.” It’s alright, son. He won. He is the stronger one.

Jesus: You’re a courageous woman, Mama.

Mary: Of course not, I’m scared to death. I just obey without a clear idea of the Lord’s plan for you. But don’t worry, I won’t be in your way. On the contrary, I would like to follow you... to help you... though I don’t know how...

Jesus: But, Mama, you were the one who pushed me into this! You used to tell me: “The Lord wants to humble the great and exalt the humble.” You taught me that. And that’s what we have been doing all along these months in Capernaum and in the cities by the lake...

Mary: And in Jerusalem...?

Jesus: The good news must be proclaimed in Jerusalem too, and now is the time to do it.

Mary: Take a little of this milk before you go. You’ve become so thin, you might not be able to make it even to Samaria... C’mon son, drink this and see how good it is...

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the festival was almost half over. As we approached the temple, we saw the procession coming out. Men, women and children, all waving branches of palm and willow, sang along the streets. The priests repeated the same ceremony at the atrium: God’s ministers, intoning psalms of the tents, went around the altar...

Priest: Lord, give us salvation! Lord, grant us success!

All: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord

The Temple’s atrium was filled with drunken men and children chasing sheep. Jerusalem reeked of ripe fruit as she happily bade farewell to the year that was to end...

A Man: Hey, countrywoman, look who’s here! The prophet from Galilee.

A Woman: You’re drunk, that’s why you’re seeing prophets everywhere!

Another Man: I’m telling you, woman, look at that cloak with patches... yeah, it’s him.... Hey, folks!

Run!... The prophet has arrived! The prophet has arrived!

People responded to the man's screams by milling around us at the gate of Corinth... A group of men pushed Jesus up onto a piece of rock....

A Man: Hey you, Galilean, what're you doing here?!

Jesus: Celebrating this year's harvest; it was good!

Another Man: Speak louder, for we can't hear you over here! Dammit, pig, stop pushing!

The gate of Corinth was a cockpit in turmoil. Everybody wanted to get close to the newly arrived prophet...

Jesus: We have come to celebrate this year's harvest and to inform you of what is happening in the north! Yes, the farms have yielded wheat and grapes, that's right. But the Lord is announcing a greater harvest, a feast and a banquet to be celebrated by all people on earth. Friends from Jerusalem: we are here to bring you the good news! The Kingdom of God has come!

Man: Oh, great, for this Kingdom of God!

A Woman: And where the hell is it so we can see it?

Jesus: You don't have to look up to heaven nor anywhere else, woman. It's right here, where we poor people are gathered!

Another Man: Long live the Galileans! In Jerusalem and all over the country!

Another Woman: Hey, young man, yes, you, who speak so beautifully, will you explain to us one thing: what must we do in order to enter this kingdom? And who'll be left behind?

Jesus: The door to the Kingdom is narrow. One must pass through it with empty pockets. Only those who share what they have shall pass through it. Those who deny the poor shall be left behind. Those who think they are first shall be last, and the last shall be first! Those who are at the end of the line shall go in first!

A Man: That's very well said, Galilean!

We had a difficult time leaving the temple. The people were shoving each other. They all wanted to see Jesus. The Roman soldiers watched at a close distance to prevent major trouble. Some Galileans invited us to spend the night in their bamboo tents. At nightfall, we stayed in one of them, while people from the capital continued talking and arguing...

A Neighbor: Did you notice how he spoke? I tell you, this man is the Messiah!

Another Neighbor: But have you ever seen a Messiah in broken sandals? You must be out of your mind!

Another Neighbor: Besides, the Messiah can't be a Galilean. He must come from the family of King David.

Neighbor: So, what family did this guy come from? That's what we don't know.

Neighbor: He's got to be the son of David! Either he comes from David's family or he is not the Messiah!

A Teacher: My friend, how can he be the son of David, when there's a psalm where David calls him father instead of his son?

Neighbor: What psalm are you talking about? This guy speaks so clearly, he's got the word of God on his tongue....!

Pharisee: How can the Messiah be the son of David when David himself calls him father? As another psalm says, no one can be the son of his own son. Don't you think so?

Neighbor: Listen, I don't understand a word you're saying... nor everything the Galilean says... so why don't you just get lost and sing your psalms somewhere else!

Neighbor: This Galilean was born in a poor town called Nazareth! Do you think the Messiah would come from there, huh? Don't be silly! When he comes, no one will ever know where he comes from. But he suddenly will appear. Zas! The heavens will open and we shall see him... He's the tricky type, you know... Let the Messiah go to sleep tonight, while we all go to the Aziel's inn! The best wine in Jerusalem is kept in the barrels of this scoundrel!

That night, the prophet from Galilee was the talk of the whole town: from the barrio of the potmakers,

the water carriers, to the street of the prostitutes and the big market... Nobody could come up with a good answer to the same question about him... The autumn's new moon, as it faintly shone over the walls of the holy city that was surrounded by tents, was at its highest point in the sky. Jerusalem, weary after the festival, was just beginning to succumb to deep slumber...

At the start of autumn in September, the people of Israel celebrate the feast of the "sukkoth" (feast of the tents and huts). This brings to a close the fruit harvest and the gathering of grapes. Of the three pilgrimages held by the Israelites in Jerusalem annually – the Passover, the Pentecost and the Tents – the last was considered to be the most festive and popular. It was during this time that more people converged on the capital. For seven days, the people lived in huts that were put up on terraces or on patios of the houses, along the expanse of the temple, or in public squares around Jerusalem. These huts were constructed in remembrance of the tents where the Hebrews lived for forty years during their journey through the desert and to the promised land.

In Jesus' time, and as influenced by the prophetic texts (Zec 14:16, 19), the people associated the feast of the Tents with the triumph of the Kingdom of God and the Messiah. This episode shows the enthusiasm of Jesus' cousins in his becoming more and more popular each day and their excitement, for their own interest, over Jesus' going to Jerusalem for the festival. At this point, Jesus was already a very popular prophet not only in his own Galilee but also in the south, in Judea, and even in the capital. At this point too, Jesus was fully aware of the conflict brought by his words, his actions and the people around him: the poor, pursued by the law, "the damned," "the leftovers" of that society.

In this episode it is the second time that Jesus visits Jerusalem. He does it semi-clandestinely, because after the news that Herod was after his head, he did not think it prudent for him to be making noise. In this case, although he does not reject the idea of spreading his prophetic message widely among the pilgrims who converged on the capital, he shuns the spectacular proposed to him by his cousins.

If at this point Jesus was already aware of a violent death, Mary, too, had the intuition that this could be the end of her son. That is why she was scared. Mary was a courageous woman and a woman of faith, although this faith does not suppress fear nor weakness. Mary, constantly fearing the consequences of his actions, suffered because of her son's commitment; she had no clear picture of where this commitment would lead. Nevertheless, she moved on and was guided by her faith which continued to grow and mature in her.

It was also a fact that the roads to Jerusalem were not safe. In Jesus' time, banditry was rampant all over the country. In order to protect their trade, through the routes of the caravans, the Romans took special interest in ridding the roads of bandits. Farmers told great stories about hijackers and were apprehensive of the risks entailed on their trips. It was a special favor from God to be able to reach Jerusalem safe and sound.

At the capital, after this first public speech shown in this episode and summarized in the constant message of the gospel: share, try to enter through the narrow gate by giving, instead of accumulating (Mt 7:13-14), the people, gathered in Jerusalem for the festival, were talking about Jesus. They wanted to find out if he is or is he not the Messiah, or – even more – if such a man of low origin, with no doctorate nor studies at all, nor authority – could really be the one... In those times, awaiting the Messiah was a constant topic of conversation among people. Some Rabbis believed that the Messiah could only come from the family of David (he could be his "son"). Others did not give much importance to this aspect, but to what the Messiah could do. In his second trip to the capital, Jesus is already known. Poor people channel their hopes for justice through him.

(Jn 7:1-13 and 40-43)

THE FIRST STONE

Husband: Get out of there, insolent woman! Now you can't escape anymore!

Neighbor: Knock that door down and get them out?

Lady neighbor: Adulteress, adulteress!

A mob of men and women shouted as they gathered around Cirilo's house, in a district in Jerusalem where water carriers lived. Stones were hurled against the door while curses were heard all over the place.

Another Neighbor: You'll pay for this, you bitch!

Another Lady Neighbor: We know that you two rascals are inside!

Through a hole in the yard, a half-naked man leaped and rushed down the street, like a rat coming out of its hiding place.

Husband: Let him go, I'll come back for him some other time. But now, it's Joan I must confront!

Neighbor: Get her out of the house, and hurry!

After shovings from the neighbors, the wooden lock gave way and the door opened. Several men milled inside the house... In one corner, beside the stinking creek, a horrified woman was seen crouching...

Husband: Oh! How I want to strangle you, you filthy woman! You bitch. I swear that this will be your last day on earth!

Neighbor: Death to the adulteress! Kill her!

Lady Neighbor: She must die, she must die!

Neighbor: Get her!

Two men rushed toward the woman, grabbed her by the hair and dragged her out of the house... Then an old man snatched away the sheet with which she intended to cover her body...

Husband: Leave her that way, for everyone to see her sins! If she didn't have any qualms undressing before Cirilo, neither would she mind baring herself before everyone!... Neighbors, this woman has betrayed me... and went with another man! Help me regain my honor that has been tarnished by this woman's infidelity!

Lady Neighbor: Let her die! Let her die!

Neighbor: Go and live with your good-for-nothing lover, you slut!

The two men who lifted her by the arms dragged her through the small, narrow street, while she resisted by kicking. With raised fists, they shouted at the top of their voices, as they headed south toward the cliff of the Gehenna, a cursed barrio where the residents of Jerusalem burned their garbage and stoned their adulterous women.

Lady Neighbor: Death to the adulteress! Throw her into the pit!

Neighbor: Now, now, look who's here! The prophet from Galilee!

In the midst of our conversation with Jesus near the Temple, we saw the angry crowd approaching...

Neighbor: Come with us Prophet, and fulfill the Law of Moses! The stain of adultery can only be washed out by stoning the guilty one!

Husband: The more hands there are, the more stones shall be hurled! Come with us. Let all your friends come along too!

Neighbor: We caught this whore in the same bed with Cirilo, the water carrier!

Lady Neighbor: She can't give any excuse. We're all witnesses to her offense!

The men dragging the woman cleared the way, and dropped her in the midst of everyone. Her face almost kissed the ground and her knees were already bleeding. Her whole body was wet with saliva and was full of bruises... One of them, in a gesture of contempt, stuck out his right foot and rested it on the woman's face, pressed against the stones on the ground...

One Neighbor: Who is the prophet here?... So, it's you?... Well, why don't you condemn her now, so that the devil can swallow her up and lead her directly to hell!... Come on, what are you waiting for?... If you are indeed a prophet, speak up and condemn her!...

Lady Neighbor: Let her die! Let her die!

Jesus approached the group of men who were shouting and threatening with their fists...

Jesus: Where is the husband of this woman?

Husband: Here I am! I used to be the husband of this whore, but not anymore. What do you want?

Jesus: Tell me what happened. Has she ever deceived you before?

Husband: Of course! She would always deny it, but sooner or later, it is easier to spot a liar than a cripple...

Jesus: Tell me... How many times, do you think, has she been unfaithful to you?

Husband: How many times? I don't know anymore. Thrice, four times or five times... She is worse than a bitch in heat.

Then Jesus bent over and with his finger, drew three, four, five lines on the ground...

Jesus: What else is your complaint against her?

Husband: What else? Ha! Isn't this imprudence committed in broad daylight sufficient enough? Do you want more evidence against her? She would say, "I am going to visit a sick friend and cheer her up" ...and who was this sick friend but Cirilo, the water carrier and butcher from the next block. Wait till I see him... I will cut him into pieces with his own butchers knife!

Lady Neighbor: Have you seen how she flirted with my husband, right before my eyes – making me look so stupid! If you had only seen how she wiggled her way in front of our house, while tongues kept on wagging... What a whore she is!

Another Lady Neighbor: This woman has been laid upon by every male in the neighborhood!

Lady Neighbor: Tell the prophet how they caught her fondling Jack's son! Come on, tell him!

Another Lady Neighbor: The Rabbi wouldn't turn his head for nothing, when she passes by, if he didn't know a lot about her!

Lady Neighbor: She's got a foul mouth. Everything she utters is loathsome.

Neighbor: If you only knew what she says and does!

Lady Neighbor: You should see how she dresses herself – baring practically all her breasts! What a brazen woman!

All the while, Jesus, in a squatting position, was drawing a line for every accusation hurled against the woman...

Old Man: This harlot's misdeeds are endless!

Lady Neighbor: We knew all along this was coming, folks! She is her mother's daughter, a whore like herself. Nobody even knows who her father is...

Husband: Enough of this silly talk! What have you got to say, prophet from Galilee?

Jesus: Will someone get me a stone, please?

All: Very well, and be tough with her!

An old man, with a look of malice in his eyes, leaned over to pick up a stone, and gave it to Jesus...

Lady Neighbor: Pounce her on the head – like we all do to adulterous women!

Neighbor: Crush her to death: Crush her to death!

Jesus weighed the stone in his hand, as he looked at the woman who was lying flat, her face on the ground, in the middle of the street...

Jesus: My fellowmen, I am sorry, but I can not cast this stone at this woman. If anyone here thinks that he is without sin, let him come forward and do it...

A pot-bellied old man went up to Jesus...

Old Man: Give me the stone. I'll do it. We have to fulfill the Law of Moses, which condemns adultery...

Jesus: Make sure it will not rebound on you, as it did on Goliath...

Old Man: What on earth do you mean?

Jesus: Now you listen... just between the two of us... How much interest do you charge when you lend money... ten percent, twenty, or perhaps... forty percent? ...This is also against the Law of Moses, don't you think so?

Jesus stared at the old man, who was about to throw the stone at the naked body of the woman. His look was like a razor's blade penetrating through the old man's eyes.

Jesus: The Law prohibits that you choke the poor to death because they are unable to pay their debts on time. Do you agree, my friend?

The stone slid from the old man's hand, as he turned around and slipped through the crowd...

Lady Neighbor: What's with him? Why did he back out?

Jesus again faced the people who were getting impatient.

Jesus: Who among you wishes to cast the first stone at the woman?

Neighbor: I do. Give it to me. If there is anything that disgusts me – it's infidelity... What an abominable woman!

A tall man, full of arrogance, approached the woman...

Jesus: Say, my friend, what is your job?

Neighbor: My job? I am a businessman. I run a food store along Puerta del Angulo.

Jesus: And probably, you keep two weighing scales for your business: one, to weigh all your purchases, and another, to weigh what you sell... Tell me, how many have you got... one or two?

The vendor opened his mouth to reply to Jesus, but he couldn't utter a single word. Then he withdrew and disappeared among the crowd...

Jesus: And you... by your looks, you must be a lawyer or a judge... a judge of those who sit in the Great Council... Tell me, my friend, how much bribe do you receive for convicting the widow and exonerating the landowner? Do you wish to cast the first stone?... How about you?... You must be a doctor. Go ahead... Throw the first stone. After all, this woman lives in the slums. You haven't set foot in the place, have you? All your patients come from the wealthy barrio, naturally, because they can afford to pay you.

Neighbor: Stop all this nonsense! This woman is a sinner. You have noted down her sins through the lines you drew on the ground... See how numerous they are!

Jesus: Why do you see the mote in her eye, while you refuse to see the plank in you own?

Neighbor: The mote in my eye! This woman is guilty of the most grievous sin, adultery!

Jesus: It is more adulterous to see priests in cahoots with the oppressive rulers of the people. Yet no one hurls stones at them. It is more adulterous to see God's servants worshipping Mammon, the god of money, but no one lifts a finger to accuse them. All of you are hypocrites. Go and hide yourselves in the mountain caves, because the God of Israel's coming for the final reckoning, and just as you have done to this woman,

you'll be judged the way you judge others.

Jesus leaned back and spoke no more. Then he reached out to erase the lines that he had drawn on the ground, while the accusations were hurled against the adulteress.

Peter: By golly, Jesus, how you left them breathless!

Jesus: It seems that the only sin they're aware of is that of sleeping with a woman. They waste their time picking on this type of woman and criticizing her sins. Yet, the more obvious things and the grave abuses against the poor are committed right before their own eyes, without their knowledge...

Peter bent over the woman who was lying flat on the ground...

Peter: Hey, you're saved. You're very lucky. What's your name?

Joan: Joan... but I... I...

Jesus: Weep no more, woman. It's all over now. Here, cover yourself with this sheet. Take it easy. No one's going to hurt you anymore. Open your eyes now. Look, they've all left. No one has condemned you. Not even God. Neither has he cast a stone at you.

Peter and Jesus lifted Joan from the ground, and brought her home to the aqueduct street, facing the barrio of water carriers, near the holy Temple of Jerusalem.

The episode of the adulteress – which can only be found in the gospel of John – is not among the ancient manuscripts which are preserved from the original text of said gospel. Some are of the opinion that this text, which, on the other hand, is replete with historical realities, must have been deleted from the gospel of Luke and from the writings of John precisely because Jesus' compassion for this sinful woman might turn out to be scandalous to the first Christian communities. It is therefore this aspect that makes the story relevant.

In Israel, adultery was considered a public crime, punishable by death, in accordance with the ancient laws (Lev 20:1). Customs and traditions had interpreted a number of laws in favor of the male species. Thus, a married man was said to have committed adultery only if he had an affair with a married woman. If the latter, however, was single, a prostitute, or a slave, then such act on the part of the man was not considered adulterous. On the other hand, a woman having an affair with any man was considered an adulteress. A woman suspected of adultery was subjected to a public trial by making her drink bitter water. If her stomach became swollen after drinking it, then this confirmed her adulterous act. If she did not feel any malaise at all, then it was considered a false accusation (Num 5:11-31). This test was performed daily by a priest in the Puerta de Nicanor of the Temple of Jerusalem. The man was never subjected to a similar process. In any case, once adultery was proven, the guilty ones (man or woman) – should be punished by the people through stoning.

Since adultery was considered a public crime, the people should likewise cleanse the stain of sin publicly. Death by stoning was carried out by the residents of the place where the sinner had been guilty of the sinful act, and usually the place of torture was held beyond the walls of the city. Witnesses to the crime were the ones who cast the first stones at the culprit. Other crimes punishable by stoning were blasphemy, divinations and other forms of idolatry, as well as the violation of the Law of the Sabbath.

Adultery is a sin against fidelity. In a number of cases, it is also an expression of weakness. In order to save the adulteress from death as mandated by law, Jesus, in this episode, contrasts this "sin" with other offenses like fraud, exploitation, usury, judicial corruption and many others. In this light, it is evident that acts of injustice committed against the poor and the less fortunate, by taking advantage of their misery, are far more grievous in the eyes of God than the sins of the flesh.

Jesus was always merciful, full of understanding and tolerant with cheaters, prostitutes and drunkards – this wide gamut of human weaknesses which are related to the flesh, and to the cunning existence of the poor. On the other hand, he frowned upon the hypocrisy and injustice of the rich and the powerful. He

never branded the sinners and the condemned as a “race of snakes,” as the heads of the official religion claimed. Rather, this insult was intended specifically for them. The Christian community should be able to identify, as Jesus has shown, the real sin that separates people from God and isolates them from each other.

(Jn 8:2-11)

77

LIKE A RIVER OF LIVING WATER

The last day of the Feast of the Tents was the most significant. The week-long jubilation at the end of the year and the new harvest were almost over. The pilgrims who were jam-packed in Jerusalem bade their last farewell to the Holy City by attending the solemn rite of the water in the Pool of Siloam, beside the walls by the south...

Abiah: Everything's all set for the procession, huh, Priest Zirah?

Zirah: Right. In a little while, we'll go to the temple to get the silver jug. Are you coming with us, Magistrate Nicodemus?

Nicodemus: Why, of course....

Abiah: For sure he'll be there too... All these days he's been hovering around the temple with his pals from Galilee....

Nicodemus: Who?

Abiah: Who else, but that Jesus of Nazareth. He's been putting our patience to the limits! He does nothing but bring trouble or join the troublemakers.

Zirah: Thank God the Almighty, this will soon be over. The rotten apple must be removed so as not to spoil the rest*.... ha, ha, ha... don't you think so?

Nicodemus: What do you mean, Zirah?

Zirah: I mean, we've already discussed this with Caiphas, the high priest, who has given us his authorization....

Nicodemus: What for?

Abiah: To get the troublemaker. The holiday ends today... and so does his glibness with the holiday today. A stint in jail will knock his senses off!....

Nicodemus: But, how can that be possible! Are you out of your mind? You cannot condemn anyone without trying him. That's the Law.

Zirah: Nicodemus, don't you think we've had enough of his silly talk? He's filled up the whole Galilee with all his nonsense, and now he wants to stir up the whole capital! Don't you know what happened the other day to the adulteress? They were going to stone her to death, as the Law of Moses demands.

Nicodemus: Of course I know! The entire Jerusalem has been talking about that...

Abiah: Well, now they'll all be silenced! Everything's over! We'll get rid of the agitator from our midst.

Nicodemus: Take it easy, my friends. People say that Jesus is a prophet...

Zirah: Of course, it's the wine that made him see things... A prophet! Bah! Only thieves and rascals could come from Galilee!

Nicodemus: This man is different, Zirah. I talked to him once, and believe me, I...

Zirah: So you were also wheedled by him? Why don't you open your eyes, Magistrate Nicodemus! Has any one of our chiefs and pharisees believed in him? Look at his followers: a gang of rogues, who neither bathe nor obey the Law of Moses! Damn!

Nicodemus: Hear him speak first. All I ask is that you listen to him speak.

Abiah: We'll get him first. Then we'll figure out what to do with him, ha, ha, ha... Priest Zirah, tell the guards to come. They ought to be instructed on what to do, ha, ha, ha...

Later, in the afternoon, the streets near the pool of Siloam were teeming with people. With branches of palm trees in our hands, we waited for the procession of the priests who headed for the fountain with a silver jug to be filled with holy water and poured later on the temple's altar.... The lighted torches illumined the afternoon in Jerusalem....

Zirah: Let us give thanks to the Lord who is good!

All: His love is forever!

Zirah: Let the whole house of Israel declare it!

All: His love is forever!

Zirah: Let the house of Aaron declare it!

All: His love is forever!

Zirah: Let all the friends of the Lord declare it!

All: His love is forever!

The solemn procession reached the Pool of Siloam. A priest, wearing an embroidered dalmatic, descended the humid stairs toward the spring that supplied drinking water to the people of the city of King David. Then he leaned over to fill the silver jug with water....

Zirah: This, my children, is the holy water that purifies, that quenches our thirst, the life-giving water! Praised be the name of the Lord and lift up your branches in His honor!

Then something unexpected happened. Jesus climbed through one corner of the pool and shouted so loud for everyone to hear....

Jesus: My friends, listen to me! This water is stagnant; don't drink from it! The living water is something else! The living water is the Spirit of God!

A Man: What the hell is this sot trying to do, yelling at the top of his voice?

Another Man: Get him out of there, he's distracting the people and disrupting the procession!

Jesus: My friends, the Spirit of God hovers around the water, making new things like in the beginning of creation! Those of you who thirst for justice, come and be one with us, and in your heart will spring forth a river of living water, like the torrent seen by the prophet Ezekiel, that inundated the earth and purged her of all her sins!

A Man: What's all this mess around here? Until when shall we put up with this rascal? Why can't you shut him up?

Another Man: Hey, isn't he the same guy who they say is a prophet, and whom they wanted killed?... How can he go on shouting, yet no one is arresting him?

A Woman: Maybe the chiefs of the Sanhedrin have been converted and now they believe that this troublemaker is the Messiah after all!

A Man: What stupidity! The Messiah will descend from heaven enveloped in a cloud of incense! This guy comes from Galilee, reeking of onions!

Jesus was between James and me. We were surrounded by an avalanche of people. The priests in the procession, infuriated by the incident, left the jug of water and the branches of palm trees, and called for the guards. But Jesus continued talking...

Jesus: My friends, look above you! Look at those torches that illumine the walls of the city!.... The New Jerusalem will be as bright! I bring you good news which is the light of the world! The news is that God, our Father, is offering us, those who are down here, his Kingdom. God is light, and his Spirit is a torch that will give light to the earth; yes, the light to the four corners of the earth, the light that will burn all the scum, giving birth to a world where there are no rich nor poor, no masters nor slaves, a new heaven and

earth where only justice will reign!

A Woman: Let's get out of here, Lenore, I don't like the way things will end up here!

Another Woman: Damn, why do they have to mix God's work with politics?

A Woman: C'mon, run, the beating and stoning will start any time now....

A Man: This blabber mouth must be a Galilean, I say!

Another Man: Such nice words, huh? Such big lies!

Man: Shut up, you beast, and hold your tongue! Can't you see this man is sent by God?

Man: What are you talking about? Look at him! He's nothing but a crazy man who wants us all to be like him! Hey, will someone push him down from that wall?

Man: This man is possessed by the devil. Can't you hear it, Nazarene? The devil of rebellion is inside you!

Jesus: No my friend, there is no devil inside me. I'm here to tell you the truth. The truth hurts, and that's why some of you refuse to listen!

Man: Ignore this kook! He talks a lot! It's the devil who sent him!

Man: What about those people over there? Who sent them then?

Woman: Well, they are the good demons! Let's get out of here, neighbor, things are getting out of hand!

From the cobbled street descending from Mount Zion to the Pool of Siloam, four soldiers of the Temple who were sent by the priests were heading toward Jesus to arrest him...

A Soldier: That's it, Galilean! You've caused enough trouble already.... Beat it, all of you!... C'mon, I told you to disperse!.... Hey, you, get down from that wall, or we'll get you down ourselves...!

Jesus: Why, what've I done?

Another Soldier: You're under arrest. Come with us.

Jesus: Me, under arrest? What's my offense?

Soldier: We've got orders from the high priest.

Jesus: But why, what are they accusing me of?

Soldier: Search me, and I don't give a damn. We've got a warrant of arrest signed by the high priest.

Jesus: And who is he?

Soldier: Are you so dumb you don't even know who he is? You must be a peasant...!

Jesus: Until lately, soldier, you were also a peasant like me... You and your pals... Don't you remember anymore?... Sure, I know the high priest of the Temple... Caiphas, a "great man".... And you work for him, don't you?

Soldier: Stop that nonsense, Galilean. I said you're under arrest.

Jesus: Let's all go to jail then!... This is amusing!... Prisoners taking other prisoners...

Soldier: What crazy thing are you talking about?

Jesus: Oh, nothing, except that you are more prisoner than I am. You, who are guardians of the temple, have fallen into the snare of the priests and your chiefs, and you can't get away from them. You, who had the same origin as we did, sucked the same milk and tilled the same earth. Show me your hands, soldier... can't you see we've got the same calloused hands?... You used to be one with us... and you still are. But the so-called great men make you fight against us. They put the sword and the lance in your hands to kill us, and they filled your hearts with hatred.... They don't stand up for you. They use you. You are prisoners in uniform with a handful of coins they had robbed from us.... And this is the truth. If you understand, then it will set you free.

The murmurings of the people were gradually disappearing. The four soldiers facing Jesus looked at him intently. They were no longer holding their lances furiously. After looking at each other, they gave a half turn and left...

Zirah: These four imbeciles deserve twenty beatings each and a month's arrest! And a fine of fifty denarii! Go to hell, all of you!

Abiah: ...What has happened, Priest Zirah?

Zirah: Those stupid soldiers... They've let him go..

Abiah: Why?... Why didn't they arrest him?

Zirah: Say something, stupid, or you get twenty lashes more!

Soldier: We couldn't. We had never heard a man speak.... the way he did.

Zirah: I told you, Abiah! This man is more dangerous than he seems to be! See how he has deceived them! Damn this agitator!... Out of my sight, the four of you!... You'll go to jail for this! And I want to hear the sound of lashes from here! That will teach them to obey orders!

Meanwhile, water continued to flow in the Pool of Siloam. The torches on the last day of the Feast of the Tents illumined the walls and the massive towers of King David's city.

The last day of the Feast of the Tents was celebrated with the most pomp. The traditional processions were highlighted with bunches and sprays of palm trees, willow trees, lemon and other trees, while psalms were being sung, specially Psalm 118. Liturgy likewise incorporated in the feast the symbol of water, where, in a procession, the priests carried water in a silver jug from the fountain of Siloam – which was situated outside the walled city – to be poured on the altar of sacrifice. During this rite, people prayed to God for abundant rain in preparation for the new planting season.

Palestine, a land wanting in water, has the Jordan as her only important river. Rain is a decisive factor in the national economy. The rainy season lasts from October to April. In summer it hardly rains. The early rains (from mid-October to mid-November) prepare the land, hardened by the summer heat, for sowing. The cold rains (from December to January) which are more abundant, give rise to fertile lands that extend through the valleys. Between one rainy season and another comes the period of planting that lasts until February. The late rains (March and April) are all indispensable to good harvest. That is why, in this feast, people prayed to God specifically for abundant rain. People prayed for a fertile land, and for the fulfillment of the prophecies proclaiming the day of the Messiah where water would flow abundantly from the springs of Jerusalem, until they merged with the sea. The Feast of the Tents was, therefore, viewed with a Messianic color that annually rekindled the people's hope for liberation.

Israel's ancient traditions compared the Spirit of God with water that fertilizes sterile land, reaping from it the fruits of justice, peace, and faithfulness to the Lord (Is 32:15-18 and 44:3-5). It was the Spirit that converted Israel to a country of prophets and transformed hearts of stone to hearts of flesh. In Jesus' time, the tradition of the rabbis and doctors, which was more callous and rigid, had neglected this vital symbolism to compare water, not with the Spirit, but with the Law. The prophetic gesture of Jesus in the middle of the ceremony, his solemn proclamation, aims to bring back the original symbolism of water: that is, water is like the Spirit. And the Spirit of God always creates new things.

From the first day of the Feast of the Tents, huge candles in golden candelabras were lighted and placed in the women's patio in the Temple. The procession of the water passed through this. Each set of candlesticks held four golden bowls with oil, where wicks made of threads taken from the priests' vestment remained lighted. One had to use a ladder to reach these bowls as they were placed so high so that their lights could be seen throughout the whole city. The prophets, in talking about the day of the Messiah, mentioned a light that would surpass the night (Zec 14:6-7). Those torches, therefore, had Messianic meaning. Prophetic tradition had always associated the Messiah with light, such that he was referred to as "Light" (Is 60:1). Starting from this symbolism, Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God: a Kingdom with no shadow of injustice, but illumined by free people. Butting in the middle of the official liturgy, before the religious leaders of the Temple, was such a grave scandal that the priests immediately decided to have Jesus arrested and accused of blasphemy.

The "temple guards" sent by the priests to arrest Jesus were composed of Levites, employees of the Temple with a rank lesser than that of the priests. One of their functions was to serve as policemen. These soldiers had the power to arrest, to confiscate weapons and even to mete out punishments. They were not only in the service of the priests, but they were also engaged by the Roman military authorities to control people's rallies in Judea. Jesus confronted these armed men with firmness, but with understanding, and in spite of their privileged position, these men felt alluded to by Jesus' words.

78

A SAMARITAN WITHOUT FAITH

Jesus: My friends, what's the use of saying: "I believe in God, and I have faith" if you don't care about other people? If a hungry neighbor knocks at your door and tells you, "God bless you my brother," yet you give him nothing to eat, then what's the use of all this, huh?... This is what happens to those who profess their faith, yet remain with their arms flailing. This faith is dead, like a tree that bears no fruits!

A Man: Very well said! Long live the prophet from Galilee!

We were in the temple of Jerusalem, at the atrium for foreigners. And as always, the people from the City of David gathered around us to listen to Jesus and applaud him. These were the common people: the potters, hawkers, prostitutes, water carriers... that is why we were all surprised to see the master of the Law, in his linen cloak and wearing a thick golden ring on his finger, approach our group...

Master: May I ask you one question, Galilean?

Jesus: Sure! We are all in conversation here. What is it?

Master: I have been listening to you for a little while. I only heard you speak of sharing what one has, of giving food to the hungry.... All this is very good, I don't deny it... But aren't you missing the most important?

Jesus: The most important?... And what is the most important?

Master: God. You are forgetting God. Or is it because you are a political agitator and not a preacher of Moses' Law?

Jesus: He was the same God who gave Moses these commandments of justice.

Master: Of course, Galilean, but the Law of Moses contains a lot of commandments... What would you tell me if I asked you which of them is the most important?

Jesus: You know the answer better than I do. What did they teach us in the synagogue since we were children?... "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength."

Master: So then, you say that the first thing is to love God above all things, is that right?

Jesus: Of course, my friend. God, above everything else. But... where is God? Sometimes you find Him where you least expect Him...

Jesus: Once there was a peasant going down the solitary road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Mounted on his old mule, that man was happily riding his way back home. He had sold rye from his harvest for a good price, and he was going home to his wife and children....

Peasant: Ho, ho, wake up mule!... We still have a long way to go... Oh, dear wife, wait till you hear my story....! Larara, lararara...! At last, we'll be able to settle our debts with this little money... God, am I so lucky today!.... Larari, lararari!

Jesus: But it was not a lucky day for him because at one bend of the road, in the middle of the desert, a band of robbers was awaiting him... and when the man passed by

Robber: Give me all your money if you want to save your skin!

Peasant: No, please, don't do this to me... I worked for this for six months, it's for the food of my children... I'm nothing but a poor man...

Robber: Here, take this!

Peasant: Oh, please, don't!.... Ohhhh!...

Jesus: The robbers gave him a blow on the back of his neck, scared the mule away and took away all his money....

Robber: I think he's dead... Strip him of his clothes, too...

Another Robber: Bah, just dump him in that ditch... and let's get out of here before anyone sees us....
Hurry!

Jesus: So they left him half dead by the road, naked and without his money... Soon, when the sun shone brightly over the desert, a caravan of camels was seen heading for the road. The priest from Jericho was travelling to Jerusalem to worship in the temple of God, a solemn cult of the children of Israel...

Sophar: I assure you, Priest Eliphaz, the feasts of this year will be beautiful...

Eliphaz: That's right, Sophar. I was told that the high priest has ordered the purchase of the best incense from Arabia...

Sophar: He also bought new cups for the altar. They are made of pure gold from Ophir... let's hope we won't run out of wine to fill them up.... Ha!

Eliphaz: Hey,... do you see something in that ditch?...

Sophar: Where?... Oh, yeah.... but I can't figure it out well.... is it a dead animal.... or a man?

Eliphaz: I bet it's a man.... a drunk man. He must have drunk more wine than his body could take. He should be ashamed of himself getting drunk on these sacred days. Ah, Priest Sophar, these are the vices that plague our country nowadays!

Sophar: Hey, aren't you ashamed of this?!... You don't even have respect for the Lord and his Law.... He's not even aware of it... Maybe he's dead... Do you think we should get a little closer to see if we can do something for him?

Eliphaz: Look, Priest Sophar, if he is alive, then he'll know how to fend for himself... if he was able to get here, then he should know his way out too... and if he is dead, then what for?

Sophar: You're right, Eliphaz. That's a very sensible observation... But, what if he is only.... half dead?

Eliphaz: Do you know what I'm thinking of, Sophar? This type of people is an ungrateful lot, so they don't deserve any help. A priest who was a friend of mine gave a lift to one of this kind. He had barely travelled a couple of miles, when the guy threatened him with a knife and robbed him of everything he had.... Now, isn't that sad?...

Sophar: Yeah, I think you're right. I guess this poor fellow is dead.... At least, Sir, you can give him his last blessing!

Eliphaz: Amen.

Sophar: Well, let's forget about this. Let's proceed with the journey, for we might be late for the ceremony.... Hooo, hooo, camels, let's go...!

Jesus: In a short while, another traveller passed through that same dusty road. He was a Levite, one of those entrusted to teach God's commandments to the people. He was accompanied by his wife...

Levite: I'm telling you Lydia, I'm not ready for anything... It's easier to give a talk in a small village.... but to deliver a sermon in the synagogue of the capital is something else!

Lydia: There's no need to worry, Samuel. Talk about.... God's love, that we have to be good, and... that.

Levite: Hey, what's that bulk over there, huh?... Look...

Lydia: Oh no, don't tell me it's a dead man... I'm scared of the dead!

Levite: No, he's just wounded, the blood is still fresh.... look.

Lydia: Oh, this is horrible! Let's go, Samuel. The sight of blood makes me sick, you know that... I can't stand this anymore....

Levite: But, who is this poor creature? He's so beaten up.

Lydia: He's probably one of those rebels conspiring against Governor Pilate... Of course, they're always in trouble, meddling in politics, and see how they end up... They can't complain....

Levite: As a matter of fact, this fellow can't complain.

Lydia: Remember Daniel's son? He was such a nice young man... until he became a rebel... poor guy!... He ended up like this man... I really don't understand why people can't simply live in peace... What do you say, Samuel?

Levite: People are so violent, that's why, Lydia. And of course, they have no respect for the Lord. They are taught the commandments and the good deeds... but that's all. Everything enters through the right ear and passes through the left. If they loved God, these things would not happen... Blessed be God!

Lydia: And His holy name!

Levite: And this beast should better hurry, or we won't get in time for judgment day!... Ea... donkey,.. hurry up!...

Jesus: Then it happened that another peasant was crossing the bend on his old and skinny mule...

Samaritan: What a terribly hot day! Who could have ever invented the desert? If I don't take these figs to the market, no one will buy them; but if I bring them with me, they get rotten along the road... and then they say that God does things very well!... I'd say the contrary... because oftentimes he gives you something that you're helpless about.... Dammit, when I get to Jerusalem, I wouldn't even have a fig to crush in the belly of the high priest, Caiphas!

Jesus: That peasant was a Samaritan, who did not believe in God, nor set a foot in the Temple. When he saw the badly wounded man...

Samaritan: Hey, what happened to you?!... Damn, this guy looks terrible... He's almost dead... If I am bad, this is even worse... The vultures must all be preparing for the grand feast!

Jesus: The Samaritan got off from his mule and went over to the man who was lying in the ditch. First he washed the blood from his face.

Samaritan: This wine will cure your wounds... let's see... the oil will remove the pain... that's it...

Jesus: Then he tore off his tunic and wrapped him with bandages. He covered him with his cloak and lifted him from the ground...

Samaritan: And they say that God takes care of the world and his people!... Well, see how He took care of this poor creature!... All this is silly talk!...

Jesus: The Samaritan who did not believe in God put him on his mount, together with the sack of figs that he was bringing to the market. Though he was on his way to Jericho, he returned to the inn in Anathoth, where he attended to him and spent the night watching over him as the fever went up on account of his wounds... When it was dawn, the Samaritan spoke to the innkeeper...

Samaritan: I have to go... I'll pay you in advance... Buy all the medicines he will need, and if the money is not enough, I'll pay you the rest when I come back.

Innkeeper: Hey, what will I tell him if he asks who brought him here?

Samaritan: Tell him another man brought him here... a man like you and me... Goodbye, and good luck... Take good care of him for me!

Jesus: That Samaritan, who did not believe in God, nor set foot in the Temple, proceeded on his journey along the solitary and risky road from Jerusalem to Jericho... Now, you who are a teacher of the Law, tell me, who among them, loved the Lord?

Teacher: Well,... the truth is... I don't know... Of course, the man who helped the wounded did not believe

in God, but...

Jesus:he went to him who needed him. If at one time, on your way to the Temple to bring your offering before the altar, you remember that your brother needs you, leave your offering behind, go back and seek your brother first.

The teacher of the Law stayed a little while to listen to Jesus... Then we saw him leave hesitatingly, until he crossed the Gate of the three arches, outside the Temple of Jerusalem....

Many times, when Jesus was in Jerusalem, he would talk to the people in the atrium of the Temple, using words that were easily understood by all. The lectures of the scribes and doctors who taught in those places were always vague and mysterious, as if to distinguish the “learned” from the ignorant masses. With their moralizing interpretations, they had divested the Scriptures of all prophetic candor. A lay man, with no special education, who spoke the people’s language and who gave his own, free interpretation of the Scripture to his countrymen in the presence of the experts, was amazing to the people and irritating to the authorities in Theology. In this text, one of them precisely raises the question of interpreting the Law.

The question asked by the teacher of the Law is a theoretical one: Which is the fundamental commandment? Jesus does not respond theoretically, but he does so with a practical example, a concrete experience. The religious attitude does not only consist in accepting dogmas more or less, of knowing one’s catechism with its list of truths and moral norms. Faith is not only in the mind, it is also in our hands, in what we do. Faith demands work, concrete actions which are not only directed to God whom we do not see, but also to our brothers and sisters, whom we see. This is the essence of the message of Jesus, of the whole Christian faith (Mt. 5:23-24, James 1:22-27 and 2, 14-26; 1 Jn 3:11-18 and 4:19-21).

Jerusalem, being the capital, was the center of trade in the whole country. In spite of this, communication with the other cities was far from good. The city was separated from Jericho by 27 kilometers from the road down along the desert of Judea. In the bald mountains of Judea are found a number of caves and hideouts which have become havens for highway robbers up to the present. Banditry was then very common, and the authorities tried to control it, but it was not that easy. As a form of retaliation, the Romans would sometimes sack the neighboring villages. Apparently in Jerusalem, there used to be a special court that tried cases of looting and drew up police measures against the bandits. At present, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is amazing due to its barrenness, just like in those times. It is flanked by gray and barren mountains. There is a small chapel in one of the bends – the Chapel of the Good Samaritan – which is a reminder to the travellers of the parable of Jesus.

The priests passed through that road first. They had to go to the temple of Jerusalem by turns, in order to offer their sacrifice (blood of animals, incense, prayers). In money and social prestige, they were a powerful and privileged group. The Levites were under them in the service of the temple. They were not priests, so they could not offer sacrifices, and therefore could not go near the altar, like lay people. They were in charge of the music in the temple. They sang in the choir and played the instruments during worship. Others served as acolytes; they assisted the priests in donning their vestments for the ceremony, they carried the sacred books and cleaned the temple. Some of them who were trained in the Scriptures also served as catechists. Still others served as police of the temple. In Jesus’ time, there were about 10,000 Levites. For them as well as for the priests, the Temple in all its service, its splendor, was the fundamental value, the foremost religious obligation. The laws on purity prohibited them from getting near a corpse. By giving all sorts of excuses – ritual purity, haste, the contempt they felt for “the people” – the Levites did not help the wounded man along the road. By doing so, they thought they were doing something pleasing to the Lord.

Having a Samaritan as the third character in his story, Jesus surprised everyone and irked the theologian who had asked him the question. The Samaritans were highly discriminated against by the Israelites who felt a great disdain for them, a mixed feeling of nationalism and racism. Furthermore, the Samaritan cited here by Jesus is not in any way a religious man. He is an atheist who believes neither in

God nor in the priests, nor in anything. Using this as an extreme example, Jesus responds to the theoretical question expounded by the doctor: he who loves his wounded neighbor loves God. This is enough. And it is not necessary to perform this charitable act “for the Lord,” but for one’s neighbor. Thus, an outcast, an atheist, and a despised mestizo are shown to be one who is authentically religious. Viewed as something extremely scandalizing, the parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most subversive of the parables of Jesus.

The original word employed by Jesus in this parable is not “neighbor” but the Greek word “plesion” which is equivalent to “rea” (in Aramaic) and to our “companion.” In Jesus’ time, it was understood that in order to please God, it was necessary to do good to others, but the question was raised as to who were one’s “companions,” supposedly the object of this charity. The pharisee excluded from their love those who were not like them, the gang of rogues; the Essenes took out “the children of darkness” (= the fishermen); many Israelites excluded the foreigners; others, their personal enemies. The “companion” – according to the story – refers to anyone, because he is such, who is in need. The last part of the parable shows us who the real “neighbor” is. The atheist who went to the wounded man becomes his neighbor. A neighbor is not only one whom we meet on the road, but also one in whose road we place ourselves. True love demands an active attitude of solidarity, of reaching out, and reconciliation.

(Lk 10:25-37)

79

BLIND SINCE BIRTH

Ezekias: So you see brothers, our first parents, Adam and Eve, wanted to discover the secret of God the Most High, and know the good from the bad. And they sinned, because this knowledge belonged only to God. Only God can judge what is good and what is bad. With God, we, ministers on earth, have received from the same God the power to discern which is the good fruit and which is rotten and infested with worms.

Woman: Master Ezekias, since you are an authority on sins, please tell me... Who do you think sinned more, Adam or Eve?

Ezekias: Look, my child, the sin of Eve was greater because not only did she eat the forbidden fruit, she even led her husband to sin, and this, therefore, had made her sin more...

That morning of Saturday, passing through the Water Gate (Puerta del Agua) to enter the city, we saw Ezekias, the teacher and authority of the Law of the traditions of Israel, teaching the pilgrims who surrounded him...His eyes moved a lot, like an owl pursuing his prey. The other Pharisees like him, taught Moses’ Law in the streets of Jerusalem during the days of the feast.

Ezekias: So, having eaten the forbidden fruit, and the sin of our forefathers consummated, the two felt embarrassed for seeing themselves naked. Another sin was born that very instant, the sin of concupiscence, then the sin of greed, of lust and the sin of...

Chispa: Hey, Master What’s Your Name? You start mentioning one sin and you will end up mentioning the others too. Ha, ha, ha...!

Ezekias: What is this wretch saying?

Chispa: I said, if the old man Noah had filled his ark with all the sins you have been naming from the time you opened your mouth, then his boat would have sunk right then.

Ezekias: But who is this insolent fellow?

A Man: He’s blind, Master Ezekias.

A Woman: They call him Chispa because he's a blabber mouth. He never keeps his mouth shut.

Chispa: Go ahead, Master What's Your Name. Your story about naked Eve is getting to be interesting!... Huh!.... I may be blind, but not maim, so I can learn a lot with my hands! Ha, ha, ha....!

Ezekias: Hey, you miserable beggar, you better shut up and go away from here, that we may experience the joy of meditating on the Law of the Most High...!

Chispa: Suit yourselves, I've got my wine, after all, which is better! Ahhh....!

Ezekias: Foul mouth....! Drunkard! Well, let's go on with our discussion. Are there any more questions?

A Woman: If you know what is good and bad, please tell us, why this poor fellow was born blind. Could it be because of the sins of his parents, or his own?

Chispa: Oh, oh, my parents are nice people. Leave them alone, will you? Maybe their grandmother is the sinful one! Look at this woman...!

Ezekias: The right answer to the right question. Look, knowing the rebellious spirit of this man and the constant mockery with which he deals with the ministers of God, we can be sure that this man has sinned and because of this, he was born blind.

Chispa: Hey, how could I have sinned if I was born blind? Did I sin inside my mother's womb?

Ezekias: This man has sinned and will continue to sin. His tongue is his own judge and it is very sinful.

Chispa: And yours too. Master What's Your Name, all your spittle must have dried up at this time, so why don't you take a shot? Here, take it.... You've been talking the whole morning, you've got to wet your whistle! Ha, ha, ha!....

Ezekias: My children, let's get out of here and look for a more quiet place. With this rascal around, it's impossible to reflect truly on the word of God....

The group of pilgrims left through the narrow street, with Teacher Ezekias. Smiling, Chispa was left there, with his thick cane in his hands. He was very dark, but the wine gave a radiant look in his face. We moved closer and Jesus sat beside him...

Jesus: So, everyone's gone, my friend.... Now you can drink your wine all by yourself...

Chispa: Well, as a matter of fact, I was having much fun with them.... He's quite a guy, that teacher! I don't know what you think, pal, but what nerve he's got to judge other people, that this one has sinned, and that one is good or bad.... Pff!

Jesus: He wants to have God locked up in a cage, like a bird...

Chispa: Did you hear what he said? That I was born blind because of my sins... How's that possible when I can't even see? Hah! If I want to pinch a woman, I end up grabbing her boobs! I'm just a poor wretch.... And now he calls me a sinner! And that's the height of it!.... Look, *paisano* (compatriot), I believe God will not use up all his spittle talking nonsense, like this teacher... don't you agree?

Then Jesus spat on the ground... and made a little paste with his spittle and clay.... then he rubbed it on Chispa's blind eyes....

Chispa: Hold it, you! What're you doing to me? What's the matter?.... Are you out of your mind?

Jesus: Listen to me, Chispa, go and wash in the Pool of Siloam... Then go and see that blabbermouthed teacher and tell him what happened...

Chispa: Wait... don't go away.... Hey, who are you?.... Tell me, who are you?

After a while...

A Woman: Look, *Comadre* Lyna.... Isn't that Chispa, the blind man?

Another Woman: How can that be when the guy has no cane and walks as if... nothing... Come, let's go near. He must be someone who looks like Chispa...

Woman: Are you Chispa, who's seen at the Water Gate every morning?

Chispa: The very same one my mother gave birth to!... Yeah, I'm Chispa.

Woman: How come you can see me, or is this one of your tricks again, bandit?

Chispa: No, Ma'm Lyna. Look how well I am now, I can even tell the number of your hairs in your

moustache.....

Woman: Foul mouth! Damn you rascal!

Chispa: Please don't think I see unpleasant things alone, Ma'm Lyna. I also see how pretty you are in that striped scarf of yours.... What a sight to behold! Now I see everything! Everything! Except that teacher, whose name I don't know..... The one who cured me told me to look for him.... Where could he be?

Soon the news was all over the village...

A Man: How did it happen, Chispa, c'mon tell us....!

Chispa: This man, whose name I think is Jesus, rubbed my eyes with clay and told me to wash in the Pool of Siloam. I did, and... presto!... I was cured! That's it!

Man: And where's this man who cured you?

Chispa: I don't know. Right now, I'm looking for that teacher of the law with a shrill, crickety voice.... I wonder where he's gone!

Finally Chispa found him....

Ezekias: What's with you, poor sinner?

Chispa: I can see! I can see!

Ezekias: You can see? What nonsense are you saying, rascal?

Chispa: That I can see with my eyes! That's what I'm telling you!

Ezekias: You can see?..... Do you see my hand....? That's right.....

Chispa: Of course! In fact, I see you've got dirty hands, teacher! Ha, ha, ha...!

Ezekias: Let go of me, you fool! You're not Chispa, but an impostor. He sent you to confuse us.

Chispa: No, I'm the same one whom you saw at the Water Gate when you were telling the story of naked Eve!

Ezekias: So, what happened to you?

Chispa: A man rubbed my eyes with clay and spittle and when I washed in the Pool,..... presto, I could see!

Ezekias: And who is this man?

Chispa: The one who cured me... I was blind, so I couldn't see his face.

Ezekias: Today is a rest day! Nobody can heal on the Sabbath!

Chispa: But he cured me.

Ezekias: In whose name did he do it?

Chispa: He mentioned God's name when he cured me.

Ezekias: He couldn't have done that, because he who does not observe the Sabbath is a sinner!

Chispa: Well, I think he's a good man. And he cured me!

Ezekias: He is neither a good man nor has he cured you in God's name!

Ezekias: Who was this man?

Chispa: They say he's God's prophet.

Ezekias: Liar! He who does not fulfill God's Law cannot be a prophet!

Chispa: Well, prophet or not, I don't give a damn. He cured me!

Ezekias: Enough of this silly talk! You have never been blind, you brazen fool, impostor! Go fetch the parents of this man. I'm calling the priests right away!

A Priest: Be careful with what you are going to say! You are in the house of God and before His representatives! We shall take your statement in the name of the Almighty! Are you ready to tell the truth?

Mother: Yes, sir..... we are...

Another Priest: Is this man here your son?

Father: Yes, teacher. He is our son Roboam... Some call him Chispa.He is the same one...

Priest: You are under oath in the name of God the Almighty! Is it true that this man was born blind?

Mother: Yes, it is true. Just as I am, right now, trembling with fear... I myself gave birth to him; he was born blind... That was quite a sad thing, teacher....

Priest: Well then, if he was born blind, why can he see now? In God's name, tell the truth!

Father: The truth is, we have no knowledge of how it happened...

Mother: Why don't you ask him? He is old enough.... to explain to you everything..... yes, ask him!

So they called Chispa...

Priest: Listen, rascal, and this is going to be the last time. You are before the books of the Law and God's representatives... We know that the man whom you claim has cured you is a sinner. If you are a follower of his, then we declare you a sinner too! We cannot consent to the fact that this man has cured you on the day of the Sabbath!

Chispa: What if I was healed on a Monday?

Priest: You would commit a sin, just the same! We cannot tolerate a man who claims doing things in God's name! We are God's representatives and only we can interpret the Holy Law! We declare that this man is a sinner!

Priest: C'mon, what can you say about him?

Chispa: Here you go again! I told you, I don't give a damn, whatever he is! I was blind, and now, I can see!....

Priest: Who is this man, and where is he?!

Chispa: Let's get this over with... I know what you want... You want to learn doing marvellous things from him!

Priest: Damn, go away and join him! You're of the same stuff, anyway: you're both sinners with no breeding at all! Go ahead! We shall obey Moses, whom God has spoken to, and not this man, whom we know to be a charlatan from Galilee, who wears broken sandals and stinks of wine and whores!

Chispa: Exactly! This poor fellow has God on his side, because I couldn't imagine him giving sight to a blind man, without having God on his side!....

Priest: Are you lecturing us, the ministers of God, or something? Get out of my sight, damn! We can't allow a wretched man like you to tell us on whose side our Lord is and is not. That is our job. We can't allow anyone to do as he pleases! God's wrath befall you! Go away and don't you ever set foot in the house of the Lord!

The ministers of God drove Roboam out of the synagogue. The man who they also called Chispa, who was born blind, was able to see, beginning that Saturday, the color of the stones and the shapes of the clouds. Jesus had given him back his sight. He did everything well: he opened the eyes of the blind man and left in the dark those who, full of pride, thought they could see.

The scribes, the doctors or teachers of the law exercised a strong influence on the people. They were aware of it, and because of this, they considered themselves superior. On the other hand, by being "experts" in religion, those who "knew" felt they were exempt from sin. The superiority they displayed to the people was, therefore, intellectual and moral. Many people respected them and obeyed their instructions. They were consulted and were allowed to teach the people. It would be difficult for these teachers of the law, who had enjoyed the monopoly of God and religion, to give up this privilege that had brought them a lot of advantages. This explains their consistent opposition to Jesus, a layman with no special training in theology, who expounded on religious issues with all freedom and in a manner contrary to what was established by the official religion.

The question raised about Chispa's blindness responds to the mentality of the period. It was believed that all misfortunes were consequences of a sin committed and that God's punishment was in proportion to the gravity of the sin. God could also punish "out of love," in order to test a person. If these punishments were accepted in faith, then the misfortune was converted into a blessing, and people eventually acquired a more profound knowledge of the law, and received the pardon of their sins. But it was a belief that no punishment as God's test could prevent a person from studying the Law. In this sense, blindness could never be a test of love, but of malediction. Some rabbis were of the belief that a boy could commit sin even in his mother's womb, but it was more common to think that congenital physical defects were due to the

sins of the parents, in spite of the clarifications made by prophets on punishments inherited, insisting that it was more an individual responsibility before God (Ez 18:1-32).

Before such intolerance and obstinacy, Jesus approaches the blind man as his equal, without accepting the judgement made by the religious authorities, much less the idea that God is behind this judgment. God is not monopolized by the theologians, neither can people dictate God's actuations. God is free and wants all people to be free. All this indicates a sign to us, when Jesus opens the eyes of the man who was born blind. Those who claim they can see, that they know the truth and possess knowledge, are blind. And those who are despised, the last and the least ones, are those who actually see and get to know the truth about God.

Jesus rubs the eyes of the blind man with mud mixed with spittle. This is a sign too: He is reenacting the scene in Genesis, which describes God creating humans out of clay of the earth, mixed with his spittle. In Israel it was believed that saliva was a source of one's strength, of vital energy, and therefore, it was used to cure certain illnesses. For example, it was the traditional belief that the spittle of the first born son could cure diseases of the eyes. The symbolic element of mixing spittle with clay in this manner is significant. The gospel of Jesus, his good news, is capable of creating a new man, who is truly free not only before his brothers, but also before the Lord. God does not put people in shackles, nor does God punish them with sufferings. God wants to relate to humans as his equal.

The Pool of Siloam was located outside of the walls of Jerusalem. Siloam means "the one sent"; this makes reference to the origin of water that was stuck up in the pool. The water reached Siloam from the spring of Guijon, situated in the eastern part of the city. The fountain of Guijon was the only spring in Jerusalem from which water sprang forth throughout the year. This explains the authorities' concern to contain it as the source of water supply in the whole city in times of drought and above all, in times of war. That is why, seven hundred years before Christ, King Ezechias ordered the construction of a tunnel from the springs of Gihon to Siloam, which was then situated inside the walls. This tunnel, excavated in bare rock, is an admirable feat of engineering. It is half a kilometer long, only half a meter wide, and with a height ranging from 1.5 to 4.5 meters. Today one can still pass through the tunnel in about 3/4 of an hour, with the use of a lamp and with the water below knee high, until he gets to the ruins of the old Pool of Siloam.

What concerns the religious authorities here is not whether the blind man could see or not, but to preserve their power and influence. What has taken place disturbs them, because it spoils their theological schemes. They are not willing to accept the fact that a layman, who has also violated the law of the Sabbath, which is a rest day, can also manifest God's power. Their manner of condemnation is done by stages. First, they deny that what has happened is true and they try to make it appear as a hoax. Then they aim to suppress the joy brought about by healing, by threatening and instilling fear, showing, with an authority arrogated upon themselves, that life (the blind can see) is something negative and perilous. They deny evidences and twist values: by calling evil what is good, darkness what is light. Their false theology stops all arguments for everyone. Between humans and law, they choose the law. The last phase becomes an act of violence: expulsion from the community.

(Jn 9:1-41)

80

THE PIOUS MAN AND THE SCOUNDREL

Ophel is a barrio right at the heart of Jerusalem where many people dwell and the houses pile over one another. Like it or not, one gets to know the entire life of his neighbor with this kind of set up... That

Monday, as we passed through the front house of Ezekiel, the pious man....

Ezekiel: But of course, Rebecca, we left the temple covered with a cloud of incense. Master Josaphat was ahead, leading the procession, holding high the book of the Law with his hands.

Son: Buaaaaa....

Ezekiel: Now, what's that noise, little boy?

Rebecca: It must be the chair's leg, Ezekiel. C'mon, continue with your story about the procession...

Ezekiel: Well, as I was saying, we left the temple with great fervor and recollection....

Son: Buaaaaa.....

Ezekiel: Hey, what's the matter with this boy?

Rebecca: Indigestion, perhaps...

Ezekiel: Or ill-breeding. My son, "A rude man is a disgrace to his family." You won't do that again, son, will you?

Son: Yes, Papa.

Ezekiel: Yes what?

Son: No, Papa.

Ezekiel: Yes or no? Answer me clearly.

Son: Yes and no, Papa.

Rebecca: Why don't you leave him alone, Ezekiel. He's just a kid. Stop pestering him. He doesn't know what he's talking about.

Ezekiel: "It is one's misdemeanor that disturbs the spirit. Good breeding on the contrary, is like a balm that soothes it." Say, Rebecca, why don't you bring in some olives for us to munch?

Rebecca: Right away, Ezekiel....

Ezekiel: I know you love to eat black olives don't you, son?

Son: I don't like them, Papa.

Ezekiel: And why not, son?

Son: Because they taste like shit to me.

Ezekiel: Hey, what are you saying? Rebecca! What manners have you been teaching our son?

Rebecca: He's learned that from his playmates....

Ezekiel: Hey son, did you know that what you said is sinful?

Son: But what did I say, Papa?

Ezekiel: What you said a while ago....

Son: Which one, Papa?

Ezekiel: You know what I mean. Anyway, I don't want to hear that word anymore in my house.

Son: Tell me, Papa, what word is that?

Meanwhile, in another house, where the scoundrel, Philemon, lived...

Philemon: Ha, ha, ha.... I can't, anymore....

Marthina: Hey man, will you finish your story?

Philemon: Can you imagine the palace mayor telling the king: "My king, the prince is conspiring against you!" The king said: "Nonsense, this is all nonsense. The prince is still an innocent little boy." The palace mayor says: "Well, this innocent little boy has already set his two eyes on the throne." The king replies: "It's alright, as long as he does not lay his third eye on it." Ha, ha, ha.... This one deserves a good laugh. Ha, ha, ha....!

Marthina: Ha, ha, ha....! Don't be so gross, Philemon...

Philemon: But the gross part is, when the queen came in and told the king..... Ha, ha, ha....! Oh, oh... I can't stand this anymore..... I guess my belly is going to explode..... ha, ha, ha!.....

The next day, Tuesday, in the house of Ezekiel, the pious man...

Ezekiel: My dear, today is Tuesday, and it is the day of the guardian angels.

Rebecca: What does that mean, Ezekiel?

Ezekiel: The angels are pure spirits. They don't eat nor drink. We must emulate them, Rebecca. It's a day of fasting today.

Son: But Papa, I'm hungry...

Ezekiel: Shut up, you brat... Rebecca, why don't you just prepare light soup and some bread...

Rebecca: Is... that all?

Ezekiel: Yeah, that will be enough. "Our body is like a horse: You tighten his rein and he'll adjust to it."

Rebecca: But, Ezekiel, our child is a growing boy, and he needs sufficient food. I'm afraid he.....

Ezekiel: No need to worry, Rebecca. He who fasts never fears the Lord. If you fast, you will appear before the Lord's tribunal with your head held high.

Rebecca: And at the rate we're going, that'll be soon...!

At the same time, in the house of Philemon, the scoundrel...

Philemon: Damn, this chicken breast is better than yours, Marthina!

Marthina: But where does all the food you devour go, huh? There seems to be a hole in your stomach... Look, Philemon, you better stop now, or you might throw up everything...

Philemon: Who said so! I'm like those pelicans who swallow whatever gets into their beaks! Huh! Hey, lemme have more servings of those eggplants and lentils! And a sizable piece of that bacon too! Lalarooo...!

Marthina: Well, as you wish. But if your belly explodes...

Philemon: You're a happy, man, when your tummy is full, so they say.

Marthina: Yeah, but people also die of overeating.

Philemon: Well, if death comes and claims my life today, then I'll tell him I won't give way... if he wants to take me, then he has to drag me into it!

The following day, Wednesday, in Ezekiel, the pious one's home...

Ezekiel: "You will take one tenth of the yield from your fields, and you will take it to the Holy Temple of God, where you will offer as a pleasant sacrifice the tenth part of your wheat, the tenth part of your oil, the tenth part of your wine." It was thus commanded by Moses, as it is written in the book of Deuteronomy, thus, I will comply with it.

Rebecca: Today we shall offer our tithes and alms to the priests of God. Everything for the Temple, for giving honor to the Lord, so that we shall all be included in the number of God's chosen people!

At that same moment, Philemon was gambling in the barrio's inn....

Philemon: This is the number! C'mon, count this! Four and six, then eight, and sixteen! I win again!

A Neighbor: Such luck you've got tonight, huh, Philemon! You've left me stark naked this time!

Philemon: Know why? I've got a twin brother and the two of us started playing dice since we were in our mother's womb!

Neighbor: No, you've cheated me, that's why.

Philemon: I cheated you? Are you saying I'm a cheat? Hey, look, fellow, lemme give you another chance. I'm betting everything on seven! Everything, including the forty dinarii I won last night, and what I won yesterday!

Neighbor: What else can I bet? I don't even have a cent left.

Philemon: Man, why don't you bet your tunic? No, no, your wife will be better. Right, your wife against my dinarii. Is that okay with you?

Neighbor: Yeah. C'mon, cast the dice.

Philemon: In the name of the Archangel of the seven clouds, of the cherubim with the seven wings, of the devil with the seven horns.... gimme seven, c'mon! Here goes..... Seveennnnn!!! By Jove! I won again! Your wife is mine now, neighbor!

Thursday evening, in Ezekiel, the pious one's home....

Ezekiel: Rebecca, I'm telling you, just as the saintly Tobias told Sarah, Rachel's daughter: I'm not getting into bed without first invoking the name of the Almighty.

Rebecca: Hmmm...! Well, go ahead, invoke his name and get into bed at once, as I can't wait any longer....

Ezekiel: "Lord, You know fully well that I am not taking this sister of mine with impure desire, nor can I get close to her without the right intentions. The only reason I'm taking her is to procreate. A child, my Lord, who will not be the fruit of carnal desires, but of the hope of begetting the Messiah." My dear wife, let us procreate!..... dear wife!...

Rebecca: Ahuuuummmm...! What a boring speech you gave, the Messiah has already fallen asleep....

Meanwhile, in Philemon, the scoundrel's house...

Philemon: Pssst... come over here, my sweet, chubby lady... Don't be a bore....

A Woman: Are you out of your mind, Philemon? What if my husband finds the two of us together?

Philemon: He wouldn't say anything. He'll have bitten his tongue out of shock.

Woman: And what do you suppose I should tell him, huh?

Philemon: Tell him you walk in your sleep, and while doing so, you ended up in my arms.... mmm...

Woman: What if your wife finds out...?

Philemon: She'll never find out. She's deaf and blind.

Woman: Then, why did you marry her?

Philemon: Precisely because of that!

Woman: Oh, Philemon, you're a demon!

Philemon: Maybe, but you're the best.

Woman: Take that hand off me, you insolent...!

Philemon: I'm cold, chubby dear..... mmm... mmm...

It was a Friday in the pious man's house....

Son: Papa, Papa, I wanna go out, let's go to the plaza, Papa...!

Ezekiel: No, son. You'll only find several rude boys in the plaza. That's where you learn all those vulgar things...

Rebecca: Maybe we can go visit my cousin, Rose. Poor thing, she's all alone...

Ezekiel: She's not alone. She's divorced. I'll never set foot in the house of a divorced person. I look the other way when I walk down the street.

Son: Papa, let's go through the steps! That's where all the boys play "horsey-horsey"!

Ezekiel: The son of a good family does not mingle with street children. Wisdom means you maintain considerable distance from the rest. Don't you ever forget this, son.

Rebecca: Gosh, Ezekiel, let's go, if only to do a few exercises or take a walk around the neighborhood.

Ezekiel: No, Rebecca. Very soon it will be late and don't forget that tomorrow is a Saturday. We'll have to get up early to worship the Lord in the temple. Let's all go to bed now.

In Philemon's house, at bed time...

Marthina: C'mon, Philemon, it's time to sleep. Aren't you going to bed yet...?

Philemon: Hik! Why the hurry?... Is there a fire around here?... The night is still long..... like a monkey's tail. Hik!

Long live the monkey!

Marthina: You're drunk, Philemon...

Philemon: Who? Me....? Drunk?...

Marthina: Who else? Let's see... How many fingers do I have in my hand? Look at it very well.

Philemon: How many fingers? Lemme count them.... two.... four... six... eight.. sixteen..... twenty-four....

forty-four.... Hik!

Marthina: You're drunk.... c'mon... go to sleep...

Philemon: Solomon was more loaded, but they didn't tuck him in bed... Hik! I'm King Solomon.... Hik... I'm King Solomon!.... Hiiik!

Saturday came. It was a rest day and all the children of Israel went up the temple to pray....

Ezekiel: Lord, I thank you for giving me another week to live by your commandments. My family is different from the rest of the families in the city. We fast, we give alms and we observe tithing, we observe all norms of your sacred Law...

The pious Ezekiel, with his wife and son, was praying so loud before the altar of God... While doing this, a man entered the temple and stayed at the back. He knelt down and beat his forehead against the floor, and with his closed fist, beat his chest.... He was Philemon, the scoundrel...

Philemon: Lord, please help me... I am a sinner.... Lord!

Ezekiel: Thank you, God, because my family is not like those who are stained by sin. They are thieves, adulterers, drunkards, and full of vice... Ehem... like this one at my back...

Philemon: Lord, cast your eyes upon me.... I am not King Solomon... I am.... I am... a shit... Help me, Lord... I want to reform my life..... How I'd wished I could....

Jesus: And so it happened, my friends, that on that day, the scoundrel went home, having reconciled himself with God. But not the pious one, because, for the Lord, he who is last becomes first, and the first becomes last.

The pious man and the scoundrel are “the pharisee and the publican.” The decent man and the brazen one, the religious and the sinner. In narrating this story, Jesus makes a harsh criticism of the arrogance that characterizes the pious men of his time and of all times. He also talks of his personal conduct: Jesus was usually surrounded by these scoundrels, some of them became his close disciples, to whom his good news was directed. These people sympathized with Jesus. His actions, behavior and his life actually reveal to us how God really is. A God who is close to the suffering people, discriminated against by those who consider themselves perfect.

The organization of the Pharisees, composed of male laymen, was very significant during Jesus' time. It was estimated to have about 6,000 members then. Although its leaders were educated and belonged to the upper echelon of society, the movement had a number of supporters among the lower class. Its communities were selective – like sects. They thought of themselves as the good ones, the redeemed, and God's predestined people. In order to become part of this select group the candidates were carefully chosen, after which they underwent training for one or two years.

The focal point of the pharisaic way of life is the scrupulous observance of the Law, according to the interpretation they themselves made of the Scripture. In Jesus' time, they had formulated 613 precepts of the Law. Out of these, 248 were positive commandments, while 365 were prohibitions. Thus they turned the will of God – the Law – into a heavy and burdensome yoke. Those who did not observe all these norms religiously were damned. The Pharisees greatly despised the masses and they were convinced that these people were beyond salvation. A considerable part of the message of freedom and hope recovers its meaning by contraposing it to the lifestyle of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees succeeded in getting the support of some layers of society, specially because they were anticlerical. They were against priestly hierarchy, proclaiming that sanctity was not a monopoly of the priests, but it could also be attained by any faithful lay person. Nevertheless this truth was gravely distorted in the manner the practice of being holy was interpreted. It was reduced to a scrupulous compliance of a series of pious acts like fasting, almsgiving and prayers. The Pharisees were formalistic and ritualistic. Salvation for them was a matter of earning more and more merits. Every Monday and

Thursday, they fasted (the Law required only one day of fasting a year), they observed tithing (even insignificant wild grass was paid for), and they distanced themselves fanatically from the so-called “sinners.” These were precisely the gluttons, the drunkards, the gamblers (who were frowned upon by the religious men), and the cheats... They were the “scoundrels.”

Jesus’ constant message – as shown in his actions, in his words, in his parables – that God specially cares for the sinners, the brazen ones; and consequently they become closer to God than the pious ones, always provoked an angry protest on the part of the Pharisees. This was something they could not accept since they were always sure of their piety. And this is what Jesus was rightfully telling to their face. The Gospel tells us that if there is anything that will alienate a person from God, it is self-righteousness. This type of people tries to distance himself from the sinners, lest they become sinners too, without realizing that in reality, by doing so, they are alienating themselves from the Lord. The Pharisees believed that salvation was practically impossible for them. Jesus reversed everything: by making salvation difficult for the “self-righteous,” since what really separates them from God is that piety that kind of leads to insolence and arrogance, and that attitude which is practically beyond conversion; and not the commission of grievous sins. The scoundrels, on the other hand, are more open to humility, in acknowledging their sins before the Lord.

This transcendental message is presented to us in this episode in a humorous and picaresque manner. It is not to give it due importance; rather, it is intended to enable us to recognize the same caricature of our own attitudes, so that we may have the profound humility to learn to laugh at ourselves and not to take ourselves too seriously.

(Lk 18:9-14)

81

BESIDE JACOB’S WELL

When the Feast of the Tents was over, Jerusalem bade farewell with great sadness to the pilgrims who had filled up the streets during that week-long celebration. It was time for us Galileans to return to the North...

After two journeys on the road, we caught sight of Mount Gerizim.... The dark plains of Samaria opened before our eyes...

James: Watch out! This area is full of thieves hiding even beneath the rocks...

John: But all the caravans have already passed.... What will they rob from us?

Jesus: Maybe the lice we got from Jerusalem! That’s all we got...

James: Say whatever you want, but I think this place is damned...

John: It’s a barren place.... like the devil’s belly...

James: Besides, it’s empty and arid.

Philip: Damn it, James. Stop that silly talk. Can’t you see I’m scared?...

For about a hundred years, the Galileans of the north and the Jews of the south feared and hated the Samaritans, our countrymen who lived in the central part of the country... Stories spread all over Israel have magnified those fears. For us, a Samaritan was a rebel to the traditions of our country, and therefore did not deserve our respect, to the extent that we would not even greet them. Obviously, the Samaritans hated us too....

John: What are these monsters saying, Jesus?

Jesus: They want to stop and rest for a while, John, pff....

Philip: I would trade my cane and my sandals for a glass of water.... I'm dying of thirst!

James: The sun in Samaria is as treacherous as her people, Philip...

John: Cool it, fellas. We shall be in Sychar any moment now. There we can have something to eat and drink...

James: In the meantime, you've got no choice but to swallow your own saliva, Philip...

When the sun reached its summit, a signal that it was noontime, we arrived at Sychar, a small village nestled between two mountains, Ebal and Gerizim, the latter being the sacred mountain of the Samaritans.

John: Hurry! Let's see who gets to the well first!

The well was located at the village entrance. It was this well that our father Jacob bought from the Canaanites two thousand years ago, as a gift to his son Joseph before his (Jacob's) death... It is a huge, deep well. The water that flows in abundance beneath the parched land nurtures the growth of date palm trees beside the well...

James: Come, let's go buy some olives and pieces of bread first! I'm already starved to death!

John: Let's go, Peter! And we'd better run!.... Are you coming, Judas?.... And you, too, Philip?

Philip: Yeah, let's all go!..... And you, Jesus...?

Jesus: No, I'm staying here by the well. I'm so tired... I think I'm running a fever.... I'll just wait for you here.

Philip: Okay. Maybe you should take a nap, Moreno. By the time you wake up, you'll have before you a good jug of wine!..... Let's go!

We started heading for Sychar. Then, Jesus leaned back on a piece of stone among the bamboo trees, and closed his eyes... After a while...

Abigail: Hello... anyone there?

Jesus: Hmm.... I fell asleep...

Abigail: To hell with you, bearded man! You scared me, did you know that?... I thought it was a rat.

Jesus: Well, as you can see, I've got no tail... I'm Galilean... That's worse than a rat, isn't it?

Beside Jacob's well was a Samaritan woman whose beautiful, sunburned face was looking intently at Jesus. Her equally tanned arm that extended toward him was full of bracelets....

Abigail: I didn't say that.... Look, I don't talk to anyone. I came here to fetch some water and I'm going right away. I don't want any trouble.... and I've got nothing to do with you, do you hear?

Jesus: Well, but I want something from you....

Abigail: Oh, yeah?... A Galilean dealing with a Samaritan woman... Now, now! That's quite amusing... I'm sorry, but you've got the wrong well, my friend... The water from "this fountain" belongs to someone else already....

Jesus: No, you're the one who's mistaken, woman...

Abigail: Mmmm...mmm...mmm...!

Jesus: What's that?

Abigail: Mmmm... I mean I don't speak to Galileans, damn it! No way will I ever deal with them!

Jesus: Oh, but I talk to Samaritan women. I told you there's something I'd like from you...

Abigail: Mmmm...mmm...mmm...

Jesus: Hey, will you stop purring like a kitten and give me some water... I'm dead thirsty!... You don't have to talk to me if you don't want to, just give me something to drink, please...

Abigail: Oh... so that was it? Look, I don't want to sound malicious, but.... is it only water that you wanted from me?

Jesus: Why, isn't that enough? It's less expensive, besides, it doesn't make you drunk.

Abigail: You're right... but I'd rather drink wine...

Jesus: So you're like a mosquito...

Abigail: I'm like a what?

Jesus: A mosquito. Didn't you know what the mosquito said to the frog when he fell into the barrel of wine?... "I'd rather perish in wine than live in water!"... and splash! He plunged into the barrel and happily drowned himself in the wine!

Abigail: Ha, ha, ha...! Mmmm...mmm...mmm...

Jesus: What's the matter with you?... Did you twist your tongue again?

Abigail: Look, countryhick, once and for all, why don't you make yourself clear... What do you want, huh?... You don't convince me at all, you know.... Who are you, anyway?

Jesus: Who do you think I am?

Abigail: I bet all my bracelets you're one of those bandits roaming the mountains, robbing the men and raping the women.

Jesus: Do I really look like one of them?

Abigail: No, you look more like a storyteller to me... and a troublemaker. I'm a decent woman and right now, I'm messing up my life by talking to you.... a Galilean, no less!

Jesus: There go your biases once more. Tell me, woman, what have the Galileans done to you?

Abigail: To me, nothing, but to my people, a lot. You Galileans think of yourselves as masters of the world; you despise us and you speak ill of us.

Jesus: You Samaritans think of yourselves as masters of the world; you despise us and you speak ill of us. So, why don't we stop this and just give me water to drink. My throat is parched dry.

Abigail: Well, here's your water... and stop messing up my life...

Jesus: Ahhh.... This is nice...!

Abigail: You're a Galilean... alright... All you can do is beg... Did you hear what I said? All you can do is beg, and not even a word of thanks you utter.

Jesus: You didn't have to shout, woman. I heard you... Guess what, I'll give you something in return....

Abigail: What?

Jesus: Water.

Abigail: What water are you talking about?

Jesus: The same thing I asked from you. Do you want some water?

Abigail: The sun must have drained your brain. Tell me, how can you fetch water when I've got the bucket and the rope with me?

Jesus: I know of another well whose water is more refreshing.

Abigail: Another well? As far as I know, this is the only well we have here. That's why our great grandfather, Jacob, bought it, so that he and his children and their flocks could drink from it...

Jesus: But I know of a well that gives better water... You drink water from your well, and after a couple of hours, you become thirsty again... But once you drank the water from this well that I'm telling you about, your thirst would be gone forever.

Abigail: Hey, where's this marvellous well, huh?

Jesus: Ah, it's a secret...

Abigail: C'mon, tell me, so I wouldn't have to be coming here every now and then to fetch water...

Jesus: No, no, it's a secret...

Abigail: A secret?... So it's a cock-and-bull-story, huh? Now I know who you are, a rumor-monger and a liar!.... A marvellous well, hah!

Jesus: Okay, okay, I'll tell you where it is... but first, you've got to call your husband...

Abigail: My husband? What's he got to do with all this?

Jesus: So he'll know about it too...

Abigail: Well, I'm sorry, countryhick, but I must tell you I haven't got a husband... here, you see me as I

am, single with no commitments...

Jesus: C'mon, woman, you know that's not true... Didn't you tell me a while ago that the "fountain" was already taken...?

Abigail: Well, of course, I had to defend myself...

Jesus: Tell me, how many?

Abigail: How many what?

Jesus: How many husbands have you had?

Abigail: Hey, that's none of your business, meddler! How dare you ask me how many husbands I got. I never asked you if you went to jail or what not!

Jesus: Alright, alright, don't get furious... C'mon, let me see your hand...

Abigail: Can you read the lines in my hand?

Jesus: One moment.... let me see it.... Oh yes,... I see five.

Abigail: How did you know? Yeah, you're right, I've had five husbands!

Jesus: No, I was saying I saw five fingers in your hand...

Abigail: Now I know who you are! You're a fortune teller. A prophet!... You're a prophet, aren't you?

Jesus: Well, I'm a Galilean, like you said before...

Abigail: No, you're a prophet! I've never seen a prophet before! But now, you can't get away from me!... Lemme ask you a question.... Yeah, you've got to solve this one question for me: look, you Galileans and Jews claim that God has his throne in the mountain of Jerusalem. We Samaritans say that is not true, because it is here in Mount Gerizim where the Lord lives... What do you think of this, huh?

Jesus: Well, I think God rose from his throne and descended from the mountain, to put up his tent down here, among the people, among the poor...

Abigail: You're a prophet, I'm sure of it!... And before I realize it, you might even be the Messiah, himself...

As the Samaritan woman said this, Jesus bent over, took a white pebble from the ground and began to play with it in his hands...

Jesus: And... what if I were he?

Abigail: How's that...?

Jesus: What would you do if I were the Messiah?

Abigail: That's what I'm asking you. What would you do?

Jesus: Look, the first thing I would do would be to buy a brush this big to wipe out the barriers between Samaria and Galilee, between Galilee and Judea, between Israel and the rest of the countries in the world... Then, I would get a master key that would unlock all granaries so that there would be enough wheat for everyone... And with a big hammer, I would break the chains and shackles to set the slaves and the prisoners free. I would summon all the bricklayers of the land and tell them: Hey, friends, I want you to dismantle the temple of Jerusalem and that of Gerizim, and all other temples, because God lives there no longer, but in the streets and plazas. Those who are really seeking the Lord will find him here, among the people... I would likewise buy the best bleaching agent to wash away all those laws and norms, which for many years have been a burden on our shoulders... and I would have only one law engraved in the heart: the law of freedom... Yeah, I would do all these...

Abigail: Now I'm certain! You are the Messiah we've been waiting for! Come, come to my house and my people, so that they will hear you! C'mon!....

Jesus: Alright, but let's wait for my friends who have gone to buy some food. They'll be back any moment now...

In a short while, we got back. We were surprised to see Jesus talking to that Samaritan woman. It was not customary for men to be talking to women alone. Neither was it acceptable behavior nor expected to see a Jew conversing with a Samaritan on equal footing. But Jesus was never concerned about what people said about him. He was a free man, more free than the water gushing forth from the springs of Shechem.

We who were getting to know him more and more, didn't say anything; then we started to eat. It was noontime.

Samaria was the central region of Palestine. To go back from Jerusalem to Galilee, it was common to pass through the mountain road, crossing Samaria. About seven hundred years before Christ, the Assyrians had invaded this area of the country. They drove away the Jewish people residing in the place, where they settled as colonists. In the passage of time, the Assyrian colonists intermarried with native inhabitants who had stayed in Samaria. The result were the Samaritans: a race of mestizos, people with a hodgepodge of religious beliefs. They disdain the Israelites, the Galileans of the north, as well as the Jews of the south felt toward the Samaritans was a mixture of nationalism and racism. To be called a "Samaritan" was regarded as one of the worst insults; it was synonymous to being called a bastard.

About four hundred years before Christ, the Samaritan community definitely broke away from the Jewish community and the Samaritans put up their own temple atop Mount Gerizim, a temple that rivaled that of Jerusalem. This formalized the religious schism between the two communities. Since then, tension grew high and in Jesus' time, the enmity between them deepened. Inter-marriage between the Jews and the Samaritans was explicitly prohibited, since the latter was regarded as impure to an extreme degree, and a cause for ritual impurities. They were even banned from entering the Temple or offering sacrifices. They were referred to as "the stupid people residing in Shechem."

The Samaritans prided themselves as being descendents of the ancient patriarchs of Israel. In reality, they had Hebrew blood in them, but the rest of the Israelites considered them pagans and foreigners. The Samaritans likewise observed the Mosaic Law with so many scruples, but this made them appear idolatrous because they worshipped God in the Mountain of Gerizim. Gerizim, the sacred mountain of the Samaritans, was certainly significant in the history of the Israelites, because it was here where the blessings were given to the people before Joshua, as they entered the promised land (Jos 8:30-35). The temple of the Samaritans erected there was destroyed in Jesus' time, but its summit continued to be a place of worship, where the Samaritans went up to pray and make some sacrifices.

The city of Shechem during Jesus' time corresponds to the present-day Nablus, one of the most genuine Arab cities in the Jewish territory. At present there is one barrio of the Samaritans in Nablus where the descendants of this rebellious race live. Actually, there are hardly about 400 of them; they marry only among themselves, preserve their own dialect, their schools and their literature. The leaders of the Samaritan community are always garbed with red turbans, signifying their rank of hierarchy. Today's Samaritans still keep their traditions zealously. They still ascend Mount Gerizim during Passover to offer a lamb as sacrifice, in accordance with their rite – which is different from that of the Jews. They keep a scroll of the Law in the barrio's synagogue, which, according to them, was written by a grandson of Aaron, Moses' brother, although this has no historical basis. It is a closed community, doomed to perish, due to the continuous intermarriage of cousins or relatives. Proofs of this biological deterioration are already evident in the large number of blind and abnormal people among them.

Sychar was a small village, between Ebal and Gerizim, the twin sentinels of Samaria. Here was the land that Jacob had bought (Gen 33:18-20) which he later gave as present to his son (Gen 48:21-22). There was a well in this land which, after almost two thousand years, the people persisted in calling – in Jesus' time – "Jacob's well." Wells are very significant in Palestine, as water is scarce in the country. These underground springs which are less abundant are easily located, even after centuries have lapsed. These were vital for the shepherds and the nomads since the life of their flocks, their only source of wealth, was dependent on them. These wells had a depth of as much as 20 meters. At present, after four thousand years, it is still possible to drink fresh water from Jacob's well – for the Christians, the well of the Samaritan woman. Very near the well is a burial mound which in the Arab tradition is venerated as the tomb of Joseph, the son of the patriarch Jacob, and heir of the lands of Shechem.

The narration in John's gospel about the conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman is a grand theological elaboration replete with symbols, similar to that of John 3 with Nicodemus. The basic element

of this dialogue can be summed up in the word “freedom.” Jesus, by talking to the Samaritan woman alone, is breaking once and for all two very deep forms of prejudice during his time: the sexual, which prevented a man from talking to any woman alone; and the national-racist form of prejudice, continuing the mortal enmity between the Israelites and the Samaritans. These are the yardsticks of Jesus’ enormous sense of freedom and his great capacity for human relations. From the theological point of view, this episode likewise speaks of freedom. The freedom of God who does not want to be enclosed in temples – neither in Jerusalem nor in Gerizim – but prefers to relate with us as Father, in spirit and in truth. The new community that Jesus wants to inspire in us will not be known for the kind of worship it offers the Lord, but for the community through which it wants to bring God into our life.

(Jn 4:1-27)

82

IN A SAMARITAN VILLAGE

Abigail, the Samaritan woman who had spoken with Jesus on the day we arrived in Sychar, insisted that we go to her village. She was walking ahead of us, telling all her neighbors that she had met a prophet beside Jacob’s well...

Abigail: ...Hey, comadre Nora!!... And you, Simeon!... Come and see this man who read my palm and guessed everything I did!... And what if he’s indeed the Messiah, huh?... Hey, neighbors, c’mon, hurry and don’t you ever miss this!...

Abigail knocked at every door inviting everyone to her house. We were following her, but not with enthusiasm. As usual, my brother James and I protested a lot...

James: But Jesus, how dare you do this.... Are you sick or are you out of your mind?

John: I’d rather be tied to a post and be cooked alive than set foot in the house of these Samaritans!

James: They say whoever enters and sits in the house of a Samaritan loses his eyesight before the year ends!

Jesus: Well then, stay outside and look the other way...

James: If you do that, you’ll turn into salt, like Lot’s wife.

Jesus: It’s okay, James and John. You don’t have to go, if you don’t want to. But I’m going into Abigail’s house and greet her husband.

James: Abigail! What a sweet, little girl’s name, huh?

John: For a jug of water, you were taken in by the Samaritans, Jesus...

Jesus: No! It’s you and your old ideas and biases against the Samaritans and our relationship with them that put us all in a fix..... I’ll drink from any well and visit any house. Do whatever you please.

So we went inside Sychar, Abigail’s village. There was a small square along the road where a group of Samaritans wearing red turbans and gray tunics looked at us with hatred in their faces.

One Samaritan: Hey, hey, look who we have here, huh?

Another Samaritan: Oh, the stinking Galileans! Why don’t you just go to Lake Tiberias and wash your armpits clean! Ha, ha, ha...!

Jesus: Don’t mind them, John. Can’t you see they’re trying to provoke us?

Samaritan: Galilee! Hail to you! Grrr....! Ha, ha, ha...!

Another Samaritan: Hey, hey, what a scraggy-looking group of Galileans I see! I guess your mothers don’t

feed you very well!... What's the matter with you, red head?... Come, come over here, don't get scared. I simply want to beat your ass red! Ha, ha, ha!

Jesus: Cool it, James. They just want to get us into a fight...

James: Well, they'll get what they want, damn it! I won't allow any more insults from them! Listen well, you evil Samaritans, nephews of Lucifer! How I wish lightning would strike right now and split all of you into two!

Samaritan: And how I wish you'd lose all your teeth except one, that you may still suffer from pain!

John: May you swallow a handful of ticks that will suck the blood out of you!

Samaritan: Would that all your relatives be like onions whose heads are buried under the earth!

James: ...that fire and sulfur descend right now from heaven, as in Elijah's time, that all of you may burn, you sons of bitches!

Jesus: Stop it, James..... You too, John.... Damn those tongues of yours! They have more venom than a viper!

James: Do you hear that, Jesus?... There's thunder coming!

John: God has answered our prayers! He'll send fire from heaven to kill the devil's Samaritans!

Jesus: Okay, okay. You stay here and wait for lightning and thunder to come. As for me, I won't allow myself to catch another cold!

Jesus ran toward Abigail's house. We followed him, too, but grudgingly...

The rain had dampened all our enthusiasm.... We had forgotten the curses previously uttered as we hastily crossed the small town plaza... In a short while, drenched by the rain, we arrived in the shabby little house of bamboo and adobe stones where Abigail and her husband, Jeroboam, lived...

Abigail: Come in, come in...! This is my house, Jesus. Too small for such a big family, but... These are all my children... and this is my husband.

Jeroboam: Welcome, Galileans! My house is like Noah's ark, it opens its doors to all kinds of animals!

Abigail: Don't be rude, Jeroboam...

James: So you and your wife were the first pair that slipped into it, weren't you?

Jesus: Shut up, James.

Jeroboam: Abigail has told me that one of you is a witch who can read one's palm.... where is he?

John: The only witch here is your wife, who went to fetch water from the well at the wrong time!

Jesus: For God's sake, will you stop all those insults and let's start greeting one another first?.....

Abigail: Exactly! Say, Jesus, will you tell this stupid husband of mine what you have told me by the well, that this conflict between the Samaritans and the Galileans and the Jews is all over.... C'mon, tell him...

We sat down and talked... After a while, the rain calmed down and the Samaritan neighbors started to arrive... Soon, Abigail's little house became full. Those who could, sat down on the wet ground, while the older ones remained standing, resting their chins on their canes...

A Samaritan: Who said that this thing between the Samaritans and the Galileans is all over. Who said such nonsense, huh?

Jesus: This stupid guy here.

Samaritan: So?... and who are you?

Jesus: A brother of yours. You're my brother, too. We are all brothers and sisters, kneaded from the same dough, and we breathe the same God's breath through the nose. Don't you think so?

A bent-over old man with a long beard, nodded his head...

Old Man: Yes. Baruch, the just man, says the same thing too....

A Woman: My aunt Loida says that the sheep must go with their own kind, in pairs!... Well, stranger, our skin is not the same, you must remember that...

Jesus: But the blood that flows in you is as red as mine, cousin. Can't you see that? It's not the bark of a tree that matters, but the wood, and its fruit. Isn't that correct?

Old Man: Right. This is what Baruch, the just man, is saying too....

Samaritan: Hold it! Now this is getting tough! You Galileans have taken so much advantage of us, you have ruined our trade relations with Damascus!

John: Oh, yeah? Weren't you the ones who ruined the sale of wheat in the capital? Weren't you, Samaritans?...

Another Samaritan: You set on fire our forest in Ebal!

A Woman: It was a Galilean who stole the scroll of the Law of Aaron's grandson!

James: And who did the filthy thing of hurling those damned bones of the dead into the temple of Jerusalem?

Jesus: Dammit, will you stop it? Look, the rain has stopped. After the deluge, comes peace. What do we get by opening the wounds of our fathers?... We are all one family with only one Father, who is in heaven. This is what matters more than anything else.

Old Man: Yes, yes, this is exactly what Baruch the just man is saying...

Woman: How can we be brothers when we don't speak the same language. When a Galilean says black, the Samaritan thinks white. When a Samaritan talks of Mount Gerizim, you think of Mount Zion....

Jesus: But when a Galilean says: "I'm hungry," and feels it, the Samaritan similarly feels the same thing. When a Samaritan cries for justice, the Galilean utters the same cry for justice!... My friends from Samaria: we have been divided for many years now, ever since the Tower of Babel, I believe, when those ambitious men wanted to scale the heavens to rob the Lord of his place... Now, we have to put up another tower, not by the use of bricks this time but by joining our hands, crossing our arms, and those of the Galileans and the Samaritans, as well. Everyone is needed to be able to build this community of all one family, all brothers and sisters to each other!

Old Man: Baruch, the just man, said exactly the same thing!

James lost his cool when that old man mentioned for the fourth time the name of Baruch, the just man.

James: Wait a minute. Who the devil is this Baruch, that his name is constantly mentioned here?... It's Jesus talking and not any one else, not even Baruch!...

Abigail: Baruch is a great prophet of ours!... We owe him a lot! He has enlightened the minds of the people and defended our rights, the rights of the poor...

Old Man: Baruch, the just man, always says that....

James: What the hell do I care what Baruch says, dammit! It's Jesus who's carrying the staff of command here, the strong man of Israel!

Old Man: And what about Baruch?

James: I've got nothing to do with him!

Samaritan: Take back what you said, you red head from hell, or else...!

My brother James and a Samaritan exchanged blows. Simon and Judas likewise engaged themselves in a fight with the other neighbors while the women were shouting menacingly.... Abigail's little house shook and I thought it would have collapsed had it not been for Peter and Jesus who, after having yelled considerably, were able to get some little quiet...

Jesus: How many times should I tell you that we're all brothers and sisters and we must unite, instead of beating one another?!... If this Baruch is for justice, then he is with us, and we with him... What matters is that we are able to change things, and not the person who changes them!... Tell the just man, Baruch, that we would like to meet him and talk with him!

Night was already hovering over the village of Sychar when a tall and sturdy man entered the packed house of Abigail... He was dressed in a gray tunic with the red turban around his head, symbol of the Samaritan leadership...

Baruch: I'm Baruch... You were asking for me?

Jesus: We are just a handful of Galileans here. We're promoting the Kingdom of God in the north. I understand you and your group are doing the same in this part of Samaria.... Can we be of any assistance to you?

Baruch: Of course. Look at the fields: the crops are already ripe for harvest. We need people... Can we be of any help to you, too?

Jesus: Certainly, Baruch. As they say, one sows and the other harvests.... What is important is that things get done; who does the work is not an issue. In the end, both the sowers and the reapers are happy together, don't you think so?

Baruch: Let's be clear about this, Galilean. On whose side are you?... the zealots'?... the rebels' of the desert?..... or the Sycharians' of Judea?

Jesus: We're on justice's side, Baruch. We're for the poor who, day in and day out, are clamoring for freedom... for the rest.... will that still matter?

Baruch: I'm pleased with your words. You can count on me. We are fighting for justice for our people.

Jesus: If you're not against us, then you're with us!

Baruch: Then this calls for a fraternal embrace, Galilean!

Jesus moved toward Baruch, the Samaritan leader. The two shook hands and hugged each other with much respect and excitement, like the two brothers, Esau and Jacob, when they met after so many years, beside the Yabbok River, near Penuel.

We stayed in the village for two more days, proclaiming the Reign of God among the Samaritans....

The enmity among the Samaritans, the Galileans and the Jews was nurtured by a series of circumstances. One hundred twenty-nine years before Christ, the Jewish king, John Hyrcanus, destroyed the sacred temple of the Samaritans in Mount Gerizim. This sparked hatred in relationships between the two peoples. When Jesus was about ten years old, an incident happened that was horrifying to the Jews: During the feast of the Passover, the Samaritans, who had gone to Jerusalem, hurled bones of the dead into the Temple. Such desecration of a holy place was an act of vengeance that the Jews could never forget. Since then, tension mounted every now and then.

The Israelites – presently of the Arab race – took pride in their hospitality as a national virtue. But this was never manifested to the Samaritans nor to the Jews. They refused to extend their greetings to them, and they shut their doors as proof of their total rejection. Every time the Jews passed through Samaritan turf, it was not surprising to hear of serious incidents that would occasionally end up in real killings. Jesus' disciples, specially James and John, mirror this hostility in an exchange of verbal invectives with the village people of Sychar. Jesus does not share in this narrow nationalistic spirit of his companions. He stays for two days with the Samaritans, a detail that puts into focus John's gospel, to dramatize Jesus' breaking away from all sorts of racial nationalism and discrimination.

Baruch is not a historical character. In this episode, he appears as a leader of the Samaritans, loved and respected by his countrymen. As a just man in the service of the poor among his people, he easily relates to Jesus. The gospel is good news for the poor, transcending all barriers, notwithstanding one's being a Jew, a Samaritan, a Negro, a White, good or bad.

Ecumenism is one of the successes of the evolution of Christian thought in our days. Catholics, evangelists, the fundamentalists and - far beyond - the Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and so forth, were called to unite, not exactly because we share the same ideas about God, immortality or the creation of the world, but rather, because we are all called to construct a world of justice and peace.

If Jesus said on one occasion: "He who is not with me, is against me" (Lk 11:23), and this phrase has been interpreted by some as a sign of intolerance or exclusivism, the possible conflict arising from this is resolved with another phrase in the same evangelical text: "He who is not against you is for you" (Lk 9:50). Unfortunately, in the course of history, there has been an abundance of "religious wars," where thousands of persons have been tortured in the name of faith. Bloody crusades were organized, and were

formed tribunals to excommunicate those who had a different way of thinking. None of this does comes from the gospel. The gospel is not a call to intolerance, indiscrimination, and to a rejection of those who think otherwise. In the face of such unhappy historical legacy, the Catholics must grow in humility, in repentance and – as Jesus used to say – before they remove the mote in their neighbors' eyes, they must first remove the plank in their own.

(Lk 9:51-56; Jn 4:28-43)

83

THE BANQUET GUESTS

On our way back from the Feast of the Tents, Galilee was in great commotion. Rumors of what Jesus had done in the capital had reached Capernaum even before we got there. The talk about the new prophet was everywhere. Jacob and Simon, Jesus' cousins, returned from Jerusalem in the same caravan and spent the night in my father's house...

Simon: You're becoming famous, cousin, there's no doubt about it. Allow me to tell you this, though. It's true you've got the gift of gab and the knack for leadership... but you need people, and that's what Jacob and I are talking about... You've got to have popular support which you haven't got...

Jesus: What about those who were at the wharf this afternoon, what are they, cousin Simon?

Simon: Nothing but a bunch of rotten rascals. Where the hell do you think you're heading for, with these paupers?

Jacob: And how! Just take a look at these people around you, Jesus. A handful of ignorant fishermen who know not where their right hand is...

Simon: Like Matthew, the despicable tax collector....

Jacob: And Mary, that prostitute who reeks of whore scent....

Simon: And Selenia, who's like her....

Jacob: Not to mention those stupid peasants and scoundrels.

Simon: What's gotten into your shell, Jesus? Listen to us, cousin, get other people, people with more training, damn it!.... and with more.... how shall I say it?.... with more "influence"... Those who can move the world at the snap of a finger.... Haven't you got the idea yet?... Open your eyes, Jesus, and wake up!

Graziela: Open your eyes, Eliseus, wake up!... Happy birthday!.... Did you sleep well?

Eliseus: Ahuuuummm...! Very well, Graziela, more than ever! Tralara, tralari, tralalalari!

Manolo: Happy anniversary, master! May the God of Israel bless you from head to foot!

Eliseus: And you too, Manolo! Blazes, I feel damned happy today... I want.... I just want to....

Graziela: What is it, Eliseus?

Eliseus: "I'd like to take you in my arms, my dear!".... Tralara, tralari.... Ha, ha, hay...!

Graziela: Certainly you got up from the right side of the bed, yes siree! Happiness is man's best friend!

Eliseus: Today, I'd like all my neighbors to be happy with me!

Eliseus: Then why don't you make it happen, master? It's been a long time since we had a party in the house!

Eliseus: You're right, Manolo. And this time, it won't be just an ordinary party. It's going to be something grand! A banquet! Damn! We've had bad times during the year and we need a break!

Graziela and Manolo: We'll surprise the whole neighborhood! We'll treat them to a banquet, and all

kinds of wine and drinks will flow...

Eliseus: And there'll be music and dancing! Yippee!

Eliseus: Manolo, go to the farm right away and kill five of the best lambs that you can find...

Eliseus: Five fattened lambs..... what else, sir?

Eliseus: Graziela, go and buy some boxes of olives....

Graziela: Which of them, the green ones or the black ones, master?

Eliseus: Two of each, and don't forget the figs!

Graziela: And a pot of good chick peas!

Manolo: As well as eggplants and cucumbers....

Eliseus: And almond sauce!

Graziela: Not to forget the nuts!

Eliseus: Manolo, start milking the goats, for today milk will overflow for all my friends!

Graziela: Milk and honey will drip through the hemlines of all the guests!

Eliseus: How many barrels of wine shall I bring in, master?

Eliseus: Two,.... no, make it four, four barrels of the best wine from the house of Carmelo! I want everyone to leave my house happy and contented!

Graziela: They'll be crawling on all fours, Eliseus, with all the wine before them!...

Eliseus: Tralara, tralari....!

Eliseus: But the most important is missing, master.

Eliseus: What do you mean, Manolo?

Eliseus: How about the guests, master? Whom are you going to invite?

Eliseus: The whole neighborhood...! Everyone, yes sir! Send the word to Don Apolonius, to Doctor Onessimus.... oh, and to Absalon and his beloved wife, Madam Eunice.... I want you to invite everyone, Manolo; tell them I'm expecting them with open arms! I am expecting everyone at the banquet! I want my house to be filled with joy and with all my friends!

Eliseus: Is everything all set, Manolo?

Eliseus: Yes, master, and don't be nervous....

Eliseus: Oh, I'm not nervous, Manolo.... In fact, I'm happy.... Graziela, Graziela, have you roasted the lambs?

Graziela: They're all well roasted, Eliseus! You've asked that question for the tenth time...

Eliseus: You haven't forgotten the dates, I suppose.

Graziela: No, master. Everything is ready. Take it easy...

Eliseus: I'm just too happy, that's all...! Tralara, tralari...! Manolo, has the invitation been sent to all the neighbors?

Eliseus: To everyone, master. Look at these corns on my feet. I got them for having walked up and down the street.... I went to Don Apolonius' house, to Doctor Onessimus'..... to Absalom's, and...

Graziela:and "his beloved wife, Madam Eunice," huh...!

Eliseus: Did you hear that? It's the first night watch.

Eliseus: Well, the guests must be arriving by now...

Graziela: You know these people, Eliseus. The women have to braid their hair.... the men have to oil their moustache.... well, anyway, they always come late...

Apolonius: But what has gotten into his head, that he should invite me. Why the heck, should I, a very busy man, suck lamb's bones in his house?... Hff, this guy Eliseus is crazy.... Besides, he's a nobody, he hasn't got any fortune nor business to talk about. Tell me, shall we talk about the birds in the sky? He's a crazy fool, that's why he is what he is, penniless, without a single centavo in his pocket!

Messenger: Well, sir, what shall I tell him?

Apolonius: Whatever occurs to you. Tell him I'm not home, you don't know where I went... that's it.... I went to purchase some lands, that I had to measure them.... that he has to excuse me...

In a short while, the messenger was at Eliseus' door...

Eliseus: They're coming, they're coming! Graziela, run and open the door! Tralara, tralari....

Graziela: It's only the messenger, master...

Messenger: My master, Don Apolonius, cannot come because he is on a trip.... He's sending his regrets.

Eliseus: Did you say he was on a trip?

Messenger: He purchased a piece of land and he went to take its measurement and... that he wishes everyone to enjoy the food!..... Good-bye!

Eliseus: Too bad! I would have wanted to greet Don Apolonius.

Graziela: Don Apolonius is a very busy man and he's got lots of money.

Eliseus: They are now announcing the second watch, master.

Graziela: And still no one has come... The lambs and the chick peas are getting cold...

Eliseus: Well, don't get impatient, woman... they'll come..... Tralara, tralari....

Messenger: And what should I tell him, Doctor Onessimus?

Onessimus: Anything, man. After all, this Eliseus is so stupid, he won't even know... Ah, my teacher, Jeconiah, used to say: "a man without culture is like a ball of excrement; he who touches it, shakes his hand".... You talk to him about the mysteries of science, he doesn't understand; You explain to him the subtleties of art, and he gets bored; you tell him: "Do you know Philosophy?" and he replies: "Where does this woman live?".... Ah, these ignorant fools!

Messenger: Well, so what do I tell him?

Onessimus: Tell this Mr. Nobody that I cannot make it, that...I just bought a couple of oxen and that I still have to test them. He he... send him my regrets.

Once again, there was a knock at the door.

Eliseus: At last, the guests are coming! Graziela, hurry up!

Messenger: Here's a message from my master, Doctor Onessimus: He wants me to inform Mr. Nobody..... pardon me.... Mr. Eliseus..... that he cannot make it to the banquet, that he bought a couple of oxen..... that he wishes everyone a hearty dinner..... good-bye!

Eliseus: Good-bye...

Eliseus: Such bad luck, master...

Graziela: Doctor Onessimus is a very cultured man...

Eliseus: Yeah, a brazen man, that's what he is. Say, Graziela, there goes the third watch.... and my house is still empty..

Graziela: Don't be sad, Eliseus.... I tell you, they're coming...

Eliseus: Probably. Let's wait a little longer.... Tararira.... lira....

Eunice: What? We're going to the house of this common man?... Oh, no, my dear, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but this Eliseus has no class, he's got no manners..... Oh!

Husband: But, what shall we tell him, my dear?

Eunice: For a swine like him, anything will do. Tell him that.... we have just gotten married and are still celebrating our wedding....

And the messenger reached the house of Eliseus.

Messenger: They have just gotten married and are still celebrating their wedding.... Ay!

Eliseus: How's that?

Messenger: No, nothing. They are not coming.

Graziela: But these two were married more than a month ago...

Messenger: They are very much in love with each other and...

Eliseus: Yeah, they've got so much love, but no manners! Pff..... what a flop.... The cocks will crow in a short while, and yet, not even one of the guests has come....

Graziela: And the lambs are as cold as a dead man.

Eliseus: And the barrels of wine are left untouched.

Graziela: Master Eliseus, could they possibly have lost their way, that's why they haven't come?

Eliseus: No, Graziela, it was I who made a mistake in inviting them. Tarariro.... Manolo!

Eliseus: Yes, master.

Eliseus: Manolo, put on your sandals fast, and go through the alleys and the marketplace right away, and bring me the beggars, the crippled ones, the blind and all the poor people that you will find in the street... Tell them to come to my house, to partake of the banquet that I have prepared for them...

Graziela: Are you out of your mind, Eliseus?

Eliseus: Of course not! I have never been saner in my life. Now I understand. Run, Manolo, and tell them at once, before the sun rises...

In a short while....

Manolo: Master, the whole barrio is excited! Many of them are coming over here!.... Shall I tell them that there is no more place?

Eliseus: On the contrary, Manolo, go back and tell them that those who are hungry may come, for there is enough place in my house, there are enough lambs and olives and wine for everyone!

Eliseus: Yes, master, right away. Master, I also came across one of these prostitutes, you know... and she said that business was so bad, and if she could also come to partake of some food....

Eliseus: Of course, Manolo, tell her to come, as well as her friends.

Eliseus: And those living on the other side of the river told me that....

Eliseus: Let them come too! Let all the tramps and the stinking men as well as the whores come, too! They are all welcome in my house, this banquet is for them, the doors of my house are wide open for them!

Jesus: That night, Eliseus' house was filled to the brim with people. There was dancing, there was food and there was fun. It was a great feast... the feast of the Lord.

Simon: What did you say, Jesus?.... the feast of the Lord?

Jesus: Yes, cousin Simon, the Kingdom of God is like the banquet given by Eliseus. God's true house does not smell like incense but the sweat and the perfume of a prostitute. God is one of us, don't forget that. God is with us, with the poor.

That Jesus, a man who was already popular, whom the people saw as a true prophet, was surrounded by the poor people of Capernaum or of Jerusalem, turned out to be scandalous. To make the poor people the privileged beneficiaries of the good news and to trust in them that they might become the agents of change, was intolerable. Jesus held on to this and he even called "blessed ones or happy ones" those who were able to surpass a similar scandal (Mt 11:5-6).

Jesus' followers are known in the evangelical texts in various words, all pointing toward the same. One text talks of "the small ones" or of the "least ones" or of "the simple ones." Another word used is "nepis" (in Greek), which is equivalent to "patit" in Hebrew and to "sabra" in Aramaic, a word which sums up the following: Uncultured people, with no breeding or religious formation. Jesus was surrounded by the "amha'ares" – as the Pharisees referred to them – men and women of ill reputation, slandered, and whom the self-righteous considered as doomed on account of their religious ignorance and bad moral behavior. Jesus simply referred to them as the "poor." They are those who have nothing, "those who are weary and overburdened," "the sheep without a shepherd." Jesus, who was from the same social class, an artisan and a peasant, proclaimed the good news of liberation to them.

A number of Jesus' parables try to "justify" God's conduct, who addresses the good news to the most miserable. One of them is the parable of the "great banquet" where Jesus shows once more, one of the reasons for this preference of God: The rich, the privileged, the wise, think highly of themselves, are so satisfied and so secure that they shut themselves out of the doors of the banquet. God has invited them, but

they do not wish to attend the banquet. On the other hand, the poor, those who do not matter to anyone nor to anything, have their hearts open to the invitation. They have the capacity for excitement and surprises. They have hope in their hearts and they go. God counts on them for the realization of his historical plan and they are the ones who will jampack his house and participate in the endless feast.

From the time of the prophets, Israel describes the joy of the Messianic times with the image of a banquet, where there was good food and most of all, where drinks were in abundance (Is 25:6-8). In the minds of the people, the basic difference between ordinary food and a banquet was precisely in the amount of drink that was consumed. Wine was synonymous to celebration and happiness. It was the same with dancing. To mention the word feast meant dancing, to the point that the Hebrew word that corresponded to “feast” meant “dance” originally. The feast of the Messiah was likewise compared to a wedding feast. This is what Matthew’s version adds to this parable. Even the last of the books of the New Testament, the book of Revelation preserves this imagery of the Messianic wedding (Rev 19:7-8). Within these solemn and brilliant allegories, Jesus puts in as a wedge the “scandal” of the gospel: The guests to that banquet are the tattered poor, the beggars, the least of the people, the rascals.

To overcome the scandal of the poor is core to discovering the essence of the gospel, and what is even more important, to get into the mystery of the Lord. After Jesus, the poor shall be not only the privileged beneficiaries of the good news, but they are also called to be a part of the Kingdom. All this signifies that starting from Jesus, only those who grasp the real meaning of the poor know the real meaning of God.

The gospel is aimed at eradicating all types of differences among people, showing the way to a friendly and co-equal society. And, as it happened in Jesus’ time, the only thing that can make us understand God’s plan is to reiterate Jesus’ example: by putting God within the hands of the poor.

(Mt 22:1-10; Lk14:15-24)

84

THE CRAFTY STEWARD

After a hectic day of work at sea, battling it out with our nets and the waves, we would fasten our boats to the small wharf of Capernaum, and all of us fishermen would gather in the rambling tavern of one-eyed Joachim. There, we would gulp down a jug of wine as we protested the new taxes of King Herod and laughed at the antics of Phanuel’s steward.....

Pipo: This jug of wine is on me, pals! Hik! It’s my treat, but first, you’ve got to shout “Long live Pipo!”.... C’mon..... one, two..... and three!

All: Long live Pipo!!

Pipo: Yes sir, long live myself! Hey, one-eyed man, give more wine to all my fans, hik! Ha, ha, ha, ay! What a good life for a fattened cow like me! Ha, ha, hay!

Big Pipo was a special man. Being everyone’s friend, with his three-edged beard and rotten teeth, Pipo hopped from one pub to another laughing at his own jokes and making us laugh at the same time. Because of his charm and his talent with numbers, he had landed a good job as steward of old Phanuel, one of the wealthiest proprietors of Capernaum. But Pipo was a spendthrift. All the money he earned, and did not earn, would be wasted, draining barrels and barrels of wine...

Peter: Well, Pipo, what a good life you have, you rascal! Your pocket has more money than the caravans of the Queen of Shebah could carry!

Pipo: It’s my boss, Phanuel, who earns the money, hik!..... I just manage it.

John: Or better, you spend it, scoundrel!

Pipo: I'm just doing him a favor. Look, Old Phanuel doesn't even know what to do with his money.... hik! He doesn't know how to enjoy it.... Bah, If I don't help this miser, the moths will just eat up all his savings.....! Hik! Know something, pals? I'm just living up to a saying of Solomon: "The smart man lives on a fool but the fool lives on his work," Ha, ha, ha, hay....!

James: Where did Solomon say that, Pipo?

Pipo: Search me! I dunno, and I don't care. But that's very well said, hik! Hey, guys, look at me, I'm the happiest man in Capernaum! Hip! C'mon everybody, get your empty glasses and let's all shout: "Cheers to Pipo!"... ready,... one, two, hik!.... and three!

All: Cheers!

Phanuel: Long live Pipo!

It was something unexpected. There, at the door, was Phanuel, Pipo's employer, with his fine cane. His face was very serious. All of us remained motionless as the rich old man silently crossed the tavern... Pipo was as still as a statue, raising a glass of wine in one hand. He was unable to take the last gulp of wine....

Phanuel: Pipo!

Pipo: Yes, master....

Phanuel: You may collect all your things first thing in the morning, tomorrow.

Pipo: But, master....

Phanuel: I'm not your master anymore. I heard everything. You're fired.

Without further ado, Phanuel clasped the handle of his cane and left the pub...

Pipo: Damn. Talk of good timing, huh?.... Why, he even cured my hiccups!

Peter: Your happy days are over, my friend!

James: Tomorrow at this time you'll be on the road begging!

Pipo: Old Phanuel should have let me explain....

Peter: What else is there to explain, rascal? You should be grateful he did not send for two guards to have you arrested and kicked in jail!

Pipo: You're right, Peter..... now, what am I to do, huh?

Peter: Like what the rest of us are doing..... work!

Pipo: No, no, please, don't ever mention that to me.... I get goose pimples just by hearing the word.... I wasn't born for that.... I don't have the strength for that...

John: Sure you've got it. The problem is you've got such a big belly that you can't even bend yourself!

James: You've got to do it, pal. I've seen you tending the pigs or gathering cucumbers.

Pipo: No, no, I'm no good for farm work. There's not a single laborer in my clan.

Peter: Well then, come with us, and let's go fishing in the lake. Do you know how to cast nets?

Pipo: All I know is that I get seasick, like a pregnant woman.

John: Learn something, damn it: be a potmaker, a tailor, or a tanner...

Pipo: At my age, John? Do you think I can still learn something? I'm forty, and I'm good for nothing!

James: Well then, my friend, Pipo, I guess there's nothing left for you to do but to beg at the door of the synagogue!

Pipo: Are you crazy? I'd rather die! I, Pipo, my mother's son, begging for alms? No way, do you hear? James, and everyone, you heard me, I'll never, never do that!!

Peter: Okay, okay, you screaming fool!... And what the hell do you plan to do?

Pipo: I've got one night to think about it. One night. I've got to clear my mind for it... Hey, one-eyed, give me another shot... I promise to pay you everything tomorrow, at this time.... And this, I swear!

That night, Pipo was restless and couldn't sleep....

Pipo: What shall I do?.... What shall I do?.... Oh Pythoness of King Saul, enlighten me!... Almighty God, send me an angel who will whisper an idea in my ear!... Damn it, I'm breaking my head thinking of

something, and yet, nothing comes out of it... Pipo, think of something, fast, if you want to save your skin..... Blazes, I've got it! I've got it!..... Oh, mother, what a smart son you brought into this world!... Now, I must move.... and fast....

Pipo was on the move before it was dawn...

Lucius: But, who the devil is calling at this time?

Pipo: It's I, Pipo..... Please open the door!...

Lucius: What's the matter, man? Are you having some nightmares? Are the police after you?

Pipo: I'd rather that a whole squadron go after me.... but that's not what I'm here for...

Lucius: How's that?

Pipo: Nothing, good man. Tell me, how many barrels of oil do you owe my master, Phanuel?

Lucius: A hundred. You, yourself, made me sign the receipt, don't you remember? Is that what you came here for?

Pipo: You ask so many questions, old man. Look, here is your receipt: "I, Lucius, son of Luciano, am in debt of a hundred barrels of oil to Phanuel, in accordance with the Galilean measurement."

Lucius: What are you doing, you fool?

Pipo: I just tore the receipt that you had signed.

Lucius: So.....?

Pipo: And so, please sit down. Here, I'm giving you a new one, a blank one..... Write: I, Lucius, son of Luciano, am in debt offifty barrels of oil.... to Phanuel... yes, yes, write that, fifty barrels...

Lucius: But Pipo....

Pipo: Sshhh! Just shut up...

Lucius: What will your master say if he finds out?

Pipo: I don't care anymore what he'll say. What you'll say matters more to me, my friend, Lucius.

Lucius: I?

Pipo: Yes, you, my friend... Listen to me carefully.... Now, you only owe Phanuel fifty barrels of oil, thanks to me, your friend, Pipo, who's helping you and who cares for you..... Good-bye, old man, and go back to bed at once, that you may not catch cold!

Then, he left and knocked at another door...

Urias: A hundred sacks of wheat, that's what I owe your master, Phanuel.

Pipo: A hundred sacks? Don't you think that's too much, my friend, Urias?

Urias: That's what I say, Pipo.... I'm but a poor man... I wonder how I shall finish paying what I owe your master...

Pipo: Don't talk anymore, Urias. I'm so touched.... and moved to tears. Here is your receipt... I just tore it. Sit down here and write another one.... Just put eighty only. "I am in debt of eighty sacks of wheat to the miser, Phanuel..." Well, strike out the word miser... And don't forget, I'm doing this for you because you're my friend....

Urias: Thank you, Pipo, thank you...!

And so, Pipo, spent the whole night knocking at every door, waking up the debtors of his master, Phanuel, and making them sign new receipts... When the sun peeped through the mountains of Basan and the roosters of Capernaum began to shake their wings, Pipo, the crafty steward, had finished his mission...

Pipo: What a night!.. Now, old Phanuel may kick me in the ass if he wants to..... I'm ready for it!

At mid-morning, he went to see his master...

Phanuel: There's nothing to talk about, Pipo. I don't believe your stories anymore...

Pipo: But master, Phanuel...

Phanuel: Let's get this over with, once and for all. You have been an immoral steward. I never want to see that disgusting beard of yours ever again.

Pipo: Well, master, if you say so.... Look, here are the keys to the farm and... here are the receipts of all your debtors....

Phaniel: Very well, leave them here..... And now, you're dismissed.

Pipo then headed for Lucius' house....

Pipo: Oh, Lucius, oh!

Lucius: What happened? Tell me, my friend.

Pipo: Oh, Lucius, something unexpected happened, like the fire that burned Sodom. My master, Phaniel, just fired me.

Lucius: He fired you?..... But why?

Pipo: Because he did.

Lucius: What an injustice! Pipo, believe me, I understand your predicament.

Pipo: Believe me, Lucius. Nice words alone won't be of any help.

Lucius: Pipo, my house is your house. If you need shelter, if you need something warm to eat, some cash in advance.... just let me know, I'm your friend!

Pipo: I wasn't expecting any less from you, Lucius!

Then Pipo proceeded to the other debtors of his former master...

Pipo: Urias, now I help you, tomorrow, you help me.

Urias: What do you mean, Pipo?

Pipo: Yesterday was today and today will be tomorrow.

Urias: How's that?

Pipo: I was fired from work, man, and now I'm as poor as a rat...

Urias: Weep not, Pipo. What are friends for during these difficult times? You can count on me, my friend!

Pipo: Thank you, Urias, thank you...

That morning, Pipo took the same road he took that midnight.... knocking once again at the doors of his former master's debtors....

John: What the hell! Look how Pipo was able to get away with the devil!

Peter: Remember what I told you, Jesus? This guy as always, is back on his two feet! He has a way with everything!

Jesus: Know what's on my mind, Peter? If only we were all smart enough to fight for the lives of other people, just as Pipo has been smart enough to save his own skin, then things would be different! If we were as crafty as he, then the Kingdom of God would move forward, don't you think so?

Pipo: Hey, what's up, fellas? I'm sure you're talking about me, is that right? Well, so you won't be talking at my back, here I am. Know what? It's my treat tonight!... Hey, one-eyed, fill up their empty glasses with wine, and let them shout: Cheers to Pipo! Yeah, my friends..... one, two and three....!

All: Cheers!!

Jesus took up his glass too, and gave a toast to Pipo, the astute steward... And so in between gulps of wine and jokes, we spent a hell of a time in Joachim's pub beside the wharf.

Jesus was laughing when we left, saying that in order to work for the Kingdom of God, one had to be as innocent as the doves but as clever as the serpents....

The land owners of Galilee usually hired the services of an administrator or foreman (steward) who would oversee their lands and attend to their laborers or debtors. Generally, many of these big land owners would not stay permanently in their farms. At any rate, the system of strict accountability as we know in our countries did not exist in the Oriental economy of that period. This explains the anomalous practices committed by Pipo.

Pipo is an astute and a naughty man. An opportunist. But he is capable, sagacious, shrewd, and resourceful when it comes to getting himself out of a difficult situation and saving his skin. Jesus does not criticize his behavior; instead, he gives it importance. More so, he finds in Pipo a model of astuteness that we must imitate. The parable about the “crafty steward” – which in this episode appears to be a real thing – has always turned out to be something surprising. The fact that Jesus proposes a cheater to serve as a model of behavior is something highly audacious. Jesus knows how to see beyond the indignant reaction resulting from the conduct of the steward. The mission of the Kingdom is so urgent and there are obstacles along the way. The moment is so crucial that the speed with which this Pipo knows how to solve his problem seems admirable to him.

Jesus was never a moralist, a religious person, a puritan. He was a man in the midst of life, faced with a multitude of events, some of which were dramatic, others gray, and still others, amusing. Before such, he was a man with a sense of humor. He laughed, he knew how to laugh, he loved to laugh. We can't understand how Jesus is able to show his profound wisdom before life and people if we think of him as someone buried deep in his thoughts or uncaring. The ingenuity of a number of his parables, the ultimate surprise at the end of a number of them – this, for example – are telling us about a born humorist.

The Bible is full of wit or bits of humor. It is impossible to read an infinity of its pages with open mind and heart without smiling. One finds in them irony, ingenuity, mischief, all kinds of human wit. Humor is a sign of maturity and wisdom. The wisdom to take distance, to establish the relativity of things, not to give importance to one's self. Real humor always has some roots of true humility.

Those who do not know how to laugh at themselves, or who do not accept that others can laugh at them, may be suffering from pride, and think too highly of themselves. Persons of authority who cannot take a joke, who get irked by the same, who censure humor, are afraid of losing something of their power which probably hinges on impositions rather than on true moral authority. For a lot of people, what is religious is synonymous to seriousness, sadness, solemnity, and even bad humor. Something is wrong when Christian communities are made up of people who cannot afford to laugh.

Jesus suggested to his friends to become as “clever as the serpents and as innocent as doves” (Mt 10:17). The serpent was considered in Israel – as in the majority of ancient cultures – as a highly dangerous animal, a symbol of the bad spirits. Jesus, who was a man of life, a positive man, saw values in the feared animal: it is shrewd, wary, wise and knows how to get out of a difficult situation. The dove, the symbol of submission, will necessarily be the counterpoint of the serpent. Shrewdness is also a Christian virtue as it is a human virtue. The equilibrium that is necessary so that shrewdness is not transformed into cynicism and innocence does not convert itself into stupidity, may be obtained by Christians in the constant confrontation of their actions with the word of God, with reality and with the advice given by the Christian community.

(Lk 16:1-9)

85

THE MASTER WENT ON A JOURNEY

That afternoon, Rufina had gone to the market while her children played “horsey horsey” in the street. Grandmother Rufa was alone, taking care of Tatico, the youngest of her grandchildren, when Jesus entered Peter's house.

Rufa: Go to sleep, my little baby, ro, ro, ro, rorrito....

Jesus: Hello, grandma!

Rufa: Sshh!..... Hush, Moreno, this creature has just gone to sleep.... Poor child, with so much noise around, he can't even get a decent sleep....

Jesus: Okay, grandma, what's new around here?

Rufa: I gave him an egg to eat, but he wouldn't touch it. This little boy has lost his appetite...

Jesus: No, grandma, I mean, how are things going here....

Rufa: Oh, my son, speak louder, you know I'm hard of hearing!

Jesus: I said, how are things.....

Rufa: All I can say is that this house is full of crazy men, the craziest of which is my son-in-law, Peter.

Jesus: Why do say that, grandma?

Rufa: You're asking me? Oh, my son, don't you know the kind of people you go with?.... Come..... Just between the two of us.... I believe you've got the wrong company....

Jesus: D'ya think so, grandma?

Rufa: Like Matthew, for example... it's not because he's a tax collector, but because he's a jinx, a goner, Jesus.... Nathanael, the bald guy, is another one.... I don't like him..... Thomas, the stutterer, is another..... Hmm... It takes all kinds in your group!

Jesus: You think so, grandma?... But people can be surprising at times...

Rufa: I don't want them to go to jail.... but....

Jesus: I said people can do surprising things, grandma... A lot a people just need the chance to be able to do something worthwhile.... Listen.... There was once a wealthy man who had to go on a journey....

Master: Where are my stewards? I want the three of you to see me at sunset. There's something we'll talk about before I leave...

Jesus: So they went to see him...

Levi: What is it, master?

Master: Levi, you must have heard that I'll be away for sometime... Here.... take these five thousand dinarii... Invest them in whatever business will be beneficial to you..

Levi: I don't want to brag, master, but rest assured that the money will be in good hands...

Jesus: Then the second steward came in...

Master: Come over, Jehu.... Here, take these.... they are for you..

Jehu: What's this, master?

Master: I'm leaving two thousand dinarii for you to figure out what to do with them. You'll report to me upon my return. Is that all right?

Jehu: Yes, master.

Master: Invest the money in any business and

Jehu: Hold it, master! I know exactly what to do with the money.... ayayay! You'll see how much I'll earn with all this money...!

Jesus: It was the third steward's turn.....

Master: Here, Mattathias.... take these thousand dinarii... they are all yours...

Mattathias: A thousand dinarii.... for me..... but why?

Master: Yes, for you..... who else?.... Aren't you my third steward in the farm?

Mattathias: But, master, I....

Master: Aren't they enough?

Mattathias: On the contrary, master... Pff... now, what'll I do with so much money?

Master: Well, invest it! Buy whatever, sell whatever. Make use of the money! While I'm gone, I want you to manage part of my money, as Levi and Jehu will do... Is that clear enough?

Mattathias: Well, yes, master... I mean, it's not so clear... but.... pff... I'll try my best, master.

Jesus: In a few days, Levi, who received five thousand dinarii, became a shrewd and great businessman...

Levi: I bought horses from you for three hundred dinarii. That's it. Then you returned fifty for the horseshoes I had sold you, but since I paid you one hundred seventy-five in advance, now I only have to pay you half of the excess, that is...

A Man: Wait a minute, wait a minute, Levi... You gave me twenty-five yesterday...

Levi: And another twenty-five today, fifty all in all. Plus the other fifty from the horseshoes, less one hundred seventy-five included in the payment of one hundred which you had discounted when I gave you five dinarii for the nails...

Jesus: Jehu, the second steward, who received two thousand dinarii, was posting a big sign at the door of his house...

Jehu: "Loans at ten percent"... Yeah, this is better... People know me well and soon they will all crowd here.... To be a good lender, I must be smart and strict. I can be both... Well, come to think of it, I can be in any business of my choice... Ha, ha...!

Jesus: Meanwhile, Mattathias, who received a thousand dinarii, spent seven sleepless nights...

Mattathias: What if I invest in Don Celio's business?... Yeah, but I don't like this fat man. No, I'd rather not ask him... Pff.... What if I buy something.... but what?... Olives....? If they get spoiled...? No, no, forget it, Mattathias. If I buy, then, I've got to sell, and I need the charm to do it, which I don't have..... Ahummm....!

Jesus: Time went by..... and after many moons had passed, the master returned from his trip...

Master: Where are you, my servants? Come, come, I want to see you right away!

Jesus: Levi, was the first to see him...

Levi: Master, how was your journey?

Master: Very well, Levi, very well. How did your business go?

Levi: Here it is, master. Count it, count it.... you gave me five thousand.... I earned another five thousand dinarii...

Master: Good work, man!

Levi: I told you everything would be fine, mmmm!.... Just like honey that passes through the throat. I knew exactly what was in my hands..... I'm like a cat, you know, who can leap through any wall!

Jesus: Then, Jehu went inside....

Master: What have you got, Jehu?

Jehu: Something better than I had imagined, master! Believe me, I've been very lucky... Look... you gave me two thousand dinarii, didn't you? Here are your two thousand dinarii... I was able to earn the same amount...

Master: Good work, man!

Jesus: Finally, Mattathias appeared....

Mattathias: Here is your money, master...

Master: Let's see... eight hundred... nine hundred... one thousand... But, how much I did give you, Mattathias?

Mattathias: One thousand dinarii, master. That's everything, up to the last centavo. No more, no less....

Master: Didn't we agree that you were supposed to invest it in something that you might gain from it?

Mattathias: That's right, master, we had agreed on that. But, knowing how stupid I am, if I put this

in business I knew I would lose it in just two weeks. So I decided to keep it and... well, I dug a hole in the ground and there I kept it until now.

Jesus: His ears were red on account of his embarrassment, and he was trembling all over. Once again, he experienced the bitter pain of being a failure....

Mattathias: I am a worthless servant, master. The children in school used to ridicule me because I was always the last... My mother also said: "You were born dumb, Mattathias, and there's nothing we can do.... You know better than anyone else, master.... I'm a good for nothing servant...."

Rufa: That's exactly what I meant to tell you. That guy was a worthless one, irresponsible, a weakling and a bum!

Jesus: That's all right, grandma, that's all right. Mattathias was a worthless man. The master was not. He was the generous type, he had a big heart. That's why the story didn't end there....

Master: I'm good for nothing! I'm good for nothing. And the more you say it, the more you believe it and the more it puts you down! Damn it, Mattathias! Listen to me very well: next time, I'll have your ears pulled if you don't come up with something....

Mattathias: Yes, next time.... but... will you give me another chance, master?

Master: Sure, because I know you can do it, you can do something worthwhile. Of course....

Jesus: Later, at one time, the master had to undertake another journey... He called for his three stewards again. To Levi, the shrewd businessman, he entrusted five thousand dinarii again, and another two thousand to the able lender, Jehu. He gave poor Mattathias a thousand dinarii...

Master: Invest this money until my return. Work hard and cheer up! Good-bye!

Jesus: The master's journey was shorter this time. After a couple of moons had passed, he was back to the farm. He summoned his three stewards at once....

Master: What did you say, Levi?

Levi: You see, master, this time I had wanted to take things easy.... there is no hurry, I told myself.... anyway, I'm a very clever man..... and so....

Master:you did not do anything. You were too confident, weren't you? Levi, I can't believe that with a lot of things that you could have done..... you didn't accomplish anything.

Jesus: Then, Jehu, the second steward entered...

Jehu: Ahuuuummm...! Here are the earnings...

Master: What's this? Only three cents?... What's happened?

Jehu: Well, master, life is so difficult, you know.... Ahuuuummm...! Things are not like before...

Master: You're not like before. You also got tired of it... You slept on your glory...

Jesus: Finally, Mattathias arrived, running, his hair in disarray....

Mattathias: Master, look, count this... You gave me a thousand dinarii, and I've got another thousand! I earned it, look! I did it, master!

Master: I knew you would do it, Mattathias. I was sure of it.

Mattathias: That was what pushed me to do it, master. You had so much trust in me, I felt I had two wings at my back. I was afraid, yes, but I remembered what you had told me: you can do it, Mattathias, you can do it.

Master: And you did.

Mattathias: Yeah, I did!... Pff!! With my eyes closed, I went to purchase some tomatoes. Then I traded them for wool. I put up a shop. It was not that bad, after all, as you can see... I earned a

thousand dinarii, master!

Master: You have worked very hard, Mattathias. With so little, you were enterprising. Now, I'll give you more dinarii, and more responsibility. I know you will succeed. Because he who can be trusted with little things, can also be trusted with big things....

Jesus: So, you see, grandma, people can be amazing.... Did you like my story?

Rufa: Sure, I did. But the story, I suppose does not end there.

Jesus: What d'ya mean, grandma?

Rufa: Of course, because if this master gave Mattathias a second chance, then he should also give the two sleepyheads a third chance, don't you think so?

Jesus: You're right, grandma. God always gives us another chance. Not only a third one.... He always does.

The parable of the "talents" is, together with that of the bridesmaids, that of the thief who arrives in the night and that of the master who returns unexpectedly, a parable "of crisis." That is, these were parables told by Jesus basically to awaken the conscience of the leaders and the priests from whom God was to ask for a rigid accounting of what they had done, or better, what they had stopped doing for the people. After these series of stories, the first Christian communities sounded catechetical calls for Christian responsibility, that they would stay alert and "negotiate" their time, their life and their potentials, in preparation for the forthcoming judgment.

That's how the parable of the talents is generally understood: It is like a call to responsibility. Nevertheless, the society of technology and efficiency in which we live or that which the means of communication are insistently trying to show us gives us, at present, a literal, yet dangerous presentation of this parable. It would appear as if God had a preference for the smart people, the most intrepid, the most daring businessmen. In fact, that image of a prosperous businessman who can accumulate as much wealth is the one favored by the capitalistic society, and this could totally discredit the authentic message of the gospel. In the face of such literal translation, this could also mean that the ones who have less, the indecisive, the inferior, may not seem acceptable to God. It is clear enough that a number of the poor, because they are the most exploited, find it difficult to face responsibilities, to be creative. Because of this, the one who is called to a task of responsibility, as the parable describes – to be active in negotiating – is given another important dimension of responsibility: not to rest in one's own security, nor to be satisfied with previous success. The talents, commonly referring to the total amount entrusted by the master to his stewards, are a measure of the weight of each talent which ranges from 26 to 36 kilos, whether gold or silver. In general, a talent is equivalent to a thousand dinarii. To be able to appreciate the approximate amount of money that a talent represents, one must take into account that the ordinary wage of a farmer or laborer is equivalent to one dinarius for a whole day's work.

As regards Christian behavior, this parable is a call to responsibility. In relation to God, the story aims to highlight the infinite trust God puts in humans and likewise, God's infinite patience with our failures and limitations. It is the trust shown by parents to their children which makes children believe, the affection/love given which teaches a child to live. Some orphans grow without the security of parental affection and love. Children grow and become mature and becomes adult one day, they then live independently of their parents with the trust parents have put in them. They will someday acquire their own freedom. A similar things happens with God. God empathizes with human weakness; God never condemns, but always opens a door, always gives us a chance. God wants us to live. If we can discover the profundity of this endless trust, then we shall keep on growing and we shall become free even before God.

Only the trust born out of love can discover the sometimes hidden qualities of a person. This occurs not within the personal level only, but also structurally, within society. Only in a society organized in justice, in cooperation, can one discover one's worth, the mission he or she must undertake. This can be achieved in the same manner as the master has done in the parable, by giving opportunities to all. One of the major forms of injustice of the social organization in our countries is the tremendous inequality of

opportunities among human beings. From the time of conception, and in all aspects – medical, nutritional, cultural, housing, recreational, labor – only a few enjoy everything, while the great majority are barely given the opportunity to surpass subhuman levels of existence. All this is contrary to God's plan, who wants equality for all humans. If there is a plan where equality among men and women can be and ought to be a reality, then it is precisely this: the equality of opportunities.

(Mt 25:14-30; Lk 19:11-27)

86

THE BLOOD OF THE GALILEANS

That winter, Jerusalem was garbed in white, the snow covering the walls and roofs of the houses. It was the month of Kisleu, and our town was festively commemorating with lighted lamps the dedication of the Temple and the purification of the altar. Jesus and some of us went to the capital during the feast. As always, we stayed in the town near Bethany, in our friend, Lazarus' inn....

Lazarus:As you have heard, countrymen, it happened only yesterday, shortly before you came. Two Galilean men were in the Temple, offering a lamb as sacrifice. Then two Roman soldiers entered and apprehended the two, who were then dragged into the Antonia Tower.

Martha: They were staying with us, the poor guys... In fact, their clothes and some of their things are still in the patio...

Lazarus: One of them is the son of a certain Reuben, of Bethsaida. They say the other one is called Nino. His mother is from Chorazim.

Jesus: What will they do to them, Lazarus?

Lazarus: Search me, Jesus! The life of these prisoners hangs on a spider's web. It depends on Pontius Pilate's whims. As you can see, the scoundrel didn't have any respect for the Temple, nor for the sacrifice they were offering...

Judas: History repeats itself. Now the Romans are making fun of us, as they did with the Greeks before... Two hundred years back, during the time of the cruel Antiochus Epiphanes of the Greek domination, the foreigners had sacked the Temple of Jerusalem and profaned the altar of the sacrifice. After the initial victories of the Maccabees brothers, our ancestors performed great ceremonies of atonement. Since then, in winter of every year, we celebrate the feast of the Dedication....

Mary: Hey, Lazarus.... Martha....!

Lazarus: What's with you, Mary? Have you got any news?

Mary: Yeah. This cripple, Saul, told me that the two Galileans would be judged in the Antonia Tower. Pilate will present them before the people...

Judas: When will this be, Mary?

Mary: This morning, Judas. If we hurry, we'll get there on time...

Lazarus: C'mon, guys, let's all go there!

Lazarus, his two sisters and we, left the inn together. In a few minutes we reached the village of Bethphage, climbing through the slope of Mount Olives, crossing the Cedron river, which was slippery on account of the snow, until we got into the city of Jerusalem. Many people milled in the streets. Slowly, we shoved and pushed our way through to the front of the Antonia Tower... The black and yellow flags of Rome waved along the battlements... A giant bronze eagle on top of the flight of steps was a grim reminder that our country was under the domination of a foreign nation....

A Man: That's where the trial is!... Run, the governor is coming!

Below the Tower was a small, paved patio, where Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, tried the prisoners in public and meted out their sentence....

Pilate: When will you ever learn, huh? How do you want me to say it?... These clandestine meetings are never allowed!

A Woman: My son didn't do anything, governor. He was not meeting anyone!

Pilate: Your son and his friend were conspiring against Rome. Do you know what I do with conspirators? I crush them like bugs and fleas! Do you hear?

Pontius Pilate, the governor of Jerusalem and of the whole southern region, was a tall and robust man. He wore a white linen cape and a pair of braided sandals. His hair was short according to the Roman style, and his face showed an eternal expression of contempt for us Jews....

Woman: Governor, my son is innocent! He was inside the Temple!

A Man: And the Temple is a sacred place!

Pilate: The Temple is a mousetrap. It's the job of my men to catch the mice hiding in that hole.

Woman: Governor, they were not in conspiracy! They were offering a sacrifice, shedding the blood of a lamb on the altar of God!

Pilate: Oh, yeah? So, that was what they were doing?... Well, then, the blood of your son and that of the other Galilean will be mixed with the lamb's!..... Soldiers, bring the rebels before me, now!

Soldier: Right away, governor.

There was tense silence while the Roman guards headed for the pits of the Antonia Tower, where the prisoners awaited their sentence. In a short while they were back, pushing with their lances the young Galileans who were caught inside the Temple the other day... One of the men was tanned. His hair was dishevelled and his robe was torn into pieces. The other man was shorter, and he was covering his face with his tied hands. He was trembling, like he was suffering from fever. His back was smashed by lashings and beatings....

Woman: Have mercy on them, Pontius Pilate, and please pardon them! Where is your heart?... Can't you find pity for a mother that is weeping?... Please forgive my son, please!

Man: Clemency too for the other fellow!

Pilate: There's no forgiveness for rebels like them. Rome is an eagle and no one can escape from her claws. You Jews are a stubborn people. After the feast, when you go back to your homes, tell them what you are now to witness with your own eyes....

Pontius Pilate looked at all of us in great contempt and raised his ringed hand for the fatal command....

Pilate: Behead them!

Woman: No, no.....!

Two soldiers from the governor's guards held the Galileans and lay them down on the humid tiling. Two other soldiers came close and unsheathed their swords.... and in one slash, the heads of the young men came rolling..... We all gave out a terrifying cry. The mother of one of the victims screamed like mad and a group of soldiers had to cordon the area in order to control the mob.... But Pontius Pilate remained unperturbed....

Pilate: Bring me the victims' blood!

A soldier then took a jar, headed for the victims' bodies and filled the jar with the blood that gushed out of their necks.... and presented it to the Roman governor who was standing by.

Pilate: This is going to be my sacrifice. I will pour the blood of these stubborn rebels on the altar of this

more obstinate God of yours. Listen well, all you rebels: the only powerful god is seated in Rome. Emperor Tiberius is the only true God. He reigns over you all and mixes the blood of the sons of Israel with the blood of lambs and dogs. Long live Caesar!

A Man: Damn you, Pontius Pilate! May the blood of your own head be shed someday!

There was great bewilderment. Many of us had to close our eyes in horror as the governor, who was heavily guarded, crossed the hallway that joined the Roman fortress to the Temple. Without any deference, Pilate proceeded to the altar of the holocausts and amid the soldiers' laughter, poured the blood of the two young Galileans, which was still warm.

Another Man: This is desecration! Pontius Pilate has profaned our altar! Shake your robes, brothers!

Another Man: The governor is making a mockery of us! A while ago he brought Caesar's flags to the Temple's atria! And now, this!

An Old Man: If the Maccabees rose up in arms, they would again take up the sword of revenge!

Man: Revenge, yes, revenge! I swear there will be revenge!

Since then, more protests were mounted in Jerusalem, more people's uprisings were staged and more assassinations occurred. A group of zealots tried to dig a tunnel up to the tower of Siloah, a small arsenal beside the fountain of Ezekias, where the Romans kept their swords and other weapons... But the tower's foundation was already in a state of decay, and the tunnel caused the construction to suddenly collapse... claiming the lives of several Galilean families who had built their houses near the tower.

Lazarus: The situation is getting out of control, Jesus...

Jesus: And it's getting worse, Lazarus. There's a rumor that Pilate is reinforcing the surveillance.

Judas: Then I'm sure there'll be more prisoners and more to be crucified.

Martha: In that case, then why do they continue to get themselves into this mess, why?

Judas: Because some of them can't stand it anymore, Mary. They have no right to trample on us, like these damned foreigners are doing.

Mary: But neither is it right to bring down a tower right on the heads of those eighteen innocent victims, my gosh! They can break Pilate's bones if they wish to, but what good can they get out of it? The poor and innocent become victims of something they haven't done, huh?

Lazarus: They're doing it to provoke Pilate.

Mary: That's right, and Pilate continues to kill to provoke them just the same. That's how it is now. We can never feel safe in the street, for anyone can just thrust a dagger on us at any street corner. No, no, no, I wouldn't want to hear any more.

Jesus: Yeah, you're right, Mary. Pilate is a bloodthirsty man. And those who fight him become equally bloodthirsty. But who has taught them to be such? To be violent? This is basically the problem, don't you think so? Those in power sowed the wind, now they are reaping tempests from the poor. This will go on and on if we don't reform our ways, and soon we shall all drown in a bloody deluge.

The feast during that winter was embittered by crimes, by fear of the Romans and their surveillance. It was during that week of the Dedication when a group of Jews gathered around Jesus in one of the arks of Solomon's Gate...

A Man: Hey, you, Nazarene, what's wrong with you? Until when will you keep us guessing, damn it!

Another Man: If you're the Messiah that we're waiting for, then say so, so we don't waste any more time!

An Old Man: What we need is someone with the gall to face up to Pilate's people!

All: That's it, that's it!

Jesus: No, my friend, no. What we need are a people who will know how to face up to themselves! When the babies are small, the mother leads them by the hand so they don't fall. When they grow up to be adult, they have to walk on their own two feet.

Judas: What boy are you talking about, Jesus?

Jesus: About us. Now is the time for us to strengthen our knees and lift our heads. Freedom is in our

hands! We don't expect it from anyone! The Messiah is here, among us! He is there where two or three persons are fighting for justice! Yes, God breathed over dry bones, the bones were joined and the people awoke and stood up. The Messiah is like a big body, with head, hands and feet! All the members have the same spirit, and all parts are necessary! We've got to break the oppressive yoke among us, and together raise the flag of command! We've got to construct among us a new Jerusalem and write anew on her walls: "The House of God, the City of the Free"! Here there will be no violence, neither the violence of the wolf who kills the lamb, nor the violence of the lamb who defends itself from the wolf! We shall convert our swords into hoes, and the bars of prison cells into plowing grills!

A Man: Now he's talking! Long live the Messiah of God!

All: Long live the Messiah, long live the Messiah!

A Soldier: Hey, you Galileans, disperse, all of you! Don't you know that such assembly is prohibited? C'mon, c'mon, beat it, if you don't wish to lose your heads like the two other Galileans!

The Roman soldiers tried to arrest Jesus, but we succeeded in hiding him. We mixed with the people who were assembled at Solomon's Gate. That same day we undertook the journey to Jericho, as the situation in Jerusalem made it more and more difficult for us.

There are only two seasons in Palestine: summer and winter, or you could say the seasons are hot and cold; or sowing time and harvest time. The month of Kislev corresponds to the ninth month of the year, around mid-November and mid-December. Since Jerusalem is a desert city, the temperature goes very low in winter, and it snows expectedly.

The Feast of the Dedication of the Temple was held in December and lasted for eight days. This feast, commemorating the consecration of the Temple in Solomon's time, had been revived during the time of the Maccabees (about sixty years before Jesus was born). During the evangelical times, the people of Israel commemorated in this feast the victory of nationalistic fighters, the Maccabees over the Greek Seleucids, the country's invaders, as well as the purification of the Temple and the construction of a new altar after the holy place was desecrated by the atrocious Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes. This was also celebrated as the Feast of Light, as a reminder that the dedication of the Temple brought back the custom of lighting of the holy light with seven candles. In Jerusalem, the torches used during the Feast of the Tents were again lighted for this feast. Thus, the Dedication was popularly known as the Feast of the Winter Tents. The celebrations also bore a messianic flavor, like those of the harvest. At present, the Jews solemnly light the "hannukah" (a candelabra with eight lights, each one corresponding to each day of the feast).

*Rome ruled over her colonies in the provinces of the empire through the officials representing Caesar. These provinces were of three types: The **senatorial** (governed by the Roman proconsuls, who were annually replaced), the **imperial** (led by Roman governors, legates and procurators) and other provincial territories, which were governed by the natives who served the economic and political interests of the empire. Galilee was the latter, which was governed by Herod. Judea – whose capital was Jerusalem – was definitely an "imperial" province, beginning the year after Jesus was born. Ruled by a governor, it was militarily occupied by Roman troops, and the administration was in the hands of Roman officials. Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea from year 6 to 36 (B.C.E.).* He used to stay in the coastal city of Caesarea – the official residence of the governors – and he would transfer with his special troops to Jerusalem for the feasts, as these were the most favorable occasions for uprisings and people's movements. The priestly class of Jerusalem, the highest religious-political authorities of Israel, was in total collusion with the Roman imperial power represented by Pilate. The image of Pilate as an intellectual, a man of certain stature, and cowardice projected by a certain Christian tradition does not correspond to historical reality. All information provided by historians of the period – Philon, Flavius Josephus and Tacitus, Jews and Romans as well, confirm the cruelty of that man who was detested by the Israelites for his continuous provocations and who occupied such a high position as a result of his intimate friendship with Cejanus, the*

military favorite of Emperor Tiberius. Cejanus was one of the most influential characters in Rome during those years. Aware of the religious aversion of Jews for images, Pontius Pilate paraded the images of Caesar Tiberius along the streets of Jerusalem and placed them in the ancient palace of Herod the Great. This caused an uproar on the part of the people. Pilate likewise desecrated the sanctuary on various occasions, by robbing the Temple's treasury for his construction projects, etc. Luke's text, the basis of this episode, most likely corresponds to one of these political vendettas and religious profanations, pushed by the hateful governor. Since Galilee was the principal focus of the country's anti-Roman movements, Pilate persecuted the Galileans, whom he always suspected with more atrocity as Zealots.

During the Roman domination, the Antonia Tower (Antonia Fortress), which was situated beside the Temple and joined to the most sacred places of the sanctuary by interior stairways, was the seat of imperial garrisons. These were tasked to guard the whole city, especially the Temple's open area, where the multitude converged. In the tower was the tribunal – the praetorium – where Pilate would judge all cases of rebellion against Rome and her laws. This did not in any way resemble the present day tribunals, as there was no justice to speak of. The sentences – as in the case of opposition to the empire, could always be a death sentence – depended solely on the arbitrariness of the governor. Pilate's cruelty and profanity unleashed the people's protest movements and violent retaliations by the Zealots, the most organized group for the purpose. The Roman rule, oppressive both politically and militarily, and economically exploitative, generated strong resistance in Israel. This was the country in the entire empire that was in constant, angry rebellion against the Roman power; the last uprising was the year 70 after Christ. Jerusalem was destroyed; this caused the start of the long Jewish exile that has lasted up to our time. Jesus' time was rife with the violence of the oppressors and the counter-violence of the oppressed, leading to the inevitable deaths of innocent persons as in the case of the collapse of the Siloah Tower, the subject of this episode.

Violence is generated by unjust structures of power. This is found in laws, in courts, in economic inequality, in the lack of opportunities. It comes in the form of hunger, labor exploitation, ignorance, lack of good hygiene, etc. The same may also come in repressive form such as torture and assassination when it is met with resistance. There is another form of violence. It is resorted to by those who because they have grown weary of injustice resist, attack and fight. From the Christian point of view, it is not fair to judge these different forms of violence with the same measure. How can one resort to counter-violence without feeling hatred, which is blinding and dehumanizing? How to avoid the risk of using counter-violence as a form of retaliation or revenge is one of the major challenges before us.

Solomon's Gate was situated in the eastern facade of the large outer patio of the Temple. In the words addressed by Jesus to the people who were gathered to listen to him, he was referring to the prophetic texts and those of Paul himself, about the idea of a "collective Messiah" (Ez 37:1-14; Is 2:3-5; 9:2-4; 11:6; I Cor 12:1-29 and 13-11). From the prophet Micah (Mic 2:12-13), he began to open the minds of the Israelites to the idea of the capacity of the poor to liberate that originates from "the least" of the people, or from the entire people of Israel who had been captive in Babylon but became the bearers of Messianic promises of the Kingdom (Zep 3:11-13). Jesus, faithful to this theological tradition, never wished to monopolize messianic action, but he was more his real self in this liberating leadership among the poor (in contrast to accepting the role of a self-glorifying triumphant Messiah).

(Lk 13:1-5; Jn 10:22-40)

87

IN A SYCAMORE BRANCH

From Jerusalem, we journeyed to Jericho, the city of the roses, which Joshua had conquered with the

sounding of his trumpet. That winter, Jesus was already known all over the country, from the lands of the tribe of Dan, to the desert of Idumea, from the sea of the Phoenicians to the barren mountains of Moab... When we arrived in Jericho, the people were excited as they all came out to receive us....

A Woman: He's coming! The prophet is coming!

A Man: Long live the Nazarene! Down with the Romans!

The people pushed us on all sides. We could hardly move along the street lined with trees that joined the old walls of the city to the square-shaped plaza.... The synagogue was there, and also the Roman Headquarters and the Customs House....

Zaccheus: Damn it, what is this mob?... People can't even do their work well when they gather! They don't even know their numbers well!... Hey, you, what the hell is going on?... Is there a fire, a wedding or a funeral?

A Young Man: A prophet! The prophet of the Galileans is here! A man called Jesus of Nazareth!

Zaccheus: This is too much! As if we hadn't had enough of John, that long haired guy who drowned the people in the river!

Young Man: This man has got long hair too, Mr. Zaccheus!

Zaccheus: He'll suffer the same fate, too, young man! Israel produces a lot of prophets on one hand, and crucifies them with the other hand!

Young Man: Take a look at the crowd, Mr. Zaccheus. The people are milling around like ants! Look!...

Zaccheus: Hey, are you making fun of me, or what?

Zaccheus would have needed a stool to peep through that window. He was plump and balding. He was a short man. Ever since, he had devoted himself to the despicable job of collecting taxes for the Roman government. His ability with numbers and other money matters had made him the chief of all the tax collectors in the area. Everyone in Jericho hated Zaccheus. People made fun of his short stature, as a way of getting even with him, on account of his abuses.

A Man: Shorty, shorty, traitor! You're done with and your trade, too! The new prophet will drive away the Romans and all those who lick their asses, like you!

The entire city was out in the street. As Zaccheus left his office, all kinds of insults rained on him....

A Man: The prophet from Galilee is out to squeeze the eagle's neck of Rome, you hear that, shorty?!... Like this, look,..... grrr...!

Zaccheus: He'd better do it before Saturday! You owe me fifty dinarii, and if you don't pay me soon, you'll end up in jail.

Another Man: It's you who'll pay for all this, you leech! You can't get away with it, even if you hide yourself in a latrine! The Nazarene will get you out of there and he'll drag you through the street!

Zaccheus: Eat your hearts out..... imbeciles!

The people continued to swarm the plaza, shouting and applauding Jesus, who could hardly be seen because of the multitude.... Zaccheus elbowed his way among the crowd. Underneath his arm was the leather roll where he kept the receipts, listed all debts and tax payments... Gradually he succeeded in getting away from the place, took a shortcut through some of the huts and headed for his comfortable house at the other end of the town....

Zaccheus: The prophet from Galilee.... Well, well... This country is dying of hunger, but we never run out of prophets.... There's so much talk everywhere, but nothing happens... everything is the same... Things can't change with words... Such beautiful words, but they could spell danger.....

Before entering his house, Zaccheus looked at his reflection on the ditch that crossed through the city.... He saw that he was small, ridiculously small... Once again, he was filled with bitterness....

Zaccheus: Nothing has changed, damn it, nothing!..... What a disgusting life!

He went inside his house, kissed his wife, as always, and sat at the table to eat... Then, he lay down to get some sleep..... But the noise persisted and....

Zaccheus: What the hell! Can't I even sleep in my own house?

Sarah: It's the prophet who is in town. Everyone is so excited about him!

Zaccheus: That man again!... I don't want to have anything to do with that prophet... Close the window, woman!

Sarah: It's already closed, Zaccheus. The noise outside is very loud.

Zaccheus: Open it then!..... After all, who can sleep with that noise... Pff! Ahuuuummm! How disgusting!

Zaccheus grudgingly stood from the bed, climbed on a stool and peeped through the window....

Sarah: Can you see, Zaccheus?

Zaccheus: Whom?

Sarah: Who else? The prophet?

Zaccheus: What the heck do I want to see him for?

Sarah: I dunno... but since you peeped through the window.....

Zaccheus: Do you, too, want to go see him? Go ahead, see him. It's not my business prying into other people's lives!

Zaccheus' wife opened the door, headed for the street until she was lost amid the screaming and admiring crowd...

Zaccheus: What a man!... What bait has he got in his hook?... Even Sarah has fallen for it... Who would ever think of it... my wife.... is also following that Galilean..... Well, well. There must be something special in this fellow.... all these rascals are mesmerized by him... I think I'm getting curious too....

The noise and uproar in the street had heightened....

A Man: Tell us, Jesus, when will you drive the Romans out of the country?!

Another Man: Tell us what happened in Jerusalem, prophet!

A Woman: Hey, little girl, watch where you're going. You're stepping on my corn!

Another Woman: Neighbors, look over there, and don't lose sight of him! Ha, ha!

All of us turned to where that woman with long braided hair was pointing. Perched in one of the sycamore trees in the patio of his house was Zaccheus, his short legs balancing from one side to another...

A Man: How in the world could the dwarf climb that tree? Blazes! The devil is coiled like the serpent in paradise!

An Old Man: So, you too, wanted to see the prophet, huh?

Man: Don't you know that the Nazarene is out to pluck your tongue, shorty?

Another Man: Get down from there, scoundrel! Hey, guys, let's pull him down!

The people forgot about us as they hurried toward the patio of the publican's house. A group of men surrounded the sycamore and began to shake its branches with all their strength.... We also started to run toward the place...

Jesus: Who's that guy?

A Woman: Zaccheus, the chief of the tax collectors of the area. He's a cheat and a thief!

A Man: A treacherous dwarf!

Another Man: Down with the traitors! Down with the traitors!..

Jesus: Zaccheus, come down fast, or these people will pull you down faster than you imagine.

Finally the crowd from Jericho, amid shoutings and laughter, succeeded in bringing Zaccheus down. His little body fell down in the middle of the patio...

Man: Beat it, go away, you traitor! Dwarf!

Zaccheus: Get out of my house, all of you! Go to hell, all of you!

Woman: After you!

Jesus forced his way through the people to be able to get to where Zaccheus was, whose face was red with rage and shame. He was exchanging barbs with his neighbors....

Woman: Crush him like you would a roach, prophet!!

All: Yeah, crush him, crush him....!

Jesus: Hey, Zaccheus, how much will you collect from us?

The neighbors exchanged surprised glances when Jesus said this... Zaccheus, likewise looked at Jesus amazingly...

Zaccheus: What did you say?

Jesus: I said, how much are you going to collect from us? We'll have lunch in your house... If night befalls us, then we'll also have to spend the night here...

After a while, we all went inside Zaccheus' house. No one in Jericho understood it, and everyone criticized Jesus. Everyone was indignant that Jesus had chosen to go into the house of that man who was hated by all. We, too, who had great contempt for publicans (tax collectors) and much difficulty in accepting into our group Matthew, the tax collector from Capernaum could not easily force ourselves to be seated at the table of the chief of tax collectors...

Zaccheus: Be my guests. Ask whatever you want, eat whatever... This house is never wanting of anything!

James: Naturally, since you steal everything...

Zaccheus: How's that?

James: No, nothing..... I was talking about carob beans.... In Galilee there are many....

Zaccheus was happy. Seated on one end of the table beside Jesus, his eyes were glowing with joy. For the first time, after so many years, he had guests in his house....

Zaccheus: Well, yes. What I least expected was this....having the prophet here in my house and breaking bread for all of you, my friends from Galilee!

Peter: And they almost broke your legs, shorty!

Zaccheus: Pardon, what did you say?

Peter: That the meat is so tender, countryman!

Zaccheus: But of course. These are lambs from my flock from the other side of the river. We have direct transaction with the Moabite shepherds and we command a very good price.

John: Plus the taxes you've been collecting, you can't complain, rascal!

Zaccheus: Were you saying something....?

John: Oh, nothing, I was saying that..... it's Monday today! Ha, ha....!

James: And tomorrow is Tuesday! Ha, ha, ha!

Peter: And after tomorrow is Wednesday! Ha, ha, ha!

The laughter spread among everyone as if an invisible hand had tickled us pink... Peter and I were laughing over a plate of lamb. Zaccheus was all red, laughing to his heart's content... Suddenly he stood from the table...

Zaccheus: Ha, ha, ha...! Ay.... ha...! I'd like to say that..... although I'm a short man, you don't really have to break my legs.... I'm short, but I'm not deaf.... Yeah, the carob trees of Galilee.... I know these hands of mine have robbed a lot..... It's true..... My neighbors are right: I'm a leech and I've sucked so much blood...

We looked at each other, not knowing what to do or say.... until Jesus broke the silence....

Jesus: Forgive us, Zaccheus. We didn't mean to offend you....

Zaccheus: Save the nice words, prophet. Things won't change with words.

Then Zaccheus went near the shelf where he kept his receipts and list of accounts. He put them on the table where everyone could see...

Zaccheus: I won't talk much. I'd like to do it this way.... My debtors are free. Those whom I cheated, I shall return four times of what I've stolen. I'm getting half of the money from my chest: it's no longer mine, it's yours!

Zaccheus words stunned all of us. Jesus was filled with joy...

Jesus: Know what, Zaccheus? I believe that today you've been the prophet in Jericho.... Look, a just deed is worth more than a thousand words... Yes, things do change if people change. And the truth is that..... salvation has come to your house today!

Zaccheus: What did you say? Do you want some more wine? Why, sure, Jesus! Come, give me that cup! And all of you too!!

Once again, Zaccheus filled all pitchers with wine. We continued eating and drinking in the house of the chief of the publicans. Without knowing it, we were proclaiming the great banquet of the Kingdom of God, where the most downtrodden were to occupy the seats of honor.

Jericho is a city partly situated in the desert of Judea, in the middle of a fertile plain with tropical climate. It is found at 250 meters below sea level and about seven kilometers from the bank of the Jordan River. After the excavations done in 1952, a conclusion was made that Jericho is the oldest known city all over the world, having discovered the remaining wall dating back from the Stone Age. Jericho was the first city conquered by the Israelites when they entered the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua (Jos 6:1-27). These very significant ruins are found at about two kilometers from the present Jericho.

In Jesus' time, Jericho became important as it provided a passageway for the trade caravans crossing the desert. On account of this, an important office was set up to attend to the collection of taxes. Heading this office was the chief of the publicans or tax collectors, Zaccheus. The taxes collected in Jericho enriched the Roman coffers, since the city was in Judea, a province administratively dominated by Rome. (The taxes collected by Matthew in Capernaum were intended for King Herod.) The post of tax collectors was auctioned off by the Roman authorities, leasing it to the highest bidder. Then the publicans (tax collectors) had to pay Rome for the lease and other expenses. Rome set the fixed amount to be collected in the form of taxes. The publicans would earn very little if they were honest with the collection. That is why they arbitrarily increased the rate of collection, so they could get rich from the remaining amount. Their continuous dishonesty and their collaboration with the Roman powers earned for them the hatred and contempt of their own people.

The sycamore is a large tree that originated from Egypt from the fig family, and grows along the coasts of Palestine and the entire plains of the Jordan. It is also known as the "crazy fig tree." Its trunk is the source of durable wood, which was used in Egypt for coffins of the mummies. Its roots are very strong, and its thick leaves are heart-shaped. Its fruits which resemble small figs are abundant.

Zaccheus is one of the few rich men – together with Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea – converted by Jesus. His conversion, a result of his curiosity to take a look at the prophet and the kind of welcome he gets from Jesus, could not be sheer sentimentalism nor a vague desire to be good. His conversion does not remain in words nor in remorse of conscience: it is something that involves his pocket. He pledges to return to the people he has cheated four times the amount he has taken from them. Half of what would be left shall be given to the poor. It is a well concretized conversion, and even an "exaggerated" one. Zaccheus will apply, not the Jewish law, but the Roman law to himself – as a form of "penitence" for his fraudulent acts – which requires the return four times the original of the stolen amount. The Jewish law is less severe compared to the latter. He will also do away with the Jewish norm which prohibits the use of more than one fifth of one's fortune to help the poor. Instead, he shall donate half of it. Jesus contextualizes this authentic conversion of Zaccheus with a gesture that shows a profound theological

color. Generally it is believed the sinner should be welcomed with affection, but only after his repentance. We even believe God works in that manner. Jesus shows a new religious attitude. Jesus accepts Zaccheus even before he begins his penitence. The fact that he wants to go to his house – even to eat with him, a great indication of friendship – seems inconceivable to Zaccheus. That gesture is so amazing that it overwhelms him, as it obviously lets him see and admit to who he is, and what he has done to the people he has cheated. What his neighbors' reproaches with Zaccheus have failed to do Jesus succeeds in doing, by risking this gesture of unconditional welcome. That man, despised by everyone, within himself suddenly recovers his lost dignity and so his life becomes transformed.

The rich are not excluded from the Kingdom of God. What happens is that for them, conversion must necessarily involve giving up their wealth, precisely because they keep on selfishly storing their wealth for themselves. When he discovers his lost dignity through Jesus' gesture of welcome, Zaccheus likewise discovers why he has lost that dignity. He realizes that he has acquired his wealth while oppressing the poor people of his town. He not only realizes this, he takes positive action as a result of this; the giving up of his ill-gotten wealth.

(Lk 19:1-10)

88

AT THE GATEWAY OF JERICHO

In the middle of the desert of Judea, in the valley of the Jordan, Jericho lies like a green, circular tapestry, the city of roses and palm trees, the oldest city in our country.....

Bartimaeus: Thank you, countrywoman! God give you joy for this dinarius....!

A Woman: Say that again! We all need to be happy! Go home, Bartimaeus, and buy yourself something to eat....

Bartimaeus: No, madam. I'd rather stay here. There's nothing in my house. A lot of people pass this way. I don't get to see their faces, but.... I smell their joys and sorrows.... and that's living! Please, please, I'd like to stay here....

At the gateway of Jericho, along the wide and dusty road that leads to Jerusalem, blind Bartimaeus was seated, begging alms..... for many years. Although his beard was spattered with white hair, he was not yet old. His nervous hands clasped a greasy well-worn cane...

Woman: Well, countryman, God bless you!

Bartimaeus: May God's twelve angels guide you, madam. May God reward you!

Bartimaeus held the dinarius carefully and kept it in his pocket. Then he closed his unseeing eyes and began to journey in the valley of memories....

Ruth: Uff! Here is the leather, Bartimaeus... It weighs more than all the tripes of a whale.....

Bartimaeus: What do you know about whales, when you've never been out to sea, you dense woman?! Ha, ha! But I do know that you're getting stouter than Jonah's whale! Ha, ha! I can't even carry you in my arms anymore!

Ruth: Hey, you're tickling me! Ha, ha! C'mon, stop that ribbing now, you've got to cut the leather. A lot of orders are pending.....

Bartimaeus: Okay, okay..... C'mon, woman, give me a hand. Bring me the razor...

Bartimaeus had his small tanning shop in one of the the long streets of Jericho. He lived with his

wife, Ruth, a cheerful and resolute woman, whom he loved even in his dreams. Months and years had passed, and Bartimaeus' life was filled with joy, thanks to his work, the love he had and his friends.....

Bartimaeus: Ruth, bring me the needle...

Ruth: The needle? I haven't got it.....

Bartimaeus: Neither have I....

Ruth: Let's see, Bartimaeus, let's see.... How disorganized you are.... Where the hell.....? But.... it's right there on the coffee table, my gosh! Had it been a snake, it could've bitten you!

Bartimaeus: Where'd'ya say it was?

Ruth: There, stupid, don't you see...?

Bartimaeus reached out his arm to the table, and groped until he found the long and thick needle he was using to sew the pieces of leather

Bartimaeus: Okay, okay, now I've got it....

Ruth: You didn't see it before?

Bartimaeus: No, no, woman. I couldn't see it.....

The disease spread rapidly, and in a few months Bartimaeus' dark eyes were deprived of light forever. He couldn't use the needle, nor cut with a razor. He had to stop working in the shop. Anguish and sorrow filled his house. Like two unwelcome guests, they became his constant companions when he was seated at the table during the day, and at night when lying beside his wife....

Bartimaeus: Ruth..... oh, Ruth..... where are you? Woman, where've you been, Ruth, Ruth!

A Woman Neighbor: May I come in, son?

Bartimaeus: Who are you.....

Neighbor: I'm Lydia, Ruth's "comadre"...

Bartimaeus: Where is she?... When I woke up, she wasn't here.... Where's she?

Lydia: She's gone, my son.

Bartimaeus: What do you mean?

Neighbor: Try to understand, son.... You can't see..... and you can't work..... She's still young.... She has the right to be happy.

Bartimaeus: What silly things are you saying?

Neighbor: What she wanted me to tell you.... that she was going to Bethany, to her parents' house.....

Bartimaeus: With another man....? She went with another man, didn't she?! With someone who's not blind like me!.... Tell me! Tell me!

Neighbor: Look, son, since you haven't had any children....

Bartimaeus: But we love each other!..... Unless it doesn't matter anymore.

Neighbor: Bartimaeus, try to understand.... Life has been okay with you..... but not with her....

Soon enough, Bartimaeus had to close down his shop. His blindness had left him in anguish, without his work and the love of his wife. Little by little, his friends, showing him cold compassion, had abandoned him....

Bartimaeus: This was not the life she wanted.... Not this kind of life.... What about me?... All my little savings are gone.... What can a blind man do?... Beg? But I'm still young and strong enough to work and... how stupid of me! The blind are a good for nothing lot!... They must be led by the hand.... If they forget their canes, then they're no better than children... They are useless..... There's no choice but to beg for alms, like beggars do.... I curse the day I was born! Is this why I came out of my mother's womb? God! Why did you make me see the light, and then deprive me of it?

A few days later Bartimaeus was groping his way, with the help of a cane, through the street where the residents of Jericho and the traders from other cities passed. Seated along the border, he began to beg for alms. Later, when it was dark, he would go back to his old and solitary house. Feeling so weak for not having wanted to eat nor to talk to anyone, he would just lie down on the mat and press his dead eyes with his closed fists....

Bartimaeus: It's always night for me.... always! It'll always be so forever!.... How was the face of Ruth?..... How did she look? I can't remember anymore how her eyes looked.... her lips.... I'll never see her again..... What am I living for? Nothing! Nobody needs me and I.... need no one..... I just want to get out of this nightmare....

With too much effort, Bartimaeus stood up from his mat and began to rummage around his empty shop.

Bartimaeus: The sycamore tree at the patio.... yes..... A rope will do.... It will be difficult, but it will only be for a moment... It's more difficult to live like this, expecting nothing... only death.... which doesn't have to go after me.... since I'll go seek death myself.... Yes, yes... that'll only take a while... and everything will be over! But where the hell is that rope? Where....? Damn it! And everyone will say: "He has gone mad"... I couldn't care less.... No, no, I didn't go crazy, I just became blind, which is worse.... The rope was somewhere here.... the rope.... where's the rope...? God, where the hell is that rope?! Did you hide it from me, God?... Or was it the devil?..... Damn the two of you!..... Can't I even choose to hang myself?

Bartimaeus was crawling all over the shop, looking for the thick rope with which he used to bundle the bales of leather... He looked in all corners for the rope, in vain....

Bartimaeus: Damn, damn! Where's the rope? Where?... I want to die!... I want to die!.... I want.... I want to live.... I.... I want to live.... I want..... to live.

Bartimaeus: Why hadn't I killed myself that day?... No, it was not the devil.... Now I'm dead sure it was God who hid the rope from me... it was God who gave me the desire to live... I don't know how you got here, Bartimaeus, old, lazy bones, after all these years of pitfalls and frustrations... But here you are, stronger than the sturdy sycamore at the patio, appreciating the fragrance of the most beautiful roses in the world... This is life, I say.... And life is worth living, good Lord...!

Boy: Goodbye, Bartimaeus! We'll talk again next time!

Bartimaeus: Hold it, little boy.... Why the hurry?

Boy: The prophet of Galilee is leaving Jericho...!

Bartimaeus: Who, Jesus of Nazareth?

Boy: Yeah!. He's heading this way, with lots of people! I'm gonna tell my friend to see him!

As we were leaving Jericho, many men and women of the city went out to the street to see us off....

A Woman: Long live the propet of Galilee!

A Man: Down with the Romans and the people's oppressors!

Bartimaeus: Hey, give way and let me pass, damn it! I haven't seen the prophet yet and I wish to see him!

An Old Woman: Jesus, when are you coming back to Jericho?

Man: We hope to see you next Passover!

Bartimaeus: I want to see the prophet!

Man: Stop yelling, you idiot!

Bartimaeus: I want to see him!

Woman: Shut up, will you, Bartimaeus!

Bartimaeus: I want to see him! I want to see him!

Man: How can you see him, when you're blind, damn!

Bartimaeus: Then, let him see me... prophet Jesus! Jesus!

Jesus: Who's that guy screaming, grandma?

Old Woman: This blind troublemaker here... the one in the middle...

Jesus: Give way, please... and tell him to come over...

Man: So, you got away with it, Bartimaeus... C'mon, slip through the crowd.... the prophet is asking about you.....

Blind Bartimaeus, his face radiant with joy, cast his beggar's cloak in the air, threw his cane away, and suddenly stood up, and made his way through the crowd till he was facing Jesus....

Bartimaeus: Jesus, the prophet...!!!

Jesus: Here I am. What's your name?

Bartimaeus: Bartimaeus. I'm blind...

Jesus: Why were you shouting?... Did you want something?

Bartimaeus: Yes, if you would allow me to touch your face...

Jesus paused and closed his eyes for a moment.... Bartimaeus stretched his arms toward him and touched his wide forehead, his cheeks, his nose, the shape of his lips, his thick beard....

Bartimaeus: Thank you, prophet. They've been telling me a lot about you. Some say you're ugly. Others say you're a good man, still others say you're this and that.... Now I know...

Jesus: How long have you been blind?

Bartimaeus: Oh, for many moons now... it's been ten years since...

Jesus: So, you've been waiting for ten years...

Bartimaeus: Well, hoping and despairing... Once, I wanted to take my life. But God hid the rope from me...

Jesus: And now?

Bartimaeus: Now, I've learned to accept it. Life is beautiful until the hour of death. Don't you think so?... Well, so.....

Jesus: Wait, Bartimaeus, don't go... will you let me touch your face?

Bartimaeus: You..... touch my face? But you're not blind....

Jesus drew near and placed his hand on the eyes of that man who never stopped smiling...

Jesus: Your hope served as your cane through all these years... You had the vision to see what matters most, Bartimaeus... and you saw it with your heart.

Bartimaeus: And... and... now I can see you... No.... this can't be...! I can see your face, prophet! I only knew about you through hearsay, but now, I can see you with my own eyes!!

The city folks of Jericho pushed us and they shouted with all their enthusiasm. They were saying that Jesus was the Messiah, the one our people had been awaiting for many years! Bartimaeus was weeping with joy. He was with us for a long while, as we undertook our journey back to Galilee... At the gateway of Jericho, along that dusty road lay the dirty beggar's cloak and his old cane....

In the middle of the desert of Judea, Jericho appears as an oasis, fertile and green. It is also known as the "city of palm trees." The roses of Jericho were famous (Ecl 24:14) although we are not sure if these are the same flowers that we know as such at present. Some people believe that these flowers are the adelfas, which are typical in a tropical climate. Nevertheless, Jericho is an authentic green land. The so-called Fount of Elisha, watering the whole of the land, accounts for its fertility. Tradition has it that it was Elisha, the disciple prophet of the great Elijah, who had purified and enriched its otherwise saline waters (2 K 2:14-22).

The gospel hardly gives us information about the person of Bartimaeus – although it preserves his name, a detail that is less common in the scriptural/biblical history of miracles – and the cause of his

blindness, etc. In this episode, Bartimaeus gives us a picture of a man about to commit suicide. His failure in life – in his work, his marital life, his friends – has been unbearable. Having been in extreme desperation and having descended to the darkest pit of helplessness, he learned to hope. The miracle performed by Jesus on his dead eyes teaches us that life always has a meaning, in spite of everything. The meaning is sometimes too obscure to discover, too difficult to comprehend. Those who have suffered a lot are aware of this – but this can only be appreciated if we give life a chance to show us what it has in store for us.

The act of suicide is very rare in the Bible. It appears only once in the entire Old Testament (2 S 17:23). Other cases would be those of the warriors who would rather die than to fall into the hands of the enemies, like what happened to Saul, the first king of Israel (1 S 31:1-6), although these deaths acquire a more distinct meaning compared to a “dispassionate” suicide. In the New Testament, the only case of suicide would be that of Judas. This is in view of the great respect for life that characterized the whole people of Israel. For the Israelites, life came from God and it belonged to him solely. The human being was destined to live, and life was always better than death. Some books of the Old Testament, marked by a certain pessimism, related that death was better than a life of sickness (Ecl 30:14-17). In any case, Israel’s people prioritized life.

There is not a single word in the Bible orienting Christian reflection on suicide. However, after knowing the attitude of Jesus and his words, it can be said that in a Christian context, there should not be any condemnation for the suicidal person. (Sometimes, especially in past years, a church burial was denied a suicide victim, as a form of posthumous punishment.) Suicide is resorted to as a consequence of desperation, fear, an extreme psychological maladjustment, etc. None of these, which can be the basis of such a dramatic decision, should be a cause for rejection or condemnation because this whole gamut of human flaws always find compassion and understanding in Jesus.

In this episode, Bartimaeus has something in common with Job, that biblical character who rebelled before God because he thought he was not deserving of his misfortunes: sickness, destruction, abandonment by friends (Job 3:1-4; 20-23; 6:2-4). At the end of the book, Job utters to God the same words that come from Bartimaeus’ lips: “I knew you only by hearsay, but now, I can see you with my own eyes...” (Job 42:5). Although we must stay away from sorrow and pain, try to avoid it, minimize it and fight it in order to become faithful to the will of the God of life, sometimes we cannot escape from it. We have to accept our own limitations. In this case, the positive acceptance of pain and sorrow, can make us more mature, more tolerant, and more understanding. In other words, we become wiser in the face of life and before God’s mystery. Pain can be a passageway to a new way of facing the reality of God. Like what happened to Job and to Bartimaeus.

(Mk 10:46-52; Lk 18:35-43)

89

THE LEPERS OF GINAE

Male Leper: Lord God! I come to you on bended knees, with my face lying prostrate on the ground!

Take pity on this unfortunate creature, I’ve got nothing but bumps all over my body! I pray you, Lord, I beg you and I trust in you! I pray, I beg and I trust in you!

Female Leper: What are you saying, chatterbox? Do you think you’ll impress the Lord with your silly talk? Oh Lord, you know fully well I’m worse than he! Look, even the wounds in my body outnumber the hairs on my head!

Another Leper: Shut up, scabby, I came here first! I started praying before you!

Male Leper: I pray, I beg and I trust in you!

Female Leper: Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy!

There in the caves of Ginae, near the mountains of Gilboa, lived several men and women suffering from the worst of all known diseases at that time: leprosy. The lepers were not allowed to enter any town, nor knock at any door, much less to enter the synagogue. That is why, every Saturday some of them would gather in the big cave to pray for healing. They would scream and burn incense leaves so that their prayers would reach God through his ears and nose....

Male Leper: If you heal me, I swear I'll never cut my hair nor taste a drop of wine for the rest of my life!

Female Leper: Every month I'll walk barefoot to the Sanctuary of Shiloh!

Another Leper: I'll consecrate my life in service to you! If you cure me, Lord, I'll go the Monastery of the Dead Sea to study the holy scriptures day and night!

While the rest of the lepers prayed, Demetrius, the Samaritan, entered the cave. He was also a leper....

Demetrius: If someday you get cured, rascal, go get yourself a twin brother and let him fulfill your oath!..... Hey, folks, stop praying and listen to me! The Lord in heaven must've strained his ears with your stories. Why don't we give him a chance to rest? Listen.... Do you know what I've discovered?

Male Leper: How would we know..... Unless you tell us?

Demetrius: If you don't shut up, how can I tell you? Listen... Haven't you heard of Jesus of Nazareth?

Female Leper: Who's he?

Demetrius: He's a prophet! He is God-sent! They say the angels are with him!

Male Leper: Prophets make me laugh, more so if they come from Galilee!

Female Leper: Me too! And I won't lift a finger for them.

Demetrius: What you should move are your feet. I heard that he and his friends are taking the road to Capernaum. And they have to pass by Ginae.

Male Leper: Well, let them pass where the road is good. What the hell do we care, Demetrius?

Demetrius: They say he has healed many sick people... He simply touched them and..... presto! they're cured.

Male Leper: Well, as for me.... presto!..... I'm not moving from here.

Another Leper: Neither am I. Look, Demetrius, I understand how things are. You come out of the cave, walk four miles, the heat, the exhaustion, the blisters on your feet and... what for?

Demetrius: What for? To see the prophet, to talk to him! Maybe he can help us.

Female Leper: Help us! Ha! You are a Samaritan, and that's why you're stupid enough not to understand that the only thing we can do is to accept our fate. We're all doomed.

Demetrius: That's right, we're doomed... but we don't lose anything by trying! So, my friends of ill omen, stop lamenting. Let's all go and see the prophet!

Male Leper: No, Demetrius, we're not going.

Demetrius: Why not?

Male Leper: The prophet is not passing through Ginae.

Demetrius: Don't tell me. How did you know?

Male Leper: Because I know. I'm sure they'll take the road to Dothan. People like us are jinxed; we are never lucky. We'll just be wasting our time.

Female Leper: I think our friend, Ptolemius, is right. They'll take the road to Dothan.

Demetrius: You know something? I think with a band like you, even Nebuchadnezzar would fall from his horse! It's alright. Just burn your leaves here, while I go and wait for him along the road of Ginae. But don't tell me I didn't inform you!...

Some Lepers: Wait, Demetrius, don't go... we..... wait....

Amid grumblings and protests directed against Demetrius the Samaritan, the rest of the lepers put on

their black and dirty rags to cover their bodies. The little bell hanging on their clothes was a reminder for people to stay away. After walking four miles, they took their place along the road coming from Jerusalem and leading to the entrance of Ginae...

Male Leper: We came at the wrong time, Demetrius! Look, we've been waiting here for quite some time..... and... what for?

Female Leper: So we'll know they have taken a detour to Dothan, that's it.

Another Leper: I bet nine against one, we'll never get to see even the shadow of that roving prophet !

Demetrius: Well, I'm taking the bet. You'd better start paying, my friend, because.... I swear they're those people coming along the bend!..... Look!..... Can't you see? It's they, I'm sure!!

Male Leper: My grandfather's name was "Sure" and he's dead now...

Demetrius: Can't you see them? The prophet of Galilee is coming!!

Male Leper: Okay, okay,..... so what?

Demetrius: Now we'll tell the prophet our problem, and maybe he can help us.

Male Leper: Do you think he'll waste his time on us? C'mon, Demetrius, don't aim so high. If you fall, it could even be worse. The prophet will pass by this road, all right, without even getting a glimpse of us.

Female Leper: I agree with Ptolemius. We've got the jinx, you know.

Demetrius: Okay, okay, but I want to see the Galilean.....Hey, Jesus, help us. Do something for us. Hey, Jesus, over here even for a minute, please!

Demetrius, the Samaritan, signalled to us with his two arms. He was shouting and jumping, so we would see. Behind him, the other lepers were looking at us suspiciously....

Demetrius: They have seen us! And they're coming over!... Hey, Jesus, prophet!... But... what's wrong with you? Will you just stay there like wet chickens? C'mon guys. Move, do something!

Female Leper: What do you want us to do, Demetrius?.... C'mon, tell us...What can the prophet do for us, huh? How can he help us?... Don't be too excited... you might only be disappointed.

Male Leper: I agree with her. C'mon, Demetrius...

Demetrius: Okay, I know, I know. Go to hell, all of you! Even patient Job can't put up with you!

Jesus, Peter and I were walking ahead of the rest and when we saw the group of lepers at a stone's throw, we came to a halt...

Jesus: Hello, my friends, who are you? Where did you come from?

Female Leper: Now, he'll ask us to go away...

Demetrius: We came from the caves of Ginae! We're lepers! Can you help us?

Jesus: Well, the truth is... We didn't bring anything... Not even food nor money...!

Male Leper: I told you! It's all just a waste of time, plus a bonus of blisters on our feet..

Jesus: ...Why don't you see the priest and tell him your problem!... Who knows, you might be lucky!.... Goodbye!

Male Leper: "Who knows, who knows"... This prophet knows nothing and passes it on to the priests!

Female Leper: "Go to where the priest is and tell him your problems!" Great!

Another Leper: Well, a man forewarned is worth two men. I brought some dates with me for the long walk back to the caves. Goodbye!

Demetrius: Come back, you bunch of idiots! If the prophet had told us to go barefoot to the Sanctuary of Shiloh or to go up the Monastery of the Dead Sea, wouldn't we have done that?

Male Leper: Well, in that case...

Demetrius: Well, he's asking us something easier: to go to the priests of Ginae. C'mon, let's all go there and see what happens.

Male Leper: See what happens! I'm sick and tired of this "come and see what happens" thing! I pray, I beg, I trust.... but nothing happens!

Demetrius: If the prophet said this, then it must be for something!

Male Leper: Of course, it's for something! It's to make fun of us! Didn't you see his expression?... I'm not going anywhere...

Another Leper: Neither am I.

Another Leper: Nor I.

Another Leper: Look, Demetrius. do you think with these wounds in my leg, I can show myself to the priest for examination?

When Ptolemius, one of the lepers, took off the rag that covered his legs, everyone was aghast...

Male Leper: Look.... Look!!... My skin has become so smooth, like a child's!

Female Leper: How can it be possible!.... Let me see...

Another Leper: Your's too, Marthina!.... And yours, Godolias!!

Another Leper: And mine!!! And yours too, Demetrius!....

The lepers of Ginae wept and shouted with joy when they realized that their wounds had disappeared without any traces at all....

Male Leper: Something fantastic has happened here!

Female Leper: It has never happened before! It's a bunch of miracles!

Demetrius: See, I told you, killjoy! The prophet of Galilee has cured us, without even lifting a finger! C'mon, guys, hurry up! Run...!

Male Leper: Where to, Demetrius? Where do you want to bring us now?

Demetrius: To where the prophet is! Whether he is still in Ginae or if he has arrived in Capernaum, we'll go see him!

Female Leper: Are you out of your mind, Demetrius? Why are we going to look for him?

Demetrius: What for? To thank him, damn it!

Male Leper: Forget it, Demetrius. We won't see him anyway.

Female Leper: Of course not! Don't you see he's a prophet?

Demetrius: So?

Female Leper: Prophets just disappear. Remember Elijah, who went up the air in a chariot? We won't see him anyway.

Another Leper: Right. He'll just disappear.

Another Leper: Well, you may go on with bickerings if you want... but I'm heading right now for Bartholo's inn, since my throat hasn't had a taste of wine for three years!

Another Leper: I'm doing the same tonight!

Female Leper: I'll go greet my family in Bethulia!

Another Leper: I'm seeing Martha and Filomena, the good one and the bad one! Hahay!

But Demetrius had left them and started to run along the streets...

Demetrius: Hey, have you seen a brown, bearded man pass by? His name is Jesus of Nazareth!

A Man: No, my friend... Wait a minute, but... aren't you Demetrius, the leper?

Demetrius: Excuse me, madam, did you see a group of Galileans pass by? One of them is Jesus, the prophet.

An Old Woman: No, my son, I haven't seen anyone. I'm also looking for my lost grandson...

Finally, after a lot of running and asking, Demetrius caught up with us, at the mount of Jarod...

Demetrius: Jesus, thank you, Jesus...!

Jesus: Hey, and where are the rest of your friends?

Demetrius: Well, they.... they only think of God during rainy days.... you know!

Demetrius, the Samaritan stayed with us for quite sometime in Jarod's inn. Then they all drank a toast for him and for his nine companions who stayed behind; and for God, who makes the rain fall over the

good and bad, and the sun shine on the grateful as well as the ungrateful.

The original word in Hebrew for leprosy is “sara’at,” which is derived from the expression “to be punished by God.” Leprosy was always considered a horrible divine punishment. The religious “impurity” was thus contracted by the sick person, which made him repudiated by the rest of the community. So the lepers had to live in segregated places, were strictly prohibited from entering the cities and they had to announce their presence in the streets for everyone to avoid them. Since the disease was also perceived to be incurable, the only hope of the patients was a miracle. In any case, if the disease was cured, it had to be confirmed and certified by the priest. (Lev 14:1-32)

Dothan and Ginae are two small cities about eight kilometers apart, situated along the road ascending to Galilee from Judea, passing through the Samaritan mountains. Of the ten lepers praying and suffering in the cave of Ginae, Demetrius is the only Samaritan. There is an interesting symbolism here: The most despised of all (for being a leper and a Samaritan) shall be the only one who will keep alive the trust of the group (because of his faith, the miracle will work for everyone) and the only one who will express his gratitude for what was done to him.

A fatalistic attitude toward life paralyzes us. If everything is indeed written,” if destiny (fate) is something that cannot be contradicted, then nothing can be done but to wait for the time of its fulfillment, for good or for bad. Demetrius will fight against his companions’ pessimism and will mobilize them. This will bring him near Jesus and will open possibilities in his life. A false religion has taught the hearts of many men and women, fatalistic beliefs about life. These ideas are not certain though: We are free men and women. The direction that our life takes depends on us. If still we are not free, if ours is a life that is crushed by suffering and oppression, a fatalistic attitude (it has always been so, it will always be like this) will only perpetuate the situation. It is not destiny that perpetuates it, but our attitude.

In this episode we see how, reluctantly, the lepers go in search of Jesus; how they distrust him, criticize him, and finally, how ungrateful they are. In spite of all these, Jesus heals all of them. This miracle is therefore, a sign that God’s gifts are free. God grants us life, good health and opportunities not because we are more grateful or less grateful or in order for us to be good, but because God loves us. God’s love is unselfish, disinterested, and doesn’t expect any incense burning or applause in return.

Luke, the only evangelist who wrote about this picturesque and “incredible” account of the ten lepers who were healed, wished to elaborate a catechetical scheme about how our attitude toward God should be, and he did it by way of this parable on gratitude. This attitude is important not because God “needs” it to help us, but because being grateful helps us to be truly humble and to be more brotherly/sisterly with one another. There are people who only remember the Lord during bad times. They also follow the rest of the pattern: they are good only at asking. They never express their gratitude. Such behavior obviously implies a certain egoism, while to be grateful makes us aware of our limitations and gives us a certain joy which egoists will never experience. To be grateful is closely linked to human solidarity, to sharing, and to the knowledge that we support one another and are responsible for each other as we involve ourselves in the performance of the common task.

(Lk 17:11-19)

90

JONAH’S MIRACLE

The rumors of what Jesus had done in Jerusalem and in the cities of Judea spread like an avalanche of

stones from the mountain. The stories spread by word of mouth were magnified, and interspersed with legends. They became the topic of discussion in the markets and in the caravans. People said a lot about Jesus. They said lightning rays came out of his head, like Moses; that Elijah had lent him his chariot so that he could travel faster from one place to another; that miracles came out of his hand like butterflies.....

Old Woman: Hurry up “comadre!” I was told how the sick get healed just by passing through the shadow of the prophet! Let’s go!

Jesus’ fame grew like fermented bread. The multitude that followed the new prophet of Israel soon doubled.

A Man: Bend your head a little, “paisana”... with that hairdo of yours, we can’t see anything!

A Woman: Here you go again with your needling!

That winter on our way back to Capernaum, the townsfolk waited at the entrance of the barrio, near the gate of Consolation.

Old Woman: Hey, Jesus, how’s everything in the capital? What did you do this time?

Jesus: The usual thing.... we announced the Kingdom of God.

Old Woman: Yeah, yeah, I know. What else did you do?

Jesus: That’s it, grandma. We talked to the people, opened the eyes of the small fish, that the big fish may not gobble them up.

A Man: What the old woman wants to know is, if you made the blind see!

A Woman: Precisely. How many miracles did you perform this time, Jesus?

When the woman spoke of miracles, the multitude pushed around even harder. Many sick people had come, on crutches or carried in improvised stretchers of intertwined branches. Others were with rags tied around the sores on their arms or legs.

A Man: Bah, what really matters now is not what you did in Jerusalem, but what you will do at the moment, is that right? Look at all these unfortunate people. They’re waiting for you to do something for them.

The sick looked at Jesus with pleading eyes, stretching their arms to touch his tunic. Then, Rebecca, the weaver, forced her way through the crowd until she was facing him. Her right leg was thin and twisted; a cane was her only means of support.

Woman: Heal me, please. Make me walk again! Heal me, prophet, heal me!

Jesus looked at the woman, then he remained silent.

Woman: Heal me! You can do it! Yes, yes, I feel better now. I feel a certain warmth in my body.

The woman suddenly raised her hands toward heaven, hurled the cane serving as her crutch, and shouted to the top of her voice.

Woman: I’m healed, I’m healed!

A Man: Oh, yeah? You might break your other leg with that excitement of yours!

Another Man: Jesus, heal me too! I’ve been ill longer than she was! Clear the way and let me pass!

Julius, the blacksmith, was giving hand blows on the air to be able to get to Jesus and ask for a miracle. He had a hunchback like a camel’s.

Man: C’mon, make a miracle, straighten my back. C’mon, what’re you waiting for? Heal me!

Jesus looked at him sadly, without saying a word.

A Man: What’s the matter? Have you lost your healing power? Why don’t you do something? Why don’t

you heal me?

Woman: You gave back the eyesight of a certain Barnaby in Bethsaida! I'm blind, too, and I want to see again! Or, is he better than I am?

A Man: You can do it! You cured Seraphim in Chorazim. He was deaf and dumb!

The sick people were getting impatient with Jesus, who remained silent, with his eyes downcast. The noise was getting louder and louder. It was at this time when Rabbi Eliab appeared.

Eliab: Our paths have crossed again, Nazarene, this time not in the synagogue, but right here in broad daylight.

Jesus: Are you sick too, Rabbi?

Eliab: No, the Almighty has blessed me with good health. He has likewise given me intelligence, that I may catch the wolves hiding in sheepskin.

Jesus: Then, take a good look at me, Rabbi. Have I got wolf's ears?

Eliab: That's why I came. I'm tired of hearing so many stories. The entire Israel is talking about you. Some crazy men call you prophet. The more brazen ones even refer to you as the Messiah, for whom our people have been waiting for centuries. Very well. What can you say? Are you the Messiah or not? Speak up! Silence means an admission.

Jesus: The tree is known by its fruit. You will know me by my deeds.

Eliab: Let's put things in order, Nazarene. The Scriptures say that when God sends a prophet, he gives him the power to make miracles.

A Man: And Jesus has that power, doesn't he!

A Woman: Jesus has done a lot of miracles, Rabbi! Have you forgotten what he did to Floro, the crippled one? He was brought down from the roof and he came out running with his legs stronger than a paddle.

Eliab: Yes, I've heard of it, but I didn't see it. The heart can't believe what the eye doesn't see.

A Man: What about the fruit vendor with a withered hand, Rabbi? Jesus stretched his hand right in front of you in the synagogue.

Eliab: It's no use crying over spilt milk. Leave the fruit vendor and Floro alone, and stop talking of things in the past. We're all here and I want to see a sign today. Am I asking too much, Nazarene? Look at all these sick people. You can choose from them. Heal whoever you want, but give us one clear proof. Perform a miracle before us, and we shall all believe in you. I'll be the first to believe.

Jesus remained still, his eyes fixed on the ground. Suddenly, he bent over and plucked a few leaves from the ground. He put them in his palm and blew on them. The breeze from the lake carried the leaves on the air.

Jesus: Man's life is like a plant. One day it grows, and with just one last breath, it dies. Our life is in God's hands. Only God has the power to heal us.

A Woman: God and you, because you are his prophet!

Some People: We want a miracle! Make a miracle!

Jesus: Okay. There will be one miracle for all of you, just one.

A Man: Yes, yes, just one. C'mon, do it now!

Some People: Do it on me! Cure me!

Woman: I was here first! Do it on me, Jesus!

The sick milled around Jesus. Rabbi Eliab stayed a little distance away and waited, suspiciously, for the miracle that Jesus was about to make.

Jesus: Just one miracle, my friends. Jonah's miracle. Just this one.

Man: What's happening to Jesus, huh?

Jesus: What's happening now happened before, when God called for Jonah and sent him to preach in

the great city of Nineveh...

Voice of God: Jonah, son of Amittai, get up and go to Nineveh. The Ninevites are violent people. They trample the weak, abuse the orphans and drag the widows to court. Go and shout through the streets of Nineveh that if things don't change, I will make them change. I'll raise my hand and defend the cause of the poor. I shall be firm with those who abuse my people.

Jonah: Change your ways! Change your ways, everyone! This city is built on injustice! If you don't change your ways, Nineveh will be destroyed within forty days! Reform your ways!

King: An order from the King of Nineveh: all from the first to the last, men and women, young and old, must change their ways. Each of us must cleanse our hands which have been stained with blood and violence. Let us all repent before God and practice justice. Who knows? God might also relent from the punishment that we deserve, who knows?!

A Man: Jonah was a great man, alright!

Another Man: Greater than the whale that swallowed him!

Old Woman: And you are greater than Jonah, Moreno!

Man: Then heal me! C'mon Jesus, let's stop all this talk and just heal me, okay! What's keeping you, anyway?

Woman: Make a miracle for us to see!

Jesus: Jonah did not perform any miracle in the city of Nineveh. It was the Ninevites who made the miracle themselves, by changing their ways and living a life of rectitude. The city, which was sick before, healed itself.

Old Woman: My son is sick too! Heal him, like you healed Jairus' daughter!

Woman: Heal me, too! Don't I have the right to be healed?

Jesus: Woman, one gets healed by faith, and not by right.

Woman: I have faith and I believe in God! What more do you want, for heaven's sake!

Jesus: It is God who has faith in us, and hopes that we ourselves perform the miracle, the miracle of Jonah.

Eliab: I've had enough of this talk and please stop pushing around! Will you make a miracle or not? Can you do it or not?

Jesus: Why don't you do it yourself, Rabbi? I'm sure you can. Look, do you know how this poor creature got sick? By bending his back day and night on the loom. That's how he broke his bones! Do you know how this man twisted his neck? By carrying sacks and sacks of flour on his head to earn that measly dinarius. You make the miracle, yourself, Pharisee! It does not consist of bringing back the eyesight of the blind, but offering your pocket and sharing your food with the hungry. It is not cleansing the skin of lepers, but purging the country of the stink caused by the abuses of some people. This woman is crippled on one leg because our country is crippled on two. Let us not ask God for more miracles! They should come from us! The miracle of justice!

Eliab: Now you're talking politics! This is the only thing you can do, Nazarene! Stir up the minds of this bunch of rascals! You're a charlatan, that's what you are! And an agitator! Go away and preach all this nonsense somewhere else!

Another Woman: The Rabbi is right! This guy is a glib, that's all! Let's get out of here, c'mon.

A Man: Go to hell, Jesus! You and your good for nothing stories!

The sick people began to leave, each one going his or her own way. Some were supported by canes, others by crutches. Still others were carried on stretchers, or in their neighbors arms. Soon no one was left in the place except our group. It was getting dark in Capernaum. The cities adorning the shore like a pearl necklace began to light their white lamps. Jesus looked sad, his gaze lost in the water's reflection.

Jesus: Poor Chorazim! After all those preaching in the square and in the streets... you still haven't changed... You're still an adulterous city, worse than Nineveh and Sodom. I pity you, Bethsaida, as you lie in your warm bed in the company of big businessmen, while your people agonize in hunger and suffer in the open cold. You continue to coddle usurers and the gods of violence. You never hear the cries of the

dying innocent. And you, Capernaum, you want to scale the heavens to rob the Lord of his miracles, but you never make an effort to change your ways on earth. You refuse to perform the only miracle that God asks of you: that of doing justice.

People's religiosity that is poorly oriented and nurtured under a situation of misery easily converts into "fantastic tales" of miracles. Religion and faith become identified with something marvelous, amazing, and exceptional. God is reduced to a powerful doctor or to a circus magician. Faith becomes adulterated, its acts simplified into one sole purpose: To be able to believe in a miracle. Yet, what is even worse is that when people succumb into this frenzy, they miss what is most important: The reality of each day that is full of injustice and "sicknesses," clamoring for changes that should originate from us.

In an effort to explain who Jesus is, how he did good by performing miracles, healing the people possessed by the devil because God was with him (Acts 10:38), a number of miracle stories have been transmitted to us by the evangelists, and the gospel texts are spattered with marvelous accounts. All these narrations should not be read as such. A strict, literary criticism of the same will show how some of these miracle accounts are duplicated (compare Mk 10:46-52 with Mt 20:29-34); others are magnified, and still others are loosely elaborated, etc. All this simply tells us that although there is a certain historical nucleus in the stories about Jesus' healings, we cannot convert the gospel into something like a catalog of miracles performed by a powerful superman. This idea is common in many people with poor theological formation. In order to overcome this obstacle which may be a setback in our quest for Jesus and his good news, we might have to start with a differentiation of the terms "miracle" and "sign." The gospel of John, which brings down to seven the number of miracles performed by Jesus, gives us a reason for this. In referring to these acts, he always uses the Greek word "semeion" (= sign). A sign has no value in itself. It points at a certain direction, it indicates a road, a way. It is not the goal, but the means to attain it. In this sense, the "miracles" of Jesus would not be isolated and marvelous acts instigated by his compassion for suffering individuals. If that were so, they would not mean anything at all, and would simply vanish. On the other hand, if we take them as signs that will lead us to an understanding of Jesus' mission, we expand considerably the theology of the miracle, that Jesus of Nazareth has healed a paralytic in the first century of our era: what then, could it mean for us nowadays? But the fact that Jesus, the messenger of God's plan of justice for history, has raised a man from his downtrodden position is a sign that his good news is capable of lifting us from our passivity. A broader and more profound reading of the miracles is therefore necessary if we want to be faithful to the full content of the gospels. This is so because, for every person healed by Jesus, the evangelists are actually giving us a picture of the "prototypes" of people, in which case the picture could be of us perhaps.

Just as there is a difference between a miracle and a sign, we might as well establish the difference between faith and religion. Religion "reunites" humans with God, making the former dependent on the latter. This may be good, but it may also be risky. Sometimes religious consciousness makes us expect from God what we may achieve through our own efforts or through everyone's unity or organization. It might make us fear God's punishments for our evil deeds and shortcomings. Likewise, it might make us feel that God's benevolence may be bought by good deeds: Prayers, sacrifices, vows... These feelings have been entrenched in the hearts of men ever since the creation of the world. Nevertheless, if we want to grow as free individuals, then we must be able to overcome them. In fact, God wants us to overcome them. The proof of this desire is Jesus, who with his word and attitude, lifts up people, and takes away from them the fear of the Lord, making them responsible for their own lives and for history, making them grow in freedom. In the face of such an attitude toward freedom, historical commitment, equality, triumph over fear, etc. is anchored our authentic attitude toward faith, not on religious feelings which may revert people to a childish status if they give in to them unquestioningly.

People or certain groups hiding in the shadow of these fantastic tales of miracles may be concealing an enormous degree of materialism, thus reducing the act of God to a palpable and provable proof of his supposed power over humans. We must realize that healing a number of diseases may be done – in fact this

has been proven in history – by way of a strong psychological impact, by suggestion, and through “faith” in a manner of psychic power, letting loose hidden potentials in our being. Naturally, God is present at this moment, just as God is there when nothing of this sort happens. That is why it is highly perilous to attribute to God’s direct intervention what can be explained as the body’s means to overcome, during specific moments of exaltation. God’s involvement in our life, in history, is revealed in other “miracles.” We just need to open our eyes to realize this. Jonah’s miracle did not consist of his having been swallowed by a whale, and to be spewed out later on, safe and sound. The miracle was that Nineveh, a city wallowing in corruption and injustice, was transformed and the people realized the wrong they had committed, so they changed their ways. We can undertake at this moment, the miracle that God wants of us. The Spirit of God will sustain us in our struggle, keep our commitment alive and grant us hope that will transcend even death.

(Mt 11:20-24; 12:38-42; Mk 8:11-13; Lk 10:13-15; 11:29-32)

91

THE TIME TO GO TO JERUSALEM

That winter passed swiftly, like a comet in the sky. The branches of the almond tree showed signs of their first fruits. The field began to spread its mantle of flowers and the fresh air of spring diffused its fragrance over the plains of Esdraelon.... That day, while we were having lunch in Peter’s house....

Peter: Anything wrong, Jesus?..... Why don’t you eat?

Rufina: Looks like the Moreno hasn’t slept a wink...

Jesus: That’s right, Rufina.... but this is nothing. The truth is, I had to see..... very clearly..... As a matter fact, I have been praying for months, asking the Lord to show us the way and.....

Peter: And what...?

Jesus: Guys, I think the time has come.

James: The time for what?

Jesus: For us to go to Jerusalem. This is also the time when the poor flock to the heart of the city to share what they have and thus confront this old weary world that is about to end. Yes, what we have been saying over and over again in all corners of Galilee, we shall be repeating all over the city.

Peter: Hey, Rufi, did you put a lot of spices in the soup?!.... I think it has gotten into Jesus’ head!

Judas: Well, then, Moreno, when do we start?

Jesus: As soon as possible, Judas. God is in a hurry. There’s so much misery in the country. Herod is committing a lot of abuses in the north and the Romans are getting more atrocious in the south. Meanwhile, Caiphaz and the priests of Israel are talking about patience. Friends, we can’t be patient anymore! It’s time to put an end to all these, to expose the atrocities of these wolves, like Samson did when he set everything on fire!

Judas: Yes, sir! We should not be afraid to burn them. The ash is the best fertilizer ever!

Rufina: All of you will be the ashes! Are you all out of your mind? You were almost arrested last time, and now you still want to go back to Jerusalem? You’re all courting death!

Jesus: Of course, Rufina. This is what we’re gonna do. Samson also risked his life, but God gave him the strength to face his enemy. God will not fail us, either, I’m sure of that!

Thomas: I’m s..s..ure o..oour e..emies have de..deadly fangs,..... b..b..b..ut we have to go!

Peter: And fast! The Passover is near!

Judas: We’ll have to take advantage of the time, fellows. It’s during this time when more and more people

mill around the city.

Peter: And all the wolves come out of their dens. Pontius Pilate will be coming from Caesarea. Herod, from Tiberias. They all get together in Jerusalem for the Passover.

Jesus: We, too, shall go, but not only to remember our ancestors' freedom when they left Egypt, but also to start a new liberation. We continue to be slaves, because the pharaohs are still well entrenched in their palaces in Jerusalem. We'll go there to expose their abuses to their faces, like Moses did!

All: That's right, Moreno! Very well said, Moreno!

Jesus: Go, tell everyone! All those who want to join us. We're all going up to Jerusalem..... to set fire to all of them!

In a few days we incited the whole barrio of fishermen to go with us to Jerusalem. A lot of men and women from the neighboring villages of Sepphoris said they would join us. The city of Capernaum was virtually converted into a beehive. Nothing else was talked about except the journey to the capital in that month of Nissan...

Peter: Join us everyone! The time has come to go to Jerusalem! Hey, guy, are you coming or not?

A Man: Of course! I wouldn't want to miss the action for anything in this world!

Peter: And you, M'am, what's keeping you? C'mon, make up your mind!

A Woman: You better make yourself clear, Peter, and stop talking nonsense, will you? Tell me, what are you up to in the capital, huh? What the hell are you going there for? To look for trouble, to pray, or to have fun?

Peter: Oh, M'am, I haven't had the time to think about that yet! But not to worry, because Jesus knows what he's doing! We're going with him and... we'll cross the bridge when we get there! Believe me, neighbor, you will see, this Moreno is the Messiah that our ancestors have been waiting for!

Woman: Hey, what nonsense are you talking about, scoundrel!

Peter: What everyone else is saying, that Jesus will free Israel and he will smash the faces of these scoundrels who have been making a mockery of us! With Jesus on the front-line, we shall capture the capital and all the cities of the country!

Woman: Oh, yeah? If indeed this Moreno is the Messiah, where's his sword?

Peter: He's hiding it, damn! If he shows it now, the Romans will make him swallow it and all! Long live the Messiah!

All: Long live the Messiah!

Peter: So, what now, M'am?..... Are you going... or not?

Woman: No, no. I'm not going. I'm sick.

Peter: What an alibi! You've got a pair of strong legs to walk to Jerusalem!

Woman: Are you crazy, Peter? You'll have to carry me then like a sack of flour. No, count me out. I'm sick.

Peter: No, you're not. You're just scared, that's all. M'am, remember that cowards never have a place in history.

Woman: Right, and so much has been written about the valiant ones, but to read about it, they are stiff dead now.

Jesus: Hey, Simeon, c'mon and join us. We need courageous people like you, blazes!

Simeon: I'd like to, Jesus, but...

Jesus: But.... what?

Simeon: My family... You know how it is at home... My mother worries a lot about me...

Jesus: And you worry a lot about your mom. Hey, you're almost thirty years old, man, and you haven't cut off that cord yet?

Simeon: Listen, Jesus..... Let me tell my folks about this... so they will understand..... Give me time, will you?

Jesus: Look, Simeon, let me tell you what happened to a neighbor of mine in Nazareth who went to sow and started plowing. While he was plowing the soil, he would turn his head here and there in order to greet

everyone passing by the road... and of course, in the end, he got a twisted neck and the furrows were even more twisted.

Jesus: Listen, my friends: if a bricklayer were to construct a tower, wouldn't he count the bricks first to see if he had enough, so that he would not be left hanging in the middle of the wall? Or if a king declared war against another king, wouldn't he count his soldiers first? If he had ten thousand soldiers and he found out that his enemy had twenty thousand before the battle started, wouldn't he send a peace emissary first? Yes, we are going to Jerusalem... but... how many soldiers can we count on?

A Neighbor: Here, count me in! All I need is a uniform!

Jesus: All you need is a pair of sandals and a cane, brother!

Neighbor: Well, then, I'm ready. To Jerusalem, I go!

Jesus: And after that, what?

Neighbor: What d'ya mean?

Jesus: Jerusalem is just the beginning.

Neighbor: I'll go where you go, don't worry.

Jesus: Are you ready to leave your nest?

Neighbor: What nest?

Jesus: Your nest. Everything that gives you warmth and comfort.

Neighbor: Oh, that's another thing. I'm sleeping on a mat.

Jesus: What if we haven't got a mat?

Neighbor: There ought to be something, a stone, perhaps, to sleep on, I'll say!

Jesus: And if they take the stone from you?

Neighbor: Then I sleep on my two feet, damn it! Even horses do it, and how!

Jesus: In that case, you're one of us. Yes sir! We can count on you!

Julius: Hey, Jesus, I wanna go with you too.

Jesus: Well, then, come. Who told you not to?

Julius: No one, but.... I'm scared, that's the truth. You know, my father was killed when I was a little boy. My mom remained a widow, penniless, and with five mouths to feed. Yes, my father was a brave man, but.... what did he get? That was a long time ago, and yet, as you can see, things haven't changed ever since...

Jesus: Your father lost his life, but you haven't. That's why you shouldn't lose hope. Otherwise, you're dead like your father.

Julius: Yeah, that's it, probably. But, honestly, I'm scared. I know what'll happen. The closer you are to the fire, the easier you end up burning yourself.

Jesus: But fire gives you light. Indeed, Julius, you gain life by losing it. My father, Joseph, also lost his life when he helped the unfortunate ones fleeing from an unjust murder. His life was short, but it was worth more than that of those who protect themselves. They end up smelling like moths. Have courage, man!

Peter: You can't trust this guy, Jesus. He looks scared to death.

Jesus: Aren't you scared, Peter?

Peter: Who, me? Huh! I've never been afraid in my life, mind you! Look Jesus, you know how deeply involved we are in this matter of the Kingdom of God. We've given up everything, even our fears! These guys who join the bandwagon at the last minute just make me laugh. At first, they looked at us like a bunch of crazy guys. Now, everyone wants to join us in Jerusalem.

Jesus: The more, the better. Don't you think so, Peter?

Peter: Of course, but.... they should not break ranks! We've been rowing the boat for quite sometime now.... haven't we?... and when we finally conquer Jerusalem and sing our victory..... something special must be awaiting us, right, Jesus?

Jesus: Something special, Peter?

Peter: You know what I mean, Jesus.... not that I'm interested, but...

Jesus: Oh, I understand. Don't worry. One hundred for every one...

Jesus: For every problem that you had before, you'll have a hundred more. A hundred troubles more and a hundred persecutions more.

Peter: Well, Moreno, there'll be rough and smooth sailing, I say. Everybody loves to sit at the place of honor, no?....

Jesus: Peter, where have you seen a servant seated at the master's place?

Peter: I haven't, but.....

Jesus: No talk. All of us, when we accomplish the task entrusted to us by God, will say just one thing: the task is finished, I complied with my duty. Nothing more...

During the week of going to and from Capernaum informing the people, Jesus never grew tired talking to the people...

Jesus: They will accuse us of dividing and inciting the people. Well, it's true. From now on, there will be division even in the family: if there are five, they will be divided, three against two and two against three, the son against the father, and the daughter against the mother, and the mother-in-law against the daughter-in-law. No one can any longer just wave their arms around. Whoever does not reap, scatters. Whoever does not fight for the poor is against the poor and plays the game of the those who are oppressing the poor.

All: Very well said, Jesus! That's our man, huh, Moreno?

Jesus: Onward, my friends. Jerusalem is awaiting us! God will be with us in Jerusalem and will deliver us from bondage just as he freed our ancestors from the pharaoh's yoke! We, too, shall cross the Red Sea and we shall all be free!

We had never seen Jesus speak so ardently as during those days. His eyes glowed like those of John's, when the prophet cried out in the desert. Like John, Jesus spoke rapidly, as if words were being pressed up his throat, as if time was too short for him to say everything he wanted our people to hear.

The topic about "the time" of Jesus is of utmost significance in the fourth gospel. With this word, John designates the culminating moment of Jesus' life, initiated by his last journey to Jerusalem. The "time" for John's theology is the moment when God will intervene in a definitive manner, that of the fulfillment of the Mission of the Messiah (the final hour, eschatological). It is the moment of the glorification of Jesus and the emergence of the Kingdom of God in history. All this grand eloquence may be expressed in this manner: Jesus' commitment at the time he was baptized in the Jordan will reach its ultimate consequence – the offering of his life. We must not see any tinge of fatalism in this, as if Jesus had prepared himself for this moment and had taken the death road, knowing beforehand what was going to happen to him. No, Jesus had thought of a plan of action and other activities, one of which is seen in this episode, and which eventually would be his ultimate plan: to jolt the foundations of Jerusalem with the Good News of the Kingdom. Jerusalem, the city of contentment and injustice, was the center of religious and socio-political power of that time.

One continuously discovers in the person of Jesus, in his psychology, in his words and actions, a dominant factor: the haste, the urgency. From a purely historical point of view, Jesus is presented to us as a man who believed in the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. He was convinced that God's definitive intervention in favor of the poor would be immediately realized, that the final hour was at hand. That is why, for him, every minute was precious. It was this sense of urgency that inspired him to speak the way he did: about the war, the sword and the fire. He tried to awaken the people from their lethargy, those who believed there was plenty of time. A lot of Jesus' words and parables ought to be situated within this context of crisis which he lived historically. The future and ultimate crisis he saw was imminent and necessary in order for God's justice to come. This should not make us think of Jesus as an enlightened

fanatic, like the prophets of doom roaming our streets and cities, driving our people out of their wits. Nevertheless, one should not forget this vision of Jesus during this period, if we indeed want to remain faithful to the truth transmitted to us through the gospel.

At the time Jesus undertook his last journey to Jerusalem he was already known as a prophet, not only in Galilee but in the capital as well. Jesus had popular support, and the leaders hated him and persecuted him. His going to Jerusalem hinged on two given factors: he knew the risks he was taking; yet he also knew the importance of this prophetic gesture of his to be realized in Jerusalem, in the temple. He was anticipating death, yet he was convinced it would be a triumph for the Lord. He knew that the Kingdom should be won through pain and risks and he was ready to pay the price, trusting fully in his Father's power. Obviously, this is not fatalism, but a full understanding of the forces at play: courage in the face of perils; blind – but not fanciful – faith in the power of God, who is the most powerful of all.

Within this atmosphere of urgency are found the “vocations” of the three compatriots of Jesus. Of the first, Jesus gives an analogy of the plow. The primitive system of plowing in Palestine demanded full attention of the farmer to his work, since any form of distraction would be adverse to the soil. It is a sign of what is expected of a vocation for the Kingdom: constant commitment regardless of consequences. A frivolous attitude is useless in a risky task. The second vocation demands austerity. There is “no place for one to stay.” One is expected to give up everything: one's own comfort and tranquillity. Finally, one must be willing to give his or her life (Mt 16:24-26) to overcome the fear of death. Nothing makes one more free. Vocation is a lot more than a vague desire to be good (to be “perfect” as expected at times). It is adjusting one's life radically to a direction which turns out to be difficult, conflicting and disturbing. Jesus came to bring the sword, not peace (Mt 10:34). The way entails a lot of tension, self-denials and firm decisions; intelligent strategies, too (Lk 14:28-33). Neither should one give much credit to what he or she does (Lk 17:5-10).

*Sometimes, “vocation” is perceived to be only a matter for priests and sisters. A greater part of the evangelical texts make reference to those called by Jesus – including those of this episode in relation to the matter of “one hundred for every one” (Mt 19:27-29) – who are monopolized by the religious. This is wrong. Men and women of every social status are called to work for the Kingdom. Each one should do it in accordance with his/her family, social or professional status. Perfection is not greater in the monastery than in the street, nor is there more Christianity in the priest than in a lay person. All gospel texts referring to vocations are about God's call to **all** people, from whom Jesus demands the same commitment. This commitment – and Jesus knew this fully well – would bring sorrows and sufferings. There is no need to pursue them; they will be provided by those who are opposed to God's plan.*

When we say that Jesus is a sign of contradiction, this must be taken seriously. That he belongs to the world of the poor, making them the beneficiaries of God's message of love, makes him the object of scandal. In Jesus' time he had to clash with the learned and the powerful who could not tolerate what he said and did, to the point – and this was the height of it all – of putting God's name in the center, making God's will ultimately responsible for all. Jesus was fully aware of the enmity engendered as a consequence of his actions. (Mt 10:34-35).

(Mt 8:18-22; Lk 9:57-62)

92

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

Reuben: But Nivio, are you really serious?

Nivio: Of course, my friends. Don't you believe me?

Titus: What happened? Did you have a spat with your girl? Did your father disown you?

Nivio: Neither of the two.

Reuben: You must be sick, then.

Nivio: No, nothing of that sort. I'm perfectly all right. But I'll feel better if I go and tell him: "Hey, prophet, count me in! I'd like to join your group, too, and travel to Jerusalem, and spend the Passover in the city of David."

Titus: I bet you won't dare.

Nivio: I won't dare what?

Titus: Say that to the prophet.

Nivio: You don't know me then. Right now I'm gonna tell him.

Reuben: Wanna make a bet, Nivio?

Nivio: Sure. How much? Twenty dinarii?

Reuben: Make it forty.

Titus: Nah, a barrel of wine would be better. When you lose, we can all drink to our hearts' desire, as you drown these out of this world ideas of yours in the sweetness of wine.

Reuben: Ha, ha... C'mon, there's no turning back. You'd better swear.

Nivio: "I swear and I promise: and this bet is on, for a barrel of wine."

Titus: This is the ultimate thing we'd like to happen in Capernaum! Nelson, the son of Phanael, took the bait and fell into the Nazarene's mousetrap! Ha!

Reuben: What'll your Dad say the moment he finds out?

Nivio: What the heck do I care? He lives his own, life. I live my own too.

Reuben: What'll people say, Nivio! The landlord's son wants to be in the service of a farmer who is half witch and half agitator?

Nivio: I don't care what you say, but this guy, Jesus, is different. Golly, he's gutsy! All it takes is to listen to him.

Titus: Or better, to "smell him!" He reeks of onions and whore's perfume!

Reuben: Birds of a feather.....

Titus: So, the Nazarene has given you the itch!

Nivio: Ha, I think you're all envious!

Reuben: What? We, envious? Ha, ha, ha.... No way! Hey, I'm happy with my life.... I've got lots of servants and I don't have to work hard!

Titus: Same here.

Nivio: I'm not, and I'm decided to change my life. I'd like to do something great! I'll go see the prophet this afternoon, and go with him to the capital and then.....

Reuben: And then, go bathe yourself to remove the lice that you will have picked up from that miserable prophet! Ha!

Titus: Look, Nivio, don't you understand? Oil will never mix with water. Jesus is not of our kind. You're not of his kind either. If you join him, of what good will it be?

Reuben: I don't know what's gotten into you, Nivio, but this much I can tell you: wait till he picks on your father and the rich..... and that'll be the time to say goodbye!

Nivio: This is what you think of him. But I do believe that Jesus has an open mind. I'm sure he'll be delighted to see me. I can be useful to him. I've got money, education, I've got....

Titus: And most of all, don't forget our bet!

Reuben: Right, and it's been decided: a barrel of wine! Do you agree, Nivio?

Nivio: You bet, pals.

Nivio was the youngest son of Phanael, one of the wealthy landlords in Capernaum. He was tall and strong, never wanting in good food and elegant clothes, and he went to the best school. He helped his father in the management of their land, and he had plenty of time to spend with his friends... That afternoon, he left his luxurious house and headed for the fishermen's barrio, to a street by the sea....

Little Simon: C'mon, stupid. Jump!

Canilla: Tacatan, tacatan, tacatan.... hiyahh, horsey!

Little Simon: My little horsey jumps better than yours, look! Ha, ha, ha!

Canilla: Now, it's my turn!

Nivio: Hey, kids, could you tell me where Jesus of Nazareth lives?

Little Simon: Pff...! Yeah, he's inside, fixing a door... Hey, Moreno, someone's looking for you!

Jesus: Here I am! Who is it?

Little Simon: A young man!

Jesus was alone when Nivio came to the house. My mother was mending nets in the wharf, and old Zebedee, my brother James and I were fishing at mid sea, as always....

Jesus: Say, aren't you one of Phaniel's sons, the landlord?

Nivio: Exactly! How did you know me?

Jesus: You know, in Capernaum one get's to know everyone..... Well, this door is fixed..... Not even a hurricane can bring it down!..... What's your name?

Nivio: Nivio. I've been called by that name for eighteen years!

Jesus: Fine, Nivio... They say you're a nice person, in spite of your father...

Nivio: Nonsense! The only good person there is in the city at the moment is no one but you, Nazarene.

Jesus: Me? Why do you say that?

Nivio: Because you are. You and your group are the only ones doing something so that things may change in our country.

Jesus: Well, the truth is, you wouldn't want things to change in the country. They wouldn't suit you...

Nivio: Nothing of that sort. You're great, Jesus. I have always said so.

Jesus: I have always said that the only great one is the Lord. All of us push a nail here and there, put bricks one over the other, and we simply do what we can....

Nivio: That's why I came to talk to you. I also want to put my own brick and do my share in putting up the wall.

Jesus: You?

Nivio: Yeah. You're surprised, aren't you? Of course, I understand. Imagine, the son of Phaniel! Please don't be misled by appearances, Nazarene. You and I will get to understand each other, you will see...

Jesus: I hope so.... Come, sit over here..... and let's talk....

Jesus put the hammer and nails away and sat down on the floor. The landlord's son did the same....

Nivio: Everyone in the city talks of nothing except the journey to Jerusalem.

Jesus: What journey?

Nivio: What else? Your journey.

Jesus: Ah, of course...

Nivio: I also thought about it and made a decision: Count me in, Jesus.

Jesus: Don't tell me, you've got the sting too....

Nivio: Can't go with you?

Jesus: But of course, man! You're welcome. Indeed, I'm glad. I'm sure everyone will be pleased too.

Nivio: I hope so.... Okay, Jesus, let's go to the point. Exactly what are we gonna do in Jerusalem? What are your plans? Tell me.

Jesus: Well.... the plan is to change everything.

Nivio: What everything?

Jesus:We're going to build a new heaven and earth where everyone gives a hand, that all of us may smile and live in happiness.... What do you think of this plan?

Nivio: I like it. It seems like a beautiful plan.

Jesus: Exactly, but in order to do it, there'll be a little problem... "in order for those who have less to have more, those who have more should have less."

Nivio: What was that you said?... Seems like a tongue twister.

Jesus: No, it's something very simple. Listen! Why do some people in Israel experience hunger? Because others eat twice as much. Why do some children walk barefoot and half-naked in the street? Because others have seven tunics and fourteen pairs of sandals kept in their chests. Some of us carry only a grain of wheat in our pockets while others have their barns filled to the brim. Do you understand, Nivio?

Nivio: Understand what?

Jesus: That the only way to fill up a cliff is to reduce a hill. God's plan is to equalize, do you understand? What do you think of this?

Nivio: Sure, of course..... Okay, going back to the trip... Tell me, how many are we going to Jerusalem?... Many? Few?... Whom have you invited?

Jesus: Look, we've invited everyone... but you know how people are.... First, they say "yes, yes" then, later, they say "I forgot."

Nivio: That's right. People talk a lot, but that's all. Right, Jesus?

Jesus: Precisely. We need people who are willing to work hard and to push forward the Kingdom of God.

Nivio: Well, here I am putting my shoulder to the wheel, yes, sir. As a matter of fact, and I'm not bragging, but since I was a child, I was taught the commandments of God which I complied with. I have never stolen in my life.

Jesus: Neither were you ever hungry.....

Nivio: I have never killed anyone. Neither have I wished to do it.

Jesus: And neither have you felt the steward's lashing on your own back...

Nivio: What? You don't believe me?... Seriously, Jesus, I swear I have never done wrong to anyone...

Jesus: You don't have to swear. I believe you. Of course.... Even the drones do nothing bad in the beehive....

Nivio: Ah, now I see what you're up to.... Well, in that case, why don't you go out to the street and find out who in Capernaum has given more alms than I.

Jesus: Who do you think can do that here, when everyone has a hole in his own pocket?

Nivio: Well, yes, but..... going back to our trip.... Have you decided on what we shall bring for the trip? I guess we'll have to bring something, won't we?

Jesus: You don't have to worry about that, Nivio....

Nivio: If we have to buy something, feel free to tell me....

Jesus: To buy, no, but to sell, yes.

Nivio: To sell?..... To sell what?

Jesus: Everything. You've got to leave everything, to set your hands free.

Jesus stared at the hands of Phaniel's son. They were so smooth, unlike the calloused and chapped hands of the poor. Then he lifted his eyes and looked at him with sympathy....

Jesus: Listen, Nivio. Moses too, grew up in a rich house. The pharaoh's daughter fed him well, gave him the best clothes and sent him to the best school in Egypt. But one day, Moses went down to visit his brothers and saw an Egyptian foreman beating a Hebrew slave. Moses got so furious he killed the foreman. He lost everything – his house and his comfortable life. Left with nothing, he was persecuted by the pharaoh's guards. Thus, he became worthy of his people. Then he was able to draw close to the slave, like his equal, and call him brother, and help him to be free. C'mon, Nivio, think about this, and come back later, so we can discuss our trip....

Nivio: Sure, I'll think about it, Jesus. I'll think about it....

Nivio looked at Jesus, not knowing what to say. Then he stood up from the floor, shook his new tunic that became soiled, and left the house.... He was very sad.

Peter: Hey, Moreno, why did Phaniel's son come over?

Jesus: To teach me a game, Peter.

Peter: A game?

Jesus: Yeah..... Hey, Little Simon, come here.... run....

Jesus peeped through the door and called Peter's son who was playing in the street with a group of children..

Jesus: Say, little Simon, what game are you playing?

Little Simon: Horsey -horsey. Tacatan, tacatan, tacatan....!

Jesus: Do you want to learn a new game?

Little Simon: Sure, sure, how is it?

Jesus: Listen. It's a camel's game. You are the camel. Let's see. Get down on your fours..... like this.... See, you have a big hump on your back... Do you see this needle?

Jesus joined his fingers to form a small circle....

Little Simon: So, what do I do now?

Jesus: Do you see this small hole? The camel should try to pass through the needle's eye. If he succeeds, he wins. If not, he loses.

Little Simon remained staring at Jesus' hand. Then he stood up from the floor....

Little Simon: I don't like this game, Jesus. Bye! Tacatan, tacatan....!

Jesus: That was the game that Phanuel's son wanted to play. But the camel will never pass through the needle's eye. Even children know that, Peter.

Reuben: I've got this feeling, Nivio, that today we'll drown our sorrows in sweet wine!

Titus: "I swear, I promise, I declare..."

Reuben: ...and your bet was a barrel of wine! Ha, ha...!

Titus: Hey, Nivio, cheer up and let's toast to your silly head! Ha, ha, ha...!

Nivio's friends went inside his house, opened a barrel of wine and started to drink and played jokes on him. The landlord's son, between gulps and laughter, eventually forgot about the trip to Jerusalem.....

This evangelical text, oftentimes used to illustrate the theme about vocation, has disturbing ideas for the rich. We would say this is an account where Jesus supposedly appears to be a "demagogue." The primitive Christian tradition was faithful to Jesus' harsh criticism on wealth and he never found any possible justification for those who had accumulated wealth. The Holy Fathers of the Church were also "demagogue," when dealing with this topic: The gospel rightfully refers to excessive wealth as "unjust," since it springs from no other than injustice and one cannot possess it unless others else lose what they need or destroy themselves. Thus, to me, a popular saying seems very correct: The rich are rich on account of their own injustice or their inheritance of properties unjustly acquired," as St. Jerome put it, four hundred years after Christ (Epistle 120:1).

Nivio is what we would call today a "coffee table revolutionary." What he feels is what is sometimes justly understood to be a "vocation": An undefined restlessness to become a better person, to be of help to others. In him, there is also some sort of a warped/mal-formed conscience on one hand, and on the other, a desire to hobnob with Jesus, a leader who wins people over and becomes important in the eyes of his followers.

It is good to demythify the "rich young man." Sometimes he is pictured as a good man, pure, honest, one who obeys all the commandments, but "not fit for the religious life" because he is not courageous enough to heed the "advice" of Jesus to sell everything and give it to the poor. This is not the focus of the gospel. Jesus is not giving "advice" to those who seek perfection. Jesus shows the rich young man the only valid way to enter the Kingdom: through the experience of the poor – by putting one's self in their place, sharing in their life, taking as their own the cause of their liberation. It does not deal with an isolated bit of advice, but with the whole project of life itself. The rich young man has not committed great wrongs, but he has not done much good either. His is a sin of omission. And when Jesus shows him where he has gone

wrong – in his lack of sensitivity for the poor – he continues to be blind, to be obstinate in his own individualism, satisfied with his comfortable “decent” life.

This callousness too frequently brought about by money among the rich and so evident each day, is what brought Jesus to making this exaggerated analogy of the camel and the needle. This phrase about the needle has nothing to do with the shape of the opening of an oriental door (because of its form), as it has often been said, in order to soften the comparison made by Jesus. (It was said that this eye of oriental doors was very narrow, but if the camel lowered his hump and bent a little, then he could pass...) No, this comparison is about a sewing needle and a camel, the biggest known animal in Palestine. A camel can never pass through this eye. Never. With this exaggerated analogy, Jesus simply wants to say this: it is impossible, unless God performs a miracle. These extreme analogies are, on the other hand, typical of oriental expressions and Jesus frequently uses them to be sure that the radical character of his message is not distorted.

Nivio’s “decency,” his good deeds, are being questioned by Jesus, because he was well-fed, well-educated, with a sure future. He had all the conveniences to be good, had no need to steal or to feel constrained to violence. The “morality” of some persons is no more than a luxury. Their economic status not only allows them to live a good life, but also to be good, besides being considered such by society. Meanwhile, for many people living in misery, cheating, aggression and sometimes, prostitution or other forms of “sin” are not vices, but the logical consequence of their desperate situation or their only way of survival.

(Mt 19:16-24; Mk 10:17-25; Lk 18:18-25)

93

THOSE WHO KILL THE BODY

James: The hour has come, fellas, the hour of victory!

Simeon: Within three days we’ll be heading for Jerusalem and in three days the capital shall be ours!

Julius: So the traitors to the country had better be ready! Down with the traitors!

Simeon: And with the Romans!

Julius: And the Herodians, too!

James: And the Sadducees too!

Neighbor: Who’ll be left in the city then?

James: Silly man, we’ll all be seated on twelve thrones with the scepter on our knees.

Neighbor: Really, James? Do you think we’ll go this far?

James: I’m certain about it! That’s why I’m going with the Nazarene and with all these people! Cheer up, man! The end of it will be something great! Later you’ll regret for not having come!

Anne: You heard it, *comadre*. Jesus said there would be trouble in Jerusalem and no stone in the Temple would be left unturned.

Rufina: And then what?

Anne: What else but the sharing of the loot, after the battle! I’ve been setting my eyes on the atrium’s drapes! And the tablecloths, too!

Rufina: Well, I’d settle for one of those candleholders with seven golden angels!

A Woman Neighbor: And what’ll be left for me, huh? The seven little candles? Oh, women!

Every day, more and more neighbors in Capernaum were getting convinced to go with us to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Passover that year. I guess everyone had a distinct idea of what was to take place during the holidays. Each one was holding on to a different kind of expectation. But everyone was

dreaming of the grand day of liberation of our people....

Julius: Listen, Clete: the heavens will open wide! God will stick out his finger through the clouds and say: That Moreno is the Messiah! Follow whatever he tells you! Do you understand, Clete? He'll be in the forefront! And we'll be behind him!

Clete: Behind us are the guards with their cudgels, right? No, no, just leave me in peace. I'm not going anywhere!

Julius: Why not? What if the Lord sticks out his finger....?

Clete: Then let him lick it, I wouldn't care! Even if you tie me up, I'm not going with you, even if you drag me.

The news of our journey to Jerusalem spread beyond Capernaum, through the valley, from village to village, from door to door, until it reached Nazareth and sneaked into the hut of Mary, the mother of Jesus....

Susana: Mary, Mary! Haven't you heard? Haven't your cousins told you anything?

Mary: Yes, Susana. I know it already. Jacob came a while ago, to tell me.

Susana: If Jesus isn't crazy yet, then he looks like he is! Tell me, Mary, why can't this Moreno son of yours just stay put? Did you nurse him with milk or with hot sauce?

Mary: They say about seven hundred, eight hundred, a thousand men are joining him. That's an entire army!

Susana: Of course, an army of ants versus a giant!

Mary: Well, even David fought against Goliath and he won.

Susana: Oh, really? Are you changing your mind now? This is the height of it! *Comadre...* I'd say I'm smelling something different in this trip.

Mary: What do you mean?

Susana: Politics, revolution...

Mary: Well, if he is in danger, I can't be at peace here in Nazareth. I'm leaving right away for Capernaum.

Susana: What nonsense are you saying, Mary? Don't you remember anymore? The last time you went to see him, he sent you away. Jesus won't listen to you anymore.

Mary: This time, I won't quarrel with him, Susana, but I'll be on his side. I'll help him in any way I can. If necessary, I'll go to Jerusalem with him, anywhere!

Susana: But, Mary, wait, let me explain....

Mary: Tell me on the road, Susana. You're coming with me, aren't you?

Susana: Who, me? But, Mary....!

Mary: C'mon, Susana, hurry up. We've got to be on our way before nightfall....

Susana: Holy God, what malady has gotten into me?!

Jesus: But Mother..... and you too, Susana... what are you two doing in Capernaum?

Susana: We're going with you and your shaggy followers to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem.

Jesus: But, are you out of your mind?

Susana: The only crazy creature here is you, Jesus, but that's another matter.

Mary: Jesus, son, this seems to be a hot topic. People talk of nothing else but the trip to the capital.

Jesus: Yeah, they just talk and talk.... When the moment of truth comes, how many of them will remain?

Susana: Well, here you have two more ants coming out of the anthill.

Jesus: So I see. But it'll be better for you to go back to Nazareth. Things are getting more and more complicated and we don't know the outcome of it.

Mary: Precisely, son. We won't budge from here. If you go to Jerusalem, we go with you. If you go back to Galilee, to Galilee we go back.

Jesus: But Mother, don't you realize that.....?

Mary: You're just wasting your time, Jesus. You didn't listen to me when I asked you to return to Nazareth, remember? This time, I won't listen to you either. We'll all go to Jerusalem together. Come,

Susana, let's talk to Salome, Zebedee's wife, so she can tuck us in some corner of her house... c'mon.....

It was two weeks before the feast of the Passover, but the townsfolk of Capernaum were already preparing their provisions. Everyone was excited about the trip. That day, when I saw Jesus talking with Peter, I realized he had something else in mind.....

Peter: But, Jesus, how am I gonna say that?

Jesus: Listen to me, Peter. It'll be better this way.

Peter: But it's like scaring the horse away even before he crosses the river....

Jesus: It'll be worse if he gets scared in the middle of the current. We might have the same fate as the pharaoh's horsemen...

Peter: Okay, okay, if you say so, then I'll do it. But don't blame me later. I warned you beforehand.

That night the moon seemed like a big piece of round cake sliced into halves. The barrio folks were gathered with us in the wharf, asking Jesus what we would do when we got to Jerusalem...

Julius: Tell us, Jesus, where do we begin, huh? Shall we start from the Antonia Tower or from Herod's palace?

Simeon: I'd say, we should first give the fat Caiphas a nice good kick on his ass!

Anne: They will find out how we Galileans are if we are all united.

Neighbor: Last night, I dreamed of the moment we entered Jerusalem, with the banner of the Messiah in our hands! Long live Jesus, Hosanna!

As we became more and more excited, Jesus gave a signal to Peter....

Peter: Well, I dreamed of something else, fellas...

Anne: What was your dream, Peter? C'mon, tell us. A good dream is worth a bowl of nice, hot soup.

Peter: I'd rather not tell you.... anyway, it's just a dream....

Some: C'mon, tell us! Speak up, man!

Peter: Okay. This was my dream.... We were all walking, walking along a huge valley.... we were walking.... when, suddenly, as we looked up.... we saw a vulture hovering in the sky, above us. And every time he finished doing one circle, another vulture came to join him, and together they flew.... until another vulture came.... and another..... until finally, there were many of them, a flock of black and ugly birds hovering over our heads, waiting....

As Peter said that, all of us swallowed dry saliva. The women looked at each other through the corner of their eyes. Some of us bit our nails, not daring to say anything.... It was Julito, a young man, and a little stupid, who broke the silence...

Young Man: Hey, Peter, that dream of yours.... does it mean anything? C'mon, explain it to us....

Peter: Why don't you explain it, Jesus? I'm sure you know what it means better than I do.

Jesus: Alright, Peter, I think everyone here understands what it means... Friends, let us not be disillusioned here. The Kingdom of God has its price, which is blood. The powerful men of Jerusalem will make us pay the price. They will never forgive us for what we have done here in Galilee. Neither will they pardon us for what we shall tell to their face as soon as we get to the capital. The wolves roam in the night in search of the flock and they hide and wait for the right moment to pounce on the sheep and smash them. They'll do the same thing to us. Then, they'll offer us to the vultures.

Julius: Golly, Jesus, don't be a killjoy! First it was Peter, and now, it's you...!

Jesus: Look, we're not going to a party, but to a fight. The enemy is a lot stronger than all of us. Today we're here. Tomorrow, we might be in jail. We're all in danger, and a lot of us will be pursued from town to town. We'll be dragged before Herod and Pilate, and the high priests will beat us in the synagogues..... and then..... many of us will lose our lives.

Clete: Don't talk that way, Jesus. We shall all be the victors, with you at the forefront.

Jesus: Precisely, I'll be the first one to fall. The prophets always perish in Jerusalem.

We all looked at each other restlessly and felt the cold air of the night, like a knife penetrating our flesh and bones. Jesus' words were of no use anymore, as he continued saying:

Jesus: But don't be scared, my friends. You don't have to fear those who kill the body, but not our spirit. God is on our side. God knows even the last strand of our hair and will not allow our struggle to be in vain. Maybe we shall fall in that struggle. But then, we shall bear fruit, like the seed when it falls on the soil.

I was seated on the floor, my head cupped in my hands. When I looked up, I saw Ishmael and his friend, Nephtali, leaving the wharf. The barrio folks, old Simeon, Mam Anne and the twins were quietly slipping away, too. Then, the biggest group of men and women, as if responding to a silent command, suddenly stood up, and disappeared in the night....

Peter: Cowards! May they swallow the devil's embers for being charlatans!

James: The soldiers retreated before they could put on their uniforms!

Peter: I warned you, Jesus. We Galileans are all chickens. Look how many of us are left behind, twelve, as always!

James: Plus your mother and your neighbor, Susana.

Magdalene: Count me in, of course! Or, aren't the Magdalenes people, too?

James: What's this cheap woman doing here?

Magdalene: Like what're you doing, *paisano*. I told Jesus I was coming, so here I am. I'm going to Jerusalem with you.

Peter: No one is going with anyone, Mary. There won't be any trip.

Jesus: Why do you say that, Peter?

Peter: Open your eyes, Jesus... Everyone has gone. Only a handful of nothing is left...

Jesus: So what, Peter? Remember Gideon? He went to war with thirty thousand men but only three hundred went forth. The rest had left. They were scared and they surrendered. But the Lord granted victory to that small group. Yeah, we're only a small flock, but the Lord will raise the shepherd's staff and protect us from the wolves. Let us not fear: God will be with us in Jerusalem.

James: Are you serious, Jesus?

Jesus: Of course, James. Tomorrow, we'll be leaving for the capital.

Peter: But it's still two weeks before the Passover...

Jesus: We've got to hurry. We can delay no longer. There are too many spies and surveillance teams around. Hey, fellas, cheer up! God'll be with us. Jerusalem is awaiting us!

Peter: And the vultures, too!

That night, we all went to sleep startled. After a few hours, when the sun had barely risen, having stretched our arms and legs, we took our walking sticks and knapsacks and headed for the route of the caravans. Capernaum was left behind. The fishermen's boats were already at mid-sea. Ahead of us was a three-day journey; Jerusalem awaited us.

Jesus' idea of the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God is not the same as that of his disciples, nor that of his neighbors in Capernaum. Although everyone awaits it, some give it individual considerations, others take it as an opportunity for just revenge against the Romans. Some know not where they are heading; there are others who have a deeper understanding of it. The moment of screening comes, generally, when people begin to see the risks, the dangers and the price to pay. Then the prudent ones, the less convinced, the comfort-loving and the cowards back out of it. Commitment to the gospel is extremely demanding. By the time Christians grow in it, they discover the consequences of such commitment in their life, just as they begin to discover the strength given them by God as God accepts them.

Mary lived this process of growing in faith. Her "yes" to the Lord was an everyday thing, with every

new situation she was in. She would not have been a model of our faith or of our hope had she not doubted, had she not taken the risk even if things were not clear to her. At this point of the episode, aware of the risk that Jesus was undertaking in his trip to Jerusalem, she wanted to share this risk with him. She was no longer opposing – as she used to, during the initial activities of Jesus – neither did she passively await what was going to happen. Now she wanted to collaborate. Her faith had matured and reached the decisive point of the process: solidarity in the face of danger.

As he undertook this trip to Jerusalem, Jesus had to consider the possibility of a violent death. His confrontations with the religious authorities in deliberate violation of the Law (specially the Law of the Sabbath, the apex of the social and religious system of the time) had exposed his life to danger. He was fully aware of this. In Galilee, Herod had the authority to have him killed. In fact, he had wanted him killed (Lk 13:31). In Judea, where Jesus went, only the Romans could mete the sentence, but his decision to perform a prophetic act in the Temple had put him in the most grievous danger before the civil authorities, who were very close to the priests.

In Jesus' time, the people considered the prophets as martyrs, because they were persecuted by the kings of the country. Besides, many of them were killed on account of their accusations against the oppressive rulers: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, Zechariah, were, for the people of Israel, national martyrs. Jesus knew he was to become heir to the prophetic tradition which began with Elijah and continued with John the Baptist. By this time he knew he was a prophet. That is why, without directly seeking death, he could not expect for himself a destiny better than that of the great men of his country.

The gospel tells us that Jesus "predicted" his passion. He even makes three predictions of his passion as more evidence shows that the days of his death are nearing. Caution must be taken in reading these texts, in order not to come to a conclusion that Jesus predicted his own life and death; that he knew beforehand what would happen to him and therefore, suffered "less," knowing the beautiful denouement of his story... Given that interpretation, we dehumanize Jesus, converting his death and resurrection into a theatrical play. Being fully human, he was aware of the risks, though he would not know the exact circumstances. And being fully human, he was amazed at the circumstances, and would try to modify them. Everything seemed to indicate, for example, that Jesus thought he would be stoned to death (Mt 23:37), that he would be buried as an offender in a common pit (Mk 14:8); that immediately after his death, his disciples would also suffer violent persecution and death (Lk 22:35-38). Likewise, he thought that God would not allow his downfall, that God would not abandon him. Had he thought that way, then his anguish on the cross could not have been explained. But things did not happen as he had imagined: Jesus died, though not by stoning, was interred in a dignified sepulcher and the Jewish authorities left his group in peace. All this tells us that Jesus, indeed, considered the possibility of a violent end, nothing more. His awareness of danger cannot be construed as an infallible prediction of everything that was to happen to him. Jesus' death happened in history, subject to actual, historical circumstances, although they could have been otherwise. The passion and death of Jesus are historical events. They are not the fatal fulfillment of the design of a God detached from history, nor the result of predetermined "prophecies." These events are the fruit of human freedom. Jesus was free when he risked his life deliberately engaging in his awareness-raising activities for months, especially his actions in the Temple. The people who killed him were free. In the passion, no one is God's puppet, but human freedom including murderers and the murdered victim for the sake of justice, are put at play.

(Mt 10:16-33; Mk 11:9-13; Lk 12:4-12; 21:12-19)

The sun was already high when we left Capernaum for Jerusalem... We were twelve in the group, with Mary, Jesus' mother, Susana, their neighbor, my mother, Salome, and Mary, from Magdala. Jesus led the trek. He walked fast. The spring, with its colors, clothed the fields of Galilee. It was already dark when we reached Ginae, and we decided to spend the night in one of the fields surrounding the small city, at the border between Samaria and Galilee....

Salome: With these chicken bones I brought, I can make some delicious soup.... What do you think?

Susana: That's a good idea, Salome.... This is going to be a cold night. These rascals will sleep well with a warm stomach.... Hey, young lady, go and bring me a handful of thyme..... for the soup flavoring....

The woman from Magdala went to get some thyme, while Susana, Salome and Mary stayed by the fire, preparing the dinner that first night of the trip....

Salome: Look at this Magdalene..... how she walks and steals glances...

Susana: And how! Salome. Jesus says she has changed a lot, although my grandmother used to say that the leopard cannot change his spots...

Magdalene: Here's the thyme...

Salome: Here, give it to me... Hey, what grass is this, young woman?... This is not thyme...

Magdalene: Yes, it is, M'am Salome.... smell it.... it is thyme...

Salome: Okay, okay, drop it in the pot... if it doesn't kill us, then it will only make us fat.

Mary: Shall we get some cheese, too?

Salome: No, Mary, with this soup and some olives, we already have enough...

Magdalene: Peter says he's starved....!

Salome: He always is. He's never satisfied. He's always hungry.

Magdalene: But the man is quite strong!... He's not Jesus' right hand man for nothing...

Salome: Right hand for what?

Magdalene: Well, he's the second man, after Jesus.

Salome: Tell me, where did you get that idea, Magdalene?

Magdalene: Everyone knows about it. Didn't you know that, M'am Mary..... you're Jesus' mother... Hasn't he told you about it?

Mary: No, but....

Salome: You're a gossip, Magdalene. Such a malicious tongue you've got!

Magdalene: Who, me, a gossip? But, isn't it true that Jesus is close to Peter?

Mary: I don't know, I think..... he's close to everyone, Magdalene. The truth is, I haven't noticed that....

Magdalene: Look, either I'm a gossip or Salome is a distrustful person, my goodness! I heard somewhere, precisely from James and John, these good sons of yours, that should anything happen to Jesus, heaven forbid, the guy to man the helm of the ship is Peter....

Susana: Hey, young woman, stop talking of misfortunes now...!

Magdalene: Okay, I'll shut up, but the truth is, this trip to Jerusalem is putting us in such a big mess....

Yeah, Jesus is in charge now, but if anything happens to him, then it will be Peter...

Salome: Here you go again!...Why does it have to be Peter, tell me. Why?

Magdalene: Look, m'am, Jesus has got a sure eye, and among these rascals he would choose someone a little more decent, of course. For all his defects, Peter has word of honor.... unlike..... the "others."

Salome: Are you referring to someone in particular?

Magdalene: No.... no one.

Mary: Okay, will you stop that silly talk. C'mon, young woman, tell those men that the soup is ready....

Magdalene: Hey, Jesus! Everybody, come over!..... It's dinner time!.... C'mon!!

Salome: Have you noticed, Mary and Susana, how this woman defends Peter?... How insolent! She wouldn't be a whore for nothing..... What nerve she's got...

Mary: Forget it, Salome. I don't think she said it with malice....

Salome: Stop defending her, Mary.... This woman doesn't waste time maligning my children..... whore!
After all that she has done to my sons!

Susana: If that's the case, then she would have to charge them.

Mary: Shut up, Susana, don't make matters worse...

Salome: I don't know, Mary, but I don't trust her being with our men....

Philip: This soup is marvelous, yes siree!

Nathanael: It's so good, I almost forget about the corns on my feet!

Peter: I find the taste rather strange for me.....

John: It's your weird ideas, Peter....

James: What we need now is wine!

Mary: Tomorrow we'll buy some in Shechem, where they sell good wine.

James: Puah! The Samaritan wine tastes like castor oil...

Philip: There goes James with his idiosyncrasies again! Why don't we leave the Samaritans in peace and play dice instead..... Are you gonna play, Jesus?

Jesus: Wait till I finish licking this bone, Philip. Just go ahead....

Jesus remained seated near the fire, while the women collected the leftovers and put away the pieces of bread for the following day. The twelve of us went a little distance away, where the light of the half-moon could shine over us, so that not one of us could cheat with our dice....

Jesus: Are you tired, Mother...?

Mary: No, son. It's been quite sometime that I have walked this far, but as you can see, I can still manage...

Susana: You know something, Jesus? Your mom may be old, but she's got strong legs like a young woman's.... On the other hand, look at me, I'm too darn sleepy..... Ahuuumm...!

Philip: Number eight! This time I win! Boy, am I lucky, fellas!

James: To hell with you, Philip! C'mon, Peter, open up, it's your turn....

Peter: No..... let somebody do it..... I..... I've got to go.....

James: Hey, what's bugging you, man?

Peter: Uff.... After having felt too much hunger for hours.... and then..... zas!... it's the soup with the weird taste.....

Philip: But it was very good..... it really warmed my stomach....

Peter: It has upset mine.... Uff... just like a turbulence on the Lake of Tiberias.... Look, I'd better do something about it, somewhere..... over there... or else..... uff!

John: Better do it far from here, naughty man!

Philip: Be back soon, will ya?

Peter headed for a small olive grove till he got lost among the trees....

Salome: Look at these three women..... they already snoring....

Jesus: Yeah..... they're too dead tired, they couldn't even say a word.

Salome: Say, Jesus, now that we're alone, I'd like to tell you something.

Jesus: What is it, Salome?...

Salome: Let's go over there.... so we don't wake the sleepy heads up.... Come....

Jesus and my mother went toward the grove and sat beside a tree...

Salome: It's about that Magdalene, Jesus.... To hell with that "girl"!

Jesus: What happened? Have you been quarreling?

Salome: I hate to say this, Moreno, but, that woman and Peter.....! I don't want to be malicious, but.... either it's Peter who's flirting with her, or the other way around..... Something seems odd around here.

Jesus: Don't say that, M'am Salome....

Salome: Oh, if only Rufina had come along!..... Right, the problem is with Peter.... Magdalene thinks

Peter is everything... He's strong, most courageous, the best.... It's too obvious, Jesus.... She can't deny it..... Of course she should know!.... having been in the business for years...Well, I don't want to malign her, but that woman is dangerous....

Jesus: Do you think so, M'am?

Salome: That's not the worst of it. She's been telling everyone what you said, that this delinquent is your right hand man. That Peter is second to you. I say that can't be, and I can't believe it. Everyone knows Peter too much. He barks but never bites. He's a little scatterbrained, all right..... And she says he's courageous! A simple sneeze can scare the wits out of him!... Oh, pardon me for being catty!

Jesus: No, no, go ahead....

Salome: Look, Jesus, they say there's nothing like the old horse for the hard road. Look at my white hair, Moreno. You want some advice?

Jesus: Go ahead. What is it?

Salome: With Peter as your right hand..... you had better be a one-handed person! Jesus, you need a right arm and a left arm. Two strong arms that are willing to help and defend you...

Jesus: Who do you have in mind?

Salome: My two sons. It's not because they are my children, but because they deserve it. James and John are willing to give the last drop of their blood for you, Jesus, believe me. Forget about that dirty old man, Peter, and count on my sons, who'll be by your side. One on your right and the other one on your left.

Peter: You treacherous witch, I want to strangle you! Damn you, Salome! Hey, all of you, come over here!!!

Peter's thunderous voice shook the entire olive grove. We all stood up from our game, while the three women roused from their sleep. Everyone ran toward Peter, who was calling to us at the top of his voice...

Jesus: Peter, where've you been?

Peter: I was behind that tree and I heard everything!

Salome: And what were you doing there, you wretch?

Peter: Something more decent than what you were doing. Over here everyone! Hurry and pull out the tongue of this old hag!

James: What's going on here, damn it?! What's all this shouting about, Peter?

Peter: Why don't you ask your mother about all the intrigues she's making up? Do you know what she said? That there's "something" between me and the Magdalene.

Magdalene: What? How did I get into this mess? Hell, what have I done? Tell me, Salome, what have I done to be dragged into this muddle?

James: You better shut up, Mary, you're just making things worse!

Peter: Your beloved mother started all this, do you hear? You too, redhead, and you, John, hypocrite! Scoundrels!

It took us a great deal of effort to appease Peter and convince him to explain what he had heard behind those trees. While he was talking, my mother Salome barely looked up....

Philip: Really? Your mother could say that?

Peter: You bet! This old hag should be hanged.

James: Wait a minute, Peter. If the cap fits, then wear it. The truth hurts, after all.

Peter: Are you insinuating something?

James: It's you who's insinuating a lot of weird things. Tell me, who the devil told you that you were somebody else's right hand man?

Peter: Jesus said so during our trip to the north! Don't you remember anymore?

John: The Moreno didn't say that! That's what you wanted to be, big nose! But he didn't say that!

Peter: You see? They're just like their mother! Scheming fools! You sent her here in order to speak ill of me!

James: One more mention of my mother, Peter, and I'll tear you to pieces!

Peter: You just dare, James, and you'll be dead before the night ends!

Magdalene: Okay, so it's all my fault, isn't it? If that's it, I'm leaving... right now... I'm going back.... to Capernaum!

Jesus: No, Mary, you're not going anywhere.

Peter: If there's anyone who should leave, it's that old gossip monger and her two sons!

Jesus: No one is leaving, Peter. Neither Salome, nor Mary, nor the two of you. Damn it, that's enough! It's only our first night together and we're already fighting like two angry cocks. We're going to Jerusalem, and things will be very difficult for us. We've got to be united. When the most trying moment comes, we shall all have to drink from the same cup. Everyone. Let's forget about this right arm and left arm. Here no one is better than anyone else. We're all in the same boat and everyone must help in order to go on. Either we all come out afloat or we all end up sinking and drowning!

John: We're all coming out alive, Moreno! Guys, Jesus is right. And now..... why don't we get out of here, this place stinks like hell!

That night, we could not sleep. Peter's grumbling seemed to have no end. My mother, Salome, tossed and turned often before she fell asleep. We were all very tired. We had to wake up early the next morning to resume our journey to Jerusalem.

The gospel puts on record that some women formed part of Jesus' group who followed him from town to town in proclaiming the Kingdom of God (Mk 15:40-41). There is great novelty in the fact that Jesus was followed by these women in the company of his disciples. Salome, Susana, Mary Magdalene – and still others who probably formed part of the group – thus become a symbol of the revolutionary character of the gospel in a totally male chauvinistic society. Jesus' words and his attitude toward the women deeply clashed with the customs of his time. The Christian church, in order to be faithful to Jesus, ought to be a venue for authentic equality among men and women, where no one feels discriminated against because of sex while rendering service to the community.

In Jesus' group, as in any other human group, not everything turned out smoothly. There probably were ambitions, bickerings, suspicions, distrust and dishonesty. These were not always dramatic. They were everyday conflicts, full of ups and downs. This is true of all human relationships. Magdalene's presence in the group would surely result in clashes because of the implication of her job. Jesus did not elude such conflicts. In gathering such a diverse group, he even provoked them. Such crises within the community may sometimes be healthy if the members confront them, thus helping them grow in the knowledge of their capabilities as well as their limitations.

Jesus does not intend to avoid all these conflicts. What he expects of his group is that no one should be above anyone else. No one should appear to be favored nor oppressed in the community; no one should be different because of having greater intelligence, more ability, or for any other reason. The gospel offers itself as an alternative to the "master-slave model" which the world powers are trying to preserve – not only in Jesus' time but also in our days. This alternative tries to create communities where this system of dependency will be totally wiped out, where all its members will live in equality, where the only authority is God, where the only competition is geared toward better service to others. The Christian communities should be the critical conscience of societies founded on power, favors, and inequality.

This episode attempts to focus more on the daily life situation, rather than presenting a plot to "take power," or as a significant intrigue with a political color, a problem arising from Salome's envious attitude. The typical moral prejudice (against prostitutes), the maternal ambition to see her sons honored, and that obvious feeling of envy are the causes of the conflict. The comic scene, as played out by Peter is inspired from a text in the Old Testament where David experiences a similar situation when he is pursued by Saul (1 S 24:1-8). The Bible has many picturesque scenes of everyday life which are anything but insipid, colorless, and odorless....

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SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN

Before dawn, before the first cocks of Samaria began to crow, we got up and resumed our trip to the south, toward Jerusalem. It was a cool morning. The clouds in the east were tinged with red, announcing a radiant day....

Magdalene: Ahemmmmm....! What's the matter, Peter?... Did you sleep well?

Peter: Not a wink. What does it matter to you, Magdalene?... Who told you to meddle in my life?

Magdalene: What a creep!.... Look, I am what I am and I'm concerned with people...

Peter: Hey, look, don't deny it anymore... Those two, James and John, must have told you to talk to me.... asking me to forget and forgive, right?

Magdalene: Man, will you stop being furious?

Peter: I'll do whatever pleases me, do you hear? And tell those damned sons of Zebedee I'm not called a "rock" for nothing. No way will I relent because of their sweet words.

During that long morning walk, Peter didn't utter a single word. What transpired the night before in Ginae with my mother, Salome, had got the better of him. The rest of us didn't talk much, either... We arrived in Shechem at noon, and there we had lunch.

Philip: Hey, M'am Salome, where are those dates you brought along? The worms must be feasting on them by now....

Magdalene: It must be Peter's tongue that's pushing up daisies.... Don't you see how quiet this big nose has become.....?

Nathanael: Young lady, will you stop provoking? Something terrible might happen here....

Magdalene: Ha! Nothing will happen, I assure you... I know this won't go too far!.

James: Isn't this fish really delicious? You salted it just right, momma..... Here, have some more, Peter.... Peter?...

Peter: Eat it yourself, James, and may the devil make a fish bone get stuck in your throat!

James: But Peter, why don't you open your eyes so you'll understand....?

Peter: What is it that I should understand, you red head?

James: I've explained it to you already....

Magdalene: Oh, here we go again. What happened last night is all over. Are we going to start again?

Simon: You'd better shut up, Magdalene. If you were not what you are now, things wouldn't have become so muddled up.....

Magdalene: Oh really? So I'm the one to blame for all your squabbles, is that it? Well, *paisano*, that's not true!

Andrew: You mean you believe the stories of M'am Salome? You should know her better! Those stupid stories should be ignored, Simon!

John: Wait a minute, Andrew, don't you ever call my mother stupid, do you hear? No one here should call her stupid, do you hear?

Matthew: You talk like a brave man.... later you'll run for your life like a rabbit, John.... and you know what I mean! Ha!

John: Don't push me to the wall, Matthew, you wouldn't like what you'd hear, you leech!

Thomas: Gg-g-guys, stop b-b-bla-mm-ing each o-o-ther..... we..sshouldn't b-be t-t-thro-w-wing stones

at one a-a-no-nother!

Simon: Just shut up, will you, Thomas, and don't dip your finger into this mess!

Judas: Damn it, I'm sick and tired of all these gossips and intrigues!

John: Are you saying I'm a rumor-monger, Judas?

Judas: Yeah, that's what you are, John! Remember our trip to the north! You made up stories like Nathanael was a coward, that Philip was more stubborn than an ass....

Philip: You said that about me, John?... You should be ashamed of yourself! Say that again to my face, I dare you!

Nathanael: Shut up, Philip, leave everything to Judas. C'mon, Judas, out with it! Things should not go on like this. Let's get things clear!

James: Don't be silly, Nathanael. Isn't it obvious that Judas is accusing my brother to win Peter's sympathy? Can't you see the plan?

Judas: What the hell are you talking about, you dope? Why should I win myself over Peter? Do you think all of us are like you, rubbing elbows, to win the sympathy of important people?

James: Then you're worse, Judas Iscariot, because you lick their asses to get what you want!

Jesus: Stop it everyone, damn it! Can't we have at least of moment of peace to eat our dates? We're killing each other here! We don't even need Herod's soldiers nor those Romans to do it...

James: You, too, shut up, Jesus. There's no use defending Judas!

Peter: You shut your mouth, James, and don't save your skin! This is all your fault, big mouth!

James: No, no, you're the only one to blame for this, Peter, no one else!

Peter: You're right, red head. I want to strangle you!

Peter leaped over Matthew and Thomas, pounced on my brother James and grabbed him on the neck... He unleashed all the fury raging quietly inside him since last night.

Magdalene: They're killing each other! They're killing each other!

John: For God's sake, keep them apart!

Some of us pulled Peter away, while the others worked on James. Since they were already too enraged, soon enough we were all caught in the fight, and everyone, no more, no less, got his share of the blows in that sea of fury.

The storm lasted long enough. Finally we got back to our senses... That was not the first time we had a squabble, and we knew damned well it wouldn't be the last.... Anyway, we resumed our trip and by the time we reached the elevation of Siloh, everything was forgotten and we were laughing again and teasing one another. Only Peter continued with his grumbling.

Peter: No, no, no! Never will I look at his face again, ever. For me, he's dead and should be buried.

Jesus: Peter, please, listen to me: if among ourselves, we continue to kill each other and remain divided, then what can we expect from the ones on top?

Peter: Look Jesus, this wasn't the first time it happened. Remember the incident in the wharf a month ago? It's the same old banana, you know. I can't stand this red head and the little squirt anymore!

Jesus: That's all over, Peter.

Peter: Yeah, it's all over, but it'll happen again. I forgave him once, all right, but I'm not sure next time.... and....

Jesus: You'll have to forgive him again, and again, for seven times.... even seventy times seven. Always.

Peter: Oh, yeah? Isn't that funny? And may I know why I should tolerate the stupidity of this rascal?

Jesus: Because... because a grain of sand is nothing compared to a mountain.

Jesus: The kingdom of King Shaddai was enormous like the Great Sea. One had to undertake a hundred journeys to go from one end of the territory to another. In order to manage the affairs of the kingdom, he had assigned officials all over the provinces who were tasked to distribute the money of the kingdom... Some of these officials, however, were crooks, as in the case of Neriah....

Neriah: Here, cross-eyed,.... take it....

Cross-eyed man: But, Neriah, this is too much dough..... What if they find out?

Neriah: C'mon, take it and leave the country at once!.... And don't get yourself caught!.... I'll come back tomorrow!

Jesus: Neriah came back the next day, and the succeeding days. He always left the office with a sackful of money under his tunic and gave it to his accomplice, the man with the crossed eyes.

Neriah: At last, the days of poverty are over! Soon, you'll be a millionaire, Neriah, you'll be richer than the king!

A soldier: You're under arrest, Neriah!

Neriah: Wh...wh.....why?

Soldier: You're a thief, a smuggler, damn you! I'll bring you before the king, and when he finds out what you have stolen, he'll have you beheaded, scoundrel! C'mon!

King: What! One hundred million dinarii! Do you realize what you have stolen, Neriah? Why, that's even greater than Mt. Ararat! Even if you work like a beast all your life, you won't be able to pay me back. Summon the executioner and have this devil beheaded!

Neriah: No, no, no! Take pity on me, King Shaddai! Have compassion and forgive me!... I'm asking your forgiveness, please pardon me!!

King: Very well. You will not die. But tomorrow, before dawn, you will be sold as a slave; your wife and your children too. That's the least that you deserve for being such a thief!

Neriah: No, no! Have pity on me, King Shaddai! I... I... didn't know what I was doing.

King: You didn't know what you were doing....?

Neriah: Well, I knew, but..... forgive me just the same!

Jesus: Since the king was a good man and had a heart bigger than his immense kingdom, even bigger than the debt of his official, he pardoned him.

King: Well, then, Neriah. I forgive you. Go back to your post. Your debt has been written off and I'll forget all about it.

Cross-eyed man: How fortunate can you get, Neriah! You were born with a lucky star, wretch!

Neriah: Boy, am I lucky, but penniless, with not even a single cent to buy me some dates.

Cross-eyed man: Man, you should be happy.... You could have lost your neck.... Money is the least of your problems, you know...

Neriah: Oh yeah? So, it's the least problem, huh? Then, pay what you owe me. If I remember right, I lent you a hundred dinarii...

Cross-eyed: Bah, that was a long time ago, long before my eyes got twisted like this!

Neriah: They'll get all the more cross-eyed if you don't pay me back!

Cross-eyed: Okay, Neriah, I'll pay you when I get my wages....

Neriah: No way. I need that money now, do you hear? Right now!

Cross-eyed: But wait..... man..... it can't be now.... Ahhggg....!

Jesus: Neriah rushed toward this fellow and grabbed him by the neck with all his strength....

Cross-eyed: Ahhgg.... I ain't got the money now..... wait.... please.... listen to me...

Neriah: I can't wait, dammit! Either you pay me now or you go to jail!!

Cross-eyed: Please have pity on me.... have pity on me...!

Jesus: But Neriah had no compassion for the guy and had him sent to jail.

A soldier: And that's the story, my King... First, he dragged the cross-eyed man to the city and had him imprisoned...

King: Go get Neriah and bring him back here! Now he will know who I am! He owed me a hundred million dinarii and yet I pardoned him! Why couldn't he do the same to him who owed him only a hundred bucks?

Peter: How did the story end, Jesus?

Jesus: Well, the king got so furious he sent Neriah to jail.

Peter: Right. If I had been the king, I would've grabbed this man and torn him to pieces!

Jesus: Really?... But that man is you, Peter. You've become like Neriah.

Peter: Me...? Oh, of course..... I know where that leads to.....

Jesus: Look.... You and James and all of us owe the Lord a lot of debts and he forgives us all of them. Yet, we can't forgive the small things that other people owe us.

Peter snorted, then quickened his pace.... For sometime, he continued to sulk. But later, before sunset, he approached my brother James and started talking to him, and they ended up making peace with one another. The truth is that, with Jesus, we learned to overlook each other's mistakes, so that the Lord would also forget our own mistakes.

In our day-to-day interaction with each other, a little argument may easily generate into a quarrel, where long time grudges and misunderstandings may surface. This is perfectly logical. This is part of human interaction. And Jesus' disciples were not spared these conflicts. On account of the social class they belonged to, their varied personalities, the situation they found themselves in, ever since they joined Jesus – perilous and uncertain – and the very testimony of the gospel (Mt 20:24; Lk 22:24), it was most likely that the disciples would get entangled in arguments similar to what appear in this episode.

Number seven was a very important number in the world of the Israelites. Its origin can be traced to the observation of the four phases of the moon, each of which lasted seven days. Thus, the Israelites began to associate number seven with a complete cycle. Number seven became synonymous with plenitude, with something complete and finished. For Israel, number seven signifies totality, and given a theological context, the totality desired by God. Thus, the order of time was based on seven (the Sabbath, the sacred day, would come every seven days). The temple's candleholder had seven arms, etc. For example, the Hebrew verb "jurar" literally means "sietearse," that is, having as witnesses the seven powers of heaven and earth. Number seven is therefore, a round number. To forgive "seven" times means to forgive "everything" completely. It's like saying "Let's wipe the slate clean and let's start anew." To drive home this point, Jesus tells Peter to forgive "seventy times seven." Seventy is a combination of 7 and 10. If number seven meant plenitude and totality, number 10 (its origin is traced to the ten fingers of the hand) likewise had the nature of a round number, although to a lesser degree. "Seventy time seven" means always, in all occasions, without exception, etc.

The parable of "the unmerciful servant" is typically oriental in its exaggeration about the use of figures representing one's debts. Ten thousand talents is equivalent to one hundred million dinarii. That is, the salary of a hundred million work sessions. It is a gigantic amount, unrealistic and unimaginable. This intensely emphasizes the contrast with the measly sum of a hundred dinarii, the small amount owed by one of the characters in the episode. Rather than present an incident in Palestine, Jesus, in this parable, refers to a foreign king in the style of those great sovereigns of the Orient. This is seen for example, in the order given by the king to sell the wife and children of the debtor, a custom that was not Israelite, or in the act of sending him to prison as payment for his debts, a law that did not exist in the Jewish legal system..

In Jesus' time, the writings of the rabbis about the final judgment always referred to the two measures employed by the Lord in ruling the world: One, the use of mercy; the other, that of justice. In the end the rabbis would claim "mercy vanishes, compassion appears too remote and benevolence just fades away." Only pure justice remains. Jesus totally transformed this theological idea prevalent in his time. He showed us that even mercy, God's forgiveness, can be valid at the final hour of reckoning, though he added one decisive factor. It shall only be granted to those who have learned to forgive, who, knowing they have been

forgiven, have had compassion for the others. And they who have underestimated God's pardon shall be meted full justice. Such measure is what we set for ourselves as we pray the Lord's prayer "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Forgiveness among men and women is basic in the gospel. When we forgive, we undertake a risk. Jesus, in the act of forgiving, risked his trust in someone, hoping this gesture would be a call to his conscience, that he might reform his ways. That was what he did to Matthew, to Magdalene, to Zaccheus, and to Nicodemus.... He created a new relationship with them, setting aside all prejudices, forgiving the past to attain a different future. It deals with a positive attitude toward men and women, something that is profoundly optimistic: Evil will never have the last word, and humans are capable of transformation. This is forgiveness in the Christian sense, completely trusting one another – but never naive – and entrusting in them the others' hope of the community.

It is not easy to talk about forgiveness and reconciliation if we leave the community of our brothers and sisters and situate ourselves in a society where inequality and injustice exist. The message of reconciliation in the gospel has almost always been used as a factor in alienation. Christian love is struggle, denunciation and criticism, but we must know how to overcome the vicious circle of bitter revenge and retaliation. Through our capacity to forgive, we must set forth a new era of justice in a new society.

(Mt 18:21-35)

96

THE PROSTITUTES SHALL BE FIRST

It was the month of Nissan, the spring month. The plains of Esdraelon woke up, garbed in yellow daisies and wild lilies. The whole field smelled of humid earth in anticipation of the fresh blooms. In two days, we left Galilee and Samaria behind. We were heading for Judea, the barren land.

On the third day of our journey, we could see Jerusalem's silhouette in the distance. The Holy City was already preparing for the feast of the Passover....

Mary: Jesus, my son, I'm scared..

Jesus: Of what, mother?

Mary: Of Jerusalem. There were times when, looking at the walled city from afar, I thought it was the crown of a queen. I dunno. Now, it seems to me that the walls are like teeth of stone, of a huge mouth, wide open..... threatening....

Jesus: Jerusalem is a queen, all right, but not a murderous queen. When a great prophet lifts his head and denounces it, the giant mouth shuts up and bites.

Mary: My God, don't talk that way, son..... all the more you scare me....!

It was already getting dark. We were very tired and our feet had become callused. We crossed the gate called Fish and we entered Jerusalem. We had to pass through the wall of the Ammonites where, every night, the heavily made up prostitutes of Jerusalem lined up, exhibiting their wares....

Salome: Listen to those hookers sing! Aren't they ashamed of themselves?

Philip: Well, M'am Salome, if they don't advertise, then they don't sell. I used to do the same when I had my cart.

Salome: Stop being vulgar, Philip.

Philip: Besides, these women are an unfortunate lot.

Salome: It takes one to know one in order to know all. Just look at our “Magdalene” here.... She’s got her eyes fixed on the group....

Filomena: Mary, hey Mary!

Before we knew it, Mary of Magdala was already rushing to greet a friend stationed by the wall....

Salome: See, I told you, Philip... what’s bred in the bone will come out in the flesh!

Filomena: My gosh, Mary dear, what brought you here, young lady?

Magdalene: Precisely, Filomena, what are you doing here in Jerusalem? Have you lost something in this mad city?

Filomena: Yeah, my dignity..... that’s all.... Oh, Mary, you’re still young, but I’ve already turned thirty.... Before, my customers used to go after me. Now, it’s the other way around. Do you understand?

Magdalene: And you came as far as Jerusalem, is that right?

Filomena: You bet, my friend. But, obviously, you’ve changed your turf too. Are things that bad in Capernaum?

Magdalene: Nope..... I just decided to leave..... the trade.

Filomena: What? Did I hear you right? You mean you’ve betrayed us?.... I don’t believe you, Mary!

Magdalene: You’d better believe me, Filo. I’ve not been lighting the lamp for a couple of months now.

Filomena: Tell me, what’s occupying your time now, young lady?

Magdalene: I’m involved in something else, Filo.

Filomena: What? Are you into textiles smuggling? Or crocodile charms?

Magdalene: Nothing of that sort. It’s the Kingdom of God.

Filomena: Kingdom of God? Can you eat that, or what?

Magdalene: God must’ve grown so weary of everything, he showed his angry face through the clouds and said: “Those who don’t know must now learn how to swim, for another deluge worse than the first is forthcoming!”

Filomena: What nonsense are you talking about?

Magdalene: Sshh! There’s big trouble coming, Filomena. Those who are up will be down, and those who are down will be up! At any rate, I’d go for the Kingdom of God.

Filomena: For God’s sake, are you into politics, Mary?! That would be the height of it! Oh, this is funny!... well, if you come to think of it, politics and our trade have a lot in common. But, tell me, on whose side are you, the Zealots’ or the Sadducees’, or somebody else’s?

Magdalene: I dunno, Filomena! As far as I am concerned, I understand nothing, although where he goes, I go.

Filomena: Whom are you talking about?

Magdalene: Jesus.

Filomena: Who’s that?

Magdalene: The best guy I’ve ever met in my life.

Filomena: Now I get it! This guy is in love with you and brought you here.

Magdalene: No, Filo. It’s not that.

Filomena: Okay. You’re in love with him, which is the same thing.

Magdalene: No, it’s something else. Jesus is different. He’s a little nuts, you see, but he is a prophet! No, not a prophet. Do you know what, Filo? Jesus is no less than the Messiah!

Filomena: I’m not surprised. Every night a dozen of messiahs with their swords and everything pass through this wall.

Magdalene: I tell you, Filo, this Moreno is different. When he speaks, he looks at you straight into the eyes, like this....!

Filomena: You’re acting strange, Mary.

Magdalene: You would be too, if you knew him. Come and greet him, Filo. C’mon!

Filomena: Wait a minute, Mary. If I go, they go too. Hey, girls, why don’t you conceal your wares for a

while, so we can take a glimpse of a prophet. Let's not miss this for anything, C'mon!

Soon, we were surrounded by sloppily dressed women, with heavily painted faces and reeking of jasmine perfume.

Magdalene: Friends, this Moreno here is Jesus, the guy I was telling you about... and these are all his friends.... This lady here is Filomena, a colleague of mine in Magdala and.... all these are her friends and....

Filomena: That's all right. C'mon, you guys, out with it. What's all this hassle about the Kingdom of God you've been concerned about? Mary has been telling me about it.

A Prostitute: I'm more interested in the king than in the kingdom. Who knows, I might even like him! Tell me, Galilean, will you be sitting on the throne at the moment of victory?

Jesus: No way. In the Kingdom of God, there won't be any thrones, nor kings nor chiefs who will oppress the poor. No one shall be above anyone. Everyone shall be brothers and sisters.

Filomena: Gosh, I love to hear that. Let's see if I could also free myself from those who drool over me! Hell they sure can be very oppressing, too, ha, ha, ha!

My mother, Salome, could not contain herself...

Salome: Hey, look lady, aren't you ashamed of yourself? You need not wait for the Kingdom of God to cleanse yourself of that slime. All it takes is to repent and to give up your bad life.

Filomena: Oh, yeah? How easily you picture it, huh? I didn't know that repentance could make for survival. Tell me, lady, how many children have you got? Please pardon my indiscretion.

Salome: I have two sons, thank God.

Filomena: Well, I've got eight, and thank the devil for that, and for my husband too, who must've been Satan's first cousin. He made me pregnant eight times and now he's deserted me without having left a single cent to support my eight children. So, what do you expect me to do, Madam? You consider yourself decent enough for not displaying your body in the street! Eve neither did it, but she did something worse!

Magdalene: C'mon, Filomena, you're messing up your make-up....

Filomena: She's getting on my nerves, Mary...! To hell with that woman!

A Prostitute: Well, I'm excited about this Kingdom of God, who knows... this could be our hope for a better situation. At the rate we're going, with or without our trade...!

Another Prostitute: Yeah, let them shake off the bush at once so that all the parasites will fall off from the branches.

Philip: Pshh! Don't shout, filthy woman, the guards might hear you!

Filomena: That's it, precisely! Listen, Galileans, and you Jesus. You must be the brains of all this: If they begin to pursue you, this is the safest place for you to hide. No one looks for the Messiah in Filomena's brothel!

A Prostitute: They say a colleague of ours saved the life of our ancestors when they first stepped on this land...So, now you know where to go when the going gets rough!

Jesus: When the Kingdom of God comes, there will be a place reserved for all of you, Filomena. I promise.

A Prostitute: Well, well, let's not be sentimental now, for God created night that we might relax and be happy. Hey, you, with the mole... why don't you sing a song to welcome our comrades? After all, they are still Galileans, first and foremost! Can't you see, they haven't even washed their feet?

Another Prostitute: Okay, here goes my song... I dedicate this song / to all of you Galileans / if someone sings better here / then he should come out and reply.

Filomena: C'mon, c'mon, now it's your turn...

Jesus: Philip, it's your turn, now.

Philip: You're a pretty lady / but your head is crazy /
you're like a bell / any time it peals.

Filomena: Oh, yeah? What bell are you talking about? Hey, big sis, will you answer him?

Prostitute: They say that the smallest chili / is hotter than pepper / but not your evil tongue / that always

lies.

Filomena: More, more.... and let's see who comes out the winner!

Peter: Here's one to add more excitement to the game... If I were a singer / all my life I would sing to you / all because of those moles / that you've got on your face.

Salome: Don't be impudent, Peter. Wait till Rufina hears this!

Although we were very tired after the trip, the playful mood of those women had infected us, so we started to clap and responded to their songs. We were oblivious of what was happening behind us....

A Pharisee: Look who's here!..... Jesus, the Galilean! This was how I was expecting to see him... so drawn to these whores!

Another Pharisee: This is unbelievable... he who calls himself the Lord's prophet! How immoral!

Jesus: Hey, you guys, why don't you come sing and dance with us?....

Jesus looked straight into the faces of the Pharisees, the followers of the Law....

Jesus: Let's continue with our songs. I'm dedicating this song to all of you..... Listen. A father had two sons / whom he invited / to work in his farm / beginning at sunrise. The first said no / but later relented / and went to the farm to work. / The second said yes / but finally didn't go / he never did budge.

Philip: Hey, that's a weird song, isn't it Jesus? I didn't understand it...

Jesus: Well, it seems that the Pharisees understood, because they left. These are the ones who say yes, yet, they do nothing. Hypocrites! All these women here are a lot more worthy and they shall be the first to enter the Kingdom of God...

Philip: Don't mind them, Jesus...

Magdalene: Right, let them go... Hey, Filomena, sing us another song. The atmosphere is getting gloomy!

Filomena: Okay, here's one.... Hear ye, well, pharisees you think you're so important / but in this Kingdom of God / the prostitutes shall be ahead.

All: Very well said!..... More, more!

We stayed for quite some time singing by the wall of the Ammonites. Jesus was very happy, like David when he danced with the maids of Jerusalem in the presence of the Lord, the day he brought the Ark of the Alliance to the holy city.

In Jerusalem, the city where businessmen converge, where caravans, pilgrims and "tourists" converge, there was an abundance of prostitutes. During the holidays, possibilities of work for these women increased considerably. Most of them came – as it is still generally true in our countries – from the very low bracket of the social ladder. These were women deserted by their husbands, oftentimes with children to feed. Or they were young ladies – like Magdalene – who got stuck in the trade at an early age due to economic considerations, with no chances of recovery, as they got so accustomed to the job.

Jesus had a soft heart for the prostitutes. This ought to be interpreted as a sign of theological profundity. This was not a paternalistic predilection of a pure master who approaches a lost woman out of compassion. It was a deeper sympathy, which made him see in these women – among the poorest in the social strata of his time, and therefore who were in greater need of liberation and hope – the people preferred by the Lord. Being women and prostitutes, they were perhaps the most marginalized of the groups in Israel. Jesus, sensitive to their situation, said something that was authentically scandalous: they, the whores, would be the first to enter the Kingdom of God, together with the thieves and ill-reputed tax collectors. That was a subversion of the whole morality of his time and therefore elicited a scandalous reaction, not only among the leaders but also among common people like Salome and some of his disciples.

It is pure fiction to make of Mary Magdalene a woman in love with Jesus. This topic is too cheap to

explain the conversion of the poor lady. Jesus related to her as an equal, admitting her in the group of his friends; and trusting her, he gave back her lost dignity. He made her rise again and be reformed, and she sensed the justice that Jesus was announcing when he spoke of the Kingdom. It was that justice, which, poor as she was among the poor, was never made accessible to her before, but would be likewise available to the women of her class who never had a place in the society except that of complete dependence on the whims of the men. Because of Jesus' attitude toward these women and the hope he had given them, Magdalene understood who God was and began to glimpse his Kingdom. All this sufficed to explain Mary's enthusiasm for the cause of Jesus and her affection for him, without giving it any romantic color.

Filomena, Mary's friend, in inviting Jesus to hide in her brothel, is recalling the act of Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho who hid the Israelite spies as they prepared the road for the chosen people to the promised land (Jos 2:1-24). The letter to the Hebrews praises the faith of this prostitute (Heb 11:31) and Matthew mentions her, in the genealogy of Jesus, more for her gesture of solidarity than for historical fidelity, as a sign of the closeness to God of these women who were ostracized by everyone. Jesus' song evokes the parable of "the two sons." He reiterates this idea through-out the gospel, in order to show that those who are sure of themselves, those who are happy because they are good – those learned men listening to him and the leaders of Israel – shall be the ones left behind. The others, the poor, those reputed to be immoral, shall be present in the banquet of the Lord.

The scene with Jesus singing along with the prostitutes of Jerusalem was inspired from the gesture of King David as he entered Jerusalem with the Ark of the Alliance, dancing with the maids and the women of the town (2 S 6:1-23). On that occasion, the free behavior of the king caused a scandal and he was told that he acted like "a nobody." Similar criticisms were made against Jesus. That a prophet should mingle with this type of people constituted a scandal, more so if he felt so at home with these prostitutes. David's gesture, as well as Jesus', points to a sign revealing the identity of God: The One who becomes "one of them" from among his most despised of children.

(Mt 21:28-32)

97

THE FLAMES OF GEHENNA

Beside the city of Jerusalem, beneath the south walls is a rocky cliff known as the Gehenna during our time. Here, offerings had been made to the pagan god, Moloch and ever since this place was cursed by the prophet Jeremiah, it was utilized as a dump site.... At dusk, the residents of Jerusalem would pass through the gate called Garbage, carrying all their trash, leftovers, dried branches or dead animals, to be thrown off the cliff. Then, sulphur would be sprinkled over the rubbish and it was set on fire...

Peter: I wonder where all this filth comes from! Look at that blaze!

Philip: Damn, I hope the wind doesn't blow toward this direction. We might all burn!

Susana: Cover your noses..... this stinks like the devil!

Leaving behind the huge flames of the Gehenna, we crossed the other valley, called Cedron, by way of Bethany. It was already dark when we reached our friend's tavern where we stayed....

Lazarus: At last they're here! Martha, Mary.... our Galilean friends are here!

I'm sure they're starved!.... But that's no problem. Here in "Palmera Bonita" they'll be treated to the specialty to the house: lamb's head broiled on low fire!

Peter: Look, Lazarus, don't remind us of fire nor dead animals as we just passed through the Gehenna, where they have the same specialty as you do!

Mary: C'mon, guys, go wash yourselves first; dinner is ready. C'mon, c'mon....

Peter: I tell you, Lazarus, I almost burned my face! I won't ever pass through that wall again, more so when they burn all that trash!

Lazarus: So, what'll you do Peter, when you burn yourself in hell.... when the devil grabs you by the hair and hurls you into the Dump Site of Eternity?

Peter: Ha! That won't ever happen! By then, I shall have lost all my hair like Nathanael! Being bald could also be a blessing, don't you think?

We, the whole group, with Jesus and the women, plus the other Galileans who were staying with Lazarus and his sisters, were all seated around a dilapidated and greasy table. It was placed in the inn's patio, and it reeked of rancid wine. Nothing was left of the lamb's head. A couple of oil lamps hanging on the walls formed mysterious shadows from the faces of everyone gathered that evening....

Peter: Believe me guys, while watching the flames in the Gehenna, I became scared stiff, like those crabs when you put an ember on their eyes.... Then I felt I was having some cramps here on my back.

Philip: I felt worse when I saw what they did to a friend of mine...

Mary: What did they do to him, Philip?

Philip: That was horrible. They tied up his hands and feet, and gagged him to silence him. Then they took him to the topmost part of the wall. There was a candle below. Four men swang him like a sack of flour, and at the count of four..... splash!..... It was horrible.

Nathanael: Don't be a liar, Philip. You just made up that story.

Philip: I made it up, Nat? Okay. When the candle gets extinguished, why don't you go down to the dumpsite and collect his charred bones?

Lazarus: At least, in the Gehenna, the candle gets extinguished. They say that in hell, the flames just continue to burn, and burn and burn... it's like sticking a smoldering ember on your tummy which never dies out.

Susana: May God Almighty protect us, amen and amen!

Mary: My goodness, Philip and Lazarus, can't you talk of something else?.... Has the food upset you or something?

Lazarus: I liked the food very much. How 'bout you, Philip?

Philip: So did I. Of course it wasn't good for some.

Mary: For whom?

Philip: For these poor lambs that we've eaten. If only they could speak, then we would have known how it felt to be hit on the bones and get roasted over fire!

Lazarus: Well..... I don't mean to rub it in, but they say that even the devil has a fork this big, which he uses to hook the damned ones and roast them over low fire.

Philip: No, man, that's not so. What he has is a pot, forty feet high, where he cooks his friends in boiling oil.

Nathanael: Either you all go to hell or you shut up once and for all! I'm having goose pimples even underneath my armpit!

Mary: My teeth are gnashing too!

Sadducee:Ha, ha, haaaa....!

The boisterous laughter came from a corpulent man whose face was infested with warts....

Mary: Hey, you, what's so funny, may I ask?

Sadducee: Ha! I'm laughing at all your stupidities! I don't believe in anything you're saying at all.

Mary: You don't say! You mean, you don't believe in hell, compatriot?

Sadducee: No. Let the dead bury the dead. The rest are stories to scare the children. When you die, that's the end of everything.

Philip: Oh, I see you're a Sadducee.

Sadducee: And so? I meditate on things, and I think a lot.

Mary: And what is it that you have so much thought about?

Sadducee: What another fellow has said: "Eat, drink and be happy, for tomorrow you die." The rest is all nonsense.

Lazarus: But, how can you speak that way, compatriot?

Sadducee: I can prove it. Listen: I knew of a woman who got married and shortly after, her husband died. Then she married again and the husband died again. Again, she married and again, and again and again.... That woman was widowed seven times, after which she too, died.

Mary: And what does that mean?

Sadducee: That there can't be another life after this, otherwise, with whom, of the seven husbands she had, should the woman stay?..... C'mon, tell me... It can't be..... This simply proves that there's no resurrection from the dead.

Peter: No, man, that's not the point here. It only shows how unfortunate that woman has become!

Sadducee: Well, I insist that that is an overwhelming proof.

Peter: I'd say that's sheer stupidity!

Sadducee: There's neither heaven nor hell, fellows.... nothing at all... No one believes in this anymore!

Tobias: I do. How can I say there's no hell.... I've just been there, myself!

We all turned to look at Tobias, the old cameleer, who had not uttered a single word the whole night. He was a thin but brawny man, with sun-burned skin. He seemed to be made of strong stuff...

Tobias: That's right, guys, I just came from hell. For four days I was there, and I hope never to go back

Nathanael: What.... what happened...? C'mon, tell us....

Tobias: It was like this. You know, I always take the route of the desert, from Bethshittah to Hebron....

That night, the cold wind was blowing from Teman. I had not slept for many days and so I got off the camel, rolled myself in my woolen blanket and fell asleep on the sand... While I was sleeping, the camel was frightened by the whistling wind, and got lost in the night....

Tobias: Where the devil are you, beast?!..... Camelllll..... Camelll!... Damn, wait till you come back... I'll have your hump cut off!

But the camel never came back. The only companion I had in that interminable road had deserted me. So went my jug of water, my food and my lamp....

Tobias: Camelll!.... Camelll!....

I felt so helpless in that immense darkness. I could not even see the palm of my hand.... Then I began to walk, not knowing where to go, sinking in those mounds of desert sand, inhabited by scorpions....

Tobias: Camelll!..... Camelll!...

I was thirsty, hungry and tired.... But that was not the worst part of it. The most terrible thing was that I was all alone. Dawn came, but there was no one nor anything around me. I continued walking... Night came. The moonless night was like a tombstone to me. I ran, I screamed, there was no response from anyone.... I was a completely lost lonely soul....

Tobias: So I was in hell for four days and four nights.

Peter: How did you get out of it, *paisano*?

Tobias: I was saved by the stars. The most faithful friends a cameleer can ever have. Gradually, I was guided by them, until I could make out, from afar, a small village called Gerar. I swear, my friends, that when I finally saw a person, I rushed to him, threw myself down at his feet and kissed them. I was shouting with joy. I was no longer alone. Believe me, I'd rather be burned in the Gehenna with somebody, than be in that place again with no one beside me. Because that's what hell is: to be alone.

When Tobias, the cameleer finished his story, all of us heaved a deep breath, as if we had just come out of the desert too... The oil lamps continued sizzling on the walls of the inn...

Peter: Pff!... Hey, guys, why don't we talk of something else, huh? I still feel the lamb's eyes somersaulting here in my tummy...

Susana: No wonder, Peter. With so much hell that we're talking about here... Say, why don't we go up to heaven for a little while? At least, no one will ever feel alone in that place, I'd say....

Philip: I dunno, M'am, but the widow with seven husbands will at least know who to choose from, is that right, Sadducee?

Sadducee: Leave my name, damn it! What I said was if there was heaven, then I wouldn't know how the widow would be able to figure it out for herself!

Lazarus: If indeed there is no heaven at all, then what do we do with all these angels, huh? And where do we put the little angels, tell me?

Philip: Yeah, remember, there are male and female angels too. So, where do we put all of them?

Mary: There you go again, Philip. Big head, in heaven there's nothing of that sort you're thinking.

Philip: Oh, really? So what does one do, simply lick his fingers?

Susana: He must kneel before the Lord and worship him. That's it.

Philip: Then what?

Susana: You go on worshipping him because the Lord is thrice as holy and in heaven, we shall all be such, with our hands joined in prayer before God's throne, as we ceaselessly utter "holy, holy, holy" forever and ever.

Lazarus: Amen! Ahuumm....! Pardon me, Mam Salome, but just the thought of eternity and uttering "holy, holy, holy," makes me sleepy already.....

Philip: Say, fellas, isn't there any better place to go? Frankly speaking, this place called heaven is a little boring...

Mary: There's no other place, Philip. Either you go to heaven or to hell. Make your choice.

Philip: Well, in that case then.... when you bury me, will one of you put dice inside my pocket? Maybe, if I find somebody, a cherubim or a saint who is willing to play, then we can have a little session.... What do you think?

Jesus: I've got a better idea, Philip.....

Philip: Damn, Jesus, it's high time you spoke up! C'mon, out with it!

Jesus: Why don't you get the dice now so we can start heaven right away.... You don't have to wait to die, man!

Peter: I agree with the Moreno! Where are the dice?

Philip: Here they are, guys!..... C'mon, who's playing?

Lazarus: I am!

Nathanael: So am I!

Jesus: Hey, Lazarus, why don't you fetch some jugs of good wine? Mary, oil the lamps so these rascals can't cheat in the dark...! Martha, add more fuel to the fire, to keep us all from getting cold to the bones...! C'mon, c'mon!

Jesus cast the dice. All of us joined the game, from the Sadducee to the cameleer.

Philip: I bet five to one that heaven is exactly like this: a happy gathering of friends!

Jesus: Well, I bet fifty to one that it is something much better!

That night in Bethany, Jesus taught us that heaven was something like a big feast, an endless one... From then on, we wouldn't be asking anything and no one could take away the fun from us.

The valley of Gehenna surrounds Jerusalem in the west. It is joined in the south by the valley of Cedron. "Gehenna" is the Greek form of the Hebrew word "Ge-Hinnom" (Valley of Hinnom). In the early

times, human sacrifices were offered to the pagan god Moloch in this valley, and for this reason the prophets had cursed it (Jer 7:30-33). About two hundred years before Christ, it was the popular belief that in this place was found a hell of fire for those condemned for their evil deed and this hell had received the same name of the valley: gehenna.

Since the place was cursed, Gehenna became a public dumpsite for Jerusalem. Along the southeastern side of the walls was the so-called Garbage Gate, facing the valley. Through this gate passed all the garbage of the city. There were streetsweepers in Jerusalem who apparently cleaned the streets of the capital every day, and all trash ended up in the valley where it was burned. The job of the garbage collector was included in the list of “despised” occupations on account of its repugnant character.

For many centuries, the people of Israel believed that after life on earth, the dead went down to “sheol,” a place in the depths of the earth or underneath the seas, where the good and the bad languished together, with no feeling of joy nor pain. The “sheol” is mentioned 65 times in the Old Testament, always as a gloomy place, offering no hope whatsoever. Other people – like the Babylonians – likewise believed in a similar place (Job 10:20-22; Ps 88:11-13; Ecl 9, 5 and 10). Even the Revelation, the last Book in the Bible, manifests this idea, stating that it is Christ who keeps the keys to this abyss (Rev 1:18). It is only in the last part of the Old Testament that the Israelites have come to realize that after death, the good deeds shall be rewarded and the bad deeds punished. The book of Wisdom, written about fifty years before Christ, speaks of the same idea (Wis 3:1-10; 4:7-19; 5:1-22), by way of reflections which are spiritual and moral in nature. From the historical point of view, however, the anticipation of individual immortality of those who have died is found in the books of the Maccabees (2 Mac 12:41-46 and in 2 Mac 14:46). The most interesting contribution of these books insofar as this aspect is concerned is the following: when the Israelite warriors were confronted by death in their struggle for freedom from foreign troops, the people began to feel that these martyrs of national liberation would be resuscitated by God; that the just, who were victims of death would continue to live and be rewarded by God for their gesture of solidarity with the people and their cause. Those martyrs could not die. The book does not mention the resurrection of all people but of those who have died in battle. That is, the idea of resurrection in Israel springs from their history of insurrection, just as Israel came to know God as their “liberator” who saved them from their continued slavery in Egypt. Much later, about a hundred years before Christ, the Israelites came to know God as their “resuscitator,” realizing that the best of their men, who died in their struggle were “the very ones who would never die.”

What will become of all persons after death is something that has concerned every culture, and all peoples up to our days. The gospel is written by persons who were heirs of a series of ideas – some of which are more ancient and others, more recent – about this matter. Therefore, there is no consensus as to what the life beyond is. We are simply not given this data. Besides, the historical fact of Jesus’ resurrection completely changed the ideas of those who called themselves Christians after converting from Judaism. Jesus spoke of the fire and the “gnashing of teeth” because he was the son of his time. He did not “dogmatize” on the matter though. He spoke in the manner of his time, influenced by the garbage man of Gehenna. If there is one clear thing in Jesus’ mind as he thinks of the death of the children of the Kingdom, it is this: for those who are just, who fight for justice and they love their neighbor, the “other”, their destiny is in God’s hands, just as is the fate of the sparrows (Mt 10:29). There is no reason to fear. Faith in God, Jesus’ Father, encompasses the certainty that we shall conquer death. In summary, the gospel makes of “after death” the object of hope. In the face of insurmountable death and God’s silence before it, Jesus’ word is: hope. The liberation that he is proclaiming will also triumph over the “ultimate enemy” which is death (1 Cor 15:26).

Jesus spoke of the “full” realization of the Kingdom of God, without calling it heaven. From experience, we know, however, that such plenitude is not of this life, since death and suffering always lurk behind. The following words of Jesus describe the future life awaiting us:

1. There will not be a distinction of “nationalities,” neither will there be barriers nor discrimination. There will be full equality, regardless of biological differences (Mt 22:3).

One must take note of this apparent – at first glance – “spiritualization” as pointed out by Jesus, in opposition to the ideas represented during his time by the group of the Sadducees. These were influential and powerful people who did not believe at all in life after death, for they had it so good in this life. Since they were close to the Roman authorities and enjoyed economic benefits from the situation, they had to defend in their “theology” that the reward could only be given here on earth, precisely in the form of good position, money and privileges. Their lack of “hope” in life after death was, therefore, understandable. That is why the Sadducees were ardent defenders of the established system and brazen collaborators of the Romans. Jesus rejected the Sadducees’ materialistic view as a yardstick to the plenitude of the Kingdom of God (Mk 12:18-27).

2. Jesus utilizes symbols when he speaks of the “new world”: people will come face to face with God, the inheritance shall be handed out, there shall be laughter, the family of God shall sit around the table of the God and there shall be breaking of bread, etc. Everything shall change: the last shall be first, the poor shall become rich, the hungry shall be satiated.... Obviously, this must begin here on earth, and only thus shall we have a glimpse of what shall be experienced after the fullness of life is reached.

3. Jesus promises the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, the salvation of the community. Within this perspective, the image of the banquet and the house filled to the brim (Mt 22:1-14) synthesizes Jesus’ words about the Kingdom. “Heaven” shall be an endless feast for the poor.

The images given of heaven and hell by some preachers pose a grave hazard to an authentic maturing of faith. Hell is pictured as a horrible place and God as a sadist who rejoices at the sufferings of the damned who were sent to burning torture chambers. On the other hand, heaven is too often pictured as a boring place where a proud God remains solemn and distant, wishing only to be contemplated, revered and praised on a majestic throne. Jesus is not presented as having spoken of a Father God who is filled with kindness, revealing his compassion for all weaknesses, mingling with everyone as one of us, enjoying himself in the feasts, and suffering with us in our pain. Heaven and hell are so near to us. Heaven is in the community that shares and rejoices in genuine love among all, in co-existence, in relationships, in being together and knowing that everyone loves each other, where no one aims to dominate anyone. Heaven is creativity, humor, good health, the willingness to live, a game.... Hell is being alone. Whoever denies being a brother or sister, fails to treat others equally, does not serve or share may possess money, fame and power, yet, they are digging their own grave.

(Mt 22:23-33; Mk 12:18-27; Lk 20:27-40)

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WITH DIRTY HANDS

Just two days after we were in Jerusalem, Magistrate Nicodemus, whom we had met on one of our trips, comes early in the morning to Lazarus’ inn, in Bethany. He wanted to see Jesus...

Nicodemus: Believe me, Jesus, this guy has an open mind. He has heard a lot of things about you and he wants to meet you. He asked me to invite you to have lunch in his house.

Jesus: Fine. Tell your friend that if he really wishes to meet us, then he must invite all of us....

Nicodemus: Of course, Manasseh is also inviting your friends, Jesus, but I’m not sure about this Matthew, the tax collector... and that woman...

Jesus: Who, Magdalene?

Nicodemus: Yes... Maybe she won’t feel comfortable with the group...

Jesus: That doesn’t speak well of your friend with an “open mind.” Look, Nicodemus, we’re like ants, you

know: where one goes, everyone goes.

Nicodemus: Yeah, I know.... I just wanted to keep you out of trouble, that's why... You should go easy with these people.... I hope you understand, Jesus.

Jesus: They should understand, too, Nicodemus: all or no one.

So everybody went. The thirteen of us including the women. That afternoon, we left Bethany at dusk, entered the city through the Gate of Siloh and climbed the long street until we reached Manasseh's house. The pharisees and Nicodemus' friends were there, in the upper barrio of Jerusalem...

Nathanael: Hey, your sandals are full of holes, Philip.... and there are decent people in this house...

Philip: And what did you expect, Nat? You don't want me to come barefoot, do you? It's the only pair I got!

Nathanael: You should've asked Lazarus. He's got the same size as you.

Philip: That would've been worse! His sandals stink, didn't you notice?

Magdalene: Well, I'm okay here. See my new scarf! These men can't say I'm not properly attired!

Peter: Look who's talking! Listen here, lady, you'd better shut up and just wait to be served so you don't make a boo-boo of any sort!

In Manasseh's house friends of Nicodemus were waiting for us: three Pharisees and their wives. The Pharisees were regarded as the most ardent followers of God's laws and the ways of our ancestors. The word "pharisee" means "separated." They felt they were chosen by God, and were the best in the world....

Manasseh: Welcome to my house, my friends! Come in, come in... Servants, please attend to the guests!

Nathanael: Brace yourself, Philip! Wait till they see the holes in your shoes!

Philip: Sshh! Quiet, Nat...

Three servants waiting at the door removed our shoes and washed our feet. That was a sign of the hospitality with which the master of the house welcomed his visitors. Inside the hall where the food was to be served, there were six big jars of water for the initial washing of hands. The Pharisees were very scrupulous with cleansing rites. Since we were not used to these however, not one of us washed our hands when we got inside....

Persius: Well, gentlemen, I think an introduction is proper here. Before we all gather ourselves to eat, it is good manners that we acknowledge each other's presence.

Manasseh: Well, Nicodemus must have already told you about me, Jesus. This is Sarah, my wife....

Sarah: It's a pleasure to meet all of you...

Nehemiah: I am Nehemiah, the magistrate from Sanhedrin.

Persius: He's also in charge of the textile trade with Tyre, he, he.... That's where you see him, he's the fifth man in the whole of Jerusalem, starting from the top.... He's got half of the city in his pocket!

Nehemiah: This is Melita, my wife...

Melita: My pleasure! I've long wanted to see a prophet at close distance!

Manasseh: And this is Persius here, a doctor of the Law. He studied the holy Scriptures since he was twelve years old, and he knows them by heart, from top to bottom and vice versa... he's quite a man, you know, he can recite the laws of Moses even in his sleep!

Magdalene: Well, I sympathize with his wife...

Peter: Sshh! Hush, Mary!

Manasseh: Well, Jesus, we would like to meet your.....er..... your friends.

Peter: It's easy to know us. I'm Simon. I'm known as the troublemaker. This skinny guy here is my brother, Andrew. Those two, the red head and the other one are James and John. We're fishermen and..... well, I guess that's all.

Philip: I'm Philip, a junk dealer. I sell things in my cart and with my horn. Starting from the bottom, I'm

the first man of Bethsaida! This bald-headed guy here is Nathanael, a friend of mine. He owns a shop of woolen fabrics: business is not so good! Sometimes he gets some profit and sometimes he loses.

Nathanael: For God's sake, Philip...!

Melita: That's funny indeed....

When the introduction was over, the servants proceeded to prepare the table, while the pharisees' wives whispered among themselves, looking at us with disdain, and giggling occasionally....

Melita: Well, isn't it obvious that she's the..... hooker? The nerve! She seems to have no qualms about coming here!

Sarah: They say her name is Mary...

Melita: No, my dear, the prophet's mother is called Mary...

Sarah: Then she must be another hooker... because her name is also Mary! Hey, be careful, if you don't watch out, her husband might suddenly pick on you!

Melita: Nonsense, she's already hooked to her prophet... They say that Jesus brings her everywhere..... I'd say there's something going on here.....

Persius: Hey, those little gossips bespeak poor manners...

Sarah: Not to worry, Persius. We're talking about the prophet and the hooker and the long-haired guys with him... They'll be famous for the lice they carry on their heads, ha!

Persius: You bet!..... What were you telling me about the tax collector who looks drunk? I'm so disgusted, really....

Manasseh: Friends, the table is ready!...

Persius: Well, but first, our custom....

Manasseh: Of course..... you may now wash your hands.....

Since we were so starved, we did not hear Manasseh, the master of the house, invite us to wash our hands, according to the rite of purification of the Pharisees. They sat at the table only after washing their hands.... In a short while, we became so agog at the sight of the wine and the good food that we forgot about the cold welcome we received initially. Peter was so excited he licked the spare ribs one by one.... Philip, who was beside him, thoroughly searched the tray for the pieces of meat that were left.....

Philip:and I changed the wick from the oil lamp. Then the guy said: an oil lamp without a wick, of what use is it?... Ho, ho, ho!..... What do you think?

Nathanael: Could you pass the gravy, Mary, it's very good!

Peter: This lamb is fantastic, I tell you. Rufa, my mother-in-law, says that when you eat good meat, you must be ready for the consequences.

Melita: Well, well, can't we talk of something else aside from lambs? Since the prophet is here with us, I'd like to know what he thinks of the things that are happening around the city..... This is Babylon, Jesus, I tell you. You don't have to go far.... take the case of the family of Ptolemy...What do you think of what they have done to the daughter of Benisabe?

Jesus: I dunno... I don't know this family, Madam Melita...

Melita: Oh, if you only knew..... Poor girl..... well, poor, no, but she's a lost girl, to tell you frankly. She's like a rolling stone. She can't stay put. This is between you and me, as I don't wish to poke my nose in somebody else's life... but a reliable source told me she is pregnant, by no less than her first cousin....! The father, naturally, is distraught!

Sarah: Distraught? Is he really?..... What a creep! Why, it runs in the family! Like father, like daughter!

Melita: So, that's what's going around here, Jesus, but....

Sarah: But that's not even half of the story. There's more to it.... Well, I don't really want to talk about anybody else's life, but there are some things that have gone too far already....

Melita: Did you know that his wife tried to leave him by passing through the window...That was a great scandal in the whole Jerusalem! It turned out that....

After a while, two servants appeared with a jug of water for the purification rite, a custom observed by the Pharisees during meal time... The servants were at one end of the table where Philip was seated...

Nathanael: C'mon, Philip, pour it, man.....

Philip: What?..... Hik....! More wine? Oh man, this is cool!... Okay, here goes!

Philip grabbed the jug with his greasy hands and gulped the water for the cleansing rites down his throat....

Persius: What obscenity is this?!

Sarah: He's drunk..... Just look at that hooker beside him. She thinks it's funny!

Nehemiah: This is the last straw!

When Philip put down the jug and wiped his drenched face with the sleeve of his tunic, Nehemiah, the magistrate, stood from the table and left the dining room with an air of dignity...

Magdalene: Say, what's bugging that man now?

Philip: How should I know?!... The hot sauce must have upset his tummy...

Nathanael: No, Philip, I think it's you...

Philip: Why me? No, Nat. He went to relieve himself in the latrine... I'm sure of that....

Then Persius, the other Pharisee, stood up...

Persius: I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I can't stand it anymore... I tried to keep silent during the meal, but this is too much already. My friend Nehemiah did the same..... No, he did not go to the washroom as one of you has hinted. The doctor left because he could no longer tolerate what's going on here. And he is right. Not one of you has observed the rite of washing the hands before you came inside. Neither have you washed yourselves while we were eating. And now, this guy did the most vulgar thing we have seen in our life!

Philip: Don't you point at me with that finger of yours...! Okay, okay, I'm a swine.... well, I'm sorry, damn it!

Magdalene: Hey man, forgive him now so we can continue eating! Okay, so you're forgiven... Or if you wish, I can sing to you a song to cheer you all up!

Nathanael: Shut up, Mary..... you'll just make matters worse...

Melita: What a disgrace! I'm leaving too..... So these are "The prophet and his friends." Ha!

As Madam Melita arrogantly left the dining room, Manasseh, the master of the house, look at Jesus despidingly....

Manasseh: A while ago, I would have wanted to ask you, Nazarene, whom they call God's prophet, I would have wanted to ask you, I said, why your friends did not wash their hands before sitting at the table. I see that you have not done it, either. I see that you, their master, who is supposed to teach them the way of the Law, also don't comply with the Law.

Jesus: And you, my friend, overdid it.

Jesus stood up, resting his two hands on the table...

Jesus: Please excuse us, Manasseh. It's the lack of practice in us. We farmers don't know much about good manners. Our hands are always dirty....

Manasseh: I'm glad you're aware of it, Jesus...

Jesus:but, maybe, our tongue is purer than your wife's, who while eating, did nothing but gossip about the entire neighborhood.

Manasseh: Pardon me, did I hear you right, or...?

Jesus: Yeah, you heard me right. If you wanted to, you would even hear better. Listen, Pharisee: What makes the person unclean is not what enters through his mouth, but what comes out of it. What goes inside passes through the stomach and then out of the body. But what comes out of the mouth comes from the

heart, and from the heart, like gossip, lies, the thought that one is better than the rest.... This is what makes the person unclean.

Jesus: So this friend of yours has an open mind, huh, Nicodemus?

Nicodemus: Fine, Jesus, but..... next time, be a little more careful.

Jesus: And tell your friends to hold their tongue a little....! because if it became longer than hair, then the ladies could make a good toupee out of it!

Nicodemus went with us as far as Bethany, at the other side of the Mount of Olives, where our friend Lazarus was waiting for us with the warmth of his smile. There, in his inn, we could sit around the table with dirty hands.....

In Jerusalem, the moneyed class and the most influential was the group of the priests. Alongside this powerful circle of priestly families was the lay aristocracy composed of land owners and big-time businessmen – especially those who engaged in the trade of wheat, wine, oil and timber. They were represented in the Sanhedrin (the judicial and administrative tribunal of Israel). Nicodemus, being a counsel to the Sanhedrin, belonged to this social class and his friends would naturally come from this group.

Jerusalem – as other capital cities – dictated the ways of the wealthy class all over the country. The rich men of Jerusalem loved anything luxurious in their homes, in their manner of dressing, in their food. Their banquets – and how these were organized – to the point of having them catered to impress their guests – were one of those occasions to flaunt the wealth of this privileged social class. They were very particular with the manner by which their guests were invited and their customs in this respect were rigorously followed: the sending of invitations through their messengers. In this episode, it was curiosity which motivated the wealthy friends of Nicodemus to invite Jesus, whom they were cautious of but from whom they anticipated something original, interesting and novel that would have compensated for the “sacrifice” they had made by going to his house.

The arrogant people in this episode, aside from being wealthy, were Pharisees. Not all Pharisees were rich people, but the leaders of this religious group belong to the upper class of society. They were accustomed to washing their hands before and after meals. Washing is not only a hygienic measure. The priests were originally obliged to observe it as a ritual symbol of their “sanctity.” Later, the Pharisees had used it to show that they were God’s chosen people, since they believed in their “holiness.” Jesus and his group never had this scrupulous habit.

Basically, the conflict as seen in this episode is more of a clash of different religious perceptions in the face of ritual purity, which is common among the social classes. Many times, it has been desired that good manners be identified or associated with Christian virtue, though it has nothing to do with the one or the other. A person may be “foul-mouthed,” but this is not considered a virtue nor a defect from the Christian point of view. It is simply a consequence of the environment where one has been brought up. Besides, we must bear in mind that the gospel emerged from among the simple folks. Jesus, who was part of this group, was certainly not particular about these social manners.

Jesus counteracts the false purity of the rich Pharisees, manifested only in the washing of the hands, with the purity of the mouth, which helps avoid making judgments about other people. Behind those whispers and gossip among the “elite” women of Jerusalem there is pride, spite for others, and false moralism. Above all, their purpose was to stress their difference from the rest, as the superior people. This is what Jesus tells them to their face. There is an interesting text in the Letter of James (James 3:1-18) regarding the offenses of the mouth – which, obviously, are not a patrimony of only the upper crust of society.

(Mt 15:1-20; Mk 7:1-23)

THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD

At spring time, Jerusalem opened its twelve doors to thousands and thousands of Israelites from all parts of the country. Everyone wanted to take shelter within its walls to celebrate the great feast of the Passover... The caravans of pilgrims also included junk dealers pushing their carts, vendors selling their wares of sweets in baskets on their heads, roving teachers, prostitutes from the neighboring towns, the Bedouins who were experts in buying and selling sheep, professional beggars and the old sitar players seated at the street corners who earned their money by playing old songs.....

Zither Player: It's the story of my friend / that I'm going to sing to you / let me begin: / my good friend had / a vineyard which he treasured / and loved without measure. He weeded it, sowed the land / and built a tower / and a wine press / in anticipation for his grapes / to fill the buckets with wine / which he also made.

As we entered the city through the Water Gate, a lot of people recognized Jesus and followed us. By this time, the Moreno was already known in the whole of Jerusalem.

Jesus: That's a beautiful song, grandpa.

Zither Player: Beautiful and old, my son. It's seven times older than I. They say the prophet Isaiah used to sing it right here, beside the Temple....

A Man: Now, Israel has her prophet and Messiah!

A Woman: Yes, sir! Long live Jesus of Nazareth!

All: Long live Jesus!.... Long live Jesus!

Zither Player: You mean, the great prophet is here...? Where is he.... where?

Peter: Don't turn around, old man.... It's this bearded guy before you who was praising your song...

Zither Player: How's that?.... You...? Oh, my son, I'm almost blind, you know...

Another Man: Long live the prophet from Galilee?

The uproar of those around us was getting louder and louder. Soon, a group of priests and magistrates from the Sanhedrin was seen coming out of one of the doors of the Temple in their elegant tunics and tiaras. From the steps of the Temple, they continued watching us. They despised Jesus, yet, they also feared him, most especially, they feared the great mass of people who were gathered around us... Jesus, who saw them at once, raised his voice...

Jesus: Hey, grandpa, why don't you sing more songs about the vineyard?... I'm sure the people will listen to you, and surely, you'll be earning some dinarii.

Zither Player: Oh, my son, I don't remember the lines anymore.... How about you? Maybe you're a singing prophet, like Isaiah or like our king David...

Jesus: Nah, I sing worse than a toad.... but let me tell you the story without music... I think the people up there want to hear it.... Listen... all of you.... There was a master who owned a vineyard. His name was Michael....

Jesus: Michael loved his land very much. Since it was good land for grapes, he planted a vineyard. He cleaned his land very well, put a fence around it, put up a wine press beside it and built a tower where he could see his entire land...

Michael: Look, son.... What do you think? Isn't this the most beautiful land of all?

Jesus: Michael had a son. He loved him very much, more than anything else, more than his vineyard, so to speak....

Michael: This is your inheritance, son. Take good care of her... The land is like a woman. You have to attend to her, pamper her and watch over her.... In time, she will give her best fruit.

Jesus: Michael and his son had to go on an urgent trip. So they decided to lease the land to a group of tenants...

Michael: My friends, I trust in you. Take out the bad weeds, sprinkle some fertilizer, water the vineyard, prune the shoots and then at harvest time gather the grapes and press them in the winepress. On that day, we shall have a grand celebration!... So long, I leave everything in your hands. Okay?

A Tenant: All right, master. Don't worry, we shall take care of the land like it were our own child.

Michael: Thank you, my friends. So long! Horse, let's move, c'mon! Hiyaah!

Jesus: A month had passed and another and another. Then came harvest time.....

A Tenant: Look how beautiful the grapes are, guys!... They're as big as melons...!

Another Tenant: Yeah, let's cut the bunches and have them made into wine!

Another Tenant: Then let's all drink and have fun!... Yippee!... I'll get drunk tonight like old Noah! And let the deluge come, for all I care... Ha! Ha!

Jesus: The harvest was abundant. The clusters of big sparkling grapes were pressed, filling the buckets with sweet and foamy wine.

A Tenant: Hik! Hey, you, Acaz, there's a guy looking for you... He wants to see the foreman of the vine growers... Hik!

Another Tenant: I'm the foreman here. Hik!... Let him in, and let him stuff himself with all the grapes he wants. There's enough for everyone here..... Hik!

A Messenger: Good morning..... Señor Michael, the owner, sent me... He sends you his greetings....

Another Tenant: Well, send him our greetings too....

Messenger:and he wants me to tell you to collect your salaries as agreed upon, since the grapes must have been sold already, and that the rest of the harvest must be given to me...

Tenant: How's that again?.... Hik!..... I didn't quite hear you....!

Messenger:since the grapes have already been sold, and.....

Tenant: Sold?..... We have drunk and eaten them, that's it, but nothing has been sold....! Ha, ha, ha.....!

Another Tenant: Hey, don't be a killjoy.... go away and leave us in peace...

Messenger: But.... I..... what shall I tell my master?

Tenant: Master or no master!... Tell him not to bother us, please... for we're too busy.... and sleepy too..... Ahuuuummmm!

Jesus: So the messenger told his master about it....

Michael: It's my fault. I sent you without a letter signed by me, and of course, they must have thought that you were a smooth talker or spy.....

Messenger: Maybe sir, they have a story to tell....

Michael: Okay, don't worry. I'll send another messenger next week, to collect the money from the harvest...

Jesus: And the other messenger arrived in the vineyard....

Messenger: Señor Michael, the owner has sent me. He's sending you his regards. You may look at his signature on this tablet.

A Tenant: Well, send him our greetings too...

Messenger: ...and he asks me to collect the proceeds from the sale of the harvest....

Another Tenant: There goes the same old story again! Pff!.... What a bore! Doesn't he have any other story to tell?

Messenger: Well, since the land is his, he wants....

Tenant: His?.... Did you say "his"?..... Ha, ha, haha! Did you hear, fellas?.... This is his!.... Ha, ha, hahay!....

Messenger: Wait a minute...! Ahggg...! Wait! Look at his signature here...

Tenant: Eat that tablet, yourself!..... and enjoy it too!

Jesus: The owner of the vineyard could not believe what happened...

Michael: But how could that be possible...

Messenger: But it happened. Look at my bruises, sir....

Michael: I don't get it! There must be some confusion. I'll send another messenger, and the third time will be lucky, as they say.

Jesus: So another messenger went...

Messenger: I came on behalf of my master, Señor Michael, the owner of this farm and he says that.....

Tenant: Hey, fellas, here's another one!..... Come, let's give him a nice beating! Ha, ha, ah.....!

Messenger: But, I....

Another Tenant: No buts. Here take it, snoopy! Don't pity him...!

Jesus: Soon enough Michael learned about it....

Michael: What the hell is happening here? Who do these tenants think they are? We made a pact, but they broke it.

Messenger: It's my ribs, sir, they have broken.... I don't think I have any bone left in place....!

Michael: I've had enough of it. Right now I'm sending my son to put things right.

Messenger: Be careful, sir.... these men are not only thieves, they are also murderers...

Michael: Don't worry, they will respect my son, of course!

A Tenant: Hey, look, isn't that the master's son coming?

Another Tenant: This is the height of it!.... Either the master is stupid or he is nuts! Ha!

Another Tenant: Wait, wait a minute.... Let's all be rational. He's the heir of all this land.... If we are not nice to him, then we lose all this food and our work.

Tenant: Ha, ha, ha! What an imbecile you are, blondy! Hasn't it occurred to you yet? This is our chance! He's the heir.... if we get rid of him, then no one will remain in this land except us...! Do you get the point, idiots?... We shall be the owners of the land!... So, fellas, let's do it fast and clean!

Jesus: So the tenants lay hands on the owner's son who was insulted and spat upon, beaten and kicked out of the vineyard. After inflicting such brutalities on him, they cut off his head with a sharpened knife, like they do to lambs...

A Woman: Has this thing ever happened before? Where?..... in the north?

Jesus: In the north and in the south. It's happening right here.... C'mon, grandpa... try to remember.... the last line of your song is something like this.... "Hear the end of my sad song..."

Zither Player: Oh, yes, now I remember! Wait a minute, prophet, it's now coming back.....

Hear the last part / of my sad song / God entrusted his vineyard / to the leaders of Israel / he expected justice / but reaped only abuses. So I'm suing them / and taking the vineyard from them / to be given to the poor / because the others have been corrupt tenants / and now they will know who I am!

Jesus: Very good, grandpa, very good. So there goes the end of the story. Yes, God is the owner of the land and will demand an accounting from this band of robbers, the leaders of our country; and the vineyard shall be handed over to us, the poor people of Israel.

A Priest: Are you insinuating something, you cheating Nazarene?!

Jesus: Nothing new, my friend. The old songs of our country are as clear as the morning sun. You know the song we sing during these holidays. The stone rejected by the builders was chosen by God to strengthen the corners in the topmost part of the building. The builders did not see the value of the stone. The tenants did not listen to the messages of the owner of the vineyard. You, leaders of Israel, are like them: blind and deaf. You don't forgive those who criticize you. When the prophets came, you beat them and persecuted them, and even ridiculed them. John came and you silenced him, until finally, you had him beheaded. And now...

Another Priest: And now what?!

Jesus: And now you want to do the same with the son: you want to kill him.

The silence that ensued was broken by a shout of one of the priests:

Priest: Did you hear him?! He says he is the son of God!... Everyone has heard the blasphemy!!..... That's blasphemy! That's blasphemy!!!

The priests rushed toward us, screaming like mad. With stones they picked up in the street, they began to hurl them at Jesus, who was covered by the crowd as it retaliated against the Sanhedrin leaders and members. Stones rained on all sides. It was a moment of great confusion. Finally, we were able to mingle with the swarm of foreigners who were beginning to engulf the streets, and left the city.

Inside its walls, in the Street of Doves beside the Temple, the old zither player with the white beard continued with his song.....

Zither Player: People of Jerusalem / inhabitants of Judas / come and tell me: / what else could I do / for the vineyard that I sowed? / what more could I offer it?

In the Old Testament, the vineyard was a symbol used oftentimes to represent Israel, the people of God (Is 27:1-6; Ps 80:9-17). The song sung by the old zither player in this episode is the "song of the vineyard" (Is 5:1-7), a poem composed by the prophet Isaiah before he started his preaching, probably on the occasion of the harvest. It is one of the major literary texts in the entire Old Testament. Grape planting, which is typical of Palestine and the neighboring countries along the Mediterranean Sea, demands special care. Isaiah speaks of this special care in his poem. The clearing of the land, the construction of the watchtower and the winepress, etc., are symbolic of God's care and affection for his people.

Aside from the official singers and musicians serving in the Temple of Jerusalem, from the religious class (Levites), experts in various instruments (flute, harp, drum, trumpet, etc.), there were also street singers in Jerusalem, like the old man in this episode. Even to this day, this group still exists in many towns and villages. The songs and poems eventually become the collective memory of the people. Through these verses, they transmit from one generation to another the life and sentiments of the people. Before these were written, a number of great literary works in the ancient times were sung and orally transmitted by roving minstrels.

The parable of "the evil tenants" may be read as an allegory where each of the elements of the story has a meaning. God is the owner of the vineyard, which is Israel. The messengers sent by the master to collect the fruits of the harvest are the prophets. Jesus is the son of the owner. The tenants who rejected the messengers are the religious leaders of Israel, who seek to defend their sole interests, under the guise of false fidelity to religion. In order to attain this, they vilify, defame and even murder the prophets who expose their misbehavior.

Jesus often stressed the difficult mission that the messengers of the Kingdom had to face. He said they would be like "lambs among wolves" (Mt 10:16). He warned them of doors being shut in their faces, of their being accused as heretics, of their being charged in tribunals, and their being killed. This had been the fate of the ancient prophets, and will continue to be so for the artisans of justice of the Kingdom. Not all persons vilified and persecuted are prophets, but all true prophets are always vilified and persecuted. Such persecution is a guaranteed sign of the authenticity of working for justice's sake. The contrary – a

road full of roses and comfort – would mean a betrayal of the gospel, no matter if proclaimed in the Lord's name (Lk 6:26). Up to this day, the prophets are still being persecuted, tortured and murdered. This unjust world rejected by them is "not worthy of them" (Heb 11:35-38) and the hope in the new world which they are fighting for sustains them amid all their sufferings (2 Cor 4:7-15).

This parable speaks of the inconceivable patience of God, which is due to end. The time has come – Jesus says in this story – when the limit has been reached and God will seize the vineyard from the leaders of the country and give it to "others." These "others" are the poor, despised by the religious institution, those who matter only because they are many in numbers, those who pay their tithes, and comply with oppressive laws. They will be the heirs of the vineyard. Isaiah's song is a sad one, something that reflects betrayal. The religious leaders of Israel have been unjust, have oppressed the handicapped, resorted to violence, and monopolized the harvest... So the Lord had to decide: the leaders are out and the heirs shall be the poor.

The title "son of God" attributed to Jesus marks the continuity of his mission along the same line as that of the great prophets of Israel. He presents himself before his people and before the religious as God's final messenger – the son of the owner, who fully knows the owner's will – who likewise affirms, in a definite manner, the plan of the Father. God's patience is over: God shall relinquish the vineyard to the poor, who in turn will sow, and collect the harvest, so that they may live.

In talking about the stone chosen by God to become the cornerstone of the building, Jesus makes reference to some verses of the solemn psalm of the Passover (Ps 118). The psalm tells us how God is able to change things: the stone rejected by the builders is given the most important place by God. Jesus, the poor man, is the cornerstone. The poor are the stones for the building (1 P 2:5). The psalm ends with an expression of marvel: "This is the work of God, and we marvel at it." God's decision is amazing. It is the very essence of the gospel: The last shall be the first, the outcasts shall be the chosen ones.

(Mt 21:33-46; Mk 12:1-12; Lk 20: 9-19)

A CERTAIN JESUS

Volume 3

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A CERTAIN JESUS

A Glimpse of the Three Volumes:

Volume I (Chapters 1-51) – Jesus goes to the Jordan to listen to John the Baptist. There he meets Peter, John and Andrew.... The news of John’s imprisonment kindles his desire to do something for his people. Thus the spark: He must take over, and with a group of friends, he must awaken the spirit of the poor, telling them that God is on their side, fighting shoulder to shoulder with them. He forms his group in Capernaum, and through words and signs, presents God’s plan for humankind. Jesus gradually finds himself at the helm of a people hungry and thirsty for justice, who in turn, see in God, a Father, a Liberator and a Friend.

Volume II (Chapters 52-99) – Jesus’ activities in Capernaum and in the towns of Galilee, including his journeys to Jerusalem in the company of his twelve friends, where people meet them and follow them, prove that Jesus is a true leader of the people, a great prophet. His word becomes more and more intense as he criticizes the ambition and egoism of the rulers, while proclaiming the liberation of the poor. It is a liberation that will find realization in a new society that is communitarian and fraternal, where everyone is equal, where no one has more and others less. The conflicts among the ruling class – the priests, landowners and officials – become more accentuated, day by day. Jesus and his friends are fully aware of the calumny, the threats, persecution and the clandestine activities against them.

Volume III (Chapters 100-144) – Jesus’ last journey to Jerusalem culminates in his arrest and death. The Romans as well as the religious authorities of the capital join hands to silence the threatening voice of the prophet. Jesus became prisoner, was tortured and in his death, experienced the weakness and helplessness of those who have fought for justice against the seemingly powerful and invincible rulers of this world. The God of life who does not allow the unjust to have the last word, resurrected Jesus from the dead: this is the experience that Jesus’ friends transmit to us. The first Christian community is built on this faith.

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100

Judgment Day for All Nations

That day, after going up and down a number of hills, God's messenger, holding his trumpet underneath his arm, arrived in the valley of Josaphat... In springtime, the whole valley was clothed with green grass, while a stream of crystalline water ran in silence. The messenger, satisfied, gave a smile, greeted the newly born sun, and began to scale the stone walls rising beside the valley... Upon reaching the topmost part of the walls, he rested himself on the corner stone, took a deep breath, then blew his trumpet... The ears of the world listened. All sleepy eyes opened and the earth's inhabitants, from the greatest to the least, knew that the hour of reckoning with God had come.

Then, the messenger cupped his hands and yelled....

Messenger: Hear ye everyone!.... Make haste!.... Everyone must come to the valley of Josaphat!.... This is Judgment Day! The big day has come and the Lord will judge all nations, and all people who have lived under the sun, from Adam to the last son born of the woman on earth....

The messenger descended the pinnacle of the walls and headed toward the middle part of the valley, where a date palm tree grew. Under its green and shining foliage he spread a sheep skin, which served as a rug. Then, with the help of a knife, he made a wooden stool out of the branches of the tree. That was to be the throne where the Lord would judge all nations of the earth.

When the messenger lifted his eyes, he saw the first caravans coming out of the horizon. Behind them were groups of men and women, old men with white beards, and children being carried by the arms, multitudes of people heading toward the valley of Josaphat to be part of the great judgment of God. The messenger went to receive them....

Messenger: Who are you and where do you come from?

Egyptian: We are from the land of the pharaohs and the pyramids. We are Egyptians, children of a great nation and as numerous as the sands in our deserts.

Messenger: Which god did you worship in your life?

Egyptian: The only true god! Osiris, the son of god, the judge of the living and the dead! Here we are, Osiris, your servants!

Messenger: Okay, this way please, and take your seats over there, on the grass.

Messenger: Who is your god?

Chaldean: The only true one, and our protector, Marduck, lord and master of history, who is reborn with the new year! Marduck, here we are, your sons and daughters, the Assyrians and the Babylonians!

The people from Mesopotamia proceeded to the valley. They were garbed in hemp reach and were wearing blue turbans, as blue as the heavens that they wanted to reach through the tower of Babel.

Messenger: And where did you come from?

Greek: We came over the great sea, passing by many islands. We are Greeks of the land of wise men and artists, born under the shadow of Parnassus.

Messenger: For whom are you looking?

Greek: For Zeus, the powerful god, he who sits at the sacred Olympus. We're looking for Hermes, Dionysus and Aphrodite... for the thousands of gods that our fathers worshipped and an unknown god whose name we don't even know yet....

The Egyptians entered the valley of Josaphat, dressed in green tunics, as green as the fertile soil of the Nile.

Chaldean: We come from Mesopotamia. From the land embracing the two rivers, and which has cradled seven empires.

So the Greeks entered too, in their white tunics, as white as the marble columns that adorned their temples.

Roman: We come from Rome, the master of the world. Seven seas witnessed our birth and a she-wolf had nursed us. We are a warlike people. Mars was our god, with his military helmet and a lance. As a matter of fact, we were not too interested in the other gods.

Like a great army, the Romans crossed the valley and then sat on the grass. They were dressed in red cloaks, as red as the blood of the innocent victims of their emperors....

So it was that hundreds of nations and thousands of peoples from the four corners of the earth came, cramming together in the valley of Josaphat, each bringing the color of their religion, and asking about their god. Then came another group, from a small nation....

Messenger: Who are you? Where do you come from?... and where are you going?

Jew: You mean you don't know us? We are the sons and daughters of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. We came from the Jerusalem of the earth and we're undertaking our journey to the Jerusalem in heaven.

Messenger: Well, you've got to wait. The great judgment is about to take place here.

Jew: Wait for what? We are circumcised in the name of the God of Israel, the only true God. Where's Yahweh, the God of our fathers? Answer me!

The messenger did not reply. He just showed them the valley. And the children of Israel, like a flock in search of their shepherd, also passed through the valley, and just like the rest, looked for their place around the date palm tree. They were dressed in tunics with black and white stripes, 613 stripes all in all, like the commandments of the law of Moses.

Messenger: Let's see. Those at the end... come, come, and hurry up. Judgment is about to begin... Who are you, may I ask?

Atheist: Who, we?... Well, we are... people.

Messenger: Which god did you worship in life?

Atheist: No one. We never believed in these things....

Messenger: So, why are you here?

Atheist: That's precisely what we want to know. Anyway, what else can we do, since we were dragged here?...

Messenger: Then, come in and take your seat. God is waiting for you.

Atheist: God? What God?... Which of them?

But the messenger did not say anything, instead he pointed to the center of the valley, where, very soon, the great king would take his place in order to judge all the nations of the earth. A huge multitude pervaded the valley of Josaphat. All eyes were fixed on the small wooden throne which remained empty.

Egyptian: But, what's going on here? Until when do we have to wait?

A Woman: Where's Osiris, the god of the Egyptians?

Chaldean: What Osiris are you talking about? Marduck! Where is the god of the Mesopotamians?

Greek: Something must have happened to him... Zeus of the Olympus is never late.

Another Woman: Neither is Aphrodite!

Jew: Yahweh, God of Israel, open the heavens and come down soon! Where are you? Where do you hide yourself?

Atheist: We told you so.... There is no god. The throne will remain empty.

Messenger: Silence! Silence! Observe silence, please!

The messenger ran and went up to the pinnacle again, where he had a full view of the entire valley which was by then filled with a sea of impatient people.

Messenger: Please observe silence, everyone! Here no one is supposed to judge anyone..... Hey, give way, please.... Can't you see he's coming? Give way!...

But the multitude continued talking among one another and invoking their respective gods. They did not notice the thin young man, whose robe was full of patches and was making his way among the people.... He was carrying a walking cane and he looked very tired.... Finally, after much shoving, the man reached the center where the date palm tree with resplendent foliage was located. He wiped his sweat, approached the stool... and took his seat.

Roman: Hey, who's that insolent guy sitting on the throne of the Most High?

A Woman: Hey, you, snotty-nosed, what're you doing there? Do you feel faint? Bear with us and stand like the rest of us. You're not any better than anyone here!... Just look at him...!

Then after blowing the trumpet, the messenger finally obtained a little silence.

Messenger: The judgment of nations will now begin. Take off your tunics, your cloaks and your turbans, everything!

Jew: What is this nut saying? If we remove our clothes, then who will know who is who?

A Woman: Precisely! We may be together but we don't have to mess around with each other!

Messenger: Shut up and comply!

The multitude grudgingly obeyed that order and, in one corner of the valley, a tower of yellow clothes, with red cloaks and blue turbans, with tunics of various colors began to rise. The messenger sprinkled the tower with sulphur and set it on fire.... Instantly, at the snap of a finger, the smoke went up the sky. Only the ashes remained....

All men, big and small, those who have traveled from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south, remained naked before the throne of God.... Then the thin man, seated under the shadow of the date palm tree, stood up, with the help of his cane and began to speak....

Young Man: Friends, I apologize for having made you wait... reason is... I have just been released from jail and I was a bit exhausted. I was imprisoned for quite a long time, and was transferred from one jail to another. I was jobless for many years, knocking from door to door... yes, I also tilled the soil, but the land was not mine.... I have sown for centuries in a foreign land... I have sweated it out in various shops, worked like a beast in many textile mills, swallowed so much dust in mines... only

to earn a measly sum of money, not even enough to tide me over my hunger. I had to sleep in the open, as there was nowhere to sleep.... I was helpless, trembling with fever... without even a piece of rag to put on my forehead. I have roamed all over the world... I have been born in shanties and perished in wars. I have traversed mountains of misery before I finally came here... I have sailed in seas of tears just to be with you today. You remember me, don't you?... Or you do not know who I am? Don't you recognize me?

Then silence ensued for about half an hour... All the inhabitants of the earth gathered in the valley of Josaphat tried to recall where they had seen the young man, as his face was very familiar to them....

Egyptian: Isn't he Martin, the guy who came that night, begging for a plate of soup?

Atheist: No, man. He's Lallus, the activist who incited the farmers to go on strike. He was beaten afterwards....

A Woman: This is odd! I met a widow who looked very much like him!

Amid all the discussion everyone heard a deep, resounding voice, like the voice of rushing waters from above, alongside the sun....

God: What you have done unto him, you have done unto me. What you have not done unto him, you have not done unto me.

Then the man seated on the stool covered by sheepskin raised his cane. It was like a shepherd's staff. With that, he separated the huge multitude before him; some he put on one side, and the rest, on the other side...

Chaldean: Hey, wait a minute, what about all the sacrifices I made in the name of God, huh?

A Woman: And the prayers we said day and night?

Greek: I burned incense, lighted candles, went to temples and knelt before the altars!

But the man with the staff in his hand, replied....

Young Man: That doesn't matter anymore.

Jew: Lord, Lord, we spoke in your name, we preached in your name, and in your name we even performed miracles!

Young Man: Who are you? I don't know you!

Jew: You don't know me? How can you ever say that? I was the high priest of the Temple!

Egyptian: I was a doctor and teacher of the Law!

Roman: And I was the king of four empires!

But the young man replied again....

Young Man: That doesn't matter anymore.

Once again, the heavens opened and the deep voice of the unseen God was heard anew, that of the only true God whose name is mystery and whose face no mortal has ever seen....

God: Those on this side, you may go away now. It never mattered to you if your brothers and sisters suffered hunger, cold and misery or not. Go away.... You, on this side, come with me. I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me water to drink. You opened the doors of your houses when I needed shelter to spend the night. You consoled me when I was sick, when I was in jail.... You fought for justice.... You cared for your brothers and sisters.... It doesn't matter which god you have worshipped... come with me!

Then the messenger ran, scaled the walls and blew his trumpet for the last time....

Messenger: The judgment is over! This is the beginning of Eternity!

And from the pinnacle, God's messenger saw how all the peoples of the world were grouped into two... only two... and they began to walk through the two roads, only two. It was almost nightfall, and once again the valley remained deserted, as it was in the beginning.

We have heard Jesus tell this story in the Jerusalem Temple's atrium, Jerusalem, beside the Golden Door, facing the valley of Cedron, also known to our countrymen as the valley of Josaphat.

The parable of the "last judgment" is one of the most significant in the gospel. It deals with the last day of history, of God's final judgment of human beings. The last judgment, to the people's mind, is replete with a multitude of legends and plastic representations. Jesus' description in the gospel of this last day is essential to understanding the novelty of the evangelical message. We are faced with one of the basic texts that synthesize the essential aspects of Christian theology.

Israel's tradition is situated in the so-called "Valley of Josaphat," the place where the final judgment was to take place (Jl 4:2 and 12). Josaphat means "God judges." This was only symbolic and not geographic. About four hundred years after Christ, this valley began to be associated with Cedron Valley, which separates the Mount of Olives from the southeastern zone of Jerusalem. According to this tradition of many generations, a number of Israelites have wished to be buried in the Cedron Valley. At present, this area surrounding the walls of Jerusalem is a very extensive cemetery. Several tombs are directed toward the gates of the holy city, and there, the faithful Jews who passed away with this belief, expect to be the first to resurrect on the day of judgment of all nations.

The grandiose image we sometimes make of this day is practically lacking in this episode. God's angels are no more than a little messenger with infantile voice, whose solemn trumpet is a hoarse-sounding horn, and God's throne is nothing but a wooden stool, etc. The solemnity of the final word of God at the end of human history is delivered in the most austere and most elementary and most impoverished manner. As it happened to Jesus – where God revealed himself to us in a definitive manner, the final judgment shall also be the confirmation of the gospel: God's presence in the poor, with Jesus forever identified with them. The people mentioned in this episode are those who, in Jesus' time or in previous centuries, had greatly influenced the course of history. The Egyptians and the Chaldeans formed the two major cultures in ancient times. They excelled in astronomy, arithmetic, and architecture. They produced sages and philosophers from among them. The Greeks, who were closer to the evangelical times, are the fathers of a civilization that decisively influenced the entire Europe with their very significant discoveries in all fields of endeavor: medicine, history, philosophy, mathematics, physics, biology, politics, etc. The contemporaries of Jesus were the Romans, who were known principally in the field of law, architecture, and military organization. Another great nation mentioned in the final judgment is Jesus' country, Israel, which brought to humanity, among other things, the unwavering faith in the one true God who intervenes in the course of history. In our time, it would be: the North-Americans, the Russians, the Chinese, the Japanese, the Germans... that is, considering only the great political and economic powers of our present time. Considering however, the major religious groups, then there would be the Christians (Catholics, Protestants and the Orthodox), the Muslims (Arab countries of different nationalities), the Jews (to the present faithful up a number of traditions and laws of the birthplace of Jesus). Among them too (and they appear in the episode) would be the atheists, those who have no faith in God either in this life or after death. These differences in race or nationality will no longer matter on the day of the final judgment. One's beliefs or disbeliefs will no longer count, but what people have done or not done for their brothers and sisters. This shall be the unifying element of all human beings of all times. There will no longer be robes of different colors. Everyone shall appear naked before God, with just one thing to show: their works/acts of justice.

There are three theological ideas that are essential to this evangelical text on the last judgment. First, that human life means fellowship, the union of all men and women. We were created by God to become brothers and sisters. It is on this basis that we shall be judged. We shall be judged for the love that we have shown for others, and for our ability to create an atmosphere of unity in this world. Second, this love is not

an abstract idea, a nice feeling or an affectionate word. It consists of concrete deeds: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, a visit to the prison walls.... Doing all this is not necessarily for the “love of God.” It is enough to do it for the “love of humans.” This being so, then this is being done in the fullness of and in accordance with the will of God. And this is the third basic idea: God will not judge us for what we have done “to God.” No one loves God nor directly offends God. We love and offend God in each other (1 Jn 4:19-21). Humans are God’s sacraments, the necessary mediation and the only way to relate to the Divine.

No one shall be judged on the basis of doctrine, religious beliefs, and dogmas. These differences among the existing religious groups at present are not fundamental. A deeper and more serious dialogue would make us see how we can be, at times, with one another without realizing it. No one will be judged either because of his or her acts of worshipping the Lord: prayers, acts of penitence, vows, novenas, ejaculations, first Friday devotions, scapularies, vigils. These will not matter in the end. What will matter is when you feed the hungry, you give a drink to the thirsty, and you clothe the naked.... Such simple and basic “acts of charity” shall be our salvation. Jesus will consider these acts as having been done to himself – and to God himself – whatever it is that we shall have done to others. This idea is essential to God’s message to us.

We have to avoid looking at this love and acts of service from a purely individualistic dimension. Our neighbor is not only the individual man or woman. Today more than ever, our “neighbor” is taken in a collective sense. They comprise the majority of our people, the exploited class of society, the marginalized races, the oppressed. Pope Pius XII had already spoken of a “political charity.” Feeding the hungry is not giving a plate of food, this being a necessity notwithstanding. Feeding the hungry means to enable the people to have something to eat and therefore, what is necessary is not so much acts of benevolence, but a transformation of the economic structures which prevent a majority from having enough to eat.

This would thus be true for all acts of service on the basis of which all shall be judged by God. If we want to see God in each other, the most propitious place for this encounter is our impoverished brothers and sisters, deprived of the very human condition by the ambitions and greed of others. In the end, Jesus, the poor, shall judge us, in the name of all the poor. The ultimate meaning of history is for the poor. Our commitment with them shall determine our salvation or our final damnation.

(Mt 25:31-46)

101

For God or For Caesar

Civil Servant: But Gov. Pilate, the tax is too much!... Six hundred talents of gold are six million denarii... Six million working days!

Pilate: What’s said is said: the province of Judea will pay Rome six hundred talents of gold, no more no less.

Civil Servant: Very well, governor. I shall inform the collectors and the army right away. But, frankly, I’m afraid there will be protests and riots in the streets. You know how stubborn these Jews are.

Pilate: Maybe they deserve a nice, good beating to soften them up. If they refuse to pay, then they will know who Pontius Pilate is.

Civil Servant: What will Caiphas, the high priest, say?

Pilate: Bah, this fat man couldn’t care less. He’s like a prostitute, you know: he keeps no secrets. By the way, tell him I want to see him urgently, “that the governor has the honor to invite him to his palace to explain to him the new tax measures.” Ha!

Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor signed an order for new taxes, thereby raising the contribution to

be paid by the province of Judea to the enormous amount of six million denarii. Customs duties were also increased and all duly registered Israelites were forced to pay personal taxes... The people's protests could no longer wait....

A Man: But what has gotten into his mind? Is he really testing our patience?

Another Man: Leeches, that's what all the Romans are! But we won't pay them even a single denarius!

Another Woman: If you don't, then you won't be able to get in and out of the city, rascal! Don't you know that everything is under their control? Israel has become a huge mousetrap!

A Man: And we are the mice, aren't we? May his hand be paralyzed if he pays a tribute to the Roman Caesar!

The zealots refused to pay. Several sympathizers and the other rebels protested daily at the gates of the city of David, loudly criticizing Rome and turning the collectors' tables upside down.

That afternoon, Joseph Caiphas, the high priest of the Temple of Jerusalem and the highest religious authority of our country, hurriedly entered the palace of the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate...

Pilate: Most Illustrious Caiphas, in the name of Rome, receive my respects...

Caiphas: And mine too, governor. I received your invitation a while ago, so here I am. I have set aside my other commitments....

Pilate: I guess you already know why I called for you, your excellency. From the windows of your palace in Mount Zion to my palace you can hear the shouts of protests of this small group of fanatic protesters who have no respect for law nor authority. Have you thought of any solution that would cool them off?

Caiphas: Pardon my temerity, Governor Pilate, but.... don't you think the amount of six hundred talents of gold is rather excessive for a poor province like ours?

Pilate: You surprised me with your question, high priest. Precisely you are aware, as well as I am, of the enormous expenses of the empire, the money necessary to support an army like ours, an indispensable requisite to ensure peace and order for the Romans.... You know how expensive is the construction and maintenance of the aqueduct.... It's even more expensive to maintain you and your family in the Sanhedrin!

Caiphas: I understand, Governor, and believe me, I am aware of the sacrifices that you have been making for our country, but, in spite of this...

Pilate: Speak no more. What's said, is said. Six hundred talents of gold! If you, their chief, fail to collect this amount from these stubborn mules, then you'll have to pay from your own pockets! Otherwise, I shall go to the Treasury of the Temple myself, spit on the altar, and get from there, whatever is necessary. Is that understood, your excellency?

Caiphas: Certainly, Governor.... I apologize for not having made myself clear... I never meant to offend you nor to anger you....

Pilate: Well, you succeeded without meaning to...

Caiphas: I shall order the magistrates of the Sanhedrin right away, so that...

Pilate: I give the orders! You must pacify the people. Being the high priest, you are God's symbol on earth for this mob. The moment they see your neck, it's like seeing God himself. Well, tell these mules that Caesar is demanding payment of their taxes. And let God do the same, because He and the Caesar are friends; very good friends; in fact... just like you and me, is that right, your excellency?

Caiphas: Why, of course, governor, of course...

Pilate: Oh, another thing, don't fail to pass by the Antonia Tower tomorrow or the day after tomorrow for your priestly garments. The feast of the Passover is already near...

Caiphas: And.... what happens after the feast?

Pilate: Take it easy, your excellency. If you and your family could help me with this inevitable task of appeasing the people, then you'll have a nice, good sleep. I shall renew your appointment as high priest for the next year. Rome knows how to be grateful to her supporters....

Caiphas: Thank you, Governor, you know fully well that you can count on me...

Pilate: I shall inform my colleague, Sejanus, who is a very good friend of Emperor Tiberius. He shall be

informed of your exemplary conduct for this year...

Caiphas: Thank you so much, Governor. Please give my respects to your wife, Claudia Procula.

Pilate: And send my regards to your father-in-law, Annas...

The high priest left the governor's palace hesitatingly. Some members of the Sanhedrin were waiting for him outside, together with their guards, who would carry him in a sedan chair to his luxurious residence in the upper barrio of the city.

Caiphas: We must observe prudence, my friends. The interview was very cordial and filled with respect from both sides. Governor Pilate is in the best position to help us... if we collaborate with him.

A Scribe: What does he want from us, your excellency?

Caiphas: That we defend the new tax measures. That we help explain them to the people. The commandment says: "Honor your father and your mother." God is our father in heaven. Rome is our mother on earth. Both ask us to obey the laws. This is what we must tell the people.

In only a few hours, the whole city knew that the high priest, Caiphas was supporting the new tax measures issued by Governor Pontius Pilate. The whole of Jerusalem was talking about it in the streets...

A Man: If Rome were our mother, then I'd rather be an orphan!

Another Man: Damn it! This fat man, Caiphas, does nothing but lick Pilate's ass!

A Woman: Hey, aren't they the Galileans who're always with the prophet?... and if I'm not mistaken, the Nazarene is with them!

A Man: Hey, please wait, don't go away...!

We wanted to pass unnoticed amid the multitude that was leaving the Temple at that hour, but it was impossible. They were already gathered around us. They wanted to listen to Jesus.... But, at that moment, a group of priests, teachers of the law, and Herod's men were making way, the latter were in search of us....

A Scribe: You can't hide yourself from us, Jesus of Nazareth.... Everyone here knows you well.... How lucky of you to have come to the capital, especially on these days. Let's see, what have you got to say?

Jesus: What shall I say?

Scribe: About the happenings in Jerusalem.

Jesus: I don't get it my friend. We have just arrived from the north, and... we don't now what's going on here.

Pharisee: Don't be a fool, Nazarene, because you are not.

Scribe: Neither do you mince your words. At least, they say, that you don't give a hoot to anything but the truth, the truth which is as clear as crystal. So, speak up clear: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Caesar of Rome? What do you say?

All of us understood the trap that the followers of Caiphas had intended for Jesus. Jesus, however, remained unperturbed...

Pharisee: What's the matter? Have you lost your tongue?... Or are you too scared to reply? C'mon, speak up, is it alright to pay tribute to Caesar?

Jesus: Well... it depends....

Pharisee: Make yourself clear: Yes or no?

Jesus: I said it depends.

Scribe: It depends on what?

Jesus: On how much you have in your pocket. For instance, I can't pay it because I haven't got a single centavo!

The people applauded Jesus while the priests looked at him despidingly.

Pharisee: The law does not depend on anything, Galilean. It is our obligation to obey the law. Or, do you think otherwise?

Jesus: If I've got nothing to pay taxes, then how can I comply with the law, tell me?

Scribe: You've got to pay it just the same. That's an order from Rome.

Jesus: Well, if you don't give me some denarii, then I can't pay you, even if Raphael the Archangel orders so.

Pharisee: You can't easily get away with it, Nazarene. Here, take this denarius. It's all yours...

One of the priests took a silver coin from his tunic and gave it to Jesus. It glittered in his calloused hand....

Pharisee: And now, what?

Jesus: What do you mean?

Pharisee: You've got the money that you needed. What will you do with it?

Jesus: Well... I was planning to buy a denarius worth of bread with this piece of alms you have given me.

Scribe: That was intended for your tax. We wanted to see you paying your taxes at the collection table.

Jesus: Better, you'll see me at the bakeshop. I'm sure, Caesar has had his lunch already, but I haven't had my breakfast yet.

Pharisee: You're trying to be funny, Jesus of Nazareth. But the Caesar of Rome is too serious for that. It was Emperor Tiberius who has ordered payment of new taxes.

Jesus: What the hell have I got to do with that emperor?

Scribe: Our country is under the dominion of Rome, and all Israelites must submit to the authority of the Caesar of Rome.

Jesus: Maybe you, but not I. I don't bow before this Tiberius nor before any man.

Pharisee: He is the Caesar, who is the supreme authority here on earth.

Jesus: Tiberius is a man, just like you and me. The only authority comes from heaven. The only ruler, the only emperor is God and no one else. No one in this world has a right to call himself king nor father – who is in heaven; and the rest of us are brothers and sisters who are equal to one another.

Scribe: How dare you speak that way. Governments are authorized by God and the rulers act as the God for the people.

Jesus: You don't say...?! But look what kind of God you are for the people. You do nothing but abuse them and burden them with more and more taxes, bleeding us dry of the little money we have! And now, you still have the nerve to call yourselves benefactors of the country!

Scribe: Watch your tongue, Nazarene. He who rebels against Caesar is against God.

Jesus: On the contrary, compatriot: whoever who is for Caesar is against God. You cannot serve two masters: either you are for God or for Caesar!

Pharisee: That's almost a blasphemy! Caiphias, our high priest, has just declared our obedience to Caesar!

Jesus: And in whose name did he declare that?

Pharisee: In the name of God! Caiphias is God's representative here on earth.

Jesus: Or better, in the name of the devil and his interests.

Scribe: How dare you refer to our high priest in that manner?

Jesus: Tell him, on my behalf, that he cannot serve two masters nor use religion to silence the people.

Scribe: You've filled the cup to the brim, charlatan. The denarius we gave you, are you giving it as tax or not?

Jesus: To each his own. Give to God what is God's and to the devil, what is the devil's. Take a look at this coin... Whose face is in it?... Look at it well... It belongs to him, a man like you and me, who wanted to go to heaven and rob the Lord of his throne. The devil did the same too, and fell like lightning. Those whose names and faces appear in these coins shall suffer the same fate, too, because they too have robbed the people.... Ah, there goes the money: Give it back!

Jesus threw the coin at the feet of the priests and the teachers of the law, gave a half turn and left.

A Woman: That's the guy! Long live the Nazarene!

Pharisee: Get that man, and don't let him escape!

The men of Caiphias wanted to arrest Jesus, although it did not push through. We spent the night in Mark's house, and very early the next day, when the streets of Jerusalem were still half deserted, we secretly left for Perea, at the other side of the Jordan where John had been baptizing before.

Since the time of King Solomon (about a thousand years before Christ), taxes had been collected from the citizens of the kingdom of Israel, although not in a fully organized manner. The Persians and the Greeks, who occupied the country (500 and 150 years before our Lord's birth), had also established the system of tax collection. With the Roman domination of Palestine, which became more definite starting from year 6 of the Christian era, the system was strictly enforced on the Israelites. In fact, the Roman Government retained all excess production of the country in the wide network of customs collectors who were created to be in charge of the collection of the different taxes, thus controlling the flow of commerce throughout the province.

Pilate, the governor of the Roman province of Judea, was the supreme representative of Emperor Tiberius in Palestine. Actually, his main function was precisely to attend to the finances of the empire; therefore, the supervision of tax collection was an essential aspect of his job. On the other hand he had to keep the people at bay, who rebelled every now and then due to the economic exploitation which the system, through various measures, imposed. Judea should pay.

Rome's 600 talents (6 million denarii) is in the form of annual taxes. (A laborer was paid a daily wage of one denarius.) The taxes collected by Rome in Palestine were of three types: (1) Territorial taxes (paid partly in cash and partly in the produce of the land); (2) Personal taxes (of several types: according to wealth or income; another was of a general type which was paid by everyone, except by children and old citizens called the "tributum capitis" – per head. The evangelical account makes allusion to this); (3) Business taxes (on import and export items).

The high priests – the supreme religious authorities of Israel – "made a pact" with the Romans to ensure their power and, above all, their privileged economic situation. During Jesus' time the high priests were Annas (6-15 years after Christ) and some of his sons; and from year 18 to 37, his son-in-law, Joseph Caiphias, who appears in the episode. Like Annas, Caiphias belonged to the religious aristocracy and to one of the wealthiest families of Jerusalem. Caiphias tried to get along with Pilate, who dominated him with all types of political and economic pressures, to the extent of threatening him. For instance, one measure resorted to by the Roman governor was to keep the sacred garments worn by the high priest during religious feasts in the Antonia Tower – a Roman quarters near the Temple. The governor would hand them over only for the feasts, and later, the garments would be returned to him for safekeeping. (This tactic was also employed by Herod the Great and by Archelaus.) This symbolized the lack of independence of the religious authority with respect to the political power of the empire.

In his conversation with the high priest, Caiphias, Pilate mentioned the construction of the aqueduct of Jerusalem. Obviously, in Jesus' time, Pontius Pilate was the implementor of the great engineering work, part of which is still preserved. Pilate, who hated the Jews and who had offended their religious feeling on several occasions, took money from the so-called "Temple's treasury" for said construction. Such money was considered sacred by the religious Israelites. This act provoked impassioned revolts from the people against the Roman powers. The Revolts were suppressed by the soldiers with cudgel blows, which were not mentioned by the historians of the period.

The gospel text makes reference to two Roman emperors. Augustus Caesar ruled from the year 30 before Christ to year 14 after his birth. With him started the imperial dynasty of the Claudius family. The other one is Caesar Tiberius, son of the second wife of Augustus, who ruled from the year 14 to 37. It was under his rule that Jesus was killed. After him, other Caesars continued to rule in Rome: Caligula, Claudius, Nero... Tiberius made Augustus, his foster father, a "god." Gradually, the lust for power of all emperors demanded that all their subjects should worship them. In Jesus' time, this tendency to deify the emperor became more and more intense, and eventually became the practice until the fall of the Roman Empire. Caligula was worshipped alive. The Caesars had made images of themselves to be venerated by

making their subjects prostrate before them, etc. All this was nothing but the fruit of ambition, and above all, a wise tactic to strengthen their power and ensure submission on the part of the subjects. This idea, however, of trying to impose Roman power among the subjected people of Israel did not prosper because the Jews, faithful to the faith, strongly resisted blasphemy. But this was not so among their leaders, who, in spite of the fact that theoretically, they could not accept that the Caesar was god, in practice, ignored the whole thing and remained silent, in complicity with the established authority.

The local government (the Sanhedrin – Council or Tribunal of Israel – whose supreme authority was the high priest), was actually wanting in initiative on matters of taxes, as well as the question of relationships with other countries and defense. Its only function was to maintain religious worship and ensure strict observance of the law. In cases like that mentioned in the episode, it was clearly manifested up to what extent Israel yielded to the arbitrary whims of a foreign power.

“Give to Caesar what is due him, and to God what is God’s” is, perhaps, one of the most over-used phrases in the gospel. This has been employed continuously at all times, to define turfs and to show that the priests and the Christians should not involve themselves in political matters nor interfere in matters of the State, but rather, in concerns about God: praying, going to church.... Do not mix the different turfs or concerns, they claim, “to each his own.” Yet, the original meaning of these words of Jesus was not this. Jesus was removing from Caesar the religious basis on which the emperor wanted to rest his authority. Thus he separated God from Caesar to demythify the image of the emperor, the supreme authority of the period, in order to say that Caesar was not God.

One of the more frequent reasons for popular revolts in Israel were the taxes. It was precisely the refusal to pay taxes which sparked the Jewish revolt of the year 70 after Jesus, which destroyed the very foundations of Jerusalem and dismantled the Jewish society. Along that line, the question directed to Jesus about the payment of taxes was crucial. The zealots refused to pay their taxes as a form of active resistance to the present empire. The collaborating classes (sadducees, priests), recommended its payment. The pharisees were in doubt. Theoretically, they were against it, since they were very nationalistic, but in practice, they ended up complying with the order. In the episode, Jesus does not legitimize the Roman occupation by payment of taxes, neither does he show that non-payment is a form of open rebellion against the ruling power. His reply can be taken in another plane: that of total freedom before the secular authority.

History is replete with proofs showing that the authority of the kings (and later, that of a number of rulers) “comes from God.” For many centuries, it had been said that God “elects” the king. The following line has also been stated time and again: “A certain somebody, president, by the grace of God.” But this is not so. Authority is chosen by people – if it is a democracy. If it is authoritarian, governance/authority is imposed.

(Mt 22:15-22; Mk 12:13-17; Lk 20:20-26)

102

The Dead Friend

While Jerusalem opened all its doors to welcome the pilgrims arriving to celebrate the Passover, we were in hiding in Perea, at the other side of the Jordan. The situation in the capital made it difficult for us and we thought that during those days, it was dangerous for us to show our faces around the place...

Messenger: Pssst... Hey, buddy, I was told I could see Jesus, the prophet, here...

Peter: That’s right. What d’ya want from him?

Messenger: I want to see him. I've got a message for him.

Peter: Where did you come from?

Messenger: From Bethany.

Peter: Your name and address...?

Messenger: That's not important! What are you up to, anyway? I've got to see Jesus... it's urgent.

Jesus was sick. The briny water of Perea had upset him and he had a fever.

When the messenger went inside the house where we were lodged, he saw Jesus lying down on a mat, pale and with eyebags...

Messenger: At last I've caught up with you, Nazarene. You hide yourself better than the bats in the caves. The truth is, however, I didn't expect to see you in this condition...

Jesus: Neither did I... But as you can see, I've been sick for a couple of days...

Messenger: That's precisely why I came to see you. Martha and Mary, the sisters from Bethany, want you to know that Lazarus is very ill.

Jesus: So the rascal is also in bed...? What's wrong with him?

Messenger: A serious illness. For three days now, he hasn't uttered a single word, not even a curse. He doesn't laugh, nor take in any food. He's dying....

Peter: Bah, bad seed never dies. Mary simply makes a big fuss over anything, and that's the problem. I'm sure she pressured you to come here...

Messenger: No... but Martha too. Lazarus is in a serious condition and the two sisters are worried. They don't know what to do.

When the messenger from Bethany was gone....

Peter: But Jesus, don't you realize it's dangerous?

James: They wanted to nab you last week, blazes. If we go back now, we'll be risking our lives.

Peter: Let's wait until the Passover. It's something else when Jerusalem is teeming with people. When the sea is in turmoil, then we can throw in the bait...

Two days after the messenger's visit, Jesus felt better and wanted to go back to Judea. For some of us, that was a crazy idea.

Jesus: Hey, guys, forget about your fears and begin tying your sandals... The sun only shines for twelve hours and we'll have to take advantage. We'll be leaving tomorrow at dawn. Lazarus is waiting for us. Friends are friends, you know.

James: And so are our enemies, Jesus. They're waiting for us too.

Jesus: Then we must open wide our eyes and ears, James, so we don't fall into the trap.

Thomas: If they k...k...ki..ll...us,then..... l..l..let... it... be... S...s..some..d..day we..a..a..ll..h..a..v..e to... d..d..die.!

Peter: For the first time, I agree with you, Thomas! We all go to Judea, guys, and let the sun shine where it should!

We left Perea the next day. We crossed the Jordan as we ascended through Jericho. After long hours of walk, we finally saw the walls of Jerusalem. We passed by the walls without entering the city. We wanted to get to Lazarus' inn as soon as possible. We left the Mount Olives behind us, and when we were approaching the small white houses of Bethany, Martha, who was ridding the pathway of dust, rushed to receive us....

Martha: Jesus, you're here at last!

Jesus: How's Lazarus, Martha?

Martha: Why, didn't you know? He's dead, Jesus, he's dead... it's been four days.... Why didn't you come earlier? We had sent for you... Lazarus was asking about you... he suffered a lot.... Oh, Jesus, it was such a great sorrow!

Martha, her hair disheveled, was wearing a tunic for mourning. Weeping she embraced Jesus. Her sobbings shook her robust body like the morning wind that shook the leaves off the date tree. Soon enough, Jesus' mother and the women joined in her weeping. Philip and Nathanael were the first to become teary-eyed... and tears ran down Jesus' face.... We loved Lazarus so much.

Martha: Why did God take him away, Jesus? Why....? Mary and I needed him....

Jesus: Where's Mary?

Martha: She's inside the house. She does nothing but weep.... For four days, she hasn't eaten anything... nor slept..... I'll go see her.... She'll be glad to see you...

In spite of her gloom, Martha energetically rushed to the inn. Bereaved, and not knowing what to say, we followed her through the dusty path we had happily traversed often during our trips to the capital... As we crossed the main gate of the inn, Mary came out to meet us. She was with a lot of neighbors who condoled with the sisters after Lazarus' burial.

Mary: Jesus, why didn't you come before? Why?

Mary, fell to the ground, pulled her hair and beat her forehead against the ground...

Mary: Damn this life and damn this death!

An Old Woman: May the Lord have mercy on all of us, as we shall also end up in the pit!

Messenger: Poor women.... now they're all alone.... Who'll look after them?

A Woman Neighbor: Hey, prophet, why didn't you come when he was sick? They say you have healed a number of persons! You could have cured him too!

Old Neighbor: This fat man Lazarus was a good man. May our father, Abraham take him in his bosom!

Bethany's inn did not reek of lamb, wine nor onions, as it used to. It was in mourning. The smell of incense burnt during those days still pervaded the entire household. There were no more laments from the mourners and the music had stopped. A group of neighbors and some guests kept the two sisters company, weeping with them. After washing our feet and seating ourselves in the big hall near the kitchen, we thought Lazarus, with his usual big smile, would appear to us from any corner of the inn to welcome us....

A Man: He was the man with the largest tummy and the biggest heart in the whole of Bethany!

A Woman: You bet, Serapio! If there was ever an honest man in this town, it was your brother, ladies... He was more upright than a tree and was as good as gold....

Mary: He shouldn't have died, no... He was young and strong.

Old Woman: Patience, my child, patience.

Peter: What the hell did he die of?

Martha: It was so sudden. He fell right here in the kitchen, with a pot in his hand, as if a lightning had burned him.... He was in bed for a couple of days, motionless, and that was it....

Peter: How sad.... So, what do you intend to do now?

Mary: What else can we do, Peter...? My brother was the moving spirit of this inn. Now it's all over...

Jesus: No, Mary. Lazarus will be happy to see you continue working, so that your business will prosper.

Old Woman: How's that possible, when the dead are eaten up by worms?

Jesus: Grandma, the dead continue to see us and to love us, because... they continue to live.

Mary: You know that's not true, Jesus. You just want to console us.

Jesus: Yes, it's true, Mary. Death is just a brief farewell. After a short time, we don't see each other. Then at another short time, we shall see each other again.... We weep now, but the time will come when we shall all be together in the house of God, where there shall be no more weeping. Believe me, Mary: the dead are not dead: they continue living with God.

Mary: And my brother too?

Jesus: Sure. Lazarus is not dead. He's just gone to sleep, to be awakened by the Lord. He's alive, Mary!

Mary: Alive!... I don't hear his laughter anymore, nor do I see him enter nor leave that door with his greasy apron! That was only four days ago, and it seems like four years have passed....

Jesus: You'll see him again, Mary.

Mary: Don't deceive me, Jesus. With death, everything comes to an end.

Jesus: On the contrary, it's just the beginning of everything. Look, Mary, if a child who is to be born could speak, he would say no, he doesn't want to be born... he would think it's the end of everything for him... the warmth and the tranquility of being near his mother's heart always. But the moment he is born, then a new life begins because he sees the light of the sun, the different colors of the world.... The same thing happens when we die: we become scared... and we cry... the truth is we are born for the second time, to a life much better than we can dream of....

Mary: That sounds beautiful, Jesus. But what I have seen is, when a person dies, he is thrown into the earth and there he rots.

Jesus: Even the seed gets rotten, after which a new tree is born and later bears flowers and fruits.

Jesus turned to Martha, Lazarus' other sister, who stood silent by the greasy table, her eyes red with so much weeping....

Jesus: Where's he buried, Martha?

Martha: In the blacksmith's garden, behind the patio, Jesus. Do you want to go?

Jesus: Yeah, let's go....

We all left the inn. It was noontime and the heat of the sun was hurting our eyes. When we reached the garden and got close to the rock where the tomb was, Martha and Mary wept disconsolately.... When Jesus saw them, he covered his face with his hands and began to weep too.

Old Woman: The prophet obviously loved him so much....

Jesus: Lazarus, why didn't you wait to celebrate the Passover with us?... Why the haste, buddy?

Jesus, his eyes filled with tears, stared at the round and white tombstone. He was praying.... We too, prayed in between sobs, before our friend's tomb....

Jesus: Father, I thank you because you did not allow the earth to swallow the dead. It is your hand that delivers them from death to life, like you did to our forefathers by parting the Red Sea.... You are the resurrection and life and everyone who believes in you, although they have died, shall live... Yes, Father, the dead will rise! Let your Spirit from above come down and breathe life to all the dead, so that they may live!

Not even a leaf was moving. Jesus was trembling...

Jesus: Roll back the stone, please...

Martha: But Jesus...

Jesus: Yes, Martha, that there may be air inside...

Martha: Jesus, what're you talking about? It's been four days already.... His body must be stinking by now.

Jesus: Do as I say, Martha. Please roll the stone now...

We all felt uneasy.... But James, Judas, Simon and the stonemason went near the tomb and began to move the stone. We were all trembling like we were at the edge of a precipice. No one was weeping anymore... we were all tired and weary. We could not get our sight off that black hole that was beginning to form before our eyes... When the tomb was opened, we felt a rush of cold air blending with the penetrating scent of myrrh...

Jesus: Lazarus, brother, come! Come back to life!

Bethany was a couple of miles away from Jerusalem, near the valley of Josaphat. According to the beliefs of my countrymen, God shall raise the dead at the end of the world. That spring morning, in a

garden of Bethany, Jesus gave us a preview of the joy and surprises of the great Day of the Lord!

During the last phase of his life, Jesus learned about secrecy. He had to hide himself as a precautionary measure in the face of the growing hatred of the authorities for him (Jn 10:39-40; 11:54). From Perea, at the other side of the Jordan, he went to Bethany to find out about Lazarus' illness. Bethany is a small village situated about six kilometers east of Jerusalem. At present, one can visit a tomb venerated by tradition as Lazarus' tomb. One has to descend through the narrow and deep steps to reach a very small space where there is a stone table, where the body of the brother of Martha and Mary was said to have been lain. On one of the damp walls are written Jesus' words according to the gospel of John: "I am the resurrection and the life."

The story of Lazarus' resurrection is found only in the gospel of John. As in the other accounts solely narrated by this evangelist, we are faced with a vague and careful theological explanation in the form of a narration to focus an important point, by the use of a number of details. Jesus' community of disciples has been listening to his message of liberation, likewise confirming its gestures, activities and signs. In death, however, it sees the interruption of life, the insurmountable defeat of the whole plan of liberation. In this theological narration, John wishes to give his response of faith to this anguish: Death is not the frontier; for him who believes in Jesus, it is never and ultimate end.

When Jesus decides to go back to Bethany, which is so close to Jerusalem, his apostles oppose him. They are scared. The authorities are after his neck. He challenges them, however, risking his life to be near his friend Lazarus, who needs him. John also wants to point out one important detail of this account: for life to shine in plenitude, the fear of death must first be overcome.

According to popular belief, death becomes definite on the third day, when the dead body begins to decompose, eliminating the personal features of the deceased. When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus is already dead "for four days." That is, he is definitely dead, no doubt about it. Given these details, John wants to tell us that having faith in Jesus does not indefinitely prolong the physical life of the human being. Jesus is neither a doctor nor a wizard who can prevent death. But faith in him gives us a definite life that can be extended beyond physical death. For the just, death is no more than a "phase," as Jesus will say. Like the passage through the Red Sea, bringing the Israelites from the land of bondage to the land of freedom. Jesus – with his life and his words – has brought God's plan to us: He did not create us that we might die definitely; our fate is not death but a full and definitive life. This is where the solemnity of John's evangelical text lies. A few days before his own death, Jesus reveals in Lazarus the totality of the gospel: God will also free us from death.

In Jesus' time, the tombs were constructed by carving them in natural rocks, in the form of caves. To cover a tomb, a round stone was usually placed at the entrance, which would turn like an enormous wheel. Jesus wept before the tomb of his friend. He loved Lazarus deeply and felt sorry for his death and the sufferings of his sisters. God, whom we see in Jesus, weeps in the face of human suffering, and is one with us in our sadness. Before Lazarus' tomb, Jesus also invokes the God of life and he does it with the words of the prophet, Ezekiel (Ez 37:1-14), proclaiming that all sufferings shall be overcome, including death. The prophet proclaimed the solemn resurrection of the "dead bones" of the oppressed people of Israel. The stone slab at the entrance to the tomb is a symbol of despair. But God is capable of removing this obstacle. Thus, Jesus removes the stone, so that the "air" can enter, the biblical symbol par excellence of God's Spirit. It is a moment of extraordinary solemnity, and therefore what this narration wishes to convey is perhaps the ultimate word of the message of Jesus, the most profound conviction of the Christian faith. Death as the ultimate end of our life is the maximum point of human weakness. If everything comes to an end with death, then the essence of all our human existence is overshadowed. And this is true not only from the individual point of view, of "my" life, but also from the collective viewpoint. How can there be complete happiness in this new world "of justice" (1 P 3:13) if the dead who made it possible are swallowed up by the earth... And from here, may the hope in life after death be validated, even for the present life, and for history.

103

The Most Expensive Perfume

Peter: The first cup is for this rascal, Lazarus! His body was already infested with worms, and yet, God gave him back to us – fat as he always was. Praise God!

Old Man: Praise Him and bless Him, for he has given us eyes to see what we have seen! And long live the prophet from Nazareth!

All: Long live the prophet! Long live the prophet!

The “Beautiful Palm Trees” in Bethany, was teeming with people. Martha and Mary had prepared a big feast in the inn to celebrate Lazarus’ return to life. We all seemed to be dreaming when we saw that big-bellied man, always laughing, sharing his jokes and devouring two trays full of food. Peter and I would pinch ourselves every now and then to prove it was not a dream. Since it was not, we continued laughing and drinking to the new life the Lord had restored to our friend....

Peter: Not even my beloved Ruphi has ever cooked a lamb as delicious as this one.

Philip: Do all lambs of the Kingdom of God taste this good, Jesus?

Martha: Here, have another serving, Philip... and you too, Peter!... Hey, countrymen, we have more than enough food! And drinks, too! We can open another barrel if need be!

Mary: Not one but ten barrels! Or even a hundred barrels! Or a hundred thousand of them! Wine brings lots of happiness! Today is the happiest day in the history of “La Palmera Bonita!”... Friends, be our guests!

Lazarus: And tomorrow, we close down!... Ha, ha... at the rate you and Martha are going, I’ll be dead once again, not of any illness this time but because of enormous debts... ha, ha, ha.... Holy heavens, what crazy sisters I have!.... Tell me, Jesus, could it be that the Lord has taken me out of my grave so I may see how my two sisters could destroy me in just one day?... Just kidding... just kidding... Ha, ha, ha.... Hey, pour some more wine in the jug and bring me another lamb’s leg. I’ve been starved for four days!

With gusto, Lazarus laughed and ate all he could. Martha and Mary had ordered the slaughter of the ten fattest lambs in the fold, and spent all their savings during the previous months to buy wine, dates, figs and pastries for the feast. Then they went from house to house inviting all the village people to the inn....

Old Man: Well, what can I say, Lazarus? I thank your sisters for this madness, for this great splurging... I’ve almost forgotten what it meant to be eating warm food. And the truth is, having a full tummy comes as a blessing from heaven!

Peter: You’re right, old man Tecló! Eat and be merry!

Mary: It will be more fun if we start the dance now! C’mon, neighbors, to the patio everyone, and let’s all dance!... Then, there’ll be enough time to lick more lamb bones!... Who among you guys plays the “Dance of the Waves?”

Old Man: That’s my forte! I learned it from my grandfather. Give me that flute!

Mary: Can you play the drums, Philip?

Philip: I can only play my cart’s horn! Ha, ha, ha!

Mary: And you, Peter?

Peter: Well, I can just knock at my door’s house!

Mary: Let me play the drums! My goodness! I play better when I’m loaded!

Everyone headed for the patio. The music began to play, and sing, too. Everybody danced gayly, the

men in one circle, and the women in another. We were all clapping and turning around. Mary was continuously laughing, dancing and leaping about, going from one side to another. She was flushed and sweating, greeting everyone and embracing her brother every minute. Martha was also ecstatic. Their joy had contaminated all of us....

It was getting dark and from afar Jerusalem had lighted her first lights when we went inside the inn. There were dates, figs and pastries left on the table. Mary lighted the lamps that were hanging on the walls, then again filled up the jugs with wine....

Peter: Life goes 'round like a spinning wheel! Today you laugh boisterously, tomorrow you weep bitterly! Let's have another toast, buddies!

Philip: Exactly! Let there be no end of it!

Then we saw Mary, Lazarus' sister, leave the table and run toward the patio....

Lazarus: This crazy and cross-eyed sister of mine, where could she have gone? Will she disguise herself as the Queen of Sabah? What do you think, guys? She's capable of anything... you know... ha, ha, ha!

At that instant, Mary appeared again. She was hiding something under her green-striped tunic...

Mary: I tell you, gossip monger, if I had money to buy the elephants and camels of the queen of Sabah, I would have done so!... But, I could only afford this!

Mary took out from the folds of her tunic a flask of alabaster, the size of a squash....

Lazarus: Ha, ha, ha... and what's that thing, woman?

Mary: Neighbors, we've had been dancing and eating too much! But this is not the end of it! I've heard that in big feasts, not only wine flows but perfumes too... so, here's the perfume! It's the only thing we lack!

With tears in her eyes, and with overwhelming joy, Mary went to Jesus....

Mary: Jesus! God be with you always, may you have the best of health, and may you live as long as Methuselah, and may your mother live long to witness that, and may death not befall to you!

Lazarus: But Mary, what're you talking about? You're drunk!

Mary: Yeah, I'm drunk with joy. And it's Jesus' fault. Bless be the day, Moreno, you set foot in this house! Before, I washed your feet with water, but now, let me wash them with perfume, like they do to a great master...!

Mary broke the neck of the flask and poured the oil of nard over Jesus' feet. I think that was about half a liter of oil. All at once, the scent filled the whole inn....

Peter: Blazes! It seems I have the entire garden inside my nose!

Lazarus: But, silly woman, how much did you have to spend for such a silly idea?

Mary: You'll get mad at me, so I won't tell you. Anyway, this doesn't happen everyday, my goodness!

Philip: This smells like heaven, yes sir!

Peter: If perfume is flowing, then let it be so for wine! C'mon, fellas! Let's drink to the silliness of Mary!

The feast lasted until past midnight. The neighbors went back to their houses very contented. The women and some members of the group, exhausted, had gone to sleep. Soon, Lazarus, Martha and Mary followed suit. My brother James and I, Judas, Peter and Philip stayed for a while in the patio, conversing with Jesus... the moonlight had taken over the stars in heaven, illuminating our faces....

Philip: Hey, what's bugging you, Moreno? You've not uttered a single word during dinner....

Peter: Yeah? He's been eating and drinking! He can't eat and talk at the same time! Ha! He was busy devouring one sparerib, while his other hand was ready to put another one inside his mouth!

Philip: I saw you do the same thing, Peter! I dunno the number of ribs a lamb can yield, but man, you and Jesus had your plates filled with those of the entire flock! Ha, ha, haay!

James: You're a fool, Philip!... and so are you, Peter!... Now, this is just among us, Jesus... Say it, straight to the point....

Jesus: Say what, James?

Judas: C'mon, Moreno... now, don't deny it anymore. We know fully well why you have been very quiet all along. James and I have talked about it awhile ago. We share the same thoughts, you see.

Jesus: What's all this about? Frankly, I don't understand...

Judas: All this splurging, isn't this a waste of money? Why don't you render an account of all that's been spent. The perfume alone was enough to feed ten families!

James: Or even more! Damn, we're no different from those filthy rich we criticize: feasting lavishly while many go hungry!

Philip: And you're the first among them, James!

James: That's right, Philip, and this is what makes me furious...!

Judas: By this time in Jerusalem, a lot of people must have gone to sleep with a grumbling stomach. But here we are, preaching justice, yet gorging ourselves on good food. Then the expensive perfume.... This is what has hit me, you know. And you, Jesus?

James: C'mon, Moreno, speak up. Don't worry, Lazarus will not know of it, so it won't hurt him. But I know that this afternoon's happening has pissed you off.

Jesus: No, James, not me...

Judas: Don't tell us you approve of all these wasteful spendings and overflowing of wine at the tables....

Philip: With your feet dripping with perfume! Hahahaay!

James: I don't find that funny, Philip.

Judas: Neither do I. In fact, I feel so ashamed having been in that binge.

Peter: Well, I'm making myself available for the next occasion. Damn it, it's been a long time since I danced with too much gusto!

Philip: Next time, it shall be for Pentecost; so you know now, fellas, let's all be here!

James: You sure will be, fake rebel. But you will never see my face ever in this lavish inn.

Jesus: But James, what's all this about? What has got into your head, Judas and you... is it something that you ate in the party?... Didn't Mary say what it was? A day is a day.

Philip: It only happens once in a blue moon, as they say, in my barrio!

Judas: What the hell do I care about your barrio? Not even in the whole country. This is precisely what the rich have to say. In one day they splurge on what is the equivalent of a monthly wage of a laborer, just like that... with no feeling of remorse....

Peter: Look, Judas, don't make matters worse. Martha and Mary invited the whole neighborhood of Bethany. The party was for everybody. No one was left out. Is there anything wrong with that?... Or... aren't we, poor people, entitled to a little fun, too? Damn!

James: Of course, Peter, but splurging is something else. Do say I'm right, Jesus...

Jesus: I dunno, James, but I think the happy-go-lucky are closer to the Kingdom of God than the misers. Yeah, really... now, don't you put on that face... I think God is also a little nuts like Mary.... God does not keep too much account of everything, nor make use of scales and other measurements. What God has, God gives away, as a gift. No more, no less.

Judas: But Jesus, how can you justify all this, you who have used up all your spittle preaching justice and talking about the struggle of men and women who are deprived of even a piece of bread to feed their hungry mouths?

Jesus: Precisely, Judas, because there are thousands of them and the struggle is long, so there must be time for everything, There is time to keep and time to spend.

Peter: That's what I've been telling Nathanael: take it easy, Nat. Time must take its natural course. Nat is also hard on himself: he goes from the shop to the house, and back... that's how he's lost all his hair and soon! Hahay! And you'll suffer the same fate, James and Judas, since you work day in and day out, without even giving yourselves a break.

Jesus: Even the best wine, when neglected, becomes vinegar!

Peter: Right, Jesus. Don't make things too difficult, buddies. Each day has so much in store for us, isn't that right? We just have to open our hands and take what awaits us for the day. Today, we had a party. So be it. If tomorrow brings us tears, then tomorrow we weep.

Philip: If it brings us perfume of nard, then well and good, because my goodness, we wouldn't be reeking of onions and fish forever!

Then we all went to sleep, exhausted but happy. As I shut my eyes, I remembered Mary, Lazarus' sister, dancing joyfully, laughing, her whole body profuse with ecstatic glee. I think no one but she ever understood that the Kingdom of God is like one big banquet.

The banquet in Lazarus' house is a celebration of life. In spite of the impending risk looming over Jesus and his group which everyone is conscious about, there unfolds an interlude from partying and relaxation. Amid work, struggle and hardship, there must be time for feasting. That is why a community celebration is not only a necessary break to recharge forces, but it is also an anticipation of definite triumph of life.

Stinginess is not an evangelical virtue. Certainly, the gospel proposes austerity and sobriety. From the social point of view, in a world traversed by inequality, austerity is necessary if this world wants to be in solidarity with the poor. From the human viewpoint, neither satiety nor abundance is the road to human happiness. Moderation and endeavor make the person, form and provide the person with a framework that enables him or her to face life better. This has nothing to do with stinginess or miserliness, however. If to squander is neither a strictly evangelical virtue, the act of freedom and "provisionality" which oftentimes hides itself in the extravagant ways of the poor is a lot closer to the gospel than the miserly attitude of not knowing how to pause a little in order to enjoy however little or much they have. Jesus was not an embittered ascetic. He knew how to laugh and enjoy life. He had friends and he shared with them. He never lacked a sense of humor. His words prove this aspect of his personality. In the midst of this effort to build the kingdom, one must find time for humor and enjoyment. (Mt 6:34; Ecl 3:1-9). Bitterness, inflexibility, extreme self-rigidity, may overshadow the work for the Kingdom. These are upsetting to the person concerned, and disconcerting to the rest. A good sense of community, where everyone helps one another to overcome these limitations and gives encouragement to all, is the best cure against this temptation of bitterness which may sometimes threaten the Christian.

Mary of Bethany provides Jesus an authentic gesture of lavishness. It is a sign of endless gratitude. It is "madness" from the logical point of view. In Jerusalem, there was an industry of the manufacture of perfumes and aromatic ointments. These perfumes were burned in the temple to emit a pleasant aroma during religious ceremonies. They were also sold to the public. They were generally considered luxurious items and most of them were imported from oriental countries. So were the alabaster containers of these essences. They came from Egypt, and some local artisans had succeeded in imitating these items. The nard is a plant that originated from India. Its oil is extracted from the stem and roots, and it has an intense but very pleasant odor, like most of the oriental perfumes.

This text, literally misunderstood, has been used to justify the idea that to proclaim the possibility of a society based on equality is not possible because Jesus said that "there will always be poor around you." But, honestly speaking, this phrase cannot veer away from the rest of the Christian message which constantly points to the equality of men and women. What this phrase precisely wants to tell us is that Jesus is found only in the poor, that the dynamism of Christian life is rightfully a deed in favor of the poor.

In another false interpretation, this text is meant to justify the practice of filling up the temples with riches. When these tendencies extended to the ancient kingdoms, the Fathers of the Church raised the voice of protest. Saint John Crisostom said, four hundred years after the death of Christ: "God has no need for golden vases, but for golden souls.... The sacrament does not need precious mantles, but pure souls; the poor, however, are in much need of care... Of what use to the Lord is a table full of golden glasses, when He is consumed with hunger?" (Homily 50, 3 and 4)

104

The Shepherd and the Wolf

Lazarus: It happened a couple of weeks before you came. The shepherds of Tekoa told it to the shepherds in Bethlehem who told it to ours. I think in a few days, the story must have been repeated several times all over Jerusalem until it reached the mountains of Ephraim. By this time, the shepherds of Galilee must have heard about it....

That night Martha did not have to light any of the lamps. It was a bright moonlit night and the inn's patio shone like it was daytime. Yonder, the small houses of Bethany looked like they had a new whitewash.... Lazarus took a handful of dates as he started to tell us the story....

Lazarus: His name was David, like the other shepherd who later became our king. He lived nearby, in Tekoa, the village by the south. It was here they say that the famous prophet Amos, who had a lot to say, was born. But this David was neither king nor prophet. He was only a shepherd, tending a herd of 40 sheep....

David: Go! Go!... It's getting dark, little rascals! It's time to go home!.... Gooooooooo! Let no one be left behind.... Straight ahead!... Gooooo!...

Everyday, at dusk, the shepherd did his thing: bring back the sheep to the fold. It was not an easy thing, mind you. They say that every path has its puddle.... That's why, every time it got dark, and the sheep had to cross the great ravine, David would strike the stones with his staff.... The little animals, already familiar with the sound, passed quietly: they knew their shepherd was just ahead of them, leading them on the right path.

David: Little Glow... Painted One... Little Star... Blackwool ... Dopey... Little Ear!... Ah, everyone is here. I left forty sheep, and with forty I'm coming back!

Upon reaching the fold, David stood near the gate counting his sheep. He gave each one a name which he never mixed up with anyone else.... This David knew his flock like he was their mother... And so did the sheep: they knew him from seven miles away. Well, it happened that in the same fold, two other shepherds kept their flocks....

Cyrus: How was your day, David? Were you lucky?

David: Indeed I was, Cyrus. I passed by the eagle's ravine, and boy, my rascals had a banquet. You should see their bulging bellies. They'll sleep better than you and I, but they deserve it.... Think of the things they give us: milk, cheese, wool... It's only fair that we work for them too, going up and down the hills. That's how we're at peace with them. My little rascals were like children feasting on candy in that vast green valley.... You should've seen them...

Nato: No, I'd rather not. These animals are better off than we are.... You say "it's fair, it's fair." Tell me, is it fair that they come fully stuffed while we have nothing but a few pieces of dates and a small slice of cheese... I didn't think that the job of a shepherd was this bad, damn!

Cyrus: Who told you to start this, Nato?

Nato: No one, but I have no choice. I couldn't find anything better. Let me tell you this: I swear by this mole on your bald head, Cyrus, that as soon as I can, it will be "goodbye to you forever!" I'm sick and tired of going up and down the hill, and having to milk the animals.

Cyrus: And everything for four cents! I, too, am tired of all this! To hell with all these sheep!

Nato: To hell with the master too!

David: The sheep are not yours, that's why you talk that way. If they were your own, you'd feel affection for them....

Cyrus and Nato were shepherds who were hired for a fee. The flocks they tended belonged to two big businessmen of Tekoa. Since they did not own the sheep and the work of a shepherd was heavy, these two did not work very hard: one did his job reluctantly, while the other, maliciously. It was the opposite with David. Those 40 sheep were his treasure and he loved them...

David: Hey, friends, keep right on cursing the animals, while you eat their cheese. As for me, I'm gonna sleep... for I have to be up at dawn. I want to bring my little rascals to Bethlehem... where the pastures are supposed to be the best....

Nato: And the snakes are on the look-out...

David: Well, I always have my stick ready, besides my eyes are always open, so I don't think there's any snake that can outwit me.... So, may you dream of the Messiah's banquet, for your happiness!

The sun had not yet risen, but David was already on his toes, while his friends had not awoken from their sleep. Every morning, he would get up early, fill his sack with bread and cheese and his canteen with wine. Then he would tie his stick to his back and slip his sling into his pocket. Holding his staff well, he would set out to work!

David: Gooooo! Goooooo! Today you'll have good pasture and plenty of water for everyone!... Daisy, don't go astray! Whitey! Gooooo!

One night, the howling of the wolves was heard in the village of Tekoa. All the sheep were scared because they smelled danger....

A Shepherd: Damn!.... They have sharp fangs like swords and eyes burning like ember...!

David: How many....?

Shepherd: Ten. They killed ten.

Another Shepherd: What could I do?... I ran up the mountain, and the sheep that could escape followed me.... Since they were so stupid, they didn't know where to go...

David: How many....?

Shepherd: I've no idea...! About fourteen. Some were badly injured, some were bleeding, their bodies pierced with holes... I had to finish them off with blows, since there was no choice....

Another Shepherd: It was almost night.... Suddenly they came and attacked the flock and...

David: How many...?

Shepherd: I didn't count them. They were many!....

At night, the wolves howled on top of the mountains. Then they descended into the village and began the carnage... killing several sheep. The shepherds of Tekoa were very alarmed. David, more than anyone else.

David: We've got to do something, guys, don't you think so?

Cyrus: No way. Don't you know its the wolves who are the masters...? They come from the same hell!... You can't beat them.

David: Baloney! If we get the leader, the rest would lose heart and go away and stop killing our sheep.... The trouble is, we, ourselves, are a bunch of cowards...

Nato: Cowards?... Well, yes. So what? Look, I'm not risking my neck for these animals. You do it if you like, since you love them so much. As a matter of fact, you're beginning to look like them...

That night, David did not sleep on the straw mattress in his usual place. He stayed outside, leaning on one of the beams of the fold. The young man smelled something...

David: Let them come, let them come... They'll learn who I am....

After the first night watch, the wolves ceased to howl....

David: Well, well, their voice must have grown hoarse with so much howling....

After a while, David closed his eyes... It was a matter of seconds... Two huge, black wolves leaped over the wall of the fold and struck like lightning at the sheep...

Cyrus: The wolf!... The wolf...! Run...!

David: Stay here, dammit, and let's face it. With the three of us, we can do it!

Nato: You do it, you fool!... I'm getting out of here!

David's two companions started to run across the field, leaving him alone with the wolves and all the sheep milling around terrified, not knowing where to go, trying to flee from the attack of the beasts.... But they couldn't. Suddenly, some of them fell bleeding, their bodies ripped open. David could wait no longer.... From his bag, he took out a sharp knife, gripped it firmly with his hand, and when one of the wolves leaped over one of the sheep, he lunged at the wolf and planted the knife deep into his heart. The animal turned around and fell dead at his feet.

David: Damned beast, you have finally paid for your deeds!

The other wolf, smelling the blood of his companion, left the sheep, eyes burning with rage, to attack David... The two engaged in a deadly fight, rolling over and over on the ground.... The terrified sheep stayed close to the walls of the fold, running in confusion to all sides...

David: Easy, my little rascals...! Don't be afraid.... this beast will not come out of here alive...

The second wolf roared as he planted his fangs into the shepherd's arm. David, gasping, plunged the knife again and again into the back of the beast, who only became more enraged as he continued being wounded.... David, who was almost out of breath, succeeded in landing the knife right into the middle of the animal's chest. The beast, foaming with rage, mustered all his remaining strength, and hurled himself at the young man's neck, biting it desperately... It was indeed sad... The shepherd's blood and the wolf's mixed on the earth and saturated it.... so the fight finally ended....

Cyrus: What a daring guy he is, this David! Imagine him fighting these beasts!

Nato: And such huge animals they were! This guy really fought like a brave man....

Cyrus: Tell me, Nato. Who would ever think of fighting two wolves at the same time?

Nato: Two wolves plus the other two hundred wolves who leaped over the wall. This David had plenty of guts to fight them to save his flock. See how he left them stiff as death.

Cyrus: Yeah, but it cost him his life too... He's a fool, that's what he is...

Nato: Call him whatever you wish, but thanks to him, the sheep have been saved. Don't forget that, Cyrus, the sheep have been saved, thanks to him....

Lazarus: The story spread from mouth to mouth, from shepherd to shepherd. And now, you know it too.... He's a fool, all right, but a valiant one... He gave his life for his sheep, his little rascals, as he called them.... Don't you think the life of this man is worth talking about?

Many years later, when Peter and Andrew, my brother James and the rest of us announced to our countrymen the good news of Jesus who gave his life for his people, we were reminded of this story of the good shepherd, as told to us by Lazarus in Bethany, when the great feast of the Passover was almost near.

Jesus' theological discourse about the Good Shepherd, which is only found in the gospel of John, becomes a real event in this episode as narrated by Lazarus. Passing from one literary genre to another, the essence of the message is preserved in this evangelical text. There is a dividing line between human beings: those who are willing to work for life and generously offer their own when the time comes, and those who protect life zealously for themselves. Those who "lose" life in this way gain it, those who offer it become a fountain of life for others. All martyrs comply with this important mission of keeping hope alive.

In Israel, the small cattle owners were their own shepherds. If their flocks were composed of many animals, the owners hired other shepherds who were paid in cash and in the produce of the flock. The principal task of a shepherd is to look for pastures and drinking troughs for the animals and to protect them from hustlers and wild animals. The “tools” of the shepherd are the pole, the staff and the sling. The sling serves as a weapon against harmful animals and it is also used to gather the sheep into a specific place. In the Bible, the care shown by the shepherd for his flock is a symbol of God’s care for his people (Ps 23).

The sheep of Palestine have white tails, rich in grease. Their fleece is curly and yields a kind of wool that is best for garments. The shearing period is one of great rejoicing for the shepherds. The ewes do not have horns and the rams are most valued for food and religious sacrifices in the Temple. In general, these sheep yield white wool and the milk is excellent. Biblically speaking, the sheep is considered a kind and meek animal. In the gospel, the flock is a frequently used symbol to refer to the people, who are like “sheep without a shepherd,” and which serves as a criticism of the religious leaders of Israel, the unscrupulous priests who were unjust and materialistic. In criticizing the bad shepherds, Jesus situates himself within the line of the ancient prophetic messages (Ez 34:2-10; Jer 25:34-38).

The wolves of Palestine are lighter in color than those of the other Mediterranean countries. During the day, they hide in caves or in deserted areas and at night come down and attack the flocks. They are known as the terror of the shepherds. In the New Testament the false prophets are compared to wolves (Mt 7:15), and enemies of justice as well (Mt 10:16). In order to symbolize the peace of the Messianic times, the prophets use images where the wolf is no longer considered a menace (Is 11:6 and 65:25).

In the image of the good shepherd, Jesus gives us a picture of the “good leader,” who does not exploit his sheep, but rather serves them. He knows them and cares for them. The sheep are not a burden to him, but the meaning of his life. He has no hidden motives. His only concern is the life of his sheep, that they might have abundant pastures, and possibilities for growth.

In his discourse about the Good Shepherd, Jesus referred to him as the “gate” through which the sheep enter and leave. This image actually refers to the relationship between him and Christians. Jesus is the good shepherd, but to be a Christian is not to be a sheep in a flock without face or personality, where everyone bows the head, where no one voices out opinions, and everyone is submissive or insecure. This flock is a community of free men and women, responsible and free, and capable of loving one another, as they know they are loved by the Shepherd.

(Jn 10:1-18)

105

A New Heaven and Earth

Mary: Martha, Martha, come and hurry...! Martha, wake up!

Martha: Hmmm... what’s the matter, Mary?

Mary: Our neighbor Susa is having her baby!

Martha: This soon?

Mary: Can’t you hear? She’s screaming louder than Rachel in Ramah... c’mon, Martha, shake a leg!

Martha: That’s all right, Mary. Be calm... my goodness, you’re not the one having a baby!

Philip: Ahmmm.... What’s going on here, may I ask?... What’s all the noise?

Mary: A neighbor is in labor and there’s no better midwife in the entire Bethany than my sister Martha!

Philip: Well, I don’t mean to brag, but I have helped in the birth of more than one calf... so, if you need some assistance....

Mary: You can be of help by staying here quietly in the inn. Let's go, Martha and hurry up...! C'mon, Philip, go back to sleep with the rest...

Philip: With all the screaming, how can I?... Why can't women learn to give birth in the daytime, huh?

Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters, left the inn and went inside their neighbor's house.... It was past midnight.... The house was poor and run-down, like the rest of the houses in Bethany. Its adobe walls had been smoke-stained by oil lamps. In one corner, beside the kitchen utensils and a mound of clothes, was a basin of water, together with a clean knife and towel. In the other corner, reclining on a straw mat was Susa, groaning and supporting her tummy with her two hands... while her husband waited beside her, not knowing what to do....

Mary: I guess she'll have twins, why, she's got a tummy as big as Mount Tabor!

Lucius: Pfff! Heaven forbid, neighbor! If I hardly make both ends meet feeding her, what more with two additional mouths to feed?

Martha: Don't worry, good man. The Lord provides for every child that is born.

Lucius: Then my child will be born armless, I'm sure...!

Martha: C'mon, Lucius, you wait outside... We'll inform you as soon as the baby is born....

While Martha was rolling up her sleeves, Susa's husband sought company in the inn...

Philip: Blazes, Lucius, your wife screams like she was being skinned alive!

Lucius: What can we do, Philip? The babe's got a head bigger than yours, so he can't come out! She's been in labor for four hours... yet, nothing happens.

Peter: And we've been trying hard for four hours to get some sleep! Hey, Lazarus, why don't we light up the night with a couple of shots, huh? C'mon, don't be stingy!

Lazarus: Well said, Peter. Let's all look at the brighter side of things, okay?

Philip: Plus more faces appearing.... Look! Hey, James, don't tell me you can't sleep a wink?... Neither you nor Nathanael...?

Nathanael: With all that screaming, who can...?

Philip: Lazarus, make it four, instead of two!

We got up one by one from the mat and gathered on the patio... From there, we could hear Susa's yelling which had everyone on edge....

Lazarus: Here's wine and some squash seeds for you to munch! Hey guys, which do you prefer? To play dice, to engage in gossip or to pray for a healthy baby boy?

Nathanael: A boy with six fingers would still be okay, provided its over and done with soon! Blazes!

Philip: Don't talk that way, Nat! It's been difficult for the poor thing already... I wouldn't want to be in his place!

Lucius: Why do you say that, Philip? What's wrong with my child?

Philip: Nothing's wrong with your child, Lucius, but...

Lucius: But what? Tell me!

Philip: We're heading for the end, buddy. Poor child of yours, he came in this world too late! Before he get's weaned from his mother's breast, the final trumpet of judgment will have already sounded!

Peter: It's you who should be weaned, Philip! Where did you ever get such an idea?

Philip: That's what Jesus said the other day when we passed by the walls of Jerusalem. Don't you remember anymore? I heard it with my own two ears.

Peter: Well, maybe they need a nice, good cleaning. That'll make you hear better.

Philip: Jesus said the world is coming to an end soon and it will be worse than Noah's flood! The heavens will tremble and the stars will fall right on our heads! Then that's the end of it. The end of the world. Your poor child will see nothing but dust and ashes.

Nathanael: You're a liar, Philip. Jesus never said that.

Philip: Oh, yeah, he did. He said he even knew the date of the end of the world!

Peter: Don't tell me!

Philip: Well, I'm telling you!

While we were arguing, Jesus appeared at the door of the patio, yawning and stretching his arms... He was not able to sleep, either...

Lazarus: Ah, here's the man! Hey, Moreno, come over here. Tell us loud and clear, how much time do we have left?!

Jesus: Ahmmm... For what?

Philip: Before the end of the world!

Jesus: I thought it was the end already... what with that woman's screaming and yours too....

Jesus sat down with us at the old table as Lazarus brought another jug of wine...

Lazarus: Guys, this thing of giving birth will take long! Come, Jesus, why don't you have yourself a shot? Wipe the cobwebs from your eyes, and tell us straight: when exactly is the world going to end, huh?

Jesus: Whatever entered your heads to be discussing this at this time of the night?

Philip: 'Cause we've got to be forewarned, at least! We still have to buy wood and tar to build the ark! Didn't you say a deluge worse than the first was to come?... Or you don't remember that anymore?

Jesus: Did I say that, Philip?

Philip: Well, never mind, it doesn't really matter. It's written, anyway, and all the prophets have said it in the Holy Scriptures.

Jesus: What is written is that there will be no more floods. God promised that to Noah.

Philip: With or without floods, that's okay with me. But there will be earthquakes and terrible things in the sky and here on earth when the final day comes. Is that right?

Jesus: I dunno, Philip, but that was what the prophet Elijah was thinking all along... and look at the surprise he got for himself....

Jesus: Elijah was crossing the vast desert of Negeb, on his way to Sinai, the mountain of God.... He was so exhausted, he threw himself under a broom bush, wishing he were dead, and fell asleep... But a messenger of God woke him up...

Messenger: Elijah, Elijah!... Wake up and eat something... You've got a long trip ahead...!

Elijah: How long? Tell me, please...

Messenger: Don't ask how long. Go ahead. For every step you take, God takes another step toward you. You are going toward God who comes.

Elijah got up, ate something and started to walk through the desert, underneath the burning sun.... He walked forty days and forty nights, until finally, he reached Mount Sinai...

Elijah: Pfff!.... Now I shall see God... And the first thing that he saw was a hurricane.... It was blowing so hard, it gathered too much sand, and covered the sun. The moon lost its glow and all the lights in the sky, the big and small stars disappeared with the fury of the wind....

Elijah: My God, my God, finally I know you! You are the rumbling storm and the violent hurricane!

But he didn't receive any answer, because God was not in the thunder nor in the gusty winds...

Then the earth began to tremble.... The earthquake was so strong, the pillars of the world shook, the mountains cracked and the rocks split into a thousand pieces...

Elijah: My God, finally I know you! You are the rumblings of an earthquake!

But no answer to his voice, because God was neither in the moanings of the earth nor in the avalanch of stones... Then, came a big fire.... A crackling bonfire emerged from the bowels of the earth, razing everything to the ground, leaving nothing but dust and ashes...

Elijah: Now I know Lord, you are a consuming fire!

The fire remained silent, since God was not in the burning flame either...

Finally, he heard the murmur of a gentle breeze...

It was like a refreshing breath, like a father's breath on his son's forehead, or a mother's kiss on the cheek... And Elijah, who had a burning passion for Yahweh, the prophet of lightning, fire and earthquake, understood that God was there, in the gentle breeze.

Jesus: That was Elijah's encounter with God. I guess that's how we shall have our encounter with the Lord on the last day.

Lazarus: Fine, fine, Jesus, whether it will be through a hurricane or through the gentle breeze, I still want to ask: When is the world going to end?

Philip: That's right. When will the trumpets blow, huh?

Jesus: I dunno. It's up to God. Our concern is to be watchful and be ready like the good servants who stay awake until their master comes. The rest is left to God.

Peter: C'mon, Moreno, there shouldn't be any secrets between friends. Maybe, the Lord winked at you and told you the date...

Jesus: Or perhaps, there's no date at all, Peter, because the Kingdom of God is not like manna that falls from heaven. The Kingdom of God must be kneaded by everyone, like the dough that's made into bread.

Peter: But we've been kneading it for three years, mind you! When will the Lord extend his hand and do something for us?

Jesus: We need a little more time, Peter. We still have to walk a good distance like Elijah, until he reached Mount Sinai.

Lazarus: Tell me, Jesus, shall we get to see the end?

Jesus: First there will be wars and disasters, because there is still too much egoism in this world. Those on top do not wish to loosen their hold and we won't take it sitting down. There will be intense fighting and it will last long... We will be persecuted and we will be screaming louder than your wife, Lucius... And this will just be the start of more pain, until the poor rise up, clamoring for justice. The struggle will be bloody, the nations of the earth and the powerful of this world will tremble for what will befall them. All these things will have to happen first. These are the labor pains of a world that is beginning to give birth.

Lazarus: And... and then, what, Jesus?

Jesus: Then, when this old world has passed, a gentle breeze will blow: there will be a new heaven and a new earth without tears, nor wars, nor hunger, nor sorrow. Then above the clouds of heaven will appear a sign from God, the rainbow of peace. We, the children of God, all people of good will, will inherit the earth where we will all live in freedom and peace.

Philip: But, shall we live to see that day, Jesus?

Jesus: I dunno, Philip. Maybe yes... Or maybe our grandchildren, or our grandchildren's grandchildren. Sooner or later we, the poor, will sing our victory. That's God's promise and God's word never fails. Heaven and earth will pass away, but God's word never does.

At this moment, Mary entered, shouting in great excitement...

Mary: Hurry up, all you bums! It's a baby boy, the cutest little boy I've ever seen!

Everyone hurriedly went to Susa's house. Susa, after having labored for hours, was sleeping quietly, while Martha washed the new born little creature...

Martha: What a nice little boy, Lucius! He looks exactly like you!

Mary: Of course not! He's taken after his mother! Just look at those cute little eyes and nose!

Philip: Hey Lazarus, why don't you bring more wine over here and let's drink to this little Israelite who's just claimed a place for himself in this world!

Peter: And to the father too! Can't you see how happy he is?

Lazarus: And to the mother, who has done the best job of all!

Lazarus brought us the best wine from his inn and we stayed talking on the patio of Lucius' house until the cocks announced the coming of another new day... Susa no longer remembered her ordeal that night as she felt the joy of holding her son to her breast....

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke there are a series of discourses made by Jesus regarding the catastrophe awaiting the world. These are the so-called "eschatological" (about the end) or "apocalyptic" discourses (about the revelation of the end). These have been read traditionally as a detailed description of everything that will happen at the end of the world. These texts have also traditionally been employed to sow terror, to scare the innocent or come up with simplistic interpretations of catastrophes or wars presently taking place in the world.

Jesus did not give any details about life beyond, about heaven, the angels or even the devil, as was customary in the apocalyptic language of his period.

Neither did he make any calculations about the end of the world. He avoided making a description of the different stages of the apocalyptic drama.

Whenever reference is made in the gospel to these aspects, we can safely say that these have been the thoughts of the primitive communities of the Church.

In like manner, Jesus hardly spoke about death, and when he spoke of the resurrection (Mk 12:18-27) he ended up with an admission that God is not a God of the dead but of the living. Jesus lived with this hope and died with this faith.

If Jesus is God's messenger of the good news and he seeks life, then these evangelical texts must also be read from this perspective. Jesus speaks not of the end but of the beginning, not of destruction but of birth, not of death but of life. In order to highlight this positive and encouraging aspect, the whole episode centers on a description of childbirth. For a new being to be born into this world, time, love, patience, hope and at the final moment, effort and tremendous pain are necessary. This is the best image of what "the end of the world" will be like: a new creation, a new society of new human beings. To think of the end of the world is to think of the day of ultimate justice, the day when God will finally render an accounting of history, the day this "new heaven and earth where justice dwells" shall become a reality (2 P 13). The word of God tells us that at the end of the world, there will be no more tears, sorrows and death. All that is good in the world will remain and be transformed. There are several prophetic texts describing the future we are heading for, with images of joy and feasting. These apocalypses (revelations of the future) are identified with Messianic times and, in the language of the gospel, with the Day of the Kingdom of God. In these texts, we see beautiful images of the end of the world (Is 60:1-22; 62:1-12; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:1-5; Zep 3:14-20; Rev 21:1-18; 22:1-21).

While there is certainly rejoicing, there is also pain, which will be the road that will bring us to the day of justice. Liberation is a conquest; happiness has a high price, the freedom that God has given to people continuously puts obstacles along the road of life. Through images, the prophets also spoke of God's wrath against the unjust and the oppressors on the day of reckoning. They spoke of wars, sorrows and innumerable hardships. About two hundred years before Christ, cosmic images (falling stars, trembling earth, etc.) were used, and these were symbols also used by Jesus, since they were most common during his period, to describe the tremendous struggle of the last hours (Is 63:1-6; Jer 6:11-19; Dn 9:6-27; 12:1-13; Jl 2:1-11; Am 5:14-20; Rev 19:11-21).

The image of childbirth is quite adequate to describe the struggle at the end of time. The prophets used it (Is 66:5-16), indicating that the birth of a new people was not a matter of a single day and that it could be painful. Jesus used the same image (Jn 16:19-23) and later, Paul would use it (Rom 8:18-27) when he compared the entire history of humanity to the long and painful birth of a new society. In the same manner that the hope of a forthcoming child sustains the mother during those moments of childbirth, the hope for a new and distinct life sustains those men and women presently working for the sake of their brothers and sisters. In this gigantic childbirth, the head has already appeared, the head of the new human, who is

Jesus. We, who form the body, shall be born after him (Eph 1:22; 1 Cor 12:12 and 27).

Knowing when the end of the world is to come has been the concern of many generations. Jesus certainly believed that the end of this unjust world and the coming of the Kingdom of God were imminent. His manner of proclaiming the gospel and challenging the authorities, the urgency he felt as manifested by his words, are an indication that he believed the time to be near, that even he would witness it. The urgency of Jesus was inherited by the first Christians, who lived during the first century of our time, and who awaited the end of the world. Paul felt compelled to call the attention of early Christians on several instances (2 Thes 2:1-7 and 3:6-12), although he too, was convinced that the day was forthcoming (1 Thes 4:13-18). These were times of severe persecution of the Christians, during which thousands of martyrs died. The ardent hope of the communities made them believe that the day of ultimate liberation was coming soon. It is in this context that the last book of the Bible, the Revelation, should be read. It is a beautiful text about the end of all time, written to console the Christians who were mercilessly persecuted by the Imperial power of Rome. It ends with an ardent call: "Marana 'tha! Come, Lord Jesus!" These are the last words written in the Bible.

Even now, there is a strong curiosity to know the day of the end of the world. A number of religious sects have indicated even the exact date of this day. They also seek to convert people to their beliefs, sowing fear among them of the punishment awaiting them. The Jehovah's witnesses head this group. The Christian response to all these terrifying ideas is that we "end" the world, transforming it in terms of justice, life and love. This restlessness over dates and the supposed catastrophes awaiting us distracts us from this essential task.

God, the father of Jesus, is not a monster who wants to scare us to save us, by terrorizing us. This image of God as a wrathful personality who will crush the world with his fury on the day we least expect it, is totally false. A terrible caricature. God's wrath is something much more serious and exigent. It is a constant call for the unjust to cease being so. For the humble and the poor, God is manifest, not in fury but in tenderness, in "the gentle breeze," as happened to the prophet Elijah (1 K 19:1-13), and in the promise given us: in the end we shall see God's face and carry God's name like a kiss of peace on our foreheads (Rev 22:4).

(Mt 24:3-51; Mk 13:3-37; Lk 12:41-48; 17:26-37; 21:7-36)

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Long Live the Son of David!

It was the ninth day of the month of Nissan. On the eve of the holiday Jerusalem was teeming with more than a hundred thousand pilgrims from all cities of Judea, from Galilee and Decapolis, from the Jewish colonies scattered all over the Roman empire. As always, at the start of spring, the children of Israel would go *en masse* to celebrate the Passover within the walls of the city of David....

That morning, while we were lazily stretching at our friend's inn in the neighboring village of Bethany, Judas of Iscariot came together with Simon, the freckled one... They came from Jerusalem and there was a sense of urgency in their eyes...

Judas: Hey buddies, peace be with you all!

All: Health to you, Judas!... and peace to you, Simon!

Judas: My, my, but what are you all doing here? What're you waiting for? The whole city is bursting with pilgrims!

Simon: Now's the time, Jesus! People are asking about you. Everyone is waiting.

Judas: The people are on your side, Moreno. It's now or never! So, what do you say?

Jesus: The same thing I said when we left Capernaum. Today is the start of the preparation for the Passover. Today we shall begin to awaken Jerusalem from her lethargy and announce the Lord's coming to fulfill the Year of Grace!

All: That's it, that's it! Equality for all, equality for all! Just like at the beginning!

Judas: The various groups in the capital have been advised already, Jesus. Yesterday, Simon and I were talking with some leaders, Barabbas and those of the movement. They are supporting us. They trust you.

Jesus: That's right, Judas. But they trust their daggers even more. There's only one thing we need for our purpose, and that is the Word of God. Listen, guys, our plan must be the same as the one commanded of Moses by God: to tell the pharaoh to his face that we no longer support the yoke of any tyrant.

All: You're our man, Moreno!

Jesus: Our fathers asked to leave Egypt for the promised land. We will ask them to go away that we may live in peace in the land that the God of Israel has given us. The pharaoh before was the Egyptian whose heart was made of steel. Today the pharaohs are of our own blood who have betrayed the people.

Peter: Yes sir! They even call themselves the representatives of the Lord! Look at Caiphias, the high priest, who has sold himself like a hooker to the Roman governor! His father-in-law, the old Annas, is the biggest thief in all Jerusalem!

Philip: This fat head, Herod, is the most corrupt king ever to sit on the throne of Galilee!

Jesus: So we shall knock on the doors of their palaces and at the gates of the Antonia Tower, where this bloodthirsty Roman called Pontius Pilate has been hiding. We'll tell their crimes to their faces, one by one, as God has listed them in his book. God has seen the suffering of his people, and heard their cries. He comes to free us from the hands of the oppressors. Then we shall tell them: God sends us before you with the same name of his alliance with Moses, which is: "I Am Who Am. Now you will know Who I Am!" To you, who never believed in us, the poor of the land come to say: "Here we are. Now you will know Who We Are!"

All: Very good, very good!

Jesus: And that's the plan, my friends. What do you say?

Susana: That's the craziest thing I've heard in my whole life. Whatever has gotten into you, Moreno? How could you even think of facing those big shots and tell them their crimes point blank?

Mary: Jesus, my son, don't be a fool! Do you think these leaders will listen to you, a peasant with broken sandals? C'mon, tell me!

Simon: Exactly, mam. The pharaoh ignored Moses the first time. But such was his persistence that Moses tried to see him day in and day out until finally, the pharaoh relented.

Jesus: That's precisely what we shall do: be persistent. We shall go from palace to palace, day in and day out, from pharaoh to pharaoh until they give in. Do you all agree?

Nathanael: No, I don't. I'm sorry, but I don't agree...

Philip: There goes Nat and his fears...

Nathanael: No, Philip. I'm not afraid. I just find it silly. There's not even a second or a third chance. We'll all be crushed like ripe tomatoes, the moment we come out in the open.

Jesus: You're right, Nathanael, if we do it alone. But with our neighbors from Bethany and Bethphage...

Judas: The people from the capital will join us, I assure you. The moment they hear the noise, they'll proceed to Cedron and wait for us there!

Simon: And the moment you raise your arm, Jesus, a thousand arms will be raised too!

Philip: We'll organize ourselves into an army, Nat, a huge army!

Nathanael: Right, Philip, an army of men in tatters! A battalion of men starving to death!

Jesus: Moses had the same army and battalion when he crossed the Red Sea. It was the group Deborah had when she gathered the Israelites at the foot of Mount Tabor. And the very same ones employed by the Maccabee brothers.

Simon: But the Maccabees were armed, Jesus, while we haven't even a couple of old swords.

Peter: What did David use to fight the giant Goliath, huh?

Simon: At least he had some pebbles with him! We don't even have those!

Jesus: The stone that we shall put in our sling that will hit them on the forehead is our word. If we act as one, side by side, we shall be able to put up a wall that's more solid than that of Jerusalem. We shall form one big body, the body of the Messiah, bigger than Goliath, and stronger than the hope of all the poor of Israel!

Philip: I'm with you, Jesus! Hey guys, so it's been said. He who is afraid will stay. But this big head shall be at the front line with our flag!

Nathanael: What flag are you talking about, Philip! We don't even have one!

Philip: Then, Judas' scarf will do, after all, his ancestor was a Maccabee. Then we cut off a branch from the palm tree, tie the scarf on one end and presto!... there's our flag!

Peter: Where do we start, Moreno?

Jesus: With the hardest nut to crack. The Temple. The family of the priest, Annas, has marred it with their business and their tricks. We shall start cleaning up the country from there.

Mary: For God's sake, son. Who has put these ideas into your head? Who has put this fever into your body?

Jesus: It's the Lord, Mama. It is God's doing. We shall go the Temple in the name of the God of Israel!

Judas: When do we leave, Jesus?

Jesus: Right now, Judas. Why do we have to wait longer? What should be done must be done soon. Hey guys, let's go, everyone. Lazarus, close down the inn. Mama, Susana, Mary... come with us too, everyone is needed, men and women alike. Even the children will shout with us and the stones will melt with their shouts!

We were all inflamed. We left the inn, in spite of the fear and the risk we had to face. We were composed of a dozen men, six women and Jesus. Soon we reached the small square of Bethany where the water well was located. Jesus climbed up the wall of the well and from there called on the people...

Jesus: Friends from Bethany! Come and listen to us!... We are announcing to you the good news for all people! The Kingdom of God is here and the justice of His Messiah! God is here to unite all of us different people! He has opened the road and He is right ahead of us!... God is leading us to victory!

Simon: That's our man! Long live the Messiah!

All: Long live the Messiah!

Susana: Long live the Son of David!

All: Long live the Son of David!

Jesus: Friends from Bethany, God is on our side! If you believe, then follow us! The poor, the weeping, those who suffer from hunger, the humble, come with us!

All: Freedom, freedom, freedom, freedom...!!

The village of Bethany was mobilized. People applauded and shouted, and in a few minutes, all the residents were piling up on us, taking the shortcut through the date palm trees, toward the direction of Bethphage...

Peter: Long live he who comes in the name of the Lord!

All: Hosanna!

The pilgrims from Galilee who were lodged in the cottages along the road left their jugs of wine and their games the moment they heard the cheering and joined the group. The women peeped through the windows and greeted us with their handkerchiefs and their brooms held high. Several young men cut some branches of the laurel tree and palm leaves and waved them into the air like swords... The shouts were deafening...

Philip: Hey Jesus, we can't hear anything! Speak louder!

Jesus: What'll I do? I'd better climb in one of these trees to be able to talk to these people!

Philip: No, but on a horse, yes! Is there a horse around here?!

Susana: The soldiers and the centurions have them!

Philip: Then, even a donkey will do, damn! The Messiah of the poor will ride on a donkey!

Peter: Hey man, run to the village and untie the first donkey that you see! C'mon, go, Jesus needs it!

More and more people followed us. The twelve of us went with Jesus who led the way. Mary, his mother and the other women had overcome their initial fear, and they were shouting at the top of their voices, mingling with the neighbors of Bethany and those staying in the cottages... A farmer lent his donkey to Jesus, so that he could talk to the people better...

Jesus: Friends, the day of the Lord has come. We want justice today, not tomorrow! We want justice today, not tomorrow!

All: Hosanna, hosanna, justice today, not tomorrow! Hosanna, hosanna, justice today, not tomorrow!

When we got to Bethphage, the whole town was already in the streets. Some, who were overexcited, spread their cloaks on the road where Jesus was passing. Others raised their olive branches acclaiming the Messiah....

Judas: Long live the prophet from Galilee, hosanna!

All: Hosanna, hosanna! Justice today, not tomorrow!

We climbed the slope of the Mount of Olives. It was almost noon and the hot sun was burning our heads. Then, around the bend we saw lying at our feet the city of Jerusalem like a huge beehive, whose crowded houses were bursting with people. She was enclosed with her four walls that glowed like gold. In her midst, atop the hill of Moriah was the Temple whose stairways teemed with vendors and other merchants.

Peter: Long live Jerusalem and may all these scoundrels abandon this place right away!

Without getting off his donkey, Jesus stopped to look over the city. I remember, how at that moment, Jesus' eyes welled with tears...

Jesus: Jerusalem, city of peace, if you only knew how peace could be attained, true peace! Father, help us! We shall speak in your name! Let the deaf hear the cry for justice of the poor of Israel! Give us eagle wings as in the past, when you freed your people from the bondage of Egypt!

Peter: Look, Jesus, the people are leaving the city to join us! The victory is ours! Nothing can stop us!

Judas: Wave a branch, Jesus, that everyone may see! The people are awaiting this signal!

Then Jesus took an olive branch, held it with his two hands and raised it like a banner in the middle of the huge crowd.

Jesus: Brothers and sisters, Jerusalem awaits us! God is on our side! Move on, in the name of God!

Like a loose rock dragging whatever is in its way, we headed for the slope of the Mount of Olives, gathering clouds of dust while waving our branches. We crossed the Torrent of Cedron and filed toward the Golden Gate facing the Temple's esplanade... The Roman soldiers posted on the walls looked at us with disdain. One of the centurions, seeing the tumult, ordered the gate closed; and two of the guards responded by working on the locks. But those of us in front of the line hurriedly advanced to prevent the wooden door from closing. The uproar of the impassioned multitude became overwhelming as they passed beneath the double ark of the Golden Gate. Dragged on by an avalanche of people, we made it to the Temple's esplanade of the city of Jerusalem....

In spring, thousands of pilgrims converged on Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover, thus tripling the population of the capital. It is estimated that among the Israelites coming from various parts of the country and the Jewish colonies abroad, there were about 125,000 pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem. Since the city

could not absorb such a number, they stayed – depending on their place of origin – in the neighboring villages which, during these days of the Passover, would form the so-called “Great Jerusalem.” Bethany and Bethphage, villages situated in the eastern part of the capital, accommodated thousands of these pilgrims. The atmosphere in Jerusalem on these days was of total joy. During the year, these pilgrims collected all their savings to be spent on those special days. They ate good food, drank good wine, and bought a number of presents. For the people, these were days of respite and relaxation amid a life of continuous deprivation.

It was also during this time of festivity that the political situation in the country became most tense, as people were more aware of their desire for freedom and their hope for a Messiah. Every year, the Passover commemorated the liberation of the people of Israel. Having been in bondage for centuries, the Israelites, led by Moses and the powerful arm of God, finally obtained their own land: thus the purpose of their celebration in those days. The domination of the Roman Empire, which the Israelites had to bear for more than twenty-five years, only raised the nationalistic feelings of the people. The feast of the Passover was an occasion for people’s mobilizations of all types. Jesus was very much aware of this opportunity in order to realize his important prophetic mission right at the heart of Jerusalem which was the Temple. He was willing to take this chance. Together with his compatriots he took part in that festive atmosphere, characteristic of the days of the Passover.

In this episode, Jesus explains his plan inspired by the words and gestures of Moses, the liberator of Israel. Moses had been sent by the same God to the pharaoh’s palace to demand his people’s freedom (Ex 3:16-20). Jesus wished to repeat the same prophetic gesture before the very eyes of the “pharaohs” of his time. Just as God told Moses his name was to be their standard bearer before the oppressor, Jesus intended to do the same. Yahweh – the name of God in the Bible – literally means: “The One who is.” (Yahweh is the third person of “I Am Who Am” in the first person). This name, which is somewhat mysterious to us, may be read in various forms: “I am who makes it to be” (God the Creator), “I am whom they will know I am” (God the Liberator, who makes new things in history). In this episode, Jesus takes this last meaning of the name of God.

The events that occurred on Palm Sunday were an authentic people’s demonstration, massive and passionate, where the most profound feelings of faith in God the Liberator and in their Messiah blended with nationalistic and political sentiments of the various groups. The Zealots – the way Judas and Simon appear in the episode – would see in Jesus’ actions an opportunity to mobilize an immediate popular uprising. The disciples anticipated a concrete triumph of the ideals of justice of the Kingdom of God. The people waited for freedom, not knowing though, what road to take. This happens in any mass action. Expectations are varied, although everyone shares some common sentiments. Palm Sunday was not, therefore, an orderly religious procession with palm branches silently waving to the rhythm of religious songs. That Palm Sunday was one of turmoil..

In order to enter the capital that Sunday, Jesus took the road to Bethany. Atop the Mount of Olives, one can get a full view of the oriental walls of Jerusalem. It is an impressive and unforgettable panorama up to the present. The Torrent of Cedron along the ravine with the Golden Gate in front leading directly to the Temple presented an imposing structure in itself. This gate, which is one of the most beautiful entrances to the walls, is now enclosed. According to ancient Jewish traditions, this gate will be solemnly opened with the coming of the Messiah who will enter Jerusalem through that gate. (Until now, some of the Jews still await the coming of the Messiah). On top of the Mount of Olives facing this beautiful panorama of Jerusalem a small chapel was constructed a few years ago. It is called “Dominus Fleuit” (the Lord wept) in memory of the tears shed by Jesus that Palm Sunday while he viewed the capital of his country from that height.

The word “Hosanna” with which Jesus was acclaimed on that day literally means “Please save us!” a supplication for God’s help to obtain victory (Ps 118:25). Gradually, the people began using it as a sign of his acclamation as God and King. That Palm Sunday, the use of Hosanna was the people’s solid confession that Jesus was the much-awaited Messiah. Since the idea of the Messiah was profoundly linked not only to the religious but also to the patriotic and political aspirations of the people, it is within this total context

that we must understand the acclamations of that day.

Palm Sunday traditionally marks the beginning of the passion of Jesus. We must be prudent in making this triumphant entrance of Jesus in Jerusalem the first stage of his inexorable journey to death. When Jesus decided to enter the Temple to purify it, doing this gesture at the very heart of the religious-political system of his time, he had to be clearly aware of the risk he was taking. In fact, if anywhere, his passion “is initiated” here, precisely because what took place in the Temple represented a challenge to the authorities, which was reason enough to fill the cup that would officially and ultimately condemn him to death.

(Mt 21:1-11; 23:37-39; Mk 11:1-11; Lk 13:34-35; 19:29-38; Jn 12:12-18)

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With a Whip in His Hand

Since very early in the morning, the vast esplanade of the Temple of Jerusalem was already teeming with vendors selling cows, lambs and pigeons. The hawkers had positioned their carts of amulets and other junk beside the columns of Solomon’s Gate. Above the stairways facing the inner atria were the money changers. Curses and haggings echoed, while like a heavy cloud, the stench of blood of beheaded animals and their manure mixed with the rancid smell of the thousands of pilgrims cramming into the esplanade.

In the midst of such confusion of animals and people, we forced our way through the Golden Gate: an avalanche of peasants from Bethany and strangers from Galilee, men and women waving branches of laurel and palm trees enthusiastically, shouting hoarsely and acclaiming the Messiah, the Son of David....

All: Hosanna, hosanna, we want justice today, not tomorrow! Hosanna, hosanna, we want justice today, not tomorrow!

A Man: Long live the prophet from Nazareth!

All: Long live the prophet from Nazareth!

Another Man: Down with Caiphas and all his cohorts!

All: Down with all of them!!

Jesus was in front of us, mounted on a donkey; he was nearly crushed by the huge multitude that filled up the atrium of the gentiles.

Jesus: Friends from Jerusalem! The Kingdom of God has come! The old world is coming to an end! God has seen the oppression of our people and heard our clamor! God wants to free us from all bondage, that we may serve Him in this new land with full freedom, with our heads held high! May justice flow like a river and peace reign like an overflowing torrent!

A Man: Long live Jesus, the Messiah of God!

All: Long live Jesus!

Another Man: The Messiah is here, the Son of David!

All: The Messiah is here, the Son of David!

The scorching sun parched the tiles carpeting the Temple’s esplanade. From the walls of the Antonia Fortress, the Roman soldiers, garbed in their armour plate and armed with lances, looked at us disdainfully and waited for orders to disperse the crowd....

All: The Messiah is here, the Son of David!

We had hardly stepped on the first level when a group of Levites and guardians of the Temple cut our steps short and threatened us with clenched fists...

A Levite: To hell with all of you! May we know who's behind this tumult?

Jesus: Who else but you yourselves, who have converted the House of God into a marketplace!

All: That's right! Very well said!

All: The Messiah is here, the Son of David!

Levite: Hey you, Galilean rebel, can't you hear what this rascal is yelling? The insolence he's shouting?

A Man: Jesus is the Messiah! Long live Jesus!

All: Long live Jesus!

Levite: Silence them, the blasphemers!

Jesus: Neither you nor anyone can, for we've come in the name of the Lord! If you shut us up, stones will rain down!

Levite: Is this a threat, damn you?

Jesus: It is God who lifts his hand against you. It is God who covers His face seeing such abominations committed by you in the holiest of places!

A Woman: Nice going, Jesus! C'mon, give it to them, Jesus. Give it to them!

A Man: Stand up in the name of the Lord!

All: Yes!!!

The Levites had to give way to let us pass. Jesus' eyes were blazing like hot coals... He hastened toward the first steps, near the great stairway where small tables were set up for the money changing transactions. It was here where the Greek and Roman currency was changed to pay the Temple tax for the benefit of Caiphas and his priests. Jesus climbed onto the post of the terrace, extended his arms like Moses did when he split the Red Sea into two, and pointed to the imposing Temple of gold and marble before him....

Jesus: Friends from Jerusalem! Inside are the priests and the pharisees, and the teachers of the Law, sitting in the chair of Moses! If Moses were alive, he would have given them a good whipping! They claim themselves to be God's representatives, yet, whom do they personify but Mammon, the god of money! They invoke the Law of Moses with their lips, but their hands are after the calf of gold!

All: Very good! Hit them hard, Jesus!

Jesus: Look at the hypocrites! They preach, but don't follow what they preach! They burden us with tons of laws, drown us with taxes, with fastings and penitence, with a thousand regulations they themselves have invented which they themselves do not observe. We are bowed down with the yoke around our necks, while they don't lift a finger to relieve us of the burden!

All: That's right! Give it to them, Jesus!

Jesus: Hypocrites! They say we are all brothers and sisters, but they hasten to occupy the first seats and wear expensive clothes, and they want us to kiss their hands and call them our fathers and teachers! Teachers of what? Of lies, for that's what they teach us! Fathers of what? Fathers of greed, since that's what they do, they rob and do business with the things of God!

All: Very good, very good!!

Jesus: We call no one father nor teacher since there is only one, who is up there – the God who raises the humble, and topples the thrones of the powerful! Long live the God of Israel!

All: Long live the God of Israel!!

At that moment, a group of furious priests was descending the steps in front of them, together with the commandant of the Temple guards. They were wearing black tunics and high tiaras on their heads...

Priest: Shut up, damn you! What right have you to insult the minister of God? You're nothing but an ignoramus, a filthy farmer, who stinks more than all the garbage of Gehenna!

Jesus: You're the ones who stink, followers of Satan! You filled the house of God with cows and sheep to fatten the pockets of that old thief Annas!

Priest: How dare you talk that way, son of a bitch! Don't you know where you are?... This is the Temple

of the Most High of Israel! You're just a few steps away from the Holy of Holies where our blessed Lord dwells!

Jesus: No, He's not here. The God of Israel got up and left, because you made his house into a marketplace and his religion into a business enterprise! I tell you, not a single stone shall remain of this Temple! Everything will fall down, like the statue seen by the prophet Daniel, an enormous and expensive statue, but with feet of clay! It took only one stone to crush the whole thing! We are that stone and today, God brought us to this Temple with foundations of clay!

Priest: We will hurl stones at you, agitator, blasphemer! You have spoken against the holy Temple of the Most High!

Jesus: You're mistaken, my friend! This is not a Temple, but a tomb! A sepulcher covered with marble, but whose interior is rotten! You too, stink like a corpse! You're like tombs painted with lime! You're beautiful on the outside, but inside, you're full of worms! Hypocrites! You despise the widows, sell the orphans for a pair of sandals and here you are giving alms. First, you deprive the orphans of their bread and then you fast to honor the Lord. First, you threaten the poor with your fist, and then you come as pious men to pray in the Temple, as if God were not aware of your lies, pharisees and charlatans! You see the speck in your brother's eye while you cannot see the plank in your own.

All: Hosanna, hosanna, we want justice today, not tomorrow! Hosanna, hosanna, we want justice today, not tomorrow!

Priest: This man is possessed by the devil! He is dangerous for everyone. Silence him! Silence him!

Jesus: Of course, it's not good for them that we tell the truth. The truth sets people free and you want us to remain blindfolded so you can take advantage of us. You are the devil, a race of vipers, sons of the serpent who deceived our first parents!

All: That's our man. C'mon, Jesus, give it to them!

Then, four bejewelled elders from the Sanhedrin dressed in pure linen appeared at the threshold of the Gate of Corinth, called the Beautiful. They were the most feared and the most powerful of the magistrates of the country, relatives of the high priest, Caiphas, of the highest aristocracy in Jerusalem... We stepped back a little, when we saw them leave. Even the money changers and the vendors who were crammed into the stairways left their wares to witness what would happen... The magistrates remained above, beside the Gate. They were burning with rage at Jesus, although they contained themselves in order not to incite more people...

Magistrate: Enough of this nonsense, fake Galilean. Who do you think you are anyway?... Do you think we'll tolerate you, a mere farmer with broken sandals, to air your grievances right under our noses?... Get out of here! Do it peacefully or we'll be constrained to use violence.... We are asking you to leave this place right now!

Jesus: It is you who must go and leave us in peace... You are the cheats in this place, you have committed more crimes than we can imagine!

Magistrate: This rebel must die! He should be stoned right away!

Jesus: Sure, do it, as is your accustom! First, you kill the prophets, and then, when the risk is over, you build them monuments and adorn their tombs! Murderers! Your hands are stained with the blood of the innocent! But God will ask you to render an account of all the blood you have shed, from the blood of the just Abel to that of Zacharias, the son of Barachias, whom you murdered right here by the altar of God!

One of the elders, his eyes fuming with rage, raised his fist and cursed:

Magistrate: Woe to you, mad dog!! Woe to all of you, rebels!! God's punishment will be terrible!

Jesus: Your words don't scare us, magistrate of the Sanhedrin. God is on our side. It is God who will cast the curse on you who have made His House of prayer into a den of thieves!

Jesus bent down to the ground to get the ropes used to tie cattle. He tied them around his hand as he rushed up the steps two by two. We followed behind, hurriedly... Jesus brandished the whip with so much

fury that the four elders fled through the door where they had first appeared. When Jesus reached the top, he shouted with authority....

Jesus: Get out of here, merchants of Satan, out of here!!

The uproar was frightening. Jesus overturned the tables full of money which rolled down the stairway. The people threw themselves at the money and the money changers were so enraged that they, too, jumped over the people. Again and again Jesus hurled his whip at the tax scales. The cows and sheep were so terrified they ran in all directions.... People screamed and the vendors cursed at the top of their voices. Pigeons as well as fists flew into the air.... As the tumult got more intense, soldiers from the Antonia Tower began to mobilize. But Jesus continued talking with a passion...

Jesus: Tell Caiphaz we shall confront him tomorrow in his palace, and tomorrow afternoon, we shall accuse Herod in his den. And then, Pontius Pilate will be next. God will triumph on the third day! The great day of the Lord has come, the Day of Liberation!

All: Freedom, freedom, freedom, freedom....!

Levite: Arrest that rebel! Don't let him escape!

Priest: Put the entire city under arrest, if necessary!

A Woman: Oh my God, they'll kill all of us! Run, children, run!

Amid that human whirlwind, we were able to get Jesus out, through the gates leading to barrio Ophel. From there, we proceeded secretly to the Gate of Zion, and finally to Mark's house, who was Peter's friend... At night, we escaped to Bethany... That day, the Temple Hill of Jerusalem trembled, just like the hill in Carmel did, when Elijah lashed the whip of God against the priests of Baal.

Taken from any point of view (religious, political, social or economic) the Temple of Jerusalem was the most important institution of Israel in Jesus' time. It was so, especially for the religious authorities (priests, sanhedrites, levites, pharisees, scribes). Each of these classes, in their own fashion, subsisted on the Temple and "used" their religious position for their own advantage. It was important as well for the people who were simply overwhelmed by the magnificence of that colossal edifice. The transcendence of the place was well noted by no less than the Roman empire. After a series of vigorous negotiations, the Roman governors succeeded in demanding that a sacrifice be offered in the Temple each day for the emperor. Having accomplished this, the Israelites were excused from any form of worship to the sovereign of Rome.

The Temple was situated in a vast area overlooking the entire Jerusalem. (It occupied a fifth part of the total area of the city.) It included the sanctuary – a chapel where the Jewish religion situated the presence of God – the priests' atrium, plus three other atria or patios surrounded by porticos with columns. The three atria where lay persons could enter were: the atrium of the pagans (the only place in the Temple where non-Jewish foreigners could pass through), the women's atrium (the women could not go beyond this zone), and the atrium of the Israelites (where the Jewish men entered). Only the priests could enter the sanctuary. The Temple's structure and its divisions were a reflection of the discriminatory system of the society itself. The atrium of the pagans (of the gentiles), the outermost, was the so-called "Temple's esplanade." It was here that the market for animals to be sacrificed (bulls, cows, sheep, goats, pigeons) were located, as well as the tables for the money changers.

The money changers, whose tables were overturned by Jesus, change foreign money (Greek and Roman) for the sanctuary's own money as payment for taxes from the pilgrims. Foreign coins had the image of the emperor engraved on them, and therefore were considered by the Jews as blasphemous and impure (the emperor was considered a divinized man). Which is why this type of money could not be accepted in the sacred place and had to be changed. All Israelites were obliged to pay various annual tributes: 1) two drachmas; 2) the first harvest or the first fruit of their work and 3) the so-called "second tithe." The latter was not delivered to the Temple, but was supposed to be spent in Jerusalem (in food,

objects or lodging). During the feast of the Passover, the flow of money in the city was enormous. The money changers not only changed money, but acted as professional bankers.

God was worshipped in the Temple, in the form of prayers, songs, burnt offerings, processions of praise, etc. One type of worship was in the form of sacrifice of the blood of animals and other farm products (wheat, wine, bread, oil). The sacrifices were expressions of profound human religious sentiments. In all primitive cultures, people offered to God something of their own – destroying it, killing it, burning it – as a symbol of submission, as a way of seeking assistance or forgiveness. In Jesus' time, most of the animals sacrificed were sold there in the Temple or in nearby stores which belonged to the Temple. The animals were handed over to the priests who burned them completely or had them beheaded inside the sanctuary as a pleasing offering to God. Every day of the year there were sacrifices in the Temple, and even more during the week of the Passover: every day two bulls were sacrificed, a ram, seven lambs and a he-goat in the name of all the people. There were also private sacrifices made for various reasons: sins, impurities, promises, vows, etc. The paschal victims, rightfully so-called (young and male lambs, according to what was prescribed by Law) reached tens of thousands in those days. One historian put the figure at more than 250,000 lambs sacrificed during the Passover.

The worship in the Temple represented the most important source of income in Jerusalem. The life of the priests of the aristocracy, depended on this income, as well as the simple priests, and the thousands of employees of different categories (police, musicians, bricklayers, blacksmiths, painters, etc.). Large amounts of money flowed into the Temple coffers. It came in the form of donations from pious persons, from the cattle business, from taxes paid by the Israelites, from pledges, etc. To manage the Temple's treasury was to occupy the highest economic position of the entire country. The family of the High Priests discharged this function through a body of three devoted treasurers usually from their own lineage. Historical testimonies show that in Jesus' time, the business of selling animals for sacrifice was a monopoly of Annas and his family. Such fabulous economic power was naturally linked to political supremacy. The Sanhedrin, the highest religious-political-judicial body of Israel, held its sessions in the Temple and was presided over by the high priest.

No institution nor building of our time is comparable to this, no symbol – of power in countries today, can compare to the Temple of Jerusalem. All this should indicate the significance of what Jesus did, a lay person without religious authority to boast of, in severely criticizing the supreme religious authorities of that place.

Of that fabulous Temple, one of the great wonders of the ancient world, as a result of the Temple's destruction almost two thousand years ago, nothing is left today except a piece of one of the walls that served as its rampart: the so-called "wall of lamentations," constructed of stones measuring seven meters long. Beside this wall, the Jews still continue to pray. Here they celebrate their feasts and pray and praise the God of their ancestors. In the year 70 CE*, the Temple was razed to the ground by the Romans in order to suppress a Jewish nationalist uprising. Nothing was left of the Temple. Today we can see in its place a vast esplanade (491 x 310 meters) in the Arab barrio of Jerusalem. In the center of this esplanade is the beautiful mosque of Omar or the Mosque of the Rock. (It was built there by the Arabs, who occupied Jerusalem in the VII century.) In the interior of this mosque is a huge rock venerated by the Jews as Mount Moriah (where Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, Isaac) and where the sacrifices of animals in the Temple took place.

We must not interpret the act of expelling the merchants from the Temple as exclusively religious. The merchants were there precisely because the priests depended for subsistence on the trade. The political, religious and economic were so closely linked in the Temple of Jerusalem that it was impossible to denounce one aspect without implicating the others.

This being the most daring of Jesus' actions within the context of his prophetic mission, this episode also includes his harshest words gathered within the gospel. These are words of severe criticism against priests who use the name of God in their business pursuits, and who reduced the worship of God to idolatry of money. He assails the theologians who deceive the ignorant with laws they themselves have invented, thus distorting the image of God in exchange for fame and privilege. He denounces the people

who have made religion an unbearable burden of laws and norms.

(Mt 21:12-17; 23:1-36; Mk 11:15-19; 12:38-40; Lk 11:37-52; 19:45-48; 20:45-47; Jn 2:13-22)

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A Man of the People

Town Crier: Residents of Jerusalem and foreigners who are here for the holidays... the authorities of this city are in search of this man called Jesus, a peasant with a brown face, about thirty years old, tall, sporting a beard, who comes from Galilee and calls himself a prophet and Messiah. Any person who knows of his whereabouts should inform the magistrates of the Sanhedrin and he will receive a reward of sixty shekels of silver... The man is a dangerous rebel....

After that event the preceding Sunday in the Temple, when we invaded the atrium of the gentiles with shouts and palm branches, the religious leaders of the capital started to announce this news at the twelve gates of the city of David, in the market and in the barrios...

Meanwhile, old Annas, the wealthiest and most influential priest in the whole of Jerusalem, who controlled the sale of animals for sacrifice at the Temple from his palace, was conversing with his son-in-law, Joseph Caiphas, the High Priest for that year.

Caiphas: Had you been there, had you seen the confusion, you wouldn't be looking so smug....

Annas: I'm glad I haven't seen anything. At my age, my dear son-in-law, misgivings are dangerous.

Caiphas: We can't take any more scandal like this. Believe me, Annas, what happened last Sunday at the Temple was something truly unfortunate.

Annas: Well, I'm just sorry about my cows. Usually in these cases, scoundrels take advantage of the confusion. Five cows of mine have disappeared with their calves. At least four dozen sheep have been lost, and this is not to include the pigeons.

Caiphas: I don't count the money wasted on the stairs... The money changers claimed they couldn't defend themselves from the mob.... Fools.... It was exactly at noontime, when the most money had been collected, when this agitator came and started the tumult... Damn this Nazarene!

Annas: Anyway, my dear son-in-law, there's no reason to worry. The notice has been posted and announced all over the place.

Caiphas: What for?... The whole city is with them. They're hiding him. They're protecting him.

Annas: But there'll be always someone who will sing. Sixty shekels of silver is enough bait for someone starving to death. Take it easy, Caiphas. Don't give too much importance to that silly farmer. Tomorrow, or Thursday at the latest perhaps, this matter will be resolved... Even if this Jesus hides himself in Sheol, we'll get him. Now, rather than biting your nails, why don't you meet with the members of the Sanhedrin to explain to them the "delicate situation" caused by the Nazarene? All the magistrates will support you.... You know what to do after that, my dear son-in-law...

It was Tuesday, the 11th of Nissan. Since Sunday we had been in hiding with Jesus in Bethany, in the upper story of Lazarus' inn. Judas of Iscariot, who knew the city fully well, used to come and tell us the latest developments in the city. But that morning, it took him some time to return....

Barabbas: What the hell is your leader waiting for, Judas? What's he thinkin' of?... True, last Sunday's riot at the Temple was a good blow, but that's all. You don't win a war with palm branches.

Judas: That's what some of us were saying, Barabbas. But what can we do? He's our leader, and we do

whatever he says.

Barabbas: What about the cause, Judas? And our cause is over and above any one leader!

In one of the little huts in the barrio of Ophel, with closed doors and windows, Barabbas, one of the leaders of the zealot movement, was discussing with Judas of Iscariot....

Barabbas: Listen to me, Judas. You were one of us at one time. I can trust you. We, the members of the movement have spent the whole night discussing this and... and we have a plan.

Judas: What?

Barabbas: Listen, buddy. One thing is clear. Of all the leaders we have in this country, the Nazarene is the only one who is able to mobilize people. That's right, and we have to admit it. The leaders of the movement find difficulty admitting this, but I was able to convince them. The people find these rebels detestful because of their thirst for blood. The leaders of Perea and Judea are already sick and tired of this. Whom can we count on then?... Jesus is the only man who can make the people rise in arms, do you understand?!

Judas: Sure I do, but what does all this mean?

Barabbas: Listen, Judas. We know where to obtain a good number of swords and cudgels. We have men trained to raid the arsenal of Shiloh and the one in Antonia Tower. It's a matter of distributing the job among ourselves and planning the assault well. You know how this thing works, once it breaks out, there's no stopping it. Only one thing is lacking.

Judas: For Jesus to take up the sword and give the first move, is that right?

Barabbas: Exactly, Judas. Now, answer me: will Jesus do it or not?

Judas: I doubt it, Barabbas. The Moreno is... very idealistic. He says that our strength is not in weapons but in joint protests until we exhaust the patience of the Pharaoh, as Moses did in Egypt.

Barabbas: Idealistic, no, but an imbecile. I already told him when they killed John, the Baptizer. If you don't change your style, Nazarene, you'll suffer the same fate as the son of Zechariah.

Judas: Jesus won't change his mind. Not for now, at least.

Barabbas: But now is our chance, Judas! It's now or never! The city is in turmoil waiting for the signal to attack the Roman quarters!

Judas: If you wish, we can talk to Jesus to see if...

Barabbas: No, Iscariot. This is no longer the time to talk, but to act. And fast. If Jesus won't decide, then, we will.

Judas: And what do the members of movement say to this?

Barabbas: Kill him.

Judas: How's that again?

Barabbas: They want to kill him. To eliminate Jesus. We'll cut off his head. Then we'll blame it on the Romans.

Judas: But, are you out of your mind? How can you even think of this...?

Barabbas: You know nothing about politics, Judas. A dead leader can sometimes be more useful than one alive. Flags are made out of blood that has been shed, do you understand?

Judas: But, what would you get out of this...?

Barabbas: For the people to rise up in arms, dammit! In two minutes, the news will spread through all Jerusalem, and in the next two minutes, the uprising will break out! That will be the spark we've been awaiting for the great holocaust.

Judas: I can't believe the movement is capable of such a thing... You wouldn't do such a lowly thing, would you... Barabbas?

Barabbas: It's you who'll do it, Judas. We're counting on you. You know where the Nazarene has gone into hiding. You're one of them.

Judas: Am I hearing right, or...? Are you insinuating something, Barabbas?!

Barabbas: I'm not insinuating anything, Iscariot. I'm telling you, very clearly, how things are. Jesus is more useful dead. And you are in the best position to carry out this plan.

Judas: Dammit! Hearing you talk makes me hate you, Barabbas! Goodbye. You can't make me kill a buddy. Much less Jesus.

Barabbas: Wait a minute, Judas. Take it easy. Try to understand the movement.

Judas: I'm sorry, Barabbas. I don't betray my friends.

Barabbas: Why do you say friend?

Judas: What else?

Barabbas: Yeah. It's not betrayal, but strategy. Someone has to die for the people, for the country. Understand this, Judas!

That afternoon of Tuesday, the high priest, Joseph Caiphas called an urgent meeting of the chief magistrates of Jerusalem...

Caiphas: Please try to understand, illustrious members of the Sanhedrin. This is a serious matter and we must make a fast decision. It is about the fanatic called Jesus, who, many of you must have heard, has been much talked about. A man of the worst type, a rebel against Rome, who blasphemes against the Temple: an agitator, a conspirator and... and besides, an imbecile. Only a fool would try to bring down a wall by throwing tomatoes at it.

A Magistrate: It is my opinion, your excellency, that we take drastic action on this matter. The leper, the unclean and the rebel must be isolated from the community at the soonest possible moment.

Jeconiah: I'm sorry, but I don't agree. The city is teeming with pilgrims right now. The people are very restless with the new taxes. Let us wait for the holidays to pass. Then, everything would be easier and less noisy.

Another Magistrate: I agree with my colleague, Jeconiah! Besides, it is not for us to arrest this rebel. We will be criticized by the people. Let Governor Pilate take care of him.

Another Magistrate: Governor Pilate is tired of putting up crosses for our messiahs! He wants no more trouble!

Jeconiah: On the contrary, Pilate seeks a new excuse to continue robbing the Temple treasury!

Caiphas: Illustrious colleagues, don't speak that way of the Governor. Pontius Pilate has his little foibles, it's true, but he is a prudent man and has always supported us in governing this province... Personally, I believe if we simply leave this Nazarene rebel alone, it would make Governor Pilate nervous and he just might inform Caesar. His friend, Sejanus in Rome doesn't look well at our people. He could give orders to invade Jerusalem and sack the Temple. Don't you think it easier to get rid of one man than risk the peace and order of our country?

All: Yes, yes, you're right, your excellency! This rebel must die!

Caiphas: I'm glad we have agreed on this decision. It is better for one man to die in order to save the whole nation.

At that same hour, in a small hut in Ophel...

Zealot: Fine, Judas. I understand your reasons and... your feelings. Why don't we come to an agreement? It won't be necessary to shed the blood of the Nazarene, as Barabbas, our comrade proposed.

Judas: So what's it this time?

Zealot: To get him arrested will be enough. Jesus is so popular. When the people get to know about it, they'll all take to the streets.

Judas: And what does the movement want from me?

Zealot: Aren't you aware of the announcement by the magistrates of the Sanhedrin? They're after Jesus.

Judas: They'll never find him. We have him well hidden.

Zealot: Yeah, Judas. Sooner or later, they'll find him. They'll put him in jail once the pilgrims have gone, and things will never be the same. You've got to understand, Judas. Now is the time. Jerusalem is crammed with people. We can't afford to miss this chance.

Judas: And you want me to squeal on him, is that right?

Zealot: Listen, Judas. Set aside your sentimentalism and try to be reasonable. It's necessary to have Jesus

arrested during these holidays. Don't be scared. Before they put him on the cross, the uprising will have broken out. The first thing we'll do is free the prisoners who are rotting in the dungeons of the Antonia Tower. Trust us, buddy. We'll bring back your beloved leader safe and sound. The movement promises you that.

Judas: If I say yes, what would I have to do?

Zealot: Your mission would be a little unpleasant... but necessary. You'll have to go see the chief commandant of the Temple and tell him the hiding place of Jesus.

Judas: In other words, I'd squeal on him.

Zealot: No, Judas, you'll be a true fighter up to the last. Come on, decide for yourself. Go to those sons of bitches and tell them where the Nazarene is. If they reward you with money, accept it. This comedy should be played well.

Judas: It's the price of treason.

Zealot: No, Judas, it's the price of the revolution. So, what?... Can we count on you?... or not?

Commandant: What's your name?

Judas: Judas... Judas of Iscariot.

Commandant: What do you want?

Judas: I know... I know where the man is.

Commandant: You don't say!... Look, a number have come giving false information, and I am not about to mobilize my men, just to go after ghosts.

Judas: You can trust me... I am... I'm one of them.

Commandant: Oh yeah?... That's better.... Where's your leader?

Judas: You can't get him now. He's surrounded with people. I'll inform you at the right time.

Commandant: Don't worry, because you'll go with us too. If you're lying, we'll cut off your head. Do you understand?

Judas: Yeah.

Commandant: Here, take it, parrot. This is one half in advance. Thirty shekels of silver.... You'll get the other half once we have the man in our hands. Now, beat it!..... Puah... Poor souls... selling their own leader for a few shekels....

Judas of Iscariot left the palace of the high priest, Caiphaz, and vanished into one of the dark and narrow streets of the city of Jerusalem....

Judas: Old fool... when the people rise in arms, you'll remember me...!

The episode in the Temple may well summarize the whole prophetic activity of Jesus. For months Jesus' life was lived in a tense climate, filled with an increasing distrust on the part of the Roman and Jewish powers. In the face of such a society, Jesus took a clear stand. In this episode in the Temple, he obviously manifested whose side he was on, and whose side God was on, since he was God's messenger. Jesus was not an ethereal being who distanced himself from the rest of humanity. He took sides and in so doing, he clashed with the leaders who, from that moment on, joined forces in order to get rid of him.

If the events of the Temple had put the authorities on their toes, Jesus, from that time on, also tried to make himself less visible, as a matter of precaution. One can never insist enough that the passion of Jesus was not one of fatal destiny that the Son of God had to fulfill in this world, but it was a historical event with specific culprits, who acted freely in killing Jesus. Jesus, in the step he undertook during those days of tension and conflict, likewise acted freely. He made a choice. Filled with trust he took the risk.

If we are to see the passion of Jesus as something historical and therefore, circumstantial, then Judas' betrayal must likewise be recovered from the total fatalism with which it has traditionally been interpreted. We will never know at a distance of two thousand years, the soul of Judas, a man who shared much with Jesus during his prophetic days. If we make him the archetype of evil, the absolute Evil, that he was born "only to betray," the devil himself, we gravely mutilate the historical reality of the events that happened

during “those days” in Jerusalem. The reason for Judas’ betrayal is shown in this episode as a matter of political “tactic,” which is in consonance with the ideology of the zealots, a group to which in all probability, he belonged. It is a manner of giving a “down-to-earth” character to this betrayal, of removing it from the realm of fatalism, assuming that it simply depended on the sole ambitious motive of receiving a reward of 30 pieces of silver.... We have to see in Judas the man of flesh and blood and not a puppet whose strings are controlled from above by a terrible God who predestined the betrayal in order to kill his own son.

The zealots were not bloodthirsty revolutionaries. Neither can we identify them, no less, with a political party, as we understand the term nowadays. Their ideology took root in a profound religious tradition by which Israel understood their country to be a holy land which could not be suppressed by foreigners. They were known for their passionate nationalism and intense spirituality based on the very spirituality of the prophets. In their mode of action, they distinguished themselves for their zeal to immediately free Israel from Roman domination. Tactically, they were “impatient.” Their option was to use arms. Ideologically, they were perhaps the group which most clearly represented the infinite thirst for freedom which Israel experienced during the last centuries of her history. All this explains their coincidence with Jesus in many things. They saw their own aspirations in him, and at the same time were fascinated by the popular charisma of the Galilean prophet, and determined to take immediate action. All these also contributed – as this episode suggests – in giving rise to Jesus’ condemnation to death, suggesting that Judas’ betrayal was a strategy that would lead to a popular uprising. For the zealots, the events in the Temple had to be decisive, which they interpreted as the prelude to the much-awaited definitive insurrection.

Jesus always remained independent of the various groups at play in the political drama of that time. At the end of his life, the ruling forces wishing to get rid of him, converged with other organized popular groups – such as zealots – who wanted “to use him.” According to the plan presented in this episode, the final plan where “a man must die for his people” focuses the enormous freedom of Jesus and the risk which at times cannot be foreseen, in the radicalization of revolutionary groups as they aim to realize their goals in a short time and thereby detach themselves from reality.

Judas’ betrayal and the responsibility of the zealots or other popular groups in the death of Jesus should not make us forget that historically, maximum culpability for Jesus’ death rests on the religious authorities of Jerusalem, who allied themselves with the Roman imperial power. Caiphias, the high priest, and his counterparts, the wealthiest and most influential men of Jerusalem, were the great culprits.

(Mt 26:14-16; Mk 14:1-2; Lk 22:1-6; Jn 11:45-57)

109

The Lamb and the Unleavened Bread

Since Sunday, after the episode in the temple, we did not show our faces in Jerusalem. They were looking for Jesus throughout the city and we were all in danger. Our friend, Lazarus, hid the twelve of us and the women in the basement of his inn in Bethany....

Lazarus: How’s life treating you in the rathole, guys?

John: Not bad, Lazarus. What else can we ask for? We have shelter, food and friends to talk with...

Lazarus: Uff...! I’m staying with you for a bit brothers, but damn it, tell me, what are you guys up to, huh?

Peter: We still dunno what the hell we’ll be doing tomorrow, Lazarus, because...!

James: Psst! Shut up, Peter! If you keep shouting, we'll be playing dice in jail!

Peter: Okay, fine.... What shall we do tomorrow?

John: Well, partake of the Passover meal, like all good Israelites. We'll celebrate the holiday hiding in a cave if need be, but we'll celebrate, just the same!

Mary: Tomorrow will be Passover supper... Time really flies fast, doesn't it, gentlemen...?!

Magdalene: You bet, Mam Mary.....

Peter: Look, buddies, if we don't move now, we'll end up having no lamb at all for supper. Our good countrymen are first to buy the fattest lambs and when it's your turn, you have no choice but the skinny ones.

It was getting dark but we didn't light a lamp, so as not to attract attention. It was Wednesday, the 12th of Nissan. The next day, we Galileans who had gone up to Jerusalem for the holiday would partake of the Passover supper...

Lazarus: Friends, pardon me if this dampens your spirit, but I don't think you should be celebrating supper here...

James: I agree with Lazarus. This inn is getting to be more dangerous by the day. Bethany is bursting with pilgrims. Tongues wag where there are so many people.

Lazarus: Sooner or later, with or without squealers, they'll be coming to look for Jesus. The night of the Passover is the perfect time for it. They know where to find his kind. Will you take my advice? Go to some other place. I feel sorry for Martha and Mary, who're just too willing to prepare the lamb for you. No, this place won't be safe tomorrow, Thursday.

Susana: Well then, where the hell shall we go, huh?

Peter: I've got an idea!

John: Psst!... Don't shout, Peter...

James: What's on your mind, man?

Peter: I'll talk to my friend, Mark. He'll lend us his house. It isn't big, but it'll be just right for us.

John: That's a silly idea, big nose. Mark's house is very near the palace of Caiphas.

Peter: Exactly, John. Who'll ever think that we're that close to them? That's the last place they'd go to search for us.

James: That's right. Besides, if on a Thursday we all gather in front of the palace of Caiphas, then we can look over the place and start talking to people...

Susana: Haven't you learned your lesson?... Or is it because you are all hare-brained that you don't understand? And here you are planning another disturbance like last Sunday?

Jesus: Of course, Susana. On Friday we'll all see Caiphas and the rest of the bigwigs of Jerusalem, and tell them to their faces what they should already know. Now that we've started, there's no turning back.

John: That's right, Jesus, but last Sunday shouldn't be repeated. Your head is at stake, Moreno.

Jesus: Everyone's life is at stake, John. But we must go on. Those who risk not, lose not, but neither do they win.

Lazarus: Right, Jesus, you must go on; but like a snake, you must be clever.

Mary: For God's sake, son, do you think something bad's going to happen...? Hearing you talk that way makes me nervous...

Jesus: Don't be afraid, Mama. Everything will turn out fine, you'll see. God will give us a hand. God will not fail us, I'm sure of that. The guardian of Israel doesn't sleep and will never let us fall.

Peter: Well, everything's arranged. Tomorrow, before dawn, John and I will talk to Mark and we'll buy the lamb. The women should get up early too, so that they can prepare the food....

Lazarus: Those who stay please keep still, like a corpse. No one is to open his mouth until suppertime!

That Thursday, the sun was beginning to shed its golden light on the walls of Jerusalem when Peter and I arrived in the Temple. In spite of the time, there were already a hundred people in the vast white tiled

esplanade and we just had to push our way through....

John: Hey, loud mouth, since you know so much about animals, choose the lamb yourself.

Peter: Take a look at that one, John! It seems to be good stuff... Come!... Hey, compatriot!

Woman Vendor: Yes?

Peter: Compatriot, how much will you charge me for that animal?

Woman Vendor: You can have it for fourteen denarii!

Peter: Fourteen what? Look, I could buy the whole flock for that! No, no, no, here, take these six denarii, and it's finished!

Woman Vendor: Six denarii? No way! Give me twelve!

Peter: What? I'll give you seven and that's it!

Woman Vendor: Listen, big nose, since I find you to be kind of cute, let's leave it at nine, and it's a deal!

Finally, we bought our lamb. It was a year old male, a perfect animal, as commanded by the law of Moses. With him on our back, we scaled the marble steps, crossed the Beautiful Gate as we elbowed our way through the atrium of the Israelites. Hundreds of Galileans crowded the place, as they waited for their turn. Beside the stone of the holocausts, the priests, with their tunics drenched in blood, were cutting off the heads of the lambs one by one, before they were offered as sacrifice for the Passover....

Peter: Don't push, compatriot, we'll all be attended to!

An Old Man: Hey, you, Galilean... aren't you one of those who were with the prophet of Nazareth last Sunday...?

Peter: Who, me?... Well, I... the truth is...

Old Man: Yes, you... and you too... I remember faces.... You can trust me, don't worry.... I lost my voice shouting hosannas with all of you here in the Temple. That was the greatest day of my life, yes sir!.... Well, if you see the prophet, please tell him on my behalf that everyone in my barrio is waiting for the next time.... If we were a thousand last Sunday, there will be a hundred thousand of us the next time he raises his voice of protest. Oh well, no one will ever say that I didn't see the Messiah before my death!

Susana: Magdalene, sweep the house clean! See to it that every nook and cranny is well cleaned, young lady.... Not a bit of dirt anywhere...

Magdalene: Pff!... Moses must have thought of this since it wasn't he, but his wife who had to do the sweeping, naturally...

Susana: Look, Magdalene, go and bring Mary more water for the dough!

That morning of Thursday, while Peter and I were buying the lamb, the women went to see Mark's house in the barrio of Zion, so that they could prepare the food for supper. Mark's was a two-story house. We were to celebrate the Passover supper in a small room with white-washed walls and wooden floor on the second story of the house....

Susana: The dough is okay, Mary, look....

Mary: I think it's too thick, Susana... put in a little more water. Unleavened bread gets hard.

Susana: Not as hard as your son's head, Mary... I keep asking myself: how can it be that this Moreno whom I have seen come into this world, should be... should be the Messiah, like the people were shouting last Sunday? Don't you think everyone in this country has gone nuts, Mary? What do you think?

Mary: I don't know, Susana, I don't know what to think... But look, it seemed our people also went crazy there in Egypt, when Moses took them out of it. It was madness for them to look for freedom....

Susana: You're right there.... When people begin to seek freedom, God is in their midst... Oh my dear, I think it's my faith that's wavering, Holy God!

Mary, Jesus' mother, and Susana, sat squatting on the floor, kneading the flour with water for the unleavened bread. According to the tradition of our parents, the bread that was eaten during the Paschal dinner was made without any leavening, in remembrance of the bread that the women of Israel had kneaded

in great haste, with no time to wait for its fermentation, that night they left Egypt.

Peter: Hey women, here comes the king of the holiday!...

Mary: Don't make so much noise, Peter!... No one should know that we're even here...!

Peter: Well, well, since I came out of the noisy street, I simply forgot.... Say, what do you think of the lamb?... As you can see, it's good stuff, but I got it cheap...

Susana: Magdalene, my dear, if you're done with your sweeping, give Salome a hand in cleaning the lamb, come on...

Peter: Don't throw away the entrails, Mary... Today, every part of it must be eaten, including the hoofs...!

My mother and Magdalene began to prepare the lamb. On the night of the Passover it was roasted on a fire, without breaking any of its bones. The lamb had to be eaten whole, including its entrails. The leftovers were not to be kept for the next day, but had to be burned at dawn.

Susana: Did you remember to bring some blood for the doors, Peter?

Peter: Here it is... Hey John, give me a hand, will you? Then we'll go back to Bethany!... I want to see Jesus about this...

Magdalene: Tell us first!...

Mary: What's up in the city, Peter?

Peter: They've been talking of no one else but your son, Mary. Everyone is asking where the hell he's hiding. The moment he shows his face, the whole Jerusalem will stand up as one.

John: Yesterday, there were announcements in the streets, hoping to find an informer.... But no, the people are on his side. There's no need to worry....

Susana: Okay, enough of this talk, let's all get to work! You, Peter, work on the doors!

During the feast of the Passover, we painted the leaves and the thresholds with the blood of the sacrificed lamb, like our fathers did in Egypt. That was the blood of the alliance which Yahweh, God, had forged with the chosen people, when God saved them that night from slavery and gave them their freedom...

Magdalene: Uff!... It's too spicy!... Let's put in more onions.... Now it's ok... The lamb will be most grateful for this sauce, more than the rain in spring... Besides, the salad is good medicine for hiccups...!

That afternoon of Thursday, Mark's house smelled of recently baked bread and roasted lamb. Magdalene prepared the herbal concoctions which, according to tradition were supposed to be eaten that night. It was a kind of bitter salad in remembrance of the tears and sufferings of our ancestors in Egypt. Jesus' mother and Susana made the hot sauce for the bread. It was colored red, the same as the color of the bricks made by the Israelites in Egypt when they were slaves of the pharaoh....

Mark: Well, let's see what's these women have come up with, aside from non-stop chattering...!

Susana: Everything's ready, Mark!

Mark: Yeah, yeah, everything, everyone's ready, including the guards! Oh, damn, why did I ever allow myself to be convinced by this big nose, Peter? Look what I have in my house... a bunch of agitators!... So, say a little prayer to the archangel, Michael, that he lend us his sword the moment they come to arrest us. Ayayay!

Mary: Psst, be quiet, Mark...! When are the boys coming? They ought to be here, by now....

Susana: They'll wait until it's a little dark. They should be careful. All gates of the city are well guarded...

Mark: Fine. Have you forgotten anything?

Magdalene: Can't you see? The lamb will be ready any moment now!

Mark: Tonight, what's as important as the lamb is the wine. Have you forgotten that?

Magdalene: The wine! That's right! We have no wine!... Now, where can we get some wine?

Mark: Take it easy, woman, take it easy... Downstairs I've got a jar full to the brim!... We can drink to our hearts' content, and there'll be enough for a toast with Elijah in case he comes...! Tonight we'll all raise our cups high and drink to the freedom of our people...!

Susana: Yes, we can raise our cups, but you lower your voice, Mark. My goodness, you're creating a scandal here, man...!

Notwithstanding the fear and the risk, we were all happy that night, ready to celebrate the greatest feast of the year. We were hoping against hope that God would extend his hand to us, and once and for all, break the chain that enslaved our people.

The Feast of the Passover was the most solemn feast of Israel. It was celebrated on the first month of the Jewish year, the month of Nissan (corresponding to the middle part of March and April in our calendar). The feast lasted for seven days, but days 14 and 15 of Nissan was considered the day of the Passover, with the celebration of the Passover supper. How this feast was celebrated was transmitted from generation to generation and has been recorded in the book of the Exodus (Ex 12:1-28).

For centuries before Christ, the Feast of the Passover was linked to the Feast of the Unleavened Bread (Ex 13:3-10). In its origin, before Moses, it was a feast of the shepherds (where lamb was eaten) and that of the unleavened bread, a feast of the farmers (where bread from the new harvest was eaten). After the time of Moses, these popular feasts became definitely associated with the liberation of the people from slavery in Egypt. This was what Israel continued to commemorate for the following centuries until the time of Jesus. The Passover was something like a feast of national independence. It was a patriotic and at the same time, a profoundly religious celebration. For the people of Israel, it was the hand of God that paved the way for the liberation of their ancestors.

The highlight of this feast was the Passover supper, at the center of which was the lamb. In Jesus' time, the lamb was usually purchased in the atria of the Temple and was offered as sacrifice right there. The priests, appropriately dressed for the rite, beheaded the lambs, one after the other, before the altar. These lambs were brought to the atria by the Israelite men. After the blood had been shed before the altar, as a pleasing sacrifice to God, the victims were returned to their owners, who brought them to their houses or directly to the available ovens, to be roasted collectively in the streets.

The lamb was eaten in accordance with Jewish practice, within the walls of Jerusalem, the holy city. At sunset, which was the start of a new day for the Israelites, the families, groups and neighbors, gathered together for the solemn supper. Since houses were small and there should be at least ten persons for every lamb, supper was also celebrated on the patios, terraces and even on the roofs. Jerusalem, with many pilgrims around, was an impressive picture of a festive atmosphere. It was the most solemn night of the year. In primitive times, supper was held inside the Temple, in the esplanade, but about a hundred years before Christ, this custom was stopped due to the multitude congregating in the capital. Symbolically, the doors of the Temple remained open wide during the whole night of the Passover.

During the Paschal days, the marketplaces of Jerusalem were filled with typical products needed for that particular supper. Lettuce was the prescribed vegetable for the salad of the night. Other vegetables like chickory, watercress, artichokes and other bitter herbs could also be used. The bitterness was a remembrance of the pain and tears of the people when they were slaves in Egypt. The ritual marmalade of the night was called "jaroset," which was made of different kinds of fruit (figs, dates, raisins, apples, almonds), several condiments (cinnamon, especially) and vinegar. It was served as an appetizer by spreading it on bread. Its color and consistency reminded the Israelites of the clay that their ancestor slaves had used for making bricks in the enormous construction projects of the pharaoh.

The bread that was eaten during the seven days of the feast was kneaded without leavening. This bread was called "massot" or "unleavened" bread. It was also prescribed that all nooks and corners of the houses must be swept clean so that not even a bit of leavening be left inside. The primitive thinking saw in the process of fermentation of bread a symbol of decay and death. Thus, the practice of eating the "purest" of all breads during the feast. The unleavened bread was made in the form of a cake, somewhat thick. This reminded the Israelites of the bread they had brought along during their escape from Egypt, whose dough had not had time to grow and ferment.

Some Israelites possibly continued with the ancient custom of signing with blood of a sacrificed lamb

the doors of the place where they gathered for supper. On the night that Israel left Egypt, that blood was the sign that distinguished the houses of the oppressors from those of the oppressed, so that God could free the latter and punish the former (Ex 12:2-13).

The book of Acts mentions the first Christian communities who gathered to pray in the house of Mark (Acts 12:12). On the basis of the above, an ancient tradition pointed to Mark's house as the place where Jesus celebrated the supper of the Passover on the eve of his death. Since it is impossible to locate this place in present-day Jerusalem, another more recent tradition situates the "last supper" in a spacious room on the second floor of a temple built on Mount Zion, in the southeastern part of the city. Below this building, the Jews of today venerate the tomb of King David. Neither one or the other has historical authenticity.

At present, the Jews continue to celebrate the feast of the Passover every year, with rites similar to what Jesus knew with respect to food, prayers, songs, etc. We Christians establish a direct relationship between this celebration and the Eucharist. Passover ("pesaj" in Hebrew) means "passage." Yahweh passed through Egypt on the night of the liberation: Yahweh, passed through the houses of the Hebrews that were marked with blood and castigated the Egyptians. Thus, the liberated people were able to cross the waters of the Red Sea (the color of blood) toward a new land. Jesus, by the blood of his life, passed from death to life. The Christian community, in the Eucharist which is a memorial of this blood that was shed for our freedom, continues to celebrate the passage of Jesus and his own passage from death to life (1 Jn 3:14).

(Mt 26:17-19; Mk 14:12-16; Lk 22:7-13)

110

The Supper of the Passover

It was dusk in Jerusalem. The sun, having finished its journey, hid itself among the barren and jaundiced mountains of Judea. Suddenly, the Paschal moon, round and silent, appeared in the sky.... It was the 13th day of the month of Nissan, Thursday, the eve of the great feast...

Peter: Hey guys, now's the time! My mother-in-law, Rufa says that the Paschal lamb must be eaten between two lights, between the sun and moon, so we have good digestion. Hurry up, Nat! Let's go, Thomas!

John: Right! The women must be worrying a lot about us.

Philip: They must be desperate by now, and so's my stomach! C'mon, let's go!

James: Wait a minute... wait a minute...!

Peter: What's the matter, James?

James: Nothing, Peter, but... let's not all go at the same time. It's dangerous. The city is being watched.

Peter: Red is right. We'd better disperse. You, Jesus, cover yourself with a cloak and don't speak to anyone. They're giving 30 shekels for your head, you know that. You shouldn't trust anyone, even your shadow!... C'mon, let's go...!

The streets of Jerusalem were teeming with pilgrims in spite of the time. They were in search of a lodging place or an inn where they could have a drink or two... We walked in pairs or in threes, passed through the little huts of Ophel; we edged our way through the fountain of Siloam and took the Long Street, which ascends to the barrio of Zion, where Mark lived... Jesus and I walked together...

John: Hey, Moreno... there's something I'd like to tell you...

Jesus: Tell me, John...

John: Something odd's happening around here. It's about Judas... I dunno, but the Isacriot is not playing clean... Last Thursday, they saw him talking to Barabbas and the rest of the movement. They also saw him leaving the house of the chief guard of the Temple.

Jesus: How did you know this, John?

John: A friend of mine who works as a servant in the palace of Caiphas told me.

Jesus: Don't you trust Judas?

John: No.

Jesus: I don't either, John. But I'm not sure... I can't believe that the Iscariot could do us harm.

John: Neither can I, Jesus... but anything can happen...

Jesus: Are the rest aware of this?

John: I don't think so. Peter hasn't noticed anything. Neither has James.

Jesus: So, what do we do, John?

John: Listen to me, Moreno. Keep an eye on Judas. Don't let him out of your sight. If the Iscariot has something up his sleeve, he'll pay dearly!

In a short while, we came to Mark's house. The women had marked the door, in accordance with tradition, with the blood of the Paschal lamb.... We crossed the small patio that was full of barrels of oil and climbed the concrete stairs until we reached the upper story where we were to have our supper that night...

Mark: Well, well, the rascals are here, at last! You see, Mary, your son and the rest got here safe and sound!

Magdalene: And they'll leave this house safe and sound the moment they get their teeth into the poor lamb!

Mary: Jesus, son, do you think we're safe here...?

Jesus: Yes, mama, don't you worry. No one saw us come...

Mary: It's you who look worried, Jesus. I can see it in your eyes. I know you like the palm of my hand. You can't hide it from me, son...

Jesus: Be calm, mama. Nothing's going to happen...

Peter: C'mon, Mam Mary, put away your fears and be happy. We're celebrating a feast, mind you!

James: Yes sir, today is the Feast of the Passover which our fathers have been celebrating for seventy generations!... We ought to rejoice!

Magdalene: And set the table! C'mon lazybones, shake a leg and give us a hand!

My mother, Salome, and Magdalene lay several mats of braided straw over the wooden floor. Since it was already dark, Mark lit the seven wicks on the ritual candelabra and put it in the middle of the room. We helped the women bring the jugs of wine from the kitchen, the round cakes of unleavened bread, the earthen bowls of hot sauce and the large trays of salad with celery, watercress and other herbs seasoned with vinegar and salt...

Mark: Anything else, guys?

Jesus: The canes, Mark. Let everyone get their own cane. That's how our forefathers partook of the first Paschal dinner, hurriedly, because they were on their way to freedom. We'll do the same, for a short while.

We formed a circle around the mats. We took our canes and raised our right foot, as if we were about to undertake a long journey. The women held the arms of the men....

Mark: C'mon, Jesus, bless the food.

Jesus: No, Mark, you're the owner of the house, the head of the family.

Mark: There's no owner nor father here. Didn't you say we are all the same here?... Go ahead, bless the food...

Jesus: No man, it's your turn...

Philip: Well, well, you better decide, because I'm starved and I'm about to collapse on the floor...

Jesus blessed the food using words that our forefathers repeated for several generations, words taught him by Joseph, his father, when he was a little boy in Nazareth...

Jesus: Bless you Lord, our God, the king of the whole world, who gave Israel this feast that we may rejoice and remember!

All: Amen! Amen!

After the first psalm with which the Paschal supper started, we put our canes in one corner, took off our sandals and sat on the floor on top of the blankets, around the straw mats.... All thirteen of us were there, including the women and Mark's family, forming one intimate group. The small flames from the candleholder dancing by the night's breeze illumined our faces...

Mark: And now, our first toast, brothers and sisters! Let's fill our cups to the brim, the wine is on the house!... Let's raise our cups to freedom!... Long live Yahweh, the God of Israel!

All: Long live Yahweh, long live Yahweh!

James: Long live our forebears who fought against slavery and left in freedom on a night like this!

All: Long live our forebears!

Magdalene: And our grandmothers too, who also fought hard against the heartless pharaoh!

Mark: Let's have more wine and more toasts, but... we're forgetting something very important. Hey, will you move a little and leave a space for Elijah, who might arrive in our house!

According to tradition, the prophet from Carmel would come at night, during the Paschal supper, to announce the coming of the Messiah. That's why, the doors of our houses were left ajar on this day and a place was reserved in all tables of the children of Israel for Elijah, who would probably come. Though tired and hungry, he would come announcing the good news....

Philip: Let Elijah come when he wishes, but please, serve the lamb now, 'cuz at the rate we're going, I'll be growing cobwebs in my belly!

Mary and Susana descended the stairs and soon enough, they were back with a huge tray of newly roasted lamb...

Peter: Bless the Paschal lamb!

John: And the hands that cooked it!

Magdalene: You better look carefully, that no one says they got a broken bone in their lamb.

Peter: C'mon and get it, partners! Not even the hoofs should be spared!

Mark: Just a moment, hold it!... All hands off the plates. First, let's wash our hands, just as it is commanded of us.

Philip: Forget it for now, Mark and let's eat, 'cuz I'm hungry as hell...

Mark: No way, man. A day is a day. At least, once a year, this gang of dirty people should eat with clean hands, I say!

Philip: Fine, fine, let's go wash our hands... Let's see... hey women, where are the bowls of water?

Magdalene: You're not crippled, Philip... why don't you get them yourself?

Mary: You too, James, there you are sprawled out, while your mother goes up and down the stairs...

Jesus: I'll go get them, myself. Just wait....

It was Jesus who stood first to get the bowl of water from down in the kitchen. He came back with it and a towel...

Magdalene: C'mon Moreno, let me have that and go back to your place...

Jesus: No, Mary, let me help...

Mary: For God's sake, son, leave that to us... Susana and I will wash your hands.

Philip: Here, Mam Mary, wash our feet, more than our hands. Something stinks over here...!

John: And it comes from your side, Philip!

Then Jesus approached Philip, tied the towel around his waist and bent...

Jesus: C'mon, big head, stick out your dirty feet here....

Philip: But Jesus, it is only a joke...

When we saw Jesus washing Philip's feet, we began to laugh. Little by little, our laughter was changed to surprise... It was a job that was only performed by women or slaves...

Jesus: C'mon Peter, your feet don't smell like a rose, either!

Peter: Are you out of your mind, Moreno?... You'll wash my feet too?

Jesus: Sure, Peter. What's wrong with that?

Peter: Jesus, you're our leader. A leader ought to be respected.

Jesus: Oh, really?... Who said so, Peter?

Peter: ...I'm... I'm saying it, dammit! C'mon, get up from there and leave that bowl....

Jesus: No, here there's no leader nor master. No one is above the other. The one who wants to be first, must be last. So, give me your feet...

Peter: No, no, no. I said no.

Jesus: Fine, Peter. Therefore, I see you're not fit to serve in the Kingdom...

Peter: What did you say, Moreno?

Jesus: If you won't get into your head that we're all equal here, then you don't fit in our group. It's better for you to go.

Peter: Wwaa...wwait, Jesus. If that's the case... well, then, pour water on my head so I get it into my senses.

When Jesus had finished washing everybody's feet, we crowded one another, reaching for the food with our hands... Through the skylight of the small room entered the enchanting moonlight of Nissan....

Mark: Let's all enjoy our supper, partners!

We started to eat the lamb, dip the unleavened bread and the vegetables in the red sauce and raise our cups full of wine in the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Peter: What's the matter, Jesus. Aren't you hungry?

Jesus: Yes, I am, Peter. I'm also in a hurry. Believe me, my friends, how I wanted to eat this Paschal supper with all of you because... because this will be the last!

Jesus, his legs crossed over the mat, looked at all of us, one by one....

Jesus: I tell you... rejoice. This year, we're still slaves. Next year, we'll all be free!... Friends, before we get together again, like tonight, God's hand will have extended to us. Yes, today I'm sure of that. The Kingdom of God is at hand, and this time, it won't delay!...

Jesus took his cup of wine and raised it amid everyone...

Jesus: I drink to the Kingdom of God! Friends, up to this moment, we have sown with tears. Now we will reap with joy!

Jesus first took a drink, then passed his cup to us. Everyone drank a little from it. Then, he got up, took the empty cup with his hands and broke it on the floor...

Jesus: You are the witnesses: I'm not drinking any wine until the Kingdom of God has come, until the Lord changes our luck, just as the desert gets transformed with the rain, until the earth opens and justice takes root!

Mary: May God hear you, son!

A thousand and two hundred years back, on a night of haste and hope, the God of Israel changed the

fate of our people. That night, Yahweh stood watch, as He took our forebears from the land of Egypt. Our grandparents told the story to their grandchildren who passed it on to their children, from generation to generation, the Passover came to be the night watch for us in memory of Yahweh, the God of freedom....

After the incident in the Temple, and aware of a possible “faux pas” on the part of Judas, Jesus participated, with great tension, in the celebration of the Paschal supper. During those days he had been clandestinely living in Bethany. Jesus knew that the authorities had put a price on his head. This gave the supper its enormous drama. That celebration was loaded with prophetic implications. Considering the possibility of an impending end, while hoping against hope, that God, his father, would save him, Jesus celebrated his last supper of the Passover.

A wide Roman road ran through Jerusalem, connecting the barrio of Ophel where small houses of the poor were crowded together to the upper barrio, in the Mount of Zion, where houses were of better construction and many of the wealthy had their palaces. Among them was the palace of Annas and Caiphas. There is no historical certainty of the place where the last supper took place. But in order for Jesus to enter Jerusalem that afternoon, or to leave the city at night, once the supper was over, he probably would have passed through this street. Not only that day, but perhaps a dozen times during his various visits to the city. A stretch of this wide street is perfectly preserved up to the present time, with several wide steps near the place where tradition points to the venue of the last supper. This stretch is one of the few places in Jerusalem preserved exactly as in the time of Jesus.

During this epoch, the Jews counted daily time by making it coincide with the start of the day, not on midnight or at dawn, but with sunset. Or to put it more precisely, with the apparition in heaven of the first star. At this time, when the day started, the Paschal supper was already beginning. It lasted until late in the evening. There are extant writings where parents are enjoined to think of different ways of distraction to keep the children awake. Together with their elders, they were supposed to keep vigil that night, the most solemn during the year. To keep vigil on this occasion was an important gesture of religious fidelity (Ex 12:42).

Many engravings and paintings give us a picture of the last supper in a way that does not correspond very well to the customs of evangelical times. In the first place, Jesus is often depicted partaking of the meal with his twelve disciples only. It was the tradition in Israel for men and women to be together during that night. It was presumed that Jesus would be with the twelve disciples as well as with the women of the group: Salome, Susana, Magdalene, his mother, etc. Secondly, the images presented to us show the apostles and Jesus seated at a table, the way we ordinarily do nowadays. What is most probable is that those who took part in that supper took a reclining position on mats or cushions spread over the floor. In more ancient times, the Israelites ate in a squatting position. Later, the custom consisted in sitting at a table or sitting on the floor – when there was a big number. But on the night of the Passover, once seated, part of the ritual was to recline one’s self. This position was a symbol of freedom. “While slaves are accustomed to eat standing, it is necessary that on the feast of the Passover, we take a reclining position as we partake of the meal, to show that we have passed from slavery to freedom,” according to a ritual provision of the period. It was also specified that even “the poorest of Israel” ought to assume the same reclining position, because Israel was a nation of free people.

In this episode, before the supper of liberation commenced, Jesus and his companions stand on their feet – a sign of slavery in Egypt – with their canes in their hands and with their sandals on. It was reminiscent of the ritual norms contained in Exodus, for the Israelites when they left Pharaoh’s country that night (Ex 12:11). They were a symbol of the urgency of that night and the journey they were about to undertake, which would lead them through the desert, toward the Promised Land.

Wine was basic in the Paschal supper. Ordinarily in Palestine, wine was not part of the meal and even less so for the poor. On solemn occasions though, and especially during the Passover, the abundance of wine was essential. According to the ritual, a minimum of four cups of wine would be taken. One of the practices of that night was to await the coming of Elijah, the Messiah’s messenger. Every year, the people of Israel awaited on that night, the coming of the Messiah and His definitive revelation as the liberator of the people. Elijah, who in popular tradition was the precursor of the Messiah, had a place reserved in a

number of houses at the Paschal table. There is an old poem called “The Four Nights,” which was always rendered on the night of the Passover, and which dealt with the most important events of history: The creation of the world, the alliance with Abraham, the liberation of Egypt... Likewise the Messiah – and this the fourth instance – would come on a night like this.

In order to solemnize the Paschal food, one of the requirements was to purify the water before eating the lamb. Since people were wearing sandals, the feet easily got most dirty every day. Jesus’ friends were not of the “pious” type (Pharisees), obsessed with a thousand and one purifications. But that night, even the least religious tried to respect the custom. It was a way of rendering greater significance to what was being commemorated in the supper.

Certainly, the washing of the feet was a task delegated to the servants or slaves in houses where they served. Otherwise, it was assigned to women. On this night it was Jesus who performed the ritual. This gesture was spontaneous, totally natural, without solemnity or ceremony. He never intended to show humility. He was already humble. In the simplicity of the event, the disciples read his important message after the Passover: God was revealed to them as a servant, as a friend. This gesture is no less than a sign of what he lived all his life: To be with his people, “as one of them.”

In breaking the cup, Jesus manifested his vow not to drink again until he does so again in the Kingdom of God (Luke 22:16). It was a prophetic gesture that was very meaningful. Aware of the risk hanging over him, Jesus staked his hope in the Kingdom that was at hand, the coming of which he saw as imminent. He put his trust in God, because he also foresaw the time of “hardship.” In this instance, not drinking and fasting bore the meaning of “intercession.” With this vow, Jesus ardently asks for the coming of God’s Kingdom.

(Lk 22:14-18; Jn 13:1-17)

111

The New Alliance

Jerusalem stood watch. The lighted lamps in their houses were bathed by the light of the full moon. It was Thursday, the 13th month of Nissan. We were all seated around in a circle on straw mats covered with blankets when Judas of Iscariot, who had been very quiet during supper, made a motion to get up...

Judas: Hey, guys, since this is going to last long, I think we’ve got to buy more wine...

Mark: I don’t think it’s necessary, Judas. I still have half a jar filled with wine in the kitchen.

Judas: But it’s better to have more than to be short, isn’t that right?

Jesus: What’s wrong with you, Judas...?

Judas: Nothing, Jesus. What could be wrong with me...?

Judas was very tense. So was Jesus, although he tried to hide it. I already told him that Judas had been acting strangely these past few days... Anything could happen, so I hid the knife under my tunic and gripped the handle very tightly....

Jesus: Sit down, Judas... Do you want some more sauce? It’s very good...

Jesus dipped a piece of bread into the sauce and gave it to Judas....

Judas: Thanks, Moreno... Well, then, let me buy something else...

John: Damn you, Iscariot, you’re not going anywhere!

Judas: What’s the matter with you, John...? Let me go.

Jesus: Yes, John, let him go...

John: But Jesus...

Jesus: Let him go, John... Judas, you may go, but come back soon.

Judas opened the door, placed his striped blanket on his shoulders and slowly went down the stone stairs facing the patio. Jesus remained silent momentarily, staring blankly at the black frame of the door... It was already night.

Peter: What the hell is going on here? Speak clearly!

Mark: Hey, John, what's with you and Judas, huh? Why didn't you want him to leave? What's going on here?...

Matthew: Speak out once and for all, dammit... What is it you want, to be choked by the lamb?

I sat down again on the floor, looking at Jesus, not daring to utter a word...

Andrew: What's wrong, Moreno? Speak up, man...

Jesus raised his eyes from the plate. He looked at us with sadness, with worry...

Jesus: When the wolf comes, each sheep goes its own way. Friends, things have become so difficult, more difficult than ever...

Jesus remained silent for a while. His wide forehead was marked with wrinkles and he was perspiring... We were all restless. Magdalene began to sob, drawing herself close to Mary...

Peter: Damn, why are you saying this now, Jesus?

Jesus: Because anyone of us could falter.

Andrew: Are you saying that because of Judas?

Jesus: No, it's for everyone...

Andrew: Not for me, Moreno!... No, no, don't look at me that way...

Matthew: Not for me, either... I think. I'm a coward, that's right, but I... I...

Peter: Speak loud and clear, dammit! Fine, fine, anyone may falter... and let each be held responsible for himself! As for me, I would stick around, even if everybody abandoned you right now! I swear by my wife Rufina and all my children.

Jesus: Don't swear, Peter.

Peter: I swear, because that's the truth, I tell you! I'm not called Simon for nothing!

Jesus: No, Peter, you too, may falter, like anyone else. Don't fill your mouth with too many promises... Yes, you... If tonight things didn't turn out fine, you would have denied you knew us, even before the cock crowed...

Peter: Damn you, Moreno! That means you don't know me yet! They'll have to kill me first before I fail you! This I swear! I can bet my life on it... and you are all my witnesses!

John: Jesus, don't be a kill-joy, man. Of course, things are going bad, but rest assured that no one here's gonna back out.

Magdalene: I agree with John!... Gosh, Jesus, don't look so sullen, our salad is bitter enough...

I will never forget that moment. Jesus, his legs crossed on the mat, looked at us, one by one, and when he started to talk, we felt his words coming from deep within his heart...

Jesus: Guys, I want to thank you for everything that we have had together during all this time... The road has been very short, but difficult. We have been united up to this point... You've been my friends, you've been by my side through thick and thin... Indeed, I have loved you with all my soul...

Jesus lay his hands on his knees. His eyes welled with tears...

Jesus: We've got to continue being united, until the end, come what may...

Mary: Jesus, son, why do you talk that way? What's going to happen?

Jesus: We dunno, mama. But whatever happens, we must all be one and act as one... Once in the group, you're part of the group.

Then Jesus, with his big and calloused hands, took one of the pieces of bread on the mat.

Jesus: Stay close to each other, like the grains of wheat that formed this bread... Like the seeds that were sown on the hills and the mountains and were gathered to form this dough... We must be one, like these grains that were gathered together....

Jesus looked at the brown and crispy bread kneaded by his mother, the unleavened bread of the great feast of the Passover...

Jesus: My friends, our fathers ate the bread of affliction in Egypt. On a night like this, they also felt anguish and fear, and gathered hurriedly for dinner, awaiting the passage of God through that land of slavery and misery.... God passed through, and the bread became the bread of freedom for them... For several months, we have announced the good news that God is on our side, that He has chosen us, the poor of this world, who have kneaded this bread with sweat and tears, to inherit the Kingdom... For many months, we have struggled, so that things might change, so that the bread would reach us... This may be our last supper together.... That's all right, it doesn't matter.... I leave my fate in God's hands and my life in this bread!... When you are gathered together to share this bread, do it in memory of me.... And when you do, I shall always be with you....

Jesus broke the piece of unleavened bread into several pieces and all of us ate a piece.... Then he filled the cup before him with wine, red and fresh... reflecting the lights of the small lamps....

Jesus: How can we repay the Lord for all the good that He has done for us?... Let us raise this cup of freedom and rejoice in God's name!... My friends, when God took our fathers from the bondage of Egypt, He took them to Mount Sinai and there, made an alliance with them. A blood compact. Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of animals... Now, there is no more need for the blood of any animal.... This wine is taken from the juice of grapes pressed and squeezed from the winepress.... It is the blood of all the innocent who have died, their eyes turned to heaven, not knowing why they died.... It is the blood of all those who have fallen in their struggle for their brothers' freedom... I, too, pour my blood into this wine, and with this, God makes a new alliance to free the people from all forms of bondage...

Jesus handed me the cup, filled to the brim, which I passed on to Peter, then to Mary... Everyone took a gulp of the strong, sweet wine....

Jesus: Yes, it's true, I will always be with you and you with me, as we are tonight, partaking of the same bread and drinking from the same cup. We have to love one another, and be willing to risk our life for others... Nobody has love greater than one who gives his life for his people... Yes, we must be ready to have our bodies torn into pieces, like this bread is broken; and likewise, have our blood shed just like this wine. Today, we celebrate the feast of the liberation of our people. We cannot lose hope in God... One day we, too, shall obtain our freedom...

Mary: Oh, my son, you seemed to be giving a farewell talk....

Jesus: Mama, I've already told you that things aren't going well...

John: For God's sake, Jesus, will you go straight to the point and tell us, once and for all!

Peter: There you go again!... But, what's really going on, man?

All eyes were fixed on Jesus....

Jesus: Guys, there's been a betrayal.

Peter: What? Whom are you talking about? About Judas, I guess?

John: Right. We were already suspicious of him. The Iscariot has been acting strange these days.... Haven't you got eyes to see?

Peter: Where did he go, dammit? Where?

Jesus: We dunno, Peter. We dunno what his plans are...

Matthew: It could've been me... knowing all my connections with the people up there... But, why Judas?

We all turned to Matthew, the tax collector. His brilliant eyes seemed to be begging our forgiveness for a betrayal he had always committed whenever he stretched his hand, much more than any one of us...

Mark: Now it doesn't matter why he did it. What matters now is that we get out of this house immediately.

Peter: That's right. If Judas has gone to squeal on us, then they'll be here any time...

Mark: Let's go upstairs, there's no time to lose!...

Andrew: To hell with you, Moreno, why didn't you tell us beforehand! They may have been following us already!

Mark: Hurry, get your cloaks and let's go!

Mary: But, where... where are you going?

Magdalene: Oh, Holy God, protect us!

Mark: The women will stay. No one is going to touch you. You'll be safer here... We'll go to the mountain, to that garden I have by the Cedron! There we can hide in the caves.

Peter: Good idea, Mark.

Mark: Say no more. We can't spend the night here.... Listen, tomorrow, before dawn, you're all going to Galilee. I'll see to it that you get out of the city. You can't stay in Jerusalem any longer, not one day more....

Magdalene: Right, to Galilee! This city is damned from all sides!

Jesus: I'm not going back to Galilee. We still have a lot to do in Jerusalem.

Andrew: C'mon, Moreno, don't be a fool!

Mark: Jesus, they'll grab you, once you stick out your head and if Judas has spilled the beans, then they won't stop until they find you...

Mary: My God, how could he have done such a thing?

Mark: Stop thinking about him, Mary. Whatever it is, we've got to get out of here. C'mon, let's go!

John: Peter, take these two swords with you. Anything can happen, you know.

Peter: Damn you, Judas! I could tear you to pieces!

Mark: We'll take the shortest way... Take it easy, women, nothing's gonna happen to you.... And don't you ever tell anyone where we are! Not even the angels from heaven!... C'mon, guys!... And let's disperse, we're not going in groups! Hurry!

We left hurriedly, without looking back, like our fathers had done the night the Lord passed by Egypt, with his strong hands and extended arms, to take them from the pharaoh's bondage.

The moment Judas left the place where they were gathered, Jesus felt an even greater tension during that Paschal supper. When he spoke of "betrayal," the horizon began to close shut. His faith in the liberating God would, from that moment, be more arduous, more painful and more dramatic for him. It is within this framework that a new alliance would be initiated, some new ties for the community of those who would continue the plan that he had barely started.

It was the custom during the Paschal supper for whoever presided over the celebration – the head of the family, or the mother or the eldest in the group – to observe the practice of explaining the ritual step by step to the rest. It was a custom faithfully observed by everyone. The youngest of the group kept on asking the eldest the symbolic meaning of prayers, the lamb, the bread... Jesus' words during this occasion, giving the bread and wine a very special meaning, fitted well into this custom. Jesus' action was not isolated from the ceremony. It was completely in consonance with the traditions of the supper that whoever presided over it should explain the meaning of the bread and the wine they were partaking of that night.

Typical of the Israelite mentality, as in other oriental people's mentality, is the belief that eating together unites the people dining together. Being together at such a time has a serious and profound

meaning: it joins one and the other, a sign of communion that remains beyond dinnertime. It is within this environment that Jesus and his friends were brought up. Once the bread was blessed to start the meal, by whoever presided over the table – in this case, Jesus – the community was formed and remained constituted. On the other hand, it was customary in all similar occasions, that whoever presided – generally the head of the family – should break the bread and give a piece to each of the members of the family. The same could be said of the wine. It was common to use one common cup, passed from one hand to another during supper and from which everyone drank. These gestures were not special nor “mysterious.” They were common practices and all who dined with Jesus that night had experienced it since childhood. It was furthermore understood that by partaking of the bread and wine everybody shared in the blessing given before distributing the food.

Jesus broke the bread, distributed it among the group and did the same with the cup of wine. In the “broken” bread, Jesus gave a sign of a life shared to the extreme, until the very end, until death if necessary. In the red wine, Jesus offers a sign of the blood shed for others, given generously to fertilize the earth for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The Eucharist, celebrated to the present by Christians, repeats the gestures and signs made by Jesus on that Paschal night, and should be understood in the same light. It is about a table communion which becomes the communion of life. We cannot confine communion to the eating of the Bread and the drinking of the Wine. Communion must happen in life. One must remember that the first Christians did not understand their Eucharistic celebrations as a mere formal repetition of what Jesus did on Maundy Thursday only, but also as a continuation of their community life with him, as living through a time of food shared together, with all the profound significance it had for them.

Of the texts that have come to us regarding the last supper and the words pronounced by Jesus that night, which the Christian Church celebrates in memory of the Eucharist, the most ancient of these texts is not found in gospels. It is what Paul has in his first Letter to the Corinthians (11:23-25). It is here where Paul speaks of a “new alliance.” A central moment in the history of Israel was when Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of heifers sacrificed on Mount Sinai and consecrated the Israelites as people of God (Ex 24:1-8). Jesus, when he offered his life, started a new alliance between God and people. An alliance, because the life of Christians is a commitment, a handing over. New, because with Jesus all ancient religious forms have been surpassed.

In explaining the meaning of the bread and wine, as was customary during the Paschal meal, Jesus “offers” his life for others. In Jesus’ time, it was already understood that the death of an innocent – a boy, a woman, victim of injustice – had a “value” as ransom for the people. These deaths were a cry before God. A cry of intercession for the community. This idea appears in the Book of the Maccabees, written about a hundred fifty years before Christ. In the mind of the faithful followers, it was understood that the death of a just person drew God’s finger closer to history, bringing it a liberating fecundity and the pardon of sins of people. Jesus knew he was the prophet, the messenger of the Kingdom of God; at the same time, he had this clear premonition that his life would end in a violent manner. When he was reflecting on the meaning of his death, he responded with the current ideas of the world he lived in. In the words of the prophet Isaiah (Is 53:1-12) about success and failure, humiliation and reward, pain and hope, Jesus found light in the midst of that night of uncertainty where his heart fervently turned to God from whom he expected everything.

(Mt 26:26-35; Mk 14:22-31; Lk 22:19-23 and 31-38; Jn 13:21-38; 15:4-15)

112

In the Garden of Gethsemane

That night of Thursday, the 13th of Nissan, Jesus' mother and the women remained in Mark's house, with the windows shut. Our Paschal supper was finished in a hurry. There were still some pieces of lamb left on the plates and on the straw mats. The cups still glowed with the wine we were unable to drink... When we learned of what Judas did, we hurriedly left the place, hiding ourselves in the shadows....

Andrew: Do you think these bandits will recognize us...? Hik...!

Peter: Hell! You're drunk...

John: Well, look at Thomas...

Peter: Silence them, James!... They're risking our lives!

Mark: Don't run, guys!... Disperse!... Stay close to the walls!

The streets were dark. Mark, who was walking in front with Jesus and Peter, was showing us the best way, so as not to arouse suspicion. We were leaving the barrio of Zion behind... The houses where the Galileans lived were still lighted and the Paschal songs could still be heard in the streets... We left Jerusalem through the gate of the Valley, edging our way through the walls toward the Cedron river... Not even a cloud could be seen above. The full moon, motionless, watched over the night in the middle of the sky...

Nathanael: Do you think they're following us, Philip?... I'm scared.

Philip: So am I, Nat. I don't think we're gonna make it.

Nathanael: According to Jesus, it is at this moment that God will stick out his hand for us...

Philip: God or the soldiers, whoever comes first...

With cautious steps we crossed the small bridge over the Cedron... The garden of Gethsemane was almost at the foot of the slope of the Mount of Olives, where Mark had a piece of land which he inherited from his grandparents... Among those old and twisted trees, we would spend the Paschal night in hiding, sheltered in some caves....

Mark: Guys, I think we'll be safe here... Before the cock crows, we can head towards the north...

Jesus: I've said it, Mark, I'm not going back to Galilee.

John: Well, if you stay, Jesus, so do I...

Peter: C'mon, John, don't be silly...

John: Go to hell, delinquent, I think we have to....

Mark: Stop it. Now is not the time to argue. Look, Moreno, you still have a few hours to decide....

John: Okay, I'll stay here as watchman. I've got a sword. Who's gonna join me?... How about you, Peter?

Peter: Sure, John. I've got the other sword with me. You, James, stay and watch too.

Mark: Okay, the three of you, as sentinels... I don't think something's gonna happen, but just in case... The rest may get some sleep over there, among the rocks, just be alert, will you?

Andrew: No, no, no... I'm not going to sleep without you first telling me where the hell has Judas gone... I want to know right now...!

Peter: Hell, skinny!... Will you shut up and go to sleep... it might sober you up!... Dammit, where could that Iscariot be?... That's what everybody wants to know...

At this time, Judas was in a rambling hut in barrio Ophel, and talking with one of the zealot leaders...

Zealot: What're you waiting for, man? Barabbas is already in action, organizing the assault for tomorrow. Now it's your turn. Go to the Sanhedrin and do your act. You've got to start there. The rest will follow.

Judas: I hate doing this.

Zealot: We know. You've said it seventy times and we believe you, man. It's the price you've got to pay to help start the uprising. Each one has a role to play. Tomorrow, you'll see, when Jerusalem awakes and finds out about the arrest of the Nazarene... That will be a grand day! We won't stop until we have driven the Romans away from here...

Judas: In the meantime, in the eyes of everyone, I'm a traitor...

Zealot: Traitor?... The moment we are free, everyone will be grateful for what you have done. C'mon, Judas, go and see the chief guard of the Temple and tell them they're in the house of this Mark...

Peter, James and I acted as guards with our swords unsheathed. The night was cool.... Close to us, hidden among the rocks, were the rest who were able to steal some sleep. Wrapped up in their cloaks, they were even snoring. Without his tunic but wrapped up in an old sheet, Mark slept beside a little hut which housed the oil press... Jesus was seated on a rock, cupping his head with his hands... He did not want to sleep... The crickets were the only voices heard during the night....

Jesus: Why would Judas do such a thing?... I don't understand... I just don't get it.... We've been together for so long... Since that day we met in Nazareth... We've been working for many months, proclaiming the Kingdom of God... and now this!... What could've happened, Judas?... What wrong have I done to you? ... Were you betrayed by our group?... We trusted you... why didn't you trust us?... Why did you fail us, buddy? Why did I let you leave Mark's house? Why didn't I intervene?... Why did I allow you to squeal on us?... Oh damn! Why?!...

Commandant: Come in, friend. We've been waiting for you. You said, tonight....

Judas: I kept my word. I know where he is.

Commandant: Is he alone?

Judas: With a handful of friends.

Commandant: Are they armed?

Judas: Just a couple of old swords.

Commandant: What's your signal to my men, so that they won't make a mistake?

Judas: I'll go near him and greet him with a kiss.

Commandant: Okay. Then, as per our agreement. When the Nazarene is in our hands, you get your remaining 30 shekels. But if this is a hoax, then, prepare your head, parrot.

Judas: I'm not lying. Let's go.

Commandant: After you, Iscariot. Hey, guards, ready!...

So, Judas of Iscariot left the patio of Caiphaz's palace beside the chief guard of the Temple. They were followed by a group of soldiers armed with swords and clubs. The torches illuminated the already deserted streets of the barrio of Zion... There in Gethsemane, James, Peter and I were reclining on the trunk of an old olive tree. The air smelled of humid earth during the night... Jesus came to us with a scared look in his eyes...

Jesus: Don't you hear that noise...?

John: Ahummm... What noise, Moreno?

Jesus: They seem like footsteps... coming from there...

Peter: It's probably a vixen in search of her den. Don't worry, man, we're safer in this garden than being under the wings of cherubims!

John: Are you all right, Jesus?... You look pale. Come, get some sleep. We'll watch over you...

Jesus: I'm scared, John. I feel anguish... as if a hand was trying to choke me and I couldn't breathe....

Peter: Come, Moreno, sit down and let's talk. This will take away your fear.

Jesus sat in a squatting position beside us... He looked at us with sadness, like he was asking for help, I dunno.... As for the three of us, our eyes were already getting heavy with sleep.

Jesus: Remember that night in the north, in Caesarea? It was a night like this... I was scared... I felt I couldn't handle the burden.... You encouraged me a lot... You promised you wouldn't leave me.... that we would fight together, always as a group.... Indeed my friends, you encouraged me a lot... Tonight I need... I dunno... I need to be assured that everything is worth the effort... that it's worth continuing the struggle...

John: Jesus, that night you told us that... that....

James, Peter and I had fallen asleep. The Moreno's words drifted from us in the dark and vanished in the heaviness of our sleep.... Then Jesus moved away from us about a stone's throw away and sat on a rock. Beyond the Cedron, Jerusalem was radiant with the moonlight and was completely white....

Jesus: What a bad time to have gotten into this mess. I should have stayed in Nazareth... I should have lived life in my own way... with my own house... some children... a wife... like anyone else... I could have had a daily job... the simple joy of each day... My mother would have been very happy taking care of her grandchildren... It was the wrong time to go to the Jordan and meet John the prophet, and be baptized by him...! No, it wasn't John... it was you, Lord... you are behind all this... you pushed me into this... you got hold of me, and you were stronger... You lured me into this... and I allowed myself to be lured... You have put words, burning like ember, into my mouth... I wanted to put them off, but I couldn't... they seeped into my whole being like fire, even burning my bones... I grabbed the plow into my hand at the wrong time!... Now it's too late to turn back... No, I still have time. I've got to flee, get away from here... Peter and the rest are setting out for Galilee tomorrow.... Yeah, that'll be better... I'll go with them too.... Why should I stay, anyway?... I'll go back to the north and hide myself in the village... or in the mountain, or under the rocks, if necessary... I want them to forget about me and I'll forget every-thing that has happened... Oh yes, that's what I'm going to do...!

During this time, Judas who was leading the guards, arrived at Mark's house...

Judas: Dammit, they're not here! Where the hell have they gone?

Mary: Judas, Judas, wait, don't go away...! Judas!

In the street...

Judas: Which way did they go, old woman...?

Old Woman: That way, son, toward the Cedron, but I...

Judas: Hey, soldiers, this way, come over here!

The bent olive trees cast their shadows over the ground. In the east, a few clouds rapidly crossed the sky, suddenly concealing the creamy moonlight. Darkness veiled the whole garden, the old oil press and the sleeping bodies... From afar, the shrieking sounds of the nocturnal birds served as a warning during the night.... It was not cold, but Jesus started to tremble... He stood up from the rock where he was seated and once again came toward us... Deep in my sleep, I felt his halting steps...

Jesus: Peter!... John!...

Our eyes opened... only to close again.... We were totally exhausted... Jesus moved away and disappeared among the olive trees...

Jesus: Father! If my time has come, give me strength... give me the courage not to respond to their violence with violence.... If they put me on trial, give me the right words to accuse them in court.... If they torture me, silence me so as not to give my companions away.... They want to kill me, Father.... but I don't wish to die.... Not yet! Not yet! I don't want to die, I don't want to die...!! Give me time, Lord!... I need time to finish the job!... I still have to open the eyes of the people... to announce the good news to the poor... Our group has barely started to move... no, no, I cannot fail now, I can't... Father, they want to silence us, to drown the voice of those who clamor for justice.... Let your will be done, not theirs! Let not the powerful and the blood-thirsty win, but you, the God of the poor, our Protector!... Stretch out your hand, Father! Help us, the humble of this world, always defeated... if not, strike me from your book!... Yes, I know that if the grain of wheat does not fall into the soil and die, it doesn't give any fruit... I myself said it and the spirit understood... but when the time comes, the flesh trembles... I'm scared, Father... I'm scared... At least, give me a sign.... Yes, a sign, a proof that you have not deceived me, that this struggle has not been in vain.... You gave Gideon a sign before leaving for battle... You showed Jeremiah a branch

of an almond tree.... Look at that branch, Lord, the branch of that tree... if that olive tree could bloom and yield a white flower immediately as a sign of peace... Answer me, Lord!... Why do you remain silent?... Am I asking too much? You asked more from me!... You asked me to leave my land and my parents... I spoke for your sake, I was angry for your sake at the powerful of this world and I shouted in the plaza and in the streets and I did not sit with liars to eat with them.... I am left alone because of you... I have lost everything, thinking about you... Can't you at least give me a sign?... Not even that?... Speak up and answer me!! Or is everything a mirage, like the mirage in the desert...?

Jesus bent and put his face to the ground, and desperately scratched the stones with his hands and nails.... At that same moment, Judas of Iscariot, followed by a troop of soldiers, crossed the Cedron. The soldiers penetrated the dark and took their position along the slope of the Mount of Olives....

In order to get to the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus and his disciples crossed the Cedron Torrent. The Cedron is a depression or a narrow valley surrounding Jerusalem on the eastern side. It is formed by several streams. Usually it was dry and water flowed through it only during winter. The lands near the Cedron were particularly fertile since within this torrent flowed the blood of the victims sacrificed in the Temple. The outlet for the blood started by the side of the altar and flowed through the Cedron underground. The animal blood was good fertilizer for the soil.

Gethsemane was a garden composed of several gardens extending through the fertile slopes of the Mount of Olives, separated from Jerusalem by the Cedron. In Aramaic, Gethsemane means "oil press," probably because of the presence in this area of olive presses for the trees growing on the mountain. At present, a big church is constructed at the foot of this Mount, in memory of the place where Jesus prayed. In the center of the temple is preserved the so-called "rock of agony," in traditional veneration of the place where Jesus was supposed to have prayed that night. In the church's garden one can still find several millenarian olive trees, which could be offspring of those which grew on the Mount during Jesus' time. From the seed of the fruit of these very old trees, religious souvenirs for tourists, especially as rosaries, are made.

In Gethsemane, sensing an imminent violent death, Jesus experienced a variety of contradictory feelings. It was a decisive moment involving Jesus' commitment of faith. He had never felt so vulnerable and never would his faithfulness be more painfully strengthened. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks to us of the tears he shed as he begged his Father to save him from death (Heb 5:5-10).

In his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus' will to live does not contest the will of God regarding his death. Otherwise, the God described to us by Jesus would be only an executioner who could be appeased only by the blood of his son, in addition to playing accomplice to the powerful of this world. A monstrous image of God. It is impossible to see in this god the "Abba," the "papa" of Jesus. God did not kill his Son, nor send him to die. God did not wish this death. If we accepted these fallacies, then the real assassins would be excused from their guilt. No, God is the God of life and the living. God never desires death. To a certain point, he will oppose this death of Jesus whom he will resurrect.

The will that Jesus wishes to accept is the will of God. Neither does he ask his Father to enable him to overcome the weakness he feels at that moment, but to strengthen his fragile will as a man who was afraid, who was losing hope and getting desperate.

All prophets experience these feelings in their lives, and they turn to God. Jesus' prayer in this episode captures the distressful words of the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 15:15-18 and 20:7-9) and Moses' clamor, when he spoke with God face to face, claiming from him the liberation of Israel (Ex 32:32; Num 11:11-15). These are the prayers of the prophet, a bridge between his brothers and sisters for whom he feels responsible, and God, for whom he knows he has accepted the role of messenger.

(Mt 26:36-44; Mk 14:32-40; Lk 22:39-46)

113

Like a Thief

It was dawn of Friday, the 14th of Nissan. Jerusalem was sleeping, reeking of lamb's blood and drunk with wine and the holidays. We were also asleep, sprawled among the olive trees of Gethsemane, dreaming of going back to Galilee as soon as possible, where we could hide ourselves in our own province.... Only Jesus remained awake. His head bowed down and buried in his calloused hands, he saw the hours pass and he prayed...

Jesus: Let not their will but yours be done, Father... Not their will... but yours.... Let not the powerful win, but you, the God of the poor...

Then a voice, most familiar to us, resounded in the middle of the night...

Judas: Jesus!... Jesus! Are you there?!... Jesus!...

Jesus suddenly stood up and went toward us...

Jesus: Wake up!... Do you hear that?... People are coming... Peter!... John!...

Peter: What's the matter... what?

Jesus: Psst!... Quiet...

Jesus was in front of me, he was very pale, and his eyes were glowing with fear...

Judas: Jesus!!... Where are you?

Peter: Dammit, John, that's Judas' voice!... What does the Iscariot want...?

John: Psst!... Quiet and be ready.... Inform the others....

Peter called Philip who woke Nathanael up. Thomas and Andrew soon followed, despite too much wine during supper... Each one shook his companion beside him and in a few seconds the eleven of us plus Jesus were all wide awake and crouching among the rocks of the garden....

Judas: Jesus!... Hey, what's the matter, where are all of you?!...

Judas' voice was getting closer and closer.... James and Simon had their hands held fast on the knives they were hiding inside their robes. Peter and I quietly unsheathed the swords we brought along from Mark's house... We held our breath and waited....

Judas: Jesus!... This is Judas.... I've got to tell you something... Where are you?

Judas was talking in the dark. Suddenly, a few olive branches moved and the Iscariot came out into a small clearing, just a little distance away from where we were hiding. His figure, tall and strong, with the usual scarf tied around his neck, stood out amid that great mass of light from the moon....

Judas: Jesus!... Are you there?... Come out for a while! I need to talk to you...

Jesus, who was beside me, took a deep breath, as if mustering enough strength before undertaking a long and difficult task....

Jesus: I'm coming out, John...

John: What? Are you crazy? That's a trap, Moreno, I'm sure...

Jesus: It doesn't matter, John. I'm coming out.

John: No, don't do it....

But Jesus freed himself from us and slowly walked toward the open space where Judas was....

Judas: At last you show yourself... I imagined you were here... so I came to look for you....

Face to face with one another, Judas and Jesus, remained in silence momentarily... The Paschal moon, round and aglow, watched over the night like the eye of a sentinel.... Jesus moved a little closer...

Jesus: Judas, why did you fail us?

Judas: Everything will be all right, Jesus. I can't explain it now, but things will turn out fine. Trust me, Moreno.

Judas advanced toward Jesus and kissed him. That was the signal agreed upon with the commandant of the Temple guards... Suddenly, two soldiers appeared from among the bushes, carrying ropes and chains...

A Soldier: You are the so-called Jesus, aren't you?

Jesus: Yes, I am. What's wrong?

Soldier: You're under arrest.

Jesus: For what reason, may I know?

Soldier: We've got orders from our superiors. Come with us.

The soldiers approached Jesus and they began tying up his hands....

Peter: Dammit, John, shall we just stay here and do nothing...?

Peter held his sword firmly, gritted his teeth and like an arrow, hurled himself at the soldiers to attack...

It was a matter of seconds. Peter flung the steel object at the head of one of the soldiers, who parried the attack, but injured one of his ears. James and I attacked the other soldier, pushing him to the ground placing the knife at his throat. Seeing this, the rest came out of their hiding place to assist us...

All: Good work, Peter!... Very good!...

Commandant: Everybody, freeze!... You're all surrounded!

The commandant's order made us all still. We had fallen into a trap... Then we saw coming out from the shadows a number of soldiers armed with swords and clubs... Some of them lighted their torches to see us better... The troop was closing a circle around us...

Commandant: I told you to freeze!

Peter: And you too! One false move and this guard is dead!

James: And this one too!

Peter held one of the soldiers, blood flowing from his ear. Peter's sword was pressed deeply into where the soldier's kidneys were... James and I held the other soldier on the ground face up, but with the knife's edge pressed against him.

Peter: Don't come close!... Jesus, run, escape through the back of the hut! To hell with you, Moreno, I told you run! Go away! We'll hold them back until you're gone...!

Jesus: But what are you saying, Peter? How can I go, leaving you here?

Peter: It's you they're after, Moreno. Don't you understand?

Jesus: They're after all of us, Peter. And somebody has to face them. C'mon, hurry, put back your swords and go away. Now we must gain some time.

Peter: What about you, Jesus? How...?

Jesus: Don't worry about me, Peter. God will help me get out of this. Go away now and try to do something.... Go on, beat it!

Jesus retrieved the sword from Peter's hands and threw it farther away, on the ground. The bloodied

steel glowed by the moonlight....

Jesus: Now, who is it you're looking for?

Commandant: We're looking for this man called Jesus of Nazareth. I've got a warrant of arrest for him.

Jesus: I am Jesus of Nazareth. I'm not armed. I won't resist arrest....

Jesus walked toward the chief guard his hands over his head.... Then he stopped.

Jesus: If you are after me, then please let the others go. They've got nothing to do with this. Peter, James, John... leave this place right away.... We'll see each other later.

Peter: But, Moreno...

Jesus: Go, I'm telling you! Inform my mother and the women. Peter, please, talk to Judas and find out what happened.

Judas was no longer in the garden. He disappeared among the olive trees. We left hurriedly through the back of the little hut where Mark kept his oil press... Jesus was left alone before the soldiers...

Jesus: You came looking for me with swords and clubs, like you were looking for a thief. You're all wrong. The thieves are your bosses. They work in the dark because they are afraid of the light.

Commandant: Hurry up! Tie him and let's keep on moving!

They tied his hands behind his back, and with another rope tied around his waist, they dragged him....

Commandant: Mission accomplished. Move on, men!... To the palace of Caiphas!

They dragged Jesus up the foot of the mountain.... Mark, Peter's friend, who had seen everything from his little hut where he was sleeping, followed the soldiers. He wore nothing but a sheet...

Soldier: Hey, man, what's the matter with you?!

Commandant: He looks suspicious! Get him!

Terrified, Mark threw away the sheet and began to run naked through the olive trees...

Andrew: Mary!... Mary!

Mary: My God, man, what's wrong?!... What happened?

Andrew: They grabbed him, Mary.

Mary: Whom?

Andrew: Jesus. They arrested him.

Mary: Oh no, oh, my son!... That can't be... oh, no!

Magdalene: Damn, what's happened? Speak up!

James: Now easy, easy.

Andrew: Only one should speak. Tell them, James.

James: They took us by surprise in the garden. It was a trap. Judas squealed.

Magdalene: Of course, he came here first... Oh, Iscariot, wait till I get hold of you...!

James: A troop of soldiers came, surrounded us, and arrested Jesus.

Magdalene: And you were all so terrified, you didn't even defend him!

Andrew: We did, Magdalene! Peter even had cut off the ear of a guard, but...

Magdalene: Ear or no ear! You're all a bunch of cowards! Now, where's Jesus? Where did they take him? Tell me where, so I can go and tear out the eyes of the whole army, if need be. Should they touch even a strand of hair of the Moreno, they will have to deal with me! I swear by the bones of my mother, these scoundrels will not hear the end of it! And you, gang of cowards, worthless bunch, and then you will say that women... if only I had been there...!

James: Shut up, Magdalene!... It was Jesus who didn't want to flee.

Andrew: That's right. We did what we could, but...

Mary: Oh, James, my son. What will they do to him? Tell me.

James: Nothing, Mary. They simply want to terrify us. I'm sure they'll set him free after the holidays....

Andrew: Jesus will know how to defend himself before the tribunal.

Magdalene: I'll blow my nose on their faces! In this country, the judges are just like my colleagues in the business: they want money and nothing else.

James: It's up to you, Magdalene, but these days, they can't do anything to him. There are a lot of people in Jerusalem. If they lay a hand on Jesus, the entire city will all rise in protest!

Magdalene: They already did, and you "his trusted men," came out running like scared chickens! Damn, where did they bring him? That's what I want to know now!

Andrew: Maybe he was brought to Caiphas.

Magdalene: My goodness, what are we all doing here? Let's go...

While the women and the other groups ran through the dark, small and solitary streets of Jerusalem toward the palace of the High Priest, Peter and I, after going back and forth several times, and having talked to the servant of the palace who was a friend of mine, met Judas in one of the huts of the barrio of Ophel...

Peter: Damn you, Iscariot, we wanted to grab you!

Judas: Men, what's all the matter with you, huh? Haven't you understood yet?

John: Yeah, we realize what a treacherous dog you are.

Judas: I promised not to say this before, but now I can. Everything was planned by the movement, do you understand? If they take Jesus as prisoner, people will take to the streets! Barabbas is organizing the uprising. In a few hours, Jerusalem will turn into a nest in turmoil. We'll free Jesus! And Israel too!

John: Do you know what you're talking about, Judas?

Judas: Everything is all set. Barabbas and the men from Perea are going to assault the arsenal of....

John: Fool!

Judas: Yes, John, it's true. I know I should have told you before, but....

John: Fool! Barabbas is also a prisoner.

Judas: What did you say?

John: They made a round up of these people and they caught him, Dismas and several men from the movement. Everything is under their control. No one can do anything, Judas. No one.

Judas: That's a lie... that's a lie... it can't be...

John: That's right, Judas. A friend of mine working for Caiphas has just told me.

Judas: No! That can't be... that can't be... nooooo!!

And Judas of Iscariot fell down on the earthen floor of the little hut, weeping and beating his face with his fists....

From the garden of Gethsemane to Calvary, Jesus would be confronted not with the fatality of his destiny, but with a series of painful circumstances before which we would see the quality of his life and his commitment. In each moment, Jesus tries to discover, step by step, the meaning of every event in order to be faithful to God and to his mission. There is no moment in his passion that Jesus ceased deciding, selecting his words and his acts. He was free. His passion brings out his courage and his rectitude.

The Levites (clergy of rank inferior to the priests) performed different functions in the temple. Among them was that of policing. These were the troops who brought Jesus when he went to Gethsemane. These Levite-police made the rounds in the temple to assure that no one went beyond the place assigned them. At night, they went on guard in 21 locations around the gates and the esplanade. This police force was under the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin (priestly aristocracy) who could assign them to special missions – like arresting Jesus. As a matter of fact, all security services of the province of Judea fell under the authorities of Jerusalem and this police force. A commandant or a senior officer headed the police troops of the Temple.

In the garden, Jesus' disciples displayed armed resistance so that Jesus would not be arrested. They

left the house where they celebrated supper, armed with a pair of swords and the gospel has it on record that Peter wounded one of the soldiers. Certainly, many of the disciples have zealot origins, and in all probability, possessed some weapons. Jesus did not encourage them in this line. In Gethsemane, he opted not to use violence. It should not be interpreted simplistically that the disciples fled out of cowardice. They tried to gain time, to grasp the meaning of what was happening, to look for a solution, to seek help. It had to be a tremendously disconcerting moment for Jesus and his group.

(Mt 26:45-56; Mk 14:41-52; Lk 22:47-53; Jn 18:1-11)

114

Before the Cock Crows

It was dawn of Friday when they arrested Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Jerusalem was still asleep, oblivious of what had happened. As a major precaution, the soldiers, with drawn swords and a few lighted torches, surrounded the walls of the city along the valley of Gehenna and entered through the gate of the Essenes. Nearby was the palace of the high priest, Caiphas...

Commandant: Lock up the prisoner, guard the two entrances and let no one set foot in the patio without my permission. Is that understood?

Mary, Jesus' mother, Magdalene, James and the rest of the group hurriedly left Mark's house, passing through the dark and deserted streets toward the palace of Caiphas, desirous to find out what was happening. It was a few hours before daybreak.

Magdalene: Look, the lights are on...

James: The bastards haven't slept all night...

Mary: Oh, James, for God's sake, what are these swine up to?

James: Don't worry, Mary. They won't harm your son. Jesus is innocent.

Magdalene: Not them. The judges of Israel are more rotten than week-old fish.

In a short while, Peter and I joined them....

John: Hey gang, we're here...!

James: Shh!... Don't yell... Any news? Have you seen Judas?

Peter: Of course. The Iscariot's crazy, saying it's the plan of the movement, that they were going to mobilize the whole city, but, as you can see, not even the cocks are up tonight... They made a fool out of him...

Magdalene: A fool? He's an informer! He'd better not be here or I'll pull out his tongue!

James: Shh!... Not so loud, Magdalene. We can't afford to attract attention. Everyone is being watched...

Tall and massive walls surrounded the palace of Caiphas. It was a luxurious building with several domes and a wide indoor patio where palm trees grew. Outside, along the walls, a number of soldiers with lances and clubs kept watch.... While the magistrates of the Sanhedrin, warned of the urgency of the situation, kept coming to the tribunal hall, Jesus was brought to the neighboring palace of Annas, the High Priest's father-in-law....

Annas: So this is the peasant who stinks, the famous Jesus of Nazareth!... How could our men have missed him with this reeking smell of his!

The old and powerful Annas was standing; the smirk on his face reflected his sense of security. A group of priests from the hierarchy of Jerusalem surrounded him. Some even covered their noses despidingly when the soldiers pushed Jesus to the center of the elegant hall...

Annas: Good work, young men. Now, you may leave and wait outside. Leave him to us.... We have to interrogate this Nazarene before we pass our judgment...

The soldiers left the patio. Jesus, with hands tied behind his back, stared at the old priest who was dressed like a prince in tunic with a black scarf and a double gold ring on his finger....

Annas: Well, well, first, tell us what happened last Sunday in the Temple. What did you do in the courtyard?... What was it you said about us, the leaders of Israel?

Jesus: Nothing that you don't already know. There was nothing I said in secret. Why don't you ask those who were present that day.

Aziel: Worthless dog! How dare you talk to his excellency that way!... Take this!

One of the servants of Annas slapped Jesus. Without turning the other cheek, Jesus replied:

Jesus: As far as I know, I haven't done anything wrong. If that is so, what right have you to hit me?

Aziel: You insolent man! Do you want me to slap you again...?

Annas: Stop it, Aziel.... I'm amused to hear his replies....

Annas began to walk from one side to another, while touching his beard. One of the lamps in the hall reflected his elongated shadow on the floor of shining marble....

Annas: You know what? Because of the trouble in the Temple, I lost a number of cows and lots of sheep.... Poor creatures, I wonder where they are now... But this game has cost you a lot... Now, you lose much more than I... They say that he who laughs last, laughs best.

Jesus: Whoever said it is right.

Annas: Oh yeah? How easily you give in, Nazarene! You surprise me.

Jesus: What amazes me is the fact that you have been a high priest for ten years and still you're not aware that it's always God who has the last laugh. The Scriptures say so.

Annas: What do you know about Scriptures when you can't even write!... Oh, these cheats in our country! ... Fortunately there are still judges in Israel... Yes, my friend, we're going to judge you... What? You're not afraid?... You, who claim to be a prophet, can you foretell our judgment?

Jesus: It's already given.

Annas: You don't say. And what could it be?... Guilty?... or innocent?

Jesus: Guilty.

Annas: You hate yourself that much, prophet?

Jesus: I know you too well, Annas. You and your cohorts. But it doesn't matter: to be guilty before you is to be innocent in the eyes of God.

Annas: What do you know about God's judgment, charlatan?

Jesus: What you never wanted to know: that God feels ill before priests like you who make a trade out of religion, enriching themselves by taking advantage of the good faith of the people.

Aziel: How dare you! Your excellency, let's have his tongue cut off!

Annas: Leave him be, Aziel... These are the tantrums of a cornered enemy... Words, after all, are like feathers: they are blown by the wind... they are nothing.

Jesus: You're wrong, Annas. God's wind will soon blow and level with you, your house and all of you who claim to be the servants of God, when in fact, you serve the kings and masters of this world. You, shepherds who indulge in self-gratification, who remain silent when the wolves attack the flock, and kill the sheep! Later, in your dens you are joined by the murderers of the sheep to share the food and drinks you prepare for them. You even embrace them in front of everyone, in the open, without any feeling of remorse! Mercenary shepherds who have fattened yourselves at the expense of your sheep! This is what

you have done as a preparation of the day of reckoning!

Annas: That's enough, damn you! Shut up!... So they are right. After all, you do have seven demons inside!

With an irritated gesture, Annas approached Jesus and spat in his face...

Annas: May you burn in hell, son of a bitch!

Behind him, his supporters rushed toward Jesus and began to beat him and insult him... Meanwhile, in the street, the women and we waited impatiently, not knowing what was happening inside the palace...

Peter: Are we just going to stay here and watch, with our arms folded? Damn, we've got to do something.

Magdalene: That's what I was saying a while ago, Peter, but we're scared.

Mary: So what can we do, Magdalene?

Peter: Hey, John, do you think this servant friend of yours is inside? Well, why don't we call him and sneak into the patio?

James: What for, Peter?

Peter: To find out what's happening. If we have to create a scandal, then let it be. This can't go on like this. By hook or by crook, they've got to free the Moreno!

Magdalene: That's the way to talk, bum. I'm with you.

Peter: Let's go, John.

John: Okay, Peter, let's go. But watch your tongue. Everyone is all ears inside and....

Peter: Better. Let them hear what I say. That's what I want: let them hear me! Let's go!

John: Psss... Hey, buddy, he and I know a certain Bruno who works here as a servant... He's expecting us, you know, and...

Soldier: Well, let him wait. We have orders not to allow anybody in. Do you think I'm stupid enough not to know that you're one of those seen with the Galilean? You too!

Peter: Bah, take it easy, buddy... Cheer up, man... Look, with this denarius you can go get yourself some wine, will ya?

Peter slipped the money into the soldier's hands and he left the door for us to go inside...

Peter: See how we must deal with these people, John? If you seem inferior to them, they kick you in the ass. Come, let's find out where Jesus is....

The palace troops of the high priest had built bonfires in the middle of the patio. They were playing dice near the fire to warm themselves and to kill boredom over a long night watch....

Soldier: Five and three! It's all mine!... Hey, you're getting my money!

Another Soldier: You're cheating, baldy!

Soldier: Cheating? The Nazarene has brought me luck! Didn't they say he performs miracles? Here's the proof, five and three!

Soldier: It's a miracle if he comes out alive from the hall of Annas! They're beating him to death! I wouldn't like to be in his shoes!

Soldier: Not even in those of his cohorts! Do you know what they told me? They're going to raid a group from Capernaum who was with the Nazarene... Poor souls, they don't know what's waiting for them...! C'mon, c'mon, enough of this talk, but let's have more money.... Cast the dice!

Peter and I, wrapped in our blankets, were beside the fire and we heard everything...

A Woman: Hey, you two, who are you...? What're you doing here, huh?... Say, you big nose, I'm talking to you...

Peter: What's wrong with me, woman?

Woman: You're Galilean, aren't you? I can tell even from afar.

Peter: And so? Is it a crime to come from the north?

Woman: Maybe you're a friend of the Nazarene. Don't deny it.

Peter: What're you talking about?... Go away and leave me in peace...

Woman: Yeah, your face looks familiar... I've seen you with the prophet.

Peter: What nonsense are you saying. Never in my life have I seen this guy!

Woman: Hey guys, come back...!

Peter and I remained squatting, without moving at all. The woman kept on calling the guards...

Woman: Here, here, come over here, guys!

Peter: Shut up, dammit!... I didn't bother you... what do you want?

Woman: You're a spy of that man.

Peter: I don't know what the hell you're talking about.

Woman: Tell that to the marines! Hey, guards, come over here and take a look at this man. He seems suspicious...

With a lighted torch, they drew close to Peter to see him better...

Soldier: Dammit, he was the one who cut off the ear of my cousin Malcolm! Grab him!

Peter tried to stand and escape, but a group of soldiers surrounded him at once.

Soldier: So, this is the man who injured Malcolm...? Ha!... Let's see if you can be as brave here as you were in the garden...

One of the soldiers drew his sword and approached Peter.

Peter: Wait a minute, friend... I'm not the one you think I am... it's a mistake... Aghh!

The soldier was cornering Peter at the point of his sword until Peter was driven to the wall of the patio. The rest formed a circle for their own amusement...

Soldier: An ear for an ear, as they say!... But I'll cut off your two ears to make it even...

Peter: Please, I... I know nothing about this... I...

The soldier passed the tip of his sword on his forehead, his face, and his ears....

Soldier: It tickles doesn't it? How about this?!

...And he thrust the tip of the sword under his chin. Peter became white as flour....

All: Stick him, stick him!!

Peter: No... no... I don't know anything... I don't know that man, nor was I ever with him... I don't...

Soldier: See how brave he is... See if his underwear is wet... Damn you, Galilean, what are you doing here?... Speak up!

Peter: I... I...

Soldier: Let him go, man. Don't stain your hands with the blood of a chicken!

Another Soldier: To cut off a woman's head brings bad luck!

Then the soldier sheathed his sword, grabbed Peter by the nape, and dragged him toward the palace gate and kicked him out.

Soldier: Get away from here and I never want to see your face again, bastard!

I was able to slip through the other gate. I ran, and turned to the corner where I found Peter lying among the stones, face down. He was covering his face with his hands... When Magdalene and the rest asked what had happened, Peter cried bitterly... It was still dark, but the first cocks were already announcing the start of a new day....

The palaces of the former High Priest, Annas, and the High Priest of that year, Joseph Caiphas, were situated near each other, in the high barrio of the city. They were very luxurious inside and out. A number of slaves, servants and employees served in them. In the palace of Caiphas, there were spacious halls where the special sessions of the Sanhedrin were held, without having to transfer to the branch offices of the Temple.

Annas had been high priest for nine years (from 6 to 15 after Jesus). He was appointed to this office by Quirino, the Roman governor of the province of Syria. Annas became so influential that after him, five of his sons were appointed high priests, after which came his son-in-law, Joseph Caiphas. His lust for power, his greed and his fabulous wealth were known to all. The business of selling animals to be sacrificed in the Temple was practically controlled by him and his family. As the head of an influential line of priests, he was the most powerful Jewish personality during Jesus' time. Although his term was over, he maintained – according to the custom of Israel – his rank with its corresponding privileges. Since Jesus' case had nothing to do with a legal judgment, Annas' decision carried the most weight in that juridical farce.

Jesus is not "humble" before Annas. He rejects being interrogated like a criminal and does not "give the other cheek." Instead, he questions the servant of the High Priest who beats him, trying to get an explanation from him. He gives no excuses nor does he try to evade responsibility. We must realize that this confrontation took place between a lay person with no authority and the High Priest of the period. Jesus' freedom before such a religious power is complete. In this episode, Jesus echoes the words of the prophet Ezekiel, denouncing the bad shepherds of Israel, about six hundred years before (Ez 14:1-10).

Mary, the women and the disciples did not give in passively to the event. They tried to do something, although the odds initially seemed to be against them. We must not look at them as spectators to a drama whose unfolding they were aware of beforehand. Mary accompanied Jesus during those hours, hoping everything would be resolved.

Peter did not deny Jesus in a "fatal" way. As if the denial had already been "predestined," through the warnings that Jesus had made during the last supper. Peter was scared. The turn of events happened unexpectedly. Peter was weak. His three denials are, above all, a model, an archetype. It is characteristic of Aramaic narrations, giving the story three moments to show that it deals with a finished happening, complete, definitive, which reached the end. The presence of the cock has special meaning too. Orientals considered the rooster as a symbol of the power of darkness as it always moved in the dark, crowed when there was yet no light. When Peter was intimidated and denied Jesus, the crowing of the cock became a symbol of the drama that was unfolding in Jerusalem: the triumph of darkness.

(Mt 26:69-75; Mk 14:66-72; Lk 22:54-65; Jn 18:12-27)

115

The Verdict of the Sanhedrin

The palace of the high priest, Joseph Caiphas, was surrounded by soldiers with lances and had lights the whole night. They had Jesus detained in the neighboring palace of old Annas, as they awaited a swift decision on his case. Caiaphas' servants were all over the barrio of Zion, informing the 70 members of the Highest Tribunal: a special session was to take place that dawn of Friday....

Tano: Master Joseph!... Master Joseph!

Joseph of Arimathea: Who is it...?

Tano: This is Tano, the servant of the High Priest.

Joseph: What the hell do you want at this wee hour?

Tano: The illustrious Caiphas wants you to go to his palace right away. The Sanhedrin is having an emergency meeting.

Joseph: About what, may I ask?

Tano: I guess it has something to do with the Galilean, Jesus, who's making a lot of noise. They arrested him and will judge him.

Joseph: At this time?... They can't pass judgment at night. That's illegal.

Tano: I dunno about that, master Joseph... I was just instructed to tell you. Goodbye!

Joseph of Arimathea, one of the 70 members of the Highest Tribunal, hurriedly dressed up and headed for the palace of the High Priest. In spite of the time, the magistrates met in the conference room: a spacious room whose walls were embroidered with the best cedar from Lebanon. On woolen cloths were engraved the words of the sacred Law of Moses. On the floor of green marble were benches in the form of a horseshoe, where the great men of Israel would be seated: the elders, the heads of the wealthiest and aristocratic families of the capital; the Priests with tiaras on their heads; the Scribes and doctors of the Law, with their old parchment, whose fingers were stained with ink; the Saducees who were attired in Roman style; the Pharisees, with their inquiring eyes....

Joseph of A.: Where's Caiphas, Nicodemus?

Nicodemus: I don't know, Joseph...! He's probably signing the death sentence in the house of his father-in-law, Annas... He's losing no time, do you understand?

Joseph of A.: All I know is that all this is illegal. You cannot pass judgment on anyone at night.

Nicodemus: What do you think, Joseph? Can we do something?

Joseph of A.: What can we do, Nicodemus. They comprise the majority.

Three huge lamps hanging from the ceiling in the form of a ring, illuminated the hall... Finally, two servants opened the doors at the end of the hall and Joseph Caiphas, the High Priest for that year entered. He came to the meeting with all the sacred ornaments that the Roman governor had been keeping in the Antonia Tower and which he returned only during the holidays: the pure woolen tunic without seams; the pectoral (breastplate) with twelve precious stones and a white tiara, with a golden plate where was written: "Consecrated to Yahweh." The members of the Sanhedrin rose to greet him with profound reverence... Caiphas, with raised hands, blessed them, crossed the hall and headed for the presidential seat...

Caiphas: There are more than twenty-four of us here. The trial may now begin.

The assigned scribe presented the case...

Scribe: Illustrious Tribunal, your Excellencies. We are gathered here to judge the doctrine and the activities of an Israelite whose name is Jesus, son of a certain Joseph and a woman named Mary, a native of Nazareth, in the province of Galilea. Profession and educational training unknown. This person has been arrested by the chief guard of this Temple, with orders to lock him up, as authorized by the members of the Permanent Council of the Sanhedrin. The gravity of the accusations against the prisoner has compelled us to call a special meeting at the request of our High Priest, his excellency, Joseph Caiphas. Bring in the accused!

Two guards brought him in. With his hands tied behind his back and his hair dishevelled, Jesus walked up to the center of the hall... His face was swollen from the beating he received in the house of Annas. His beard was drenched with spittle...

Scribe: This is the accused. The accuser may have the floor.

A doctor of the Law, who was fat and with bulging eyes, stood up from the bench and went to Jesus...

Accuser: Distinguished judges of the Highest Tribunal: this man before you is one of the most dangerous

individuals we have come across in many years. This man has repeatedly made a mockery of the most sacred institutions, the pillars of our nation: the Law of Moses and our ancestors' traditions. He has not only rebelled against the civil but also against the religious authorities, inciting the simple folks to follow his perverse example. As a proof of this, I beg the entrance of witnesses who have come freely of their own free will, to give testimony against the accused...

Scribe: Bring in the first witness!

A tall, young man, with a pockmarked face appeared in the hall...

Scribe: You must remember that you have to tell only the truth. Or else, the blood of the innocent shall flow upon your head.

Accuser: What is your name?

Tano: Tano.

Accuser: Were you at the Temple's esplanade that Sunday this rebel came, mounted on a donkey, together with a shouting mob?

Tano: Yes.

Accuser: Did you hear what he said?

Tano: Yes.

Accuser: What did he say?

Tano: Well, that the house of God is like a cave full of bandits and that the priests are making business out of religion... and that if Moses were alive, you would all receive a good beating from him....

Accuser: Oh yeah?... What else did the accused say?

Tano: Well, he also said that all of you are a bunch of hypocrites, sons of the serpent, sepulchers painted with lime, fake, and Satan's traffickers...

Caiphas: Dammit, that's enough. I don't think there's a need to repeat all the impertinent things that the charlatan may have said.

Scribe: Pardon me, your excellency. Ehem... the next witness please!

And one by one, the witnesses gave their statements....

Old Woman: ...He said this, yes, he did, I heard him say it. He said he wanted to bring down the Temple by stoning it.

A Man: No, magistrate. Jesus said that nothing will be left of the Temple, as its very foundations will be destroyed...

Accuser: Excuse me. Did the accused say: "that it was going to be destroyed" or "that he was going to destroy"....? Please clarify well this point.

Man: Well, the truth is.... I don't remember anymore.

Another Man: He's a witch! A sorcerer!... He cures people through the power of Beelzebub!... He said he would climb the Temple's pinnacle and from there throw himself down without even having a scratch, because he has an agreement with the devil!

A Woman: This bearded man and his band of outlaws have committed many atrocities: whenever they come to a certain town, they rob the peasants of their harvest, rape the women, and armed to the teeth, kill decent people just like that....

An Old Man: This man is dangerous. I know him! He's got venom in his mouth like a serpent. He stirs up discord between the poor and the rich, talks of liberation, saying that the earth is for everyone, that the prisoners should be set free in the year of grace, that better salaries should be given, that no one is a slave to anyone, that the titles of ownership should be torn up, that taxes should not be paid, that all masters be damned and that the masters should be down and the laborers should be up... that he wants to change everything... do you understand? Turn the omelet over, that's basically his message.

Another Pharisee: He does not fast nor respect the Sabbath. He is never seen paying tithes to the priests. He is seldom or never seen praying in the Temple. He criticizes the clergy, while he is a mere lay person. He speaks of the Holy Scriptures without having studied them nor authorized to teach. What else can I say? He

eats with the Publicans (tax collectors) and deals with whores.

A Priest: That is not the worst part of it, your excellencies! This rascal allows himself to be called the “Messiah” by the people. Do you hear that: “Messiah of Israel” and also “Son of David.”

Accuser: The accuser said that?

Priest: Yes, he did! If you are doubting my testimony, why don’t you ask him, yourself.

Caiphias: We should have started from there and saved a lot of nonsense!

The high priest stood up suddenly. Then, he raised his hands, asking for silence...

Caiphias: Illustrious members of the Tribunal, we have gathered sufficient evidence about the crazy ideas and the worst actuations of this rebel. On the other hand, we can no longer delay, given the urgency of the situation. Allow me to personally finish with the interrogation...

Caiphias fixed his owl-like eyes on Jesus who remained standing at the center of the room...

Caiphias: Nazarene, you have many accusations against you... What can you say now?... Are you guilty? ... Or do you plead innocent?... What’s the matter with you? Why are you mum about the charges?... There’s just one question I’d like to ask, distinguished members of the Tribunal. One of the witnesses spoke of the Messiah and this criminal allowed the people to call him such.... This is most interesting, isn’t it, gentlemen?... Say something, Nazarene: Are you the Messiah, the Liberator of our people?

But Jesus remained quiet, without lifting his eyes from the floor...

Caiphias: I, the high priest of Israel, am talking to you. I’m the voice of God on earth! Respond!... Who do you think you are? The Messiah?

Jesus slowly raised his head. With his dishevelled hair and face full of bruises, and swollen lips from blows inflicted on him, he managed to smile with sarcasm...

Jesus: Why do you ask me?... If I say yes, you won’t believe me. If I say no, you won’t release me. So...?

Caiphias’ callous face was trembling with rage. His right hand touched the crown in front of which was engraved in golden letters, the holy name of God, and whose name only the high priest could utter... He spoke with the authority of his office...

Caiphias: I’m putting Yahweh as my witness.

As he mentioned the name of God, the whole body bowed their heads and closed their eyes...

Caiphias: I ask you, in the name of the Most Holy, to declare that you are the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God.

There was a profound silence. The elders, the priests, the teachers of the Law, the pharisees and the saducees, including the palace guards all had their gaze fixed on Jesus’ lips....

Jesus: You have said it. I am the Messiah. Yahweh is my witness too, and knows I’m not lying.

Caiphias, red with fury, grasped his throat, as if he were grasping for breath...

Caiphias: That’s blasphemy!

He shook his tunic from top to bottom... All the magistrates sprang from their seats as if they were pushed by a spring. There was a groan, echoing the words of the high priest...

All: Blasphemy! Blasphemy!

And one after the other, they also shook their tunic, affirming the accusation of Caiphias...

Caiphias: What further do we need of witnesses? You have heard him, illustrious members of the Tribunal! What is your verdict for this man?

All: Death for him! Death for him!

The Sanhedrinites screamed with their clenched fists raised... Caiphas, looking satisfied, asked for silence...

Caiphas: Illustrious gentlemen, the Law of Moses very clearly states: "Take the blasphemous out of the city and let the people stone him to death."

A Priest: What else are we waiting for, your excellency? This Galilean must be stoned right away!

All: Yes, yes, to Gehenna he goes!

It was the old priest, Annas, who stood up to pacify the magistrates...

Annas: My dear colleagues... please, let us not lose our cool, which should be the primary virtue of a judge. Yes, my son-in-law is right. According to the Law, this man deserves to be stoned. But if the people suspect us, then they will make trouble. Wouldn't it be more prudent to deliver him to Governor Pilate and let Rome be the judge?

Priest: But... if the governor does not condemn him?

Annas: Don't worry, my colleague. Shrewdness is the next important virtue of a good judge...

Jesus was pushed and kicked out of the Tribunal. The Sanhedrinites spat on him as he passed by. The others took off their sandals and hit him on the face... The high priest issued an order for the 400 synagogues of Jerusalem to read the notice: "Jesus of Nazareth, who was tried by the Sanhedrin, has been expelled from our faith: shut your doors to this blasphemer." It was 6:00 o'clock in the morning. Jerusalem woke up, drenched by incessant rains of the first hours of dawn. The opaque light of dawn presaged a gloomy day.

During the Greek domination, about two hundred years before Christ, the Sanhedrin was finally constituted in Jerusalem. It had originally started a couple of centuries before that. During evangelical times, under Roman domination, the Sanhedrin was the first political and religious representation of the country before Governor Pilate. It was in the south, in Judea, where this Great Council had major influence. The Sanhedrin was also the supreme court of justice and the highest court where municipal cases of Jerusalem were resolved. It also functioned as a decision-making body in financial and economic matters within the national level.

The Sanhedrin was composed of 70 members, aside from the High Priest who was the presiding official. In Jesus' time, there were three types of Sanhedrinites: the priests, the scribes, the elders. In the priestly group were those who performed the functions of the high priest and the most prominent members of the four great families of Jerusalem. They constituted something like a Permanent Commission that decided on all ordinary cases. The group of scribes was composed of theologians and important jurists from the group of pharisees, a lay association. The elders were the heads of the wealthiest and most influential families of Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin therefore, was the organism that gathered the most powerful people of various orientations in the capital – religious, political, ideological, economic.

The usual venue for their meetings was in the southwestern part of the Temple, in the luxurious and solemn "hall of cut stones." Since all buildings were closed during the night, Jesus was brought to the palace of Caiphas, where there were special rooms for urgent sessions. Even during Roman domination, the Sanhedrin was able to preserve its right to pass the death sentence, although the penalty of death had to be ratified by the Roman powers. This authority of the Sanhedrin to mete the death sentence was limited to "religious" matters only. Jesus was accused of various charges – being "possessed by the devil," healing through diabolic powers, blasphemy against God, rebelling against the Law and the religious authorities, which, according to the laws of the Sanhedrin, were punishable by death by stoning. The "false prophets," according to Jewish laws, ought to die by strangulation.

Joseph "of Arimathea" was born in a city of Judea bearing that name, a Greek form of the Hebrew "Rama." The writings of the period indicate that he was a rich landowner who had recently bought lands on the outskirts of Jerusalem. He belonged to the group of "elders" of the Sanhedrin. In the meeting of that

night, and together with Nicodemus, magistrate from the group of the Pharisees, he supported, with not much success, the idea that the trial be conducted in a just and legal manner.

The trial of Jesus was pure farce. The unholy hour during which it was held, nor the day (in the solemnity of the Passover), nor the trial in urgency, could offer a valid, juridical excuse. Even before it started, the sentence had already been given. But the authorities wished to clothe it with all legality to justify it before the people and the few who sympathized with Jesus, in whom they could see a true prophet and a leader beloved by the people.

After the testimonies by false witnesses who were brought in by the Sanhedrin, in their desire to feign legality over the whole farce, Jesus would finally be accused by the Great Council of having committed blasphemy. In Israel, blasphemy was a grave offense, which was not reduced to uttering obscene things against God, the way we understand it nowadays. Blasphemy consisted of despising God and his representatives, usurping divine rights, dealing with sinners considered to be cursed by God... The overly scrupulous Pharisees even considered as blasphemous the mere utterance of the name of God: Yahweh.

The act of blasphemy of which Jesus was accused, was that of acknowledging himself to be the Son of God. But this affirmation must not be taken as if Jesus were revealing a dogma of himself. It has nothing to do with a dogmatic expression or process as we understand at present, the phrase “Son of God” (second person of the divine nature, hypostatic union, etc.). It deals with a Messianic affirmation, since the “Son of God” was then a frequent title to both designate someone close to the will of God and also one of those names used to refer to the Messiah.

Before the supreme tribunal of his country, Jesus acknowledged himself to be the Messiah, God’s messenger, harbinger of the good and definitive news for men and women of his country. But in the eyes of the tribunal composed of men corrupted by money and power, it was blasphemous for a lay person to consider himself the Liberator of Israel. The death penalty according to the law of the Sanhedrin, for the same act of blasphemy, was equivalent to stoning: death by stoning outside the wall of the city.

To excommunicate any Israelite, temporarily or ultimately banning him from the synagogue (a place for religious worship of the community) – that was the so-called “synagogal anathema.”

In Jesus’ time, the religious authorities had taken for themselves the “power” (curse of the synagogue). The excommunicated man or woman could not enter the synagogue nor pray with the community. On two occasions the gospel of John gives recognition to the sympathizers of Jesus who were threatened with this kind of punishment (Jn 9:22 and 12:42). Jesus himself warned his friends that they might be taken as heretics, that they might be excommunicated and even killed, using God as their own justification (Jn 16:2).

(Mt 26:57-68; Mk 14:53-65; Lk 22:66-71)

116

The Governor’s Interrogation

It was Friday, the 14th of Nissan. A dark sky covered the city of David, and the continuous and bothersome rain left everything drenched: the palace steeples, the watchtowers, the small white roofs of the houses of the poor, the Temple’s marble and the narrow streets through which a stream of dirty water haltingly trickled... Jerusalem was jolted from her sleep as the cocks announced the beginning of a new but gloomy day...

A Woman: Neighbor, neighbor!... Have you heard the news? They grabbed the prophet from Galilee!

Another Woman: Who, Jesus?

Woman: Yeah! They're holding him prisoner.

Woman: But this can't be... How is that possible?

Woman: Well, you heard it. I tell you, neighbor, in this country everything is backwards: the good ones are put in jail and the thieves stay in the palace. C'mon, dress up fast and let's see what's happening...!

The news spread through the entire neighborhood...

A Man: Barabbas and Dismas were taken prisoners in a raid they had staged. Gestas, too, was arrested. And now, they say it's Jesus, the Nazarene, whom they grabbed last night in the Mount of Olives.

Another Man: Damn, what do the Romans want? Arrest everyone?

Man: Anyway, be ready, man. Pontius Pilate will torture them to make them sing. If they do, then you know... half of the city will be locked up in the Antonia Fortress!

We, too, were out in the street....

John: Don't despair, Mary. They'll let the Moreno go. They've got no evidence against him.

Mary: Oh, John, I don't know, but I'm scared...

James: If they harm him, he will break loose, you will see.

John: Look, James, the members of the Sanhedrin are leaving.... Come, run...

The palace gates were opened and the magistrates of the Supreme Tribunal started to leave. They exuded a conceited air with their tiaras and elegant turbans. They had complied with their mission and were now heading for the street toward the high barrio. Behind them was the high priest, Joseph Caiphas, who was walking with all solemnity, in the company of four Sanhedrinites. He went directly to the Roman fortress... Jesus, with tied hands, was taken by the guards, who made their way through the people, shouting and hitting them with sticks....

The retinue crossed the city and entered through the gate on the western side of the Temple. The women and our group followed behind, amidst pushing and shoving. We could see before us the most detested tower within whose walls the governor, Pontius Pilate, was heavily protected. The black and yellow flags of Rome were drenched by last night's rain....

Soldier: Halt! Who are you? What do you want?

A line of armoured and stiff-looking Roman soldiers, stopped the Sanhedrinites. The high priest, Caiphas went forward to reply....

Caiphas: We must see the governor at once. It is a matter of importance.

Soldier: This way please, your excellency. And the magistrates too. But not the crowd.... Out, out, all of you!

Caiphas: They are not with us. Anyway, neither of us can go inside. Our law forbids it. It's the eve of the Great Sabbath of the Passover. Go tell the Governor to please come out here for a short while and attend to us.

In a short while, a window facing the esplanade of the gentiles was opened, and Pontius Pilate appeared, his arms crossed over a Roman toga, and his face unshaven. There was annoyance on his lips....

Pilate: What the hell is this?... It is barely morning and there seems to be some trouble.

Caiphas: Illustrious Governor, my apologies for the early intrusion, but believe me, this is a matter of urgency.

Pilate: What is it about?

Caiphas: This man.

The soldiers shoved Jesus to the front for Pilate to get a view of him through the window...

Pilate: What's wrong with this man?

Caiphas: He is an offender.

Pilate: And who, in this country of bandits and hookers, has no offense? Then judge him. That's what the magistrates are paid for by the Sanhedrin!

Caiphas: Governor, we have brought him before you because this is a political matter. This Galilean has rebelled against Rome. And Rome ought to pass judgment. We cannot sign the penalty of death, the punishment he deserves.

Pilate: You cannot sign it, but the way I see it, you have already done it. This man is badly beaten. By what authority have you maltreated a political prisoner of my jurisdiction?

Caiphas: Our apologies, Governor... The prisoner was captured at the outskirts of the city, in a place called Gethsemane. He showed resistance to our guards who, logically, had to defend themselves. He was also found to be in possession of arms.

All: That's a lie, that's a lie! This man is innocent. Let Jesus go!

Soldier: Silence, you dogs!!

The stentorian voice of the Roman centurion and the soldiers' threatening lances silenced us. From his window, Pontius Pilate continued talking to Caiphas at the esplanade....

Pilate: And what was this man doing in Gethsemane?

Caiphas: He and a few Galileans are conspiring against you, Governor. They belong to a group that is well organized and dangerous.... He is the leader of this group. He started making trouble in the north and now is doing the same in Judea. He is also inciting the people not to pay taxes to Rome. He ridicules the Caesar. Saying he'll be crowned as the King of Israel.

Pilate: Very good. Centurion, let the prisoner in. I shall interrogate him.

Pontius Pilate shut the window and descended the Tiling (the Lobby) where trials and hearings were conducted. It was a small inner patio, surrounded by gray columns, where the troops were also quartered. Since it was raining, the Tiling was deserted. Beneath a stone overhang, serving as a protecting roof, the Governor had a platform and a big chair with a high back and the figure of the Roman eagle above. Pilate crossed the patio and took his seat. His hands were fidgeting with a whip he used for horse-back riding. Then he called a scribe to his side, to take the declaration of the prisoner... Two escort guards brought Jesus in and closed the gates behind him. The crowd remained outside... With tied hands and torn clothes, Jesus remained standing, under the rain, between the two soldiers, before the Governor. He looked very tired...

Pilate: State your name, family and place of origin. Did you hear? I'm asking where you're from and what your name is.... What's the matter, my dear friend?... Are you too scared or you have lost your tongue? This is what you are, a bunch of cowardly and boastful Jews! You talk a lot, and then when the moment of truth comes, you all tremble like a rabbit.... Speak up, I say. Did you hear all the accusations against you? ... C'mon, answer me!... What have you done?

Jesus: Every one in Jerusalem knows what I have done. Why don't you ask them?

Pilate: I am asking you! The leaders of your town have delivered you to me. I can condemn you, if I want to, and I can even set you free, if I wish.

Jesus: You're not taking away my freedom and neither are you giving it to me. You have no authority over me.

Pilate: Really?... What gall you have, my friend. Don't you know that I can sentence you to death right now?

Jesus: That would be an added crime to your already long list...

Pilate: Aren't you afraid to die?

Jesus: It's you who should be afraid. Your hands are stained by the blood of the innocent. Mine are not.

Pilate: Of course not, but your hands are tied! I am the only person who can untie them, do you understand? So, try to speak clearly and be truthful, if you value your head. Let's see, now, tell me: do you want to be crowned as king of the Jews? Are you aspiring for the throne of Israel?

Jesus: Did this question occur to you or they wanted you to ask me...?

Pilate: Dammit! Who do you think you are anyway?! I don't get orders from anyone! And I'm not accountable to anyone for my actions! Except to the Emperor.

Jesus: Neither am I. Except to God.

Pilate: Let's see, my friend, tell me the truth. To what group do you belong?... You're one of the zealots. Aren't you?

Jesus: No.

Pilate: Or the group of the hired-assassins, perhaps?

Jesus: Neither.

Pilate: So, what's your group? Better confess! For whom do you work?

Jesus: For the Kingdom of God.

Pilate: For what?... You don't say?... And where is this "Kingdom of God?" In heaven? I like that better. You worry about God and the heavens, but leave the earth to us.

Jesus: The Kingdom of God is here on earth. It is in this world, but the leaders of this world cannot capture it.

Pilate: Oh, yeah? And where is it?

Jesus: It's hidden.

Pilate: This clandestine work of yours makes me laugh.

Jesus: It's hidden like the woodworm. You don't see it, but it will eat up the wood from inside.

Pilate: What nonsense are you saying, imbecile? And what wood are you talking about?

Jesus: The wood of your throne. All your power will vanish, consumed by worms.

Pilate: In other words, are you telling me to my face that you're conspiring against the authorities?

Jesus: Against those who abuse their power.

Pilate: Take note of it, scribe: conspiracy, rebellion, subversion. You're the leader of the group, aren't you? Do you admit having incited the people?

Jesus: The people have been agitating for a thousand years. It's the hunger that incites us. Our hunger and your violence.

Pilate: It is your violence, rebel, that stirs the people. You want to change things that cannot be changed. You are the ones provoking war. All Rome wants is peace.

Jesus: Yes, peace.... the peace of the sepulchers.

After Jesus said this, the Governor raised his whip and cracked it on his face....

Pilate: That's enough, dammit!

Jesus: The peace of the lashings...

Pilate: I said... enough!!

Jesus staggered with the second lashing, which left a purple welt on his neck. It was still drizzling. The white tiles glowed in the water... Drenched, with his clothes clinging to his body, his hair and beard dripping with water, Jesus looked straight into the governor's face...

Pilate: Mad dog from Galilee, I'll have this rabid tongue of yours pulled out. But first, you've got to tell me your plans. C'mon, speak up. What were you doing in the garden of Gethsemane?

Jesus: I was praying. Nothing bad about it.

Pilate: Really? Do you think I believe such stupidity?

Jesus: I was praying that you may not win. That your will not be done, but God's will.

Pilate: You were praying and concealing weapons. C'mon, admit it: Where are you hiding your weapons...? Answer me, I command you!

Jesus: Here.... This is our only weapon, our tongue... It is as sharp as your iron lances. It is the sword of truth.

Pilate: The truth!... That's a funny thing... the truth! If I cut off your tongue, then that's the end of your truth!

Jesus: Then you'll have to cut a thousand tongues, tongues waiting to shout your crimes to your face, Pontius Pilate.

Pilate: Shut up, insolent man! Now you will know what the truth is! Scribe, bring me the board! I shall sign the death sentence of this charlatan!

At that moment, one of the iron gates facing the Tilings was opened. A Roman lady, tall and elegantly dressed in blue, silken tunic, appeared at the door and signaled to the governor.... She was Claudia Procula, his wife....

Claudia: Pontius, please come for a minute! I've got something to tell you.

Pilate: Please don't interrupt me, Claudia. I'm busy. Go away.

Claudia: It's very important. I beg of you.

The Governor stood from his chair and hurriedly crossed the patio to avoid getting wet....

Pilate: What the devil do you want? Don't you see I'm busy with this damned Jew?

Claudia: It's precisely about him. Pontius, please, don't sign anything against this man. He was sent by the gods.

Pilate: He's a charlatan from hell. A rebel against Rome.

Claudia: They say he performs miracles and heaven protects him.

Pilate: Nonsense!

Claudia: Yesterday I dreamed about him. It was a horrible nightmare.

Pilate: I'm sorry, Claudia. It's my duty to sentence him to death. He is guilty of conspiracy. It is a grievous crime against the Roman State.

Claudia: No, Pontius, don't do it. Listen to me. Get yourself out of this mess.

Pilate: I can't, Claudia. Don't you understand?

Claudia: Yes, you can. Didn't they say he is Galilean? Well, take him to Herod and let him do what he wants. But don't stain your hands with the blood of this man. It will bring us bad luck, I'm sure.

Governor Pilate, who was also a superstitious man, did not sign the sentence and sent Jesus to the palace of Herod Antipas, tetrarch of the province of Galilee, who had come to Jerusalem for the holidays. It was about the third hour of the day....

The religious authorities of Israel were accomplices of the Roman political powers. The passion events show the extent of their submission to the foreign invaders of the land. Nevertheless, they pretend to be religious men, practicing the laws of God. That is why Caiphas speaks to Pilate from the outside, without entering the governor's palace. During the days of the Passover, an Israelite entering the house of a pagan became impure and therefore, could not celebrate the feast. The priests were extra careful in this regard, but they have no qualms in taking the life of an innocent person. Their religious rites, therefore, are nothing but an empty shell.

The Tiling ("Litostratos" in Greek, "Gabbata" in Hebrew) was a vast patio situated within the interior of the Antonia Fortress housing the quarters of the Roman garrison, whose main task was to maintain order in Jerusalem. Its name came from the huge tiles covering the area, calculated to be about 2,500 square meters. In the gospel, instead of mentioning the Antonia Fortress, reference was made to the Praetorium, Pilate's residence when he was in Jerusalem. Some research points to this, not in the Antonia Tower, but in one of Herod's palaces in the capital, lent to the governor during the holidays. However, for many centuries, tradition has situated the Tiling where the Antonia Tower was built. Some of the tiles of this type are still preserved in the basement of a Catholic convent situated in the so-called "via dolorosa" of Jerusalem. They are huge tiles, worn by time with Roman inscriptions engraved with a knife.

Pilate was a cruel and ambitious man. Historians have recorded his term as governor of Judea (year 26-36). Agrippa I describes him as "inflexible, arbitrary and ruthless." Phylon accused him for his "vulgarity, thefts, outrage, threats, executions without due process, and savage cruelty." He was also

known for his deep contempt for the people of Israel. Sejanus, a favorite of Emperor Tiberius, supported Pilate from Rome. Sejanus himself was a blood-thirsty man who was a leader of the anti-Jewish movement in the Roman empire. On the basis of this, it is not historically accurate to consider Pontius Pilate as a cultured man, though weak, an intellectual coward who – pushed by the circumstances – had no choice but to sentence Jesus to death. No, he sentenced him to die on the cross because he wanted to keep his post, which was perceived as threatened by that man. Pilate's removal from office in the year 36 was due to a massacre he ordered against the Samaritans, a barbaric act that cost him his job. Pilate was believed to have committed suicide.

Jesus was not afraid before Pilate. Similarly before the religious authorities, he proved to be a free man during the political trial. Up to the end, he was faithful to what was essential during the period of his activity: his denunciation of power. We must not interpret Jesus' words before Pilate as an attempt to dialogue with him on an equal footing, or as a master's conversation with a curious disciple or as an encounter of "politicians" exchanging opposing views. Jesus did not compromise with Pilate; he made it clear to him that only the Lord has authority.

Jesus' words, according to the gospel of John – "My kingdom is not of this world" – have often been misunderstood. The phrase does not mean that the gospel has nothing to do with the economy, politics or society. "World" in the gospel of John, is a significant and typical word. The "world" is where injustice and violence reign. This "world" has two gods: money and power. It has its own ways: lying, exploitation, use of arms, accumulation of wealth, profits. "My kingdom is not of this world" therefore means: my plan, God's plan has nothing to do with "the world." It means sharing and not hoarding. It is serving, not imposing one's self.

Only the gospel of Matthew speaks of the pressure of Pilate's wife for him to free Jesus (Mt 27:19). This reflects the religious sentiment of the Roman people, very superstitious and given to "sacred" fears, to the interpretation of dreams, to oracles, etc. Jesus' integrity, his continuous reference to God, seriously worried the wife who, later on, would influence Pontius Pilate himself, also a superstitious man (Jn 19:8). The fact that Pilate washed his hands after deciding the sentence is, aside from being a proof of his superstition, an indication of his irresponsibility and arbitrary character as a governor, who wanted to have nothing to do with the injustice of the sentence he himself had declared.

(Mt 27:1-2 and 11:14; Mk 15:1-5; Lk 23:1-5; Jn 18:28-38)

117

Freedom for the Prisoners

A Man: Hey, Anna! Jason! Jason!... Everyone, come out! Hey neighbors, to the street, all of you!

The news that Jesus had been arrested and was handed over to the hated Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, spread rapidly all over the barrios of Jerusalem. The poor people of the capital, the Galileans who were there for the holidays, the men and women of our town who had put so much hope in Jesus, took to the streets to demand the freedom of their prophet. It had not stopped raining. The pallid sun could not find its way through the clouded sky on that Friday, 14th of Nissan.

A Man: Neighbors, no one in the houses! Everyone to the street! They can't take Jesus away from us!

A Woman: Where do we have to go, Samuel?

Another Man: They say they're taking him to Herod's palace. Since he's Galilean, he will be turned over to this swine!

Another Woman: Look, look, a great multitude is coming...!

Another Man: Jesus belongs to us! Release him!

The narrow streets of barrio Ophel soon became crowded with people running, screaming, clenched fists raised, toward the Gate of the Valley, near the walls where Herod was staying...

A Man: Freedom for Jesus! Freedom for the prisoners!

A Woman: Release the Messiah!

Another Man: Jesus is ours! Free the prophet! Jesus is ours!

Not having slept the whole night, Peter, James and I, as well as the women, met immediately at a bend. The rains had left the streets slippery and we held each other by the arms to keep us from falling. Every moment, more and more people were joining us...

Magdalene: We won't leave him in peace, this Herod, damn him.... until he lets go of Jesus! If necessary, we shall have to bring down the walls of the palace!

James: Very well said, Magdalene! Jesus belongs to us and we want him free!

Mary, Jesus' mother, was supported by Susana's arm. She too, was shouting, in unison with the screaming dozens of countrymen. Drenched in their robes and blankets, they were heading through the mud-filled streets of the potters' barrio.... Along the low walls surrounding Ophel, the Roman guards intensified their vigilance...

A Man: Let go of Jesus! Free him!

A Woman: Not Rome nor anyone else can take the prophet from us!

Another Man: The Messiah belongs to Israel! Freedom for Jesus!

A Soldier: Shall we use our swords, Titus?

Another Soldier: Wait for orders. They'll come soon. Damn this mob!

Meanwhile, Jesus was brought, heavily guarded, from the Antonia Fortress to Herod's residence. When they saw them pass, the residents of barrio Ephraim also ran behind the troops guarding Jesus, and joined us in front of the palace of the ruthless king of Galilee...

Herod: At last, we come face to face, Jesus of Nazareth!... For a long time, you stayed in Capernaum while I was in Tiberias.... We have been neighbors, yet we don't even know each other....

Herod Antipas, the Tetrach of Galilee and Perea, was in Jerusalem for the holidays only. In the capital, he resided in a grand palace protected by three enormous towers on the west side of the walls... Jesus was brought to one of the luxurious halls of that building that smelled of Arab perfume.... At the center was the king, reclining on a silken triclinium... As always, Herodias, the queen, was at his side...

Herodias: "Prophet," aren't you even interested to see the face of the king?... I can't believe you have such ungrateful subjects, Herod...!

Herod: That's right. Galilean... I am your king and my wish is your command... Don't you know that?

Jesus, his hands tied behind his back and his face swollen from beatings, fixed his gaze at the scared Herod...

Herod: Poor guy.... I see you've gotten a good beating at the house of Caiphas... See how these lords from Judea abuse us, those from the north?... Or was it Pontius Pilate?... Did the foreign soldiers hurt you so?... Well, I see you're strong enough to bear it and a lot more, am I right?... What do you think, Herodias?

Herodias: Of course, my king. These peasants are like donkeys: strong, brutal and... castrated!

Herod: That's not the way to talk to the guy, Herodias.... After all, he's our visitor... Let's see, prophet, why don't you brighten up our day. Now, I've seen your face. I want to hear your voice. I was told about your gift for telling stories and amusing your listeners.... This is just between the two of us... Being a king can sometimes be boring... It's like casting your dice over and over again, and you always come out the winner... Hey, cheer up a little and tell us something... I'm almost sure, if Herodias likes your story, you'll be given a reprieve.

In silence, Jesus continued to stare at the Galilean king...

Herod: What's wrong?... What's the matter with you?...

Herodias: It's always the same. You find him full of bravado with his friends at the inn, but bring him in here and he's as tame as a lass...

Herod: It's but natural, Herodias... Farmers are a shy people... Imagine yourself coming from a barrio, and suddenly, you find yourself facing the authorities, especially the king!... But fear not, young man, I'm not as bad as they think... Stop trembling, I'm not going to devour you... I prefer other flesh, isn't that right, Herodias?... By the way, I heard you also perform miracles... Is it true, prophet?... Or are they only stories?... You don't know anything?... Not even the trick of the serpent?

Herodias: But his hands are tied, Herod. His hands should be able to move freely.

Herod: You're right, my dear... Gracus, come over here! Free his hands....

Soldier: Right away, your majesty.

One of Herod's guards went near Jesus and with his sword cut the cord tying his hands behind his back...

Herod: Are you ready?... What else do you need?... Hey, young man, take this apple...

Herod took an apple from the table and threw it to Jesus... The fruit bounced on his body and fell to the floor...

Herod: Take it, I command you. If you can make it disappear without my knowing it, I'll give you a reward... C'mon, dammit, that's not so difficult to do!... Or could it be that my wife's beauty has upset you?... Ah, my friend, that apple I can't give you!... She's all mine... Ha, ha, ha!

Jesus kept silent like a stone. Outside our loud voices of protest could be heard, demanding freedom for the prisoners...

Herodias: I'm getting bored, Herod... This idiot can't even make us laugh...

Herod: Hey man, what's the matter with you?... Speak up, say something... Have they cut off your tongue?... I'm glad of that! But that isn't enough. It isn't enough that only the prophet's tongue should be cut off, but his head too. I had John the Baptist beheaded! A stupid fool! A viper!

Herod trembled when he mentioned the name of the prophet, John, whom he had ordered killed in the prison cell of Machaerus barely a year ago...

Herod: Why do you look at me that way, damned Nazarene? Why?... Do you want me to believe that you're not scared? Well, you're wrong my friend, because I don't buy your stories! I'm not as stupid as this mob acclaiming you! You're a fake! Charlatan!

Herodias: Easy now, Herod... Don't lose your cool just because of this stupid fool...

Herod: It's the shouting outside that gets on my nerves. Gracus!... I want you to inform governor Pilate immediately. He should order his soldiers to disperse these troublemakers immediately. They should be crushed like tomatoes. If he can't do it, then I'll order my soldiers to do it and that'll be worse.

Soldier: Right away, your majesty.

Meanwhile, outside....

James: Freedom for Jesus! Freedom for the prisoners!

Magdalene: Jesus belongs to us. Release him now!

Soldier: This is a scourge of screamers. They'll end up losing their voice!

Another Soldier: Leave them alone. Pilate's guards are already there...

A Man: Release the prophet from Galilee!

Another Man: Freedom for the Messiah of Israel!

Magdalene: Mam Mary, you see they won't dare lay a hand on us. We're many, that's why! They'll have

to free him! Freedom for Jesus!

The noise grew like a swelling sea. Uncontrollable. Burning with rage, our clothes dripping wet, while all eyes were fixed on the palace gates, we didn't notice that the Roman soldiers had us surrounded...

A Man: Jesus is our man! Set him free!

A Woman: Hey, look over there! There are guards all over...!

Another Man: Well, let them be!... They can't drive us away from here!

We were cornered. Since there were many of us, we felt strong. Pressed against one another, we continued shouting....

A Woman: Freedom for the prisoners! Set the prophet free!

A Man: Bring out the prisoners! Bring out the prisoners!

It didn't take long for the soldiers to draw their short and shining swords... The raindrops pitter-pattered on their iron helmets....

Centurion: By orders of Pontius Pilate, disperse, all of you!... Do you hear?... You are to leave this place, by orders of the Governor!

Nobody budged. The hope of obtaining Jesus' freedom drove us to stay where we were, all the more over the stones of the esplanade surrounding the palace. Then, the soldiers threateningly raised their swords and drew their shields closer to their bodies...

Centurion: By orders from Rome! Disperse, or we disperse you, damn!

A Man: No one will budge until you set Jesus free!

A Woman: Even if Caesar demanded it!

Another Man: Down with Rome and down with Pontius Pilate!

The shouts of those Galileans enraged the soldiers who lunged at us upon orders of the centurion. The confusion was alarming. Suddenly, some women in the first row fell. Terrified, the people ran, slipping through the plaza to escape the assault of the Roman soldiers. The more daring ones pulled out their knives from beneath their robes and became involved in the melee. But the odds were against us since they had superior weapons. Running and stumbling over each other, we had to disperse through the steep roads leading to the walls of the Hasmoneans....

A Woman: Sarah, they might kill your little boy!...

A Man: Pilate, murderer, someday we'll get rid of you!

Magdalene: James! Peter!... Wait!... Run, Mam Mary, run!

James: John, don't stay behind, go! Philip, Andrew...!

In order not to incite the people more, the soldiers were ordered not to kill anyone, so they aimed for the legs... Desperate and terrified, we ran again for cover through the narrow streets of Ophel, where the guards could not reach us.... The wounded were brought and hidden in the nearby houses... After a while, the uprising was over... From then on, Pilate ordered strict vigilance at all the strategic points of the city...

Herod: Go and tell governor Pilate that Herod, the Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, is bringing back the prisoner that he may ratify whatever he decides regarding this imbecile. Let him die! He may hang him on the cross and gouge out his eyes! Then he may come to my palace to celebrate! We shall drink the best wine from Arabia when the worms are feasting on your body, and listen to this well, damned Nazarene...!

Herodias: Wait a minute, Herod.... You can't dismiss him like that... Didn't they say he's the King Messiah?... Well, let him look like one... Here, put this rag over him.... Let the people who love him so much see him dressed as a king!

Jesus was dragged from the hall by Herod's servants and over his shoulders they hung a white cloth of old and frayed silk that touched the floor...

A Soldier: Hail to you, king of Israel!

Another Soldier: Come, men and women, look at the Messiah of the starving people!

They laughed boisterously as they delivered him to the Roman soldiers guarding the palace gate with their lances raised. We were no longer there to see him leave. Jesus, overcome with fatigue, walked slowly, dragging his cloak of mockery, and crossed the streets of Jerusalem once again, toward the Antonia Fortress. The blood of the wounded stained the rain waters of the plaza....

Herod Antipas before whom Jesus appeared in this episode, was the youngest of the sons of Herod the Great. His father did not have Jewish blood and this gave the powerful king a complex throughout his life, as he wielded authority before his subjects. Herod the Great, who died four years after Jesus was born, had three women. Some of them were of Jewish families. This was the case of Herod Antipas' mother. This enabled the young Herod to show people that he was still a Jew, appearing like a good follower of the religious laws. Every year, during Passover, he would go to Jerusalem to join his countrymen in celebrating the holidays. He refrained from having his face engraved on the coins of the Galilean kingdom, knowing this would make the pious Israelites furious. He also tried to intercede before Pilate in defending some of his countrymen, in order to earn the sympathy of his subjects.

Once he defended a group of Israelite rebels, resulting in enmity between him and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. In order to hurt the religious feelings of the Jews, on one occasion Pilate paraded imperial banners bearing the image of Caesar Tiberius along the streets of Jerusalem. He placed the imperial coats of arms in the palace of Herod the Great, in the sight of all the citizens. It was a grave offense to the Jews, who did not tolerate any representations of the Caesar, whom the Romans venerated as a God. So great was the scandal that beside the people's revolts, a letter of protest was sent to Caesar in Rome, signed by the Jewish leaders of the country, demanding the removal of Pilate. Herod Antipas was one of the signatories of that letter, and since then, considered an enemy of Pilate.... The costly construction of the aqueduct built by Pilate in Jerusalem, using the money of the Temple, also caused enmity with Herod, who, as a man fighting for "religious" considerations, could not tolerate such an act of sacrilege. All these bickerings stopped with Jesus' trial, whose death sentence was agreed upon by both rulers. For them, Jesus was a threat and they agreed to have him die as soon as possible. Herod the Great, the father of Herod Antipas, constructed magnificent buildings in Jerusalem. It was he who restored the temple, which was finished about twenty years before Jesus was born. (The first temple was built by King Solomon and was destroyed about five hundred years before Christ.) He constructed the Antonia Fortress, a gigantic theater, an aqueduct, an enormous hippodrome – for horse races and circus games – a big sepulcher for himself and his family, etc. Prominent among these constructions was his own palace, near the western wall of the capital, with three immense towers dominating the city. The tallest (45 meters) was that of Phasaël (dedicated to a brother of Herod). Another, which was 40 meters, bore the name of Hippicus (a friend of the monarch); and the smallest and most artistic (27 meters), was the tower of Mariamme, one of the ten wives of Herod, who was the only one to carry the title of "queen" and who was murdered by the king himself. The bases of these three great towers are still preserved today.

This imposing palace stood out among all the buildings in Jerusalem. Herod Antipas would go there to celebrate the holidays in the capital and this is where Jesus was brought for interrogation by the king of Galilee. Since Jesus was a Galilean, his case legally fell within the jurisdiction of Herod. The interior of the palace was impressively luxurious. It was crammed with works of art. Slaves were available for service. Antipas, who must have been about fifty years old then, was corrupt in every sense. A superstitious man, insincere and vicious, he still harbored the fear of John the Baptist, whom he had ordered killed. This episode shows all his baseness and debility. Jesus did not utter a single word to denounce the man. His silence was enough to totally discredit a king whom he called a "fox."

When the people of Jerusalem and the thousands of pilgrims – many of whom were Galileans – who had gone to the capital for the holidays, learned that Jesus was arrested, they would manifest their surprise and possibly their opposition, accordingly. If the priests and the authorities took time to decide to arrest

Jesus and once arrested, immediately condemn him – in violation of all laws – it was precisely because of their fear of the people (Mk 14:1-2). These were the people, who, in the episode, took to the streets to demand Jesus' freedom.

(Lk 23:6-12)

118

He Descended Into Hell

Centurion: King Herod is sending back the prisoner, Governor Pilate, and he wants you to know that he is confirming whatever decision you make.

Pilate: Really? So, not even Herod wants to have anything to do with his subject...

Centurion: He also wants to inform you that his order of the best wine from Arabia has come. Today, this afternoon, the eve of the great Sabbath, he wishes to try it with you...

Pilate: Well, well, I like that...

Centurion: Good wine and pretty women.... You already know the parties hosted by the palace tetrach...

Pilate: Sure, I know. There's none in the whole country as brazen as he is. But let's admit it, no one ever organizes better parties than he does! Tell Herod we shall arrive on time at his party... And we'll be the last ones to leave!

Centurion: That's well understood, Governor.

Pilate: Well then, centurion, you may leave.

Centurion: Excuse me, Governor. I have the prisoner downstairs. What shall I do with him?

Pilate: Oh yes... I forgot about the Nazarene... Make him talk. I want more information about this group he works with.

Centurion: By scourging?

Pilate: Yes, whatever is necessary to make him talk. Find out their plans, where they meet, and above all, who are involved. I want their names, do you understand? Let him spill the beans. Then we'll find out their connections in the provinces.

Centurion: Leave everything to me, Governor.

Pilate: Be careful. The Nazarene is a brave little cock.

Centurion: In that case, we'll shed his feathers to make him talk better...!

From Herod's palace, in the high barrio of Jerusalem, the soldiers went back to Antonia Fortress, bringing the heavily guarded Jesus. Notwithstanding the beatings received in front of the Galilean king, we gathered again at the foot of the Roman fortress, demanding freedom for Jesus and for those who had been arrested during the holidays...

A Man: Set Jesus free! The man is innocent!

A Woman: Freedom for Jesus and for the prisoners!

That Friday, in spite of the rain, the Temple's courtyard teemed with pilgrims buying animals to be sacrificed at the altar of the priests. The lambs, arranged in a row, and without protesting, were beheaded one by one over the altar stone, which was totally drenched in blood. When the pilgrims heard about the turmoil in front of the Roman quarters, they left the Temple to join us in protest...

All: Freedom, freedom, freedom!!

In the midst of that uproar, we saw the high priest, Joseph Caiphas, enter the Antonia Fortress through a private corridor connecting the Temple to the Roman quarters...

Pilate: An amnesty? Is that what you have come for, your Excellency?... I had even thought of having all of them hanged, to teach them a lesson!

Caiphas: One does not contradict the other, Governor. In this regard, our ancestors have this to say: With one hand you discipline, and with the other, you smooth with oil.

Pilate: I admire your wisdom, illustrious Caiphas. I might end up naming you as my state counsel. Speak more, I'm listening.

Caiphas: The people are clamoring for the prisoners' freedom, Governor. Very well. You may grant a reprieve. It will pacify them. But some crosses have to be put up, to teach them a lesson.

Pilate: And who is this prisoner you want to set free?

Caiphas: Let the people decide...

Pilate: If I let them, I'm sure they'll choose the Nazarene.

Caiphas: Unless my men take care of it. Leave this to me, Governor. Who knows, they might ask for Barabbas. That's right, set Barabbas free. What do you think?

Pilate: No, Barabbas is a dangerous man. We had a hard time catching him!

Caiphas: You may leave the cage open, but the bird's wings must be clipped... This way, it cannot fly very far...

Pilate: I see what you mean, your Excellency... It's not a bad idea... Say, are you coming tonight to savor the Arab wine of Herod?

Caiphas: But of course... Hopefully, the case of the Nazarene shall have been resolved... He will have been condemned to death, is that right?

Pilate: But before that, I'd like to stretch out his tongue a little to make him reveal his collaborators and those involved in this conspiracy. He's downstairs, right now, in Hell. Hannibal, the centurion, is working him over...

The centurion called one of the executioners, and the two pushed Jesus to the dungeons of the Antonia Fortress. The Roman soldiers called the place Hell. It was a dark, humid basement, reeking of blood and excrement, where prisoners were tortured. Above the stone walls could be seen the iron collars, the shackles, the pliers for pulling out the nails and gouging the eyes, and the blades for castrating.... In a corner were piled up poles for crosses and the turnstiles... At the center, was a rack for twisting arms and joints, as well as the low columns used for flagellating the prisoners...

The Hell was full during the holidays. A line of Jewish patriots awaited their turn to be beaten and tortured. A number of zealots and young sympathizers of the movement had died in that dungeon after receiving thirty-nine lashes...

Centurion: Hey, you my friend, let's see how many you can take...

They brought Jesus to one of the those shortened posts used for torture by lashing. The stone was still dripping with the blood of the previous victims...

Centurion: Will you talk or not?... I want the names of the conspirators.

Jesus: I won't say anything.

Centurion: Then we'll have to soften your tongue a little... Remove his robe. Tie him.

The executioner stripped Jesus almost naked and pushed him on to the post. His hands and feet were tied to an iron collar that was nailed to the base, such that his whole body, with his head bowed down, formed an arch over the stone... Then, the whip was lowered from the wall. It was a whip with eight leather strips, each with a small iron ball at one end, the size of an almond. These little balls had small hooks to tear the flesh of one's back...

Centurion: Talk! Where are these Galileans who made trouble during the holidays?... Who are your supporters here in the capital? Speak up, you wretch!...

The executioner pressed the wooden handle and the lashes just awaited the orders of the centurion...

Centurion: Begin.

The whip was raised in the air and landed violently on Jesus' naked back.

Centurion: Now, do you recall their names?... Not yet?... Whom are you working for?... Who pays you? ... C'mon, talk!... I command you to talk!...

The blood began to flow on his back. The little iron balls stuck to his flesh tearing and breaking it open....

Centurion: Now confess! Who are with you?... Where are your friends hiding...?

The executioner's whip continuously landed on the bent body of Jesus. In front of him, the centurion grabbed him by the hair, then lifted his face...

Centurion: Talk, you Jewish dog!... I command you!... Who are your companions? Where do they meet? ... Now, give it to him on the legs!

The executioner moved to the side and landed the whip on the back of his legs, on his calves, on the heels of his feet... Jesus' arched body collapsed on the post, as he began to suffocate...

Centurion: Confess! Who else are with you?... Damn it, beat him harder, till he talks!!

The Roman governor went down the courtyard and ordered the gates facing the patio opened, so that all of us who were shoving each other in front of the fortress could hear him... Then we noticed that a group of the family members and servants of the priests of the Temple and the magistrates of the Sanhedrin had sneaked into the first rows.... Pontius Pilate, seated on a Tribunal chair, demanded silence....

Pilate: Citizens, we are here on holidays. Rome is magnanimous and listens to the voice of the people. You are demanding freedom for the prisoners. Well then, that will be granted!

When the governor said that, all of us looked at each other with relief. Mary, Jesus' mother, who was beside me, gave a stunned smile, as if she could not believe what she heard... Pontius Pilate, well-shaven and wrapped in a purple robe, continued....

Pilate: I am granting amnesty to a prisoner, whom you yourselves will elect. Now you've heard it: Whom do you want me to release?

Paid Group: Release Barabbas! Release Barabbas!

People: Release Jesus! Release Jesus!

Everything went fast and was confusing... Those in the first row were frenetically clamoring for Barabbas. We, at the back, the great majority, shouted for Jesus... The governor raised his hands asking for silence...

Pilate: Silence!... I cannot hear you with such an uproar... Soldiers, control the mob... I repeat, whom do you want me to release?

The soldiers were pushing us backward with their shields and they were threatening us, as the group hired by the priests and the magistrates continued screaming, while being protected by the Roman troops...

Pilate: Very well. If the people want Barabbas, then Barabbas is free.

Two soldiers took up the zealot leader from the dungeon and set him free amid the multitude. Barabbas rubbed his skinned wrists, and without stopping to talk to anyone, slipped away, passing through the streets of Barrio Ephraim. Behind him were some soldiers who were secretly following him. Their mission was to arrest him when the holidays were over.

Meanwhile, in Hell...

Centurion: Who works with you? What are their names...?

The leather whip spurted blood on the walls of the prison cell. The small iron balls sunk deeper each time, into the broken tissues, becoming embedded in the ribs... Jesus' back was a mass of bloody flesh...

Centurion: Speak up, damn!... I command you to speak up!...

Executioner: This man can't talk anymore. He's almost dead.

Centurion: How many lashings did you give him?

Executioner: About thirty-nine already.

Centurion: Make it exact, then.

Executioner: What if he dies...?

Centurion: It doesn't matter anymore... Anyway, for the last time, talk! Tell me the names of your companions!

But Jesus did not say anything. When the centurion lifted his face, his eyes were expressionless. Jesus had passed out.

Centurion: Untie this hunk of raw flesh and throw him some place. Damn these people who won't talk.

He was so beaten he no longer looked like a man.

He was scourged, wounded, and humiliated, but no word came from his mouth.

He was maltreated by people without pity,

beaten to no end by the unjust,

yet he bore the pain for our sake.

Like a silent lamb to be sacrificed,

like a sheep, mute before those who shear him,

neither did he open his lips nor utter a word.

In the Credo, we say the following prayer: "...he was crucified, was dead and was buried, he descended into hell..." "To descend into hell" means that Jesus really died, just as all people are buried with the limitations and anguish of death. "Hell" in the traditional language of Israel was the "sheol," the abyss where everyone, good or bad, was bound to go at the end of life. It was a place of silence, of sadness, where there was no hope. In this episode, "hell" is the torture chamber of Antonia Fortress. Jesus also descended into this hell before going down to his death.

Rome tortured her prisoners. Jesus' death was murder, as decreed by the imperial power. We should not see in Jesus a criminal in solitary suffering or a man "who suffered most," the only one who went through bad times. Thousands of Israelites before him were tortured and crucified and thousands more would suffer later. It was not the people who recommended nor demanded the freedom of Barabbas, the zealot leader whom the authorities had long pursued, for his involvement in violent uprisings of the people. It was even possible that during the incidents of Palm Sunday in the Temple, Barabbas and the other revolutionary groups had taken advantage of the confusion to use arms and kill some soldiers. It was the religious authorities, together with the hired group, who wanted to release a prisoner as an act of "indulgence," to cover up with legalities the case against Jesus. It is very clear in the gospels that those who wanted Barabbas were the priests and his clique (Mk 15:11; Jn 19:6). At that time, the religious leaders and the Roman authorities preferred to free a zealot with violent ways rather than Jesus.

The Jewish laws allowed the scourging of the accused. Poles were used for this type of punishment and during gospel times, lashing was common in the synagogue. All the doctors and the magistrates were authorized to pass this punishment. Rape, calumny, transgression of the Law were enough motives to apply it. Later, the poles were replaced by a three-stripped whip. The lashings should not exceed 40 – thus, 30 were ordinarily given. Tradition dictated that a bare chest should receive 13 lashes, and the rest 13 on each side of the back. The Romans popularized this kind of torture. It was used for several motives: to castigate rebellious slaves; when soldiers, in their tour of duty, committed grave mistakes; as a type of

torture to obtain confessions from prisoners, and as a prelude to torture on the cross. Among the Romans, there were three types of whips. One consisted of three cords in which small pieces of bones were attached. The other two had cords fastened from end to end, with small balls of lead hanging at the end. One of these whips, the one with several long strips, was used with Jesus. Although the lashings totalled only 39, it was real, inhuman torture which often resulted in the death of the victim.

In the basilica of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, there is a small chapel where a post similar to those used in Jesus' time in lashing the prisoners, is still preserved. It is a black stone, thick and short, with iron rings to which the naked and arched body of the prisoner was fastened.

Jesus' silence before his tormentors should not be interpreted in this episode as a passive silence, a simplistic tameness, a vacuous "surrender" to his enemies. Yes, Jesus gave himself up for the sake of his companions, to save them. His was a unified silence so as not to betray anyone, in order not to compromise his friends. He did not open his mouth, according to the beautiful image of the Servant of Yahweh whom the prophet Isaiah had already announced (Is 53:3-7). While he opened his mouth with firmness to denounce the unjust, he did not do so when the lives of the rest were at stake. His unified silence has made him a brother to thousands of men and women who in their moments of torture, knew how to resist to the point of death, in order not to betray their companions in the struggle.

(Mt 27:26; Mk 15:15; Jn 19:1)

119

A Crown of Thorns

Centurion: Governor Pilate, we have given the Nazarene 39 lashings as ordered by the law.

Pilate: Were you able to get anything?

Centurion: Nothing. Not even a word. It's like milking a stone.

Pilate: He's not a Jew for nothing! A breed of stubborn brutes! I'm sick and tired of these people and all their troubles, damn it!

Centurion: The truth is, this beast won't last anymore, Governor. The prisoner is beaten to a pulp....

Pilate: Then release him. See to it that Caiphas and his gang don't bother me anymore.

Centurion: Caiphas and his gang are waiting for his Excellency outside....

Pilate: May the god Pluto take them to hell!... Say, where is this man?

Centurion: The Nazarene?

Pilate: Yeah.

Centurion: He's still in the pits with the soldiers, Governor.

A Soldier: It's your turn, Tatus!

Tatus: Hell! Here, everybody falls asleep... And with this heat!

Fatso: C'mon, man, cast the dice again...

Soldier: Three and two! You lost, Tatus! You'll be the little king!

To kill boredom for two long hours, the Roman soldiers played dice in the humid and stinking prison cells of the Antonia Fortress...

Fatso: Hey, have this rascal blindfolded!

The game of the little king was very popular in our country. A roulette was drawn on the floor with several drawings, and the dice were thrown over them. The loser had to be king and blindfolded, and guess who among his companions hit him...

Tatus: Hey, don't make the blindfold too tight, I'm not going to cheat!

Another Soldier: Look what I brought you, buddies...!

Tatus: Lemme see... Well, well! What have you done to the Jewish prophet!... He's been beaten to a pulp!

Another Soldier: What did you expect... He's a very dangerous man.

A strong and stout soldier dragged Jesus to one of the corners of the jail and left him there to die. His almost naked body doubled up as he tried to catch his breath. From his back, furrowed by lashes, flowed trickles of blood forming little pools on the wet soil...

Fatso: But, why did you bring him here?

Another Soldier: You know how it is in "Hell?" A cage full of birds like him!... It's during the holidays when we have to work hard to make them sing... This man was a pest and I was ordered to take him some place... Here, take him! He's all yours!

Tatus: So this is the famous "prophet," ha, ha, ha...

The soldier leaned and grabbed Jesus by the hair to get a glimpse of his face...

Tatus: Bah... this "was" the prophet... but now, he's no more than trash. He's a goner. It's best to throw him on to the dunghill for the vultures to feast on him.

Another Soldier: You won't believe this, but this fellow is strong... He was able to stand the thirty-nine lashings... This morning, two of his type didn't last half the trip...

Fatso: Agitators! That's what they get... and more! For being meddlesome....

Tatus: A few months ago, I met one of these revolutionaries... You should have heard him speak...! But his bragging didn't last, you know.

Fatso: Hey, enough of this and let's go on with our game... Will you stay, Fatso? We cast the dice, making Tatus the little king...

Soldier: Listen. Wasn't this Jesus arrested because he said he was king of the Jews...? Well, let him be the king! What do you think?

Tatus: Ha, ha, ha! That's a good idea!... C'mon, let's sit him here... Get something to blindfold him...

Fatso: That's it...

Tatus: Not my scarf, damn it.... Look for an old rag over there, hurry.

Fatso: Shall we go, your Majesty, the Messiah? Ha!

Two soldiers lifted Jesus from the ground and dragged him to a small stone bench at the center of the prison cell used to torture the prisoners... They sat him there...

Tatus: Ha! What a throne! What do you say?

Soldier: Cover his "nakedness" Tatus!... A king in the nude loses some dignity... Ha, ha, ha...!

Tatus: You're right... Does your Majesty want to be caressed? Hmm... Here, take it!!

The soldier kicked him in the balls... Jesus' face contracted in pain...

Tatus: You don't play easy with Rome, my friend... Do you want another one?

Fatso: Have him blindfolded, man... Otherwise, the game won't be fun...

Tatus: Okay, put on this rag... Didn't your Jewish countrymen say that their prophets foresee everything? Well then, let him guess who's giving him the blows!

Jesus' eyes were blindfolded. Since he could hardly support himself, one of the soldiers, held his shoulders from behind to sustain him....

Tatus: Tell us, petty king, who gave you the blow?

The first blow landed on his face, shaking his whole body...

Tatus: C'mon, say something! Aren't you a prophet? Then, do your job well, my friend! We, the Romans, have done our job: keeping you at bay... Now, brave man, speak... we're listening to you...!

Fatso: We're all ears, King of Israel!

Soldier: Hey, man, it's my turn now.... Take it! Now guess, prophet!

Jesus would have fallen on the ground if the soldier had not held him from behind. Like a pair of pincers, his hands were stuck on Jesus' blood-drenched back...

Soldier: You're not very good at this game, my friend. You neither cackle nor lay eggs! Ha, ha, ha!

Fatso: Hey, this is getting to be boring...

Soldier: Leave him alone... They'll come for him soon... I think they're gonna release him... The governor doesn't want any trouble with him... The people are pretty agitated out there...

Fatso: Ha! Of course, since he claims to be the Messiah!

Tatus: The Messiah! It's not always that you have the Messiah in your hands! You should take advantage! Ha, ha, ha...!

Soldier: Listen. Why don't we dress him up like a king? If indeed he is the Messiah... So when they free him, this mob will acclaim him as he deserves...

Tatus: Exactly!... Here, let me take care of the crown!

Fatso: Be back soon, for his Majesty is in a hurry!

Soldier: Meanwhile, let's have a cloak for the king, buddies!

Fatso: That one over there will do! Bring it here! Ha, ha, hay!

A young soldier, with a pimpled face, took a red rag from the floor, which, for a time must have been the cloak of someone in the group, and now was just lying in one corner, greasy and full of dust...

Soldier: Perfect! King Messiah, the people are entrusting into your hands, the care of the kingdom!

They put the red rag over his wounded and blood-stained back, pressing it on to his wounds.... Jesus gave a groan, blinded by the unbearable pain....

Soldier: That's what you get for pretending to be a savior! Leave us alone, my friend! Here, everyone must save his own skin!

Fatso: Take off his blindfold!... He ought to see his royal bearing!

Tatus: Here's the crown, pals. What do you think?

Soldier: Not even King David whom these Jews revere, had it better!

It was a skullcap of blackberry thorns, almost dried, which the soldier had pulled from the patio of the guards. Two of them hurriedly made a braid of that macabre cap.

Soldier: Hell! This really pricks, huh!

Tatus: Put it on his head, and we'll adjust it!

Soldier: You deserve this crown, for being so stubborn, you rebellious little king!

The soldier placed the crown of thorns on Jesus' dishevelled hair...

Tatus: The crown has not really touched his royal head!

Soldier: Go get a sceptre...!

They brought an olive stick, knotty and twisted, which was used to beat the prisoners...

Tatus: Let's go inside! Here...! Each one must hold the sceptre and pledge obedience to the petty king, c'mon!

With the stick, they hit down on the crown, to make it settle on Jesus' head. The thorns, sharp and hard as needles, penetrated through the skin of the head and the forehead... From Jesus' face flowed thick trickles of blood...

Soldier: At your orders, your Majesty! Here, take it...!

One of the thorns got stuck in the right eye of Jesus. A whitish liquid mixed with the blood flowed

onto his cheeks...

Tatus: Hey man, you don't do that to our king! If he becomes blind, he won't see how his subjects revere him!

Having gotten tired of beating him, the soldiers placed the olive stick in Jesus' lifeless hands, and began to gather around him, making faces and kneeling before him...

Soldier: Cheers to the king of the Jews!

Tatus: To your health, your Majesty, the Messiah!

Soldier: Hey, but hasn't anyone noticed that our king has grown his beard? This can't be!... Do you hear, my friends?... We'll have to shave you! This is a Roman custom and we've got to comply with it... Is that okay, huh?

Jesus trembled. The soldier, heading the group grabbed his bloodstained, curly and abundant hair with his two hands... then he started to pull it off forcefully... Pulled from the roots, some of the hair got stuck with the skin, causing the blood to flow profusely from the shaven cheeks...

Soldier: This is it, your Majesty! Now we can recognize you as our Caesar! Ha, ha...!

Tatus: Cheers to the king of the Jews!

Soldier: Look at him, look at him tremble.... That's how these men are... They seem very boastful in the beginning, but the moment you lay your hands on them, they even pee out of fear...!

Fatso: I knew something was missing here! Perfumes to anoint our king! You, go get the bedpans from the small room...!

The soldiers, trained by their chiefs to make a mockery of their prisoners, laughed boisterously... One of them came shortly, with a metal container, which the group used in jail for their necessities.

Tatus: Give me, give me, I myself will anoint him!... Long live the king of urine!

Excrement and urine fell on Jesus' head, flowing through the red cloak and over his chest... The air was filled with a nauseating odor...

Fatso: What a stink this king of the Jews makes, fellas!

Jesus felt violent throbbings all over his body caused by the thorns on his head... His face was bathed in blood, dripping slowly down his naked chest... The merciless laughter of the soldiers got on his nerves like stones being hurled from a dark and bottomless pit, into which he was sinking... He felt completely desolate... The smell of the excrement was unbearable... He opened the one eye left unhurt by his torturers, to take a look at those who were mocking him.... and he wept.... His tears, saltier than his blood, rolled down his cheeks, which had become raw flesh... He felt he was going to faint, and with his remaining strength, wished to die....

This is not a fear-inspiring episode. It does not look for easy sensationalism, nor is it horror-fiction. Perhaps, sometimes we run out of words, trying to describe the pain of a man or a woman humiliated and shattered by torture. Jesus was one of these people. His physical dignity, his moral integrity, his very faith itself, suffered severe blows in the prison cell of the Antonia Fortress. If Jesus precedes us on our way, if by his faith, in the midst of trials, he became the pioneer of those who gave their commitment in the name of justice (Heb 12:2) then it was also because he was able to endure the depth of the pain of torture.

In the passion accounts, the evangelists are consistent in showing the three moments where Jesus was the object of the mockery of the powerful. The Levites-police in the service of the Sanhedrin priests, played with him some kind of a game called "the blindman's buff," making him guess the person who beat him (Lk 22:63-65). In the second moment, Herod and his corrupt court mock him by throwing over his shoulders a red cloak and a crown, making him king of the nation (Lk 22:11). Lastly, the Roman soldiers

humiliate Jesus casting a red cloak on his shoulders and crowning him with thorns, symbols of royalty, since the time of the Greeks.

On the pavement still preserved in the Paved Patio of the Antonia Fortress, there are some interesting inscriptions that will make one understand the game played by the soldiers with Jesus while he was a prisoner. In one tile can be seen carved by knife, a type of a board with small compartments (like a small parcheesi). According to some researchers, this game, which consisted basically of having tokens pass over small boxes or compartments until reaching a goal, which at the end gave a reward to the winner: making the losers king and putting them to tests. The game was called “the game of the scorpion” or “of the little king.” At that moment, the soldiers must have played this game with Jesus who was their humiliated little king.

The court of Antonia Fortress was composed of men belonging to the auxiliary troops recruited by Rome in the provinces under their dominion. These troops were different from those of the legions, which fought in wars. As a whole, they were composed of Roman citizens. In the province of Judea, the auxiliary troops also integrated foreigners from the different areas of Palestine. A majority of those who served in the Antonia Tower were Sebastenes, from the central lands of Samaria. The Jews were exempted from rendering this type of military service to the invader. The group was composed of people from a lower social status; with no scruples, soldiers were indoctrinated by their chiefs to engage in repression.

Everything is humiliating in this scene. The only dignifying thing in it is Jesus’ resistance, his firm silence, his unbending spirit. Forgiveness of one’s enemy, non-violence, the very mystery of sin, individual as well as structural (the evil in the heart of the torturer, the evil in the structure that produces evil persons), find a very special meaning within the framework of torture.

(Mt 27:27-30; Mk 15:16-19; Jn 19:2-3)

120

This Is the Man

It was about noontime. Together with a multitude of pilgrims from Galilee and neighbors from Jerusalem, all crammed into the space in front of the Antonia Fortress, we continued shouting, demanding freedom for Jesus...

Centurion: If they don’t stop, I’ll order my lancers to pierce them like they do the dogs!

The centurion’s threat was futile. Not even the rain, persistently dropping over the city of David, drenching everything and soaking us to the bones, succeeded in stopping us... The sky was completely sealed, as well as the windows and doors of the Roman fortress, where Pontius Pilate, the Governor, shielded himself.

Centurion: Governor, the people are getting more agitated.

Pilate: You need not tell me, centurion. I can hear them from here.

Centurion: Shall I disperse them, Governor?

Pilate: Yes, and never let them assemble again! They’re like a plague of mosquitoes. You kill one, and a hundred more come. You kill a hundred, and a thousand follow!... Stubborn fools!... I’m sick and tired of these people. For seven years, I’ve been nailing them on crosses, silencing their lips with soil and stones, but to no avail: Damn these people!

Centurion: Shall I disperse them, Governor...?

Pilate: What the hell is happening here? I already released one prisoner, whom they clamored for.... What more do they want?

Centurion: The same thing, Governor. Those behind are demanding freedom for this guy from Nazareth. Those in front want him dead.

Pilate: Well, let them agree, so they can leave me in peace. Deliver the prisoner to them. Let them do what they want with him.

At that same hour, in a little hut in Barrio Ophel, Judas, from Iscariot, was arguing with one of the zealot leaders...

Judas: That's what you promised me, and you can't backtrack now!

Zealot: But Judas, comrade, try to understand. Fifty of our men have been hurt in front of Herod's palace. They even slashed the hands of a little boy. I saw it myself.

Judas: I don't care what you've seen, you promised me...

Zealot: The city was not like it is today. Jerusalem now is like a garrison. There are more soldiers now than ever before. Much more than those who, from the towers of Siloh, had taken to the streets. Once you move....

Judas: Right now, in front of the Antonia Tower there are thousands protesting. All they need are weapons. Where are they? Now's the time to do something!

Zealot: Now is the time to keep cool, Judas, and wait for the holidays to pass.

Judas: Damn it, you yourselves had said we had to take the opportunity!

Zealot: That's right, but you see, we've changed our plans, buddy.... We've got to be realistic.

Judas: Realistic?... cowards! That's what you are, a bunch of cowards and traitors. You betrayed me... I gave away my chief, because it was necessary to awaken the people... What shall I do now? What shall I do now?!

Zealot: Easy now, Judas. Of course you did what you could.... so did we. But politics is like gambling, you know. Sometimes you win, other times you lose.

Judas: And this game has cost the life of a man, do you hear?

Zealot: I'm sorry, believe me, my friend. I'm really sorry, Jesus was a good man, that's right, but now... but now, we can't do anything for him....

Judas: Damn all of you! If you can't do anything, then I will do something, and you'll see...!

Zealot: Wait, buddy, wait...!

Governor Pilate slammed the door and hurriedly descended the stairs of the fortress. He headed for the paved courtyard, where we had been shouting outrageously for quite some time.... The Governor was also furious... The uproar heightened as we saw him come...

A Man: Freedom for Jesus! Freedom for the prisoners!

John: Pilate will have to give in!

Magdalene: Or else his ears will explode with so much screaming. Damn, they'll have to release the Moreno!... Mary, stop weeping and shout with us, c'mon!

John: Don't despair, Mary. They can't do anything to Jesus... that's why we're here!

More and more people joined us in front of the gates of the Antonia Fortress... Mary, Jesus' mother, and the other Mary, the Magdalene, were with us, one on each side... We tried to move forward, from among that sea of faces, but the hired group of the priests and the soldiers' barricade prevented us from advancing...

Magdalene: Demons, how much do you think these dirty slobs were paid?

John: Let them scream, Magdalene. We are the majority! Pilate will have to listen to us!

A Man: Hey, friend, they say the Governor has ordered the release of the Nazarene!

Magdalene: Really, countryman?

Man: That's right, I think they're bringing him out!

Magdalene: We told you, Mary. The stone has finally melted...!

John: Look, look, they're opening the door...!

We still didn't know that Jesus had been tortured and subjected to lashings. That's why, when the little door facing the dungeons of the tower was opened and we saw him appear, we covered our faces in horror... I shall never forget that moment... Mary, who was beside me, became livid and held on to my arm firmly to avoid falling... No, that almost lifeless being could never have been Jesus... Two soldiers dragged him along, supporting him beneath his arms... leaving him in the middle of the patio. Everyone kept silent before that bent figure with a crown of thorns on his head, and a red cloak over his naked and bloodstained body... Jesus, who could hardly stand, tried to look up, in vain... Pontius Pilate approached him and with the tip of his sword held close to his chin, lifted his head for everyone to see the prisoner...

Pilate: This is the man!... You can have him, he's all yours... Do whatever you wish with this trash and bother me no more!

Then he pushed Jesus brutally toward the mob that was crowding the huge iron doors... A loud, deafening cry was heard... We, from the back, tried to break away from the soldiers' barricade, shouting and raising our fists, finding our way to rescue him... But it was all futile... The hired group from the first row, like enraged beasts at the smell of blood, lunged at Jesus, pushing him back again toward the Tilings...

Hired Group: Crucify him, crucify him!!

Jesus slid through the wet tiles of the patio, and fell on the floor. He was like a beaten dog, his back showing a mass of raw flesh, even some of his ribs sticking out...

Hired Group: Crucify him, crucify him!

As the tumult heightened, the Roman troops tightened their shields and lifted their lances, as they awaited orders from the Governor...

Judas: They're going to kill Jesus... but only after I cut off the heads of a dozen of these swine...!

Shortly after leaving the hut of the zealot leader, Judas, trembling with rage, rushed toward the palace of the high priest Caiphas, in search of the commandant of the Temple guards.

Commandant: We were waiting for you, little parrot. What? Do you need the other thirty pieces of silver?

Judas: I came to return these...

Judas threw the pieces of silver and drew a knife from underneath his robe...

Judas: ...and to kill all of you!

He attacked the commandant of the guards... He was driven mad and he did not know what he was doing... After some moments of struggling, the commandant seized the knife from him and kicked him out the door...

Commandant: Get out of here, imbecile!... Are you having regrets?... The bird is now in his cage... and the rest... that's your own problem!

The Roman soldiers, armed with lances and clubs, were able to control the avalanche of people as we tried to push from behind to enter the paved patio... Pontius Pilate went from one end of the tribunal to the other, getting more and more irritated with the situation... Those in front, who were paid by the priests and the magistrates, came face to face with the Governor...

A Man: This man is blasphemous, he ought to die!

Hired Group: Crucify him, crucify him!

A Woman: He made a mockery of the Temple!

Another Man: He calls himself king of the Jews!

Pilate: If he is your king, then take him away and leave me in peace!

A Woman: Our king is Caesar in Rome! If you release him, you might find yourself in trouble with Rome!

Hired Group: Crucify him, crucify him!

Pilate: I've had enough, you sons of bitches, enough!!

Governor Pilate violently folded the whip in his hands and furiously faced the mob...

Pilate: He will be crucified, yes, he will be crucified, and may the fires of hell gobble him up and all of you!

Amid shouts and curses of the crowd, Pontius Pilate ascended the platform and sat in the tribunal chair, on whose high back the figure of the Roman eagle, golden and resplendent, spread its wings...

Pilate: Scribe, bring the small board immediately!

The scribe gave it to him. The Governor marked it with the seal of his ring and gave it back. Then the scribe signalled the town crier, who read the sentence aloud, atop a small stone bench...

Town Crier: "The Governor of Judea, representative in this province of the Emperor, Tiberius, condemns to death this rebel called Jesus, for the serious crime of conspiracy against the Roman authority. I, Pontius Pilate, do affix my signature, in this city of Jerusalem, this day, Friday, the 14th month of Nissan."

Judas learned about the sentence while running toward the Antonia Fortress. He was told that Jesus was beaten to a pulp. He felt the earth opening up beneath his feet... He dared not proceed to the fortress... He ran through the wet streets and out of the city, crossing the Cedron bridge... Breathlessly, he reached the garden where a few hours before, he had seen Jesus for the last time, after which he had delivered him to the Temple guards....

Judas: How did it turn out like this?... Why?... Jesus, my comrade, forgive me... Forgive me and let me be gone before you...

Nobody saw the tears of Judas. No one was there with him when he pulled out from his waist the rope he used to adorn his robe; when he climbed an olive tree, tied the robe to one of its twisted branches and, after making a knot, passed it through his neck...

Judas: God!... Oh God!... If you are a Father, as Jesus used to say, you will understand me...!

He said no more. He leaped and hanged himself... He was still wearing the yellow scarf around his neck, a present for a grandson of one of the Maccabees...

Meanwhile, in the Antonia Fortress...

Claudia: But Pontius, for gods' sake, what have you done?

Pilate: What I ought to have done. Condemn him to death.

Claudia: I told you not to stain your hands with the blood of this man.

Pilate: Don't you tell me that. Go and tell it yourself to the SCREAMING people outside.

Claudia: Have you signed other sentences?

Pilate: Yes, two more. One for a certain Gestas, a conspirator. And the other one was for Dimas, who was involved in politics. Plus that of the Nazarene, that makes three all in all.

Claudia: You shouldn't have done that to the Nazarene... Wait here, Pontius, please, and don't move...

Claudia Proculus, the wife of the Roman Governor, hurriedly got a jar of water and an earthen bowl...

Pilate: What's that for?

Claudia: To stave off the blood... Come, wash your hands... and may the gods protect us!

Pilate: To hell with the gods and your fears!

Claudia: Blood brings bad luck, Pontius.

Pilate: No, Claudia. Blood brings blood... and more blood. That's all.

Down the patio, a row of soldiers pushed us back, those who continued protesting and cursing the Governor. Upon orders of the centurion, the others condemned, Dimas and Gestas, came up from the pits. They were two young zealots who were also to be crucified that morning. The executioners had already prepared the three crosses for the final torment.

There is nothing majestic in Jesus when Pilate presents him to the multitude clamoring for his freedom. He is nothing but a tatter. He is the faithful Servant spoken of by Isaiah, hundreds of years before (Is 53:1-3). Nevertheless, in spite of his being a nobody, for the believers, "this is the man." His faithfulness to God and to his brothers and sisters, his commitment to life and justice no matter the cost – this is the man.

No matter how he washed his hands, Pilate is ultimately responsible for the death of Jesus, since he was the highest legal authority responsible for that sentence; for without his approval, the decision made by the Sanhedrin would not have been valid. This is recorded in history, just as it is manifested in the Credo: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate..." The other culprits brought Jesus before the Roman governor: the priests and the pharisees, who not only condemned him for "religious" motives, but also because this man was endangering the whole Roman system. Thus, Jesus met his death as a political criminal, accused of subversion against the Roman empire. He was tortured and executed as happened to the zealots and the rebellious slaves: on the cross. On his back he carried the accusation of the priests who sent him to death as "cursed" by God and a rebel before the Law. The Jews did not kill Jesus. This false idea has pervaded the minds of Christians through the centuries, and has become almost a dogma. Unfortunately this brought horrible consequences for the Jews of all times: discrimination, hatred, persecution, ghettos. The country of Israel – where Jesus, Mary, Peter, John and all the men and women, protagonists in the Bible, were born – was a country like any other, with virtues and flaws, but profoundly faithful to God and his traditions. The people could not be held responsible for the death of their prophet; unlike the leaders, the powerful priests of the Temple who allied themselves with the Roman empire. Thus, all the anti-semitic attitude based on the horrendous "evil" in these people who "killed God," is the result of ignorance and, of historical injustice.

The suicide of Judas is the only suicide related in the NT and practically in the whole Bible (another unique case is found in the OT). In this episode, the suicidal act is situated in consonance with the reasons, according to the account, given by Judas in delivering Jesus to the authorities. Judas' desperation must have been so awful, after knowing that no popular uprising was to take place, that Jesus was to die and with him – the plan of the Kingdom of God, for which they had worked together. It is not difficult to imagine the feelings of Judas during those moments during which the entire city was living in a real state of agitation. It was Judas who was immediately "responsible" for all this. Shame before his companions, pain for Jesus, rage against himself, desperation before God, contempt for his fellow zealots.... Judas had no way out and thought that the only way out was death. To wash away the sin and to flee from that enormous burden that was consuming him, he chose suicide, desiring to escape and atone. That is why it should inspire understanding and respect.

The figure of Judas, to a certain extent, has been used as a scapegoat for past sins and sins to be. Some have thought that if there is anybody in hell, then it is Judas, and no one else. The basis for this is found in a phrase addressed to him by Jesus at the last supper (Mt 26:24). This interpretation is unfounded. On the other hand, it seems very probable that this phrase is nothing but an addition as a dramatic warning to the communities which Matthew and Mark had incorporated in their gospel, putting it in the mouth of Jesus to give it more effect, and relating it to Judas to give it historical impact. It could be a warning for the members of the first Christian communities not to betray their companions. Those were times of secrecy and severe persecution against the Christians. Sometimes, there were denunciations, and

an indiscreet act could mean death for someone in the community. This phrase, therefore, expresses a general principle that should be read not as “hell” for Judas as an individual, but as a collective norm for all: it is better not have been born to a Christian community if in the end, it will lead to betrayal of your brothers and sisters.

(Mt 27:3-5 and 15-26; Mk 15:6-15; Lk 23:13-25; Jn 18:39-40; 19:4-16)

121

The Road to Golgotha

A Soldier: Out of the way, you filthy pigs! Out of here! Damn this mob!

Another Soldier: Wait till you have your own crosses too!

Soldier: Give way, scoundrels!

Several Roman soldiers on horseback were lashing their whips to disperse the multitude shoving one another beside the huge doors of the Antonia Fortress. The death sentence of Jesus was already signed. Full of anger and deception, we did not give up easily and we continued protesting in front of the Roman fortress...

Mary: Now we can't do anything, John, anything at all...!

John: Swine, swine...!

Magdalene: You'll pay for this, scoundrels, sons of bitches!

The furious Magdalene did not stop screaming... I was with her and the other women, near the main door of the Tilings. Mary, Jesus' mother, her eyes red, was crying disconsolately. Susana and Salome were supporting her. The time to accompany the condemned to their death had come... The soldiers fought the enraged multitude by pushing and lashing at them...

A Man: Pilate, murderer!

John: Down with Caiphas and his cohorts!

A Soldier: Let's give it to this mob once and for all. Let the horses run over them!

Soldier: Out of here, damn! Clear the way!

The soldiers cracked their whips furiously on the wet stones, driving away the people in between shouting... But when the horses had gone a little further, the multitude began to gather once again... Hoarse from shouting and drenched by the incessant rain, we challenged the soldiers up to the last moment...

A Man: Murderers! The blood of the prophet shall fall upon you!

John: Someday we shall clip the wings of the Roman eagle!

A Woman: And topple down the Antonia Fortress!

Magdalene: From its very foundations!

In the Tilings, the troops with their iron armour and red cloaks surrounded Jesus and the two zealots to prevent the avalanche from breaking the barrier and attacking them. The squad was about to move...

A Soldier: Here get your prize, you wretched people. You asked for it so you get it. C'mon, lift your arms.

The soldiers tied the transversal poles between the napes and arms of the three condemned men, in the style of a yoke...

Another Soldier: Now, you... idiot....

Dimas and Gestas were two young men like Jesus. They had been confined in jail for a few hours, and although they were tortured, they did not receive the terrible lashings like Jesus did.

Soldier: It's your turn, Nazarene...

The two sustained the wooden beam well, but not Jesus. He was staggering... The weight of the black beam, stained with blood of the other crucified victims, was too much for him, and he fell flat on his face, on the floor of the patio...

Soldier: Hey, what stuff is this "prophet" made of? On your feet!... Bring me a rope, you.

Two soldiers helped Jesus stand, without removing his arms from the beam. Then the centurion tied a thick rope around his waist with which to pull him, and tied it to the saddle of one of the horses...

Soldier: Hooo! Hoorse!

Another Soldier: Move! To Golgotha we go!

Four soldiers on horseback, brandishing their whips from one side to another, started the march. Among them, the town crier, making noise with a rattle, announced to the entire city the crime of the culprits. Behind, Dimas, Gestas and Jesus, carrying their cross on their shoulders, were guarded by two rows of soldiers...

A Woman: Long live the prophet from Galilee!

As Jesus passed through the huge door of the Tilings and appeared in the street, the people began to applaud. The applause grew uncontrollable among the multitude. The people who loved him and had acclaimed him in the Temple only a few days ago, beside the hateful Roman fortress tried to cheer him up and give him strength on the way to his death...

A Man: You've been a courageous man, Nazarene!

A Woman: May the Lord sustain you till the end... and have compassion on our people!

John: What a misfortune for the country... all those who speak the truth find a terrible end!

The troop cordoning the condemned men, fearful of an uprising, shoved us with their shields. A number of us slipped and fell on the ground. Pushed by an uncontrollable crowd, and ignoring the Roman arms, we started to walk behind the three condemned men... When the squad took to the street of the marketplace, Pontius Pilate, who had witnessed everything from one of the balconies, reluctantly shut the window of the praetorium.

Pilate: Pfff...! at last!

Soldier: Governor, a group of magistrates wishes to speak with you.

Pilate: What do they want this time?

Soldier: It's about what you ordered to be written on the small board carried by the prisoners.

When Jesus was leaving the Tilings, he, like the rest of those condemned to die, carried on his neck a piece of wooden board on which was written the reason for the sentence. In the heading could be read: "The king of the Jews," in Latin, Greek and Hebrew...

Magistrate: We deem it of great importance to clarify this point...

Pilate: What point? Dammit!

Magistrate: It is not right that his Excellency has ordered that the phrase "The king of the Jews" be written.

Pilate: And may I know why?

Magistrate: We are of the opinion that the following should have been written instead: "This man has said: I am the king of the Jews"... You understand, Governor: how can this filthy man be king...? Precisely, he is guilty of "having declared himself king..." Am I understood, your Excellency?

Pilate: You have explained it very well... But I'm sick and tired of this Galilean and with all of you! Now, go to hell, all of you! What is written is written... and I don't intend to change even a single letter of it!

Town Crier: This is how the rebels against Rome will have their end! Your sons will suffer the same fate if

they continue to conspire against the imperial eagle!... Long live Caesar and death to the rebels!...

The town crier, a bald, short man, cupped his hands over his mouth to announce the crime committed by the prisoners. His nasalized voice was drowned by the screaming multitude gathered along the road to be traversed by the condemned... I found Peter and James in one corner... They got a scared look in their eyes.... They felt downcast.... Further ahead, I also saw the others from the group, lost among the people...

A Man: This is the end of the story of the "Messiah"....

Magistrate: Blessed be God, we were able to settle this matter once and for all!

Man: Look at the multitude, magistrate. If it had not been controlled, I wouldn't know where we would have been...

The retinue had not gone very far, when Jesus, who was the last, and extremely exhausted, fell on the slimy mud in the street...

A Woman: But, don't they pity this man...?

A Soldier: On your feet, Nazarene, for we're in a hurry... Let's go!

Another Soldier: He can't go another step... He's all beaten up!

Soldier: Oh yes, he can... here, take it!

Two soldiers kicked Jesus to make him stand. The man holding the rope pulled it, trying to lift him... The people milled around him... Then we drew closer... Through his tattered robe, we could see his wounded body...

Soldier: Lift the wooden pole from his body, maybe he'll rise up again...

Another Soldier: This man is dying...

The centurion ordered the wooden pole removed from his shoulders. Jesus, was gasping for breath...

Soldier: He won't make it to Golgotha... He'll die along the road...

Another Soldier: Nonsense! He must be hung on the cross! That's the order! Hey, you, you... right, you... the big one... come over here...

Cyrene: Why?

Soldier: You may remove your cloak now...

Cyrene: But, I haven't done anything... I haven't uttered a word...

Soldier: C'mon, you'll have to carry the beam!... This filthy man has to make it alive outside the city...

Cyrene: Listen, soldier. I just came from work in the field. I swear by my life, I haven't gotten involved in politics!

Soldier: Hell! Guards, bring him here!

Simon, a big and strong peasant from the region of Cyrene, with sunburned skin, wanted to get lost among the crowd, but he was held and pushed by the soldiers... The centurion made him carry the load of Jesus...

Cyrene: Damn it! What have I done to deserve this?

The execution squad continued its march in the rain. Simon, carrying the cross uphill, was behind Jesus, who had to drag himself in order to walk... His feet, naked and wounded, kept sliding on the slippery street... When we were at Barrio Ephraim, close to the walls of the city, we saw at the corner of the so-called Fig Tree, a group of women from the Confraternity of Mercy, drenched in their black cloaks, weeping loudly beating their breasts.

Women: Have mercy on them, God of Israel! Take pity on the criminals! Look not on their many sins!

The squad stopped. This was the custom. Those women from the wealthy class of the capital went to street, out of charity, to weep and wail for the condemned... Jesus lifted his head... With sunken and

bloodstained eyes, he tried to look at them....

Women: Look not on their sins, God of Israel! Pardon their rebellion!

Jesus: Weep not for me but for yourselves, and your husbands who are responsible for this! And prepare yourselves, women. If they were able to do this to the green wood, they will even do the worse to the dry!

Soldier: Shut up! See how this man talks now! Go on, walk, walk! Move on!

Reaching the gate of Ephraim, the multitude squeezed each other behind the culprits to be able to get out of the city. But the soldiers got in the middle and with their lances positioned, prevented us from doing so...

Soldier: You can't pass here! It's prohibited! Orders from the Governor!

Another Soldier: Turn around and go back to your houses! The party's over!

But the people pushed with all their might, and at the first instance, the disconcerted soldiers had to stay away. The Magdalene, Mary and I, succeeded in breaking into the ring, passing to the other side of the wall together with a handful of men and women... Mary ran toward Jesus, who had fallen again on the ground... She leaned and tried to lift him....

Mary: Jesus, my son... my son...

Soldier: Leave him alone, woman. You can't go near him...

Mary: I'm his mother... Jesus... Jesus...

Jesus, making a great effort, straightened up slowly to look at his mother... Feeling so weak, he collapsed on the wet ground... Two soldiers pushed Mary away from him... On the barren hill of Golgotha, already stood the three wooden crosses....

The road traversed by Jesus to Calvary, his way of the cross, started from the Antonia Fortress beside the Temple, crossing the city through the barrios of the north up to the gate of Ephraim, through which he passed on his way to Golgotha outside the city. The road is presently called the Via Dolorosa, which is a long and winding street of Jerusalem, steep like the rest of the streets in the old city. It ends up in the Basilica of the Holy Tomb. Today, it is difficult to ascertain if the layout of this road corresponds to the exact route undertaken by Jesus two thousand years ago. Nevertheless, pilgrims from all over the world reenact it in a procession held on Good Friday every year. Throughout this Via Dolorosa, various churches and places recall the 14 stations or phases, which, for many years, tradition has set as highlights of Jesus' journey to the cross. Some of these stations are based on the evangelical texts and others – that of Veronica, the encounter with Mary and the three falls – take their origin from the tradition of the people who faithfully observe this pious exercise of the via crucis.

It was the Roman custom to make the condemned carry to his final destination, not the entire cross (as shown in images) but only the transversal beam, called the "patibulum." This wooden beam was placed behind the nape and had to be supported by the arms tied to the same. The wood was positioned over the shoulders like a yoke. This was extremely painful for a man who had been tortured. This explains the enormous suffering of Jesus, forcing the soldiers to ask the help of Simon from Cyrene.

The two revolutionary zealots were also brought to be crucified, together with Jesus. They were not thieves but political criminals. The Greek word used in the gospel is "lestai," the same word used to refer to the militant members of this guerrilla group. The names of Dimas and Gestas are not historical but traditional. The wooden beams carried by the three condemned would absorb the blood of many other condemned men. Jesus was not the only crucified man in history. Neither was his case exceptional during that day. On a white piece of wood was written the cause of his condemnation. This piece of wood (the "title") was carried by a town crier before the criminal or it was hung on his neck. To go through the streets carrying the wooden beam on one's shoulders and bearing the title on the neck was the ultimate form of humiliation which a criminal could be subjected to before meeting his death. This was done to

teach future troublemakers a lesson and to serve as a warning to them. The *via crucis* was more of an act of repression on the part of the establishment. The title given by Pilate to Jesus indicated the reason for his condemnation:

“Jesus, the Nazarene, king of the Jews.” The final accusation against Jesus was therefore political. It was like saying: This man is condemned for pretending to be the representative of these people. In the word “king” the Jews read “the Messiah.” In any case, the “king” of the Jews was then Caesar, and for any political leader to enter within this reality was to challenge the empire. The title was written in three languages: Hebrew, Latin and Greek. In the language of his own, in the language of the empire, and in the language of the Greeks, the actual foreigners present during the holidays. It was important for Rome that the title be well understood by the thousands of visitors in Jerusalem; it must be made very clear how Rome castigated her agitators. The INRI found in a number of crucifixes is the abbreviated form of the condemnation in Latin: “Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum.”

The soldiers sought the help of a bystander, a certain Simon of Cyrene, to help Jesus to his final journey and to keep him from dying along the road. Cyrene was an area of Africa where present-day Libya is located. That foreign Greek colony, which later became a province of Rome, had been inhabited by a number of Jews. Some of them came for the feast of the Passover, while others were born there and resided in Jerusalem. The gospel of Mark (Mk 15:21) tells us that Simon of Cyrene was the father of Alexander and Rufo. Certainly, these two young men were part of the Christian communities for whom this gospel was written. In one of his letters, Paul mentions a certain Rufo who could have been the son of this Simon (Rom 16:13).

The women of Jerusalem were members of a certain charitable organization which devoted itself to various forms of charitable acts. Aside from giving alms, they performed other deeds like praying for the conversion of those who were condemned to death, and bringing them wine mixed with incense – which served as some kind of narcotic – to diminish their pain.

During his ministry, Jesus had implanted in the minds of his companions that to proclaim the good news was to be willing “to carry the cross” (Mk 8:34). We usually take these words as an invitation to bear, with patience, whatever God gives us. That would have been a narrow interpretation of what Jesus really meant. “To carry the cross” should neither be interpreted simplistically as being willing to suffer martyrdom, since it does not only deal with a disposition which perhaps will end up one day in a violent death. Jesus does not invite us to an isolated act but to an attitude. To carry the cross is to have the courage to undertake a journey where one tastes, experiences failure, bitterness and ridicule. The powerful render the condemnation, humiliate, harass and insult the criminal up to his death. That was how Jesus saw it, and therefore, suffered. The road to Christianity is tough. To stick to this road up to the last is the proof of our faithfulness to our commitment to justice.

(Mt 27:31-32; Mk 15:20-21; Lk 23:26-32; Jn 19:17)

122

Until His Death on the Cross

In spite of the warning of Pontius Pilate, the Governor, an avalanche of people succeeded in passing through the gate of Ephraim behind the row of soldiers. There, between the road leading to Japhia and the wall of the city, was Golgotha, a round and barren hill like a skull. Here, in place of trees were planted wooden posts, a number of black poles where hundreds of men had agonized on the cross. The air reeked of decay. The continuous drizzle made us slide on the grass and on the bloodstained stones found in that

macabre place....

Centurion: Move back, move back!... Everybody, out of the way!... Clear the way!... By orders of the Governor.... Move back, everybody!... This way for the condemned!... The rest, out of the way!

The soldiers pushed us and formed a cordon from their crossed lances to avoid anyone from getting near the prisoners.... The centurion on horseback signalled to the executioners....

Centurion: Hey, what're you waiting for?... Strip them naked. You may keep their clothes when it's all over. C'mon, shake a leg...

The crucifiers helped Jesus and the other two young zealots who were to be crucified with him. They took off their robes and their trousers.... The three were completely naked. On their necks hung the small board showing their crime, in full view of the multitude that was crowding the slope of Golgotha... Jesus' body was crushed as a result of the lashings and tortures. He could hardly stand. He was shaking with fever...

Centurion: Silence!... Silence, I said!!

The centurion looked at all of us with contempt....

Centurion: Residents of Jerusalem, neighbors from other provinces: these men before you have dared to challenge the power of Rome. But no one gets away from the claws of the imperial eagle. Take a look at them now: they are naked and shamed. Read their crimes: conspirator, agitator of the people, king of the Jews... Let this be a lesson to you: this is the end for those who rebel against Rome, because Caesar's empire is immortal! Long live the Caesar of Rome!... Long live the Caesar of Rome!

But no one gave a reply. In fury, we could only clench our fists. Beneath the stubborn rain we were there, as always: the poor of Israel, the peasants of Galilee, all those who lived in the huts of Jerusalem, all those who had put their hope in Jesus...

A Man: Weep not, countryman. Let us not show them our tears. Don't give the executioners the slightest pleasure, nor show our pain to the victims...

The cordon of soldiers opened to give way to a priest of the Temple who, as was customary, enjoined the condemned to repent for their sins before the final moment...

Priest: All you rebels, ask for God's forgiveness!... How do you know, the Lord might take pity on your souls!... Hey you, who called yourself a prophet and the Messiah, acknowledge your sins before your death... C'mon, say: "Lord... forgive me my many sins..." C'mon, say it.

Jesus: Lord... forgive them... for they know not what they do.

Priest: He's a charlatan to the end...!

The priest, raising his shoulders with indifference, stepped to one side.

Meanwhile, a guard offered the three condemned some wine mixed with myrrh for them to sustain the pain a little more. But Jesus did not want to drink it. Then the centurion showed them the three poles where the prisoners were supposed to be crucified and gave the order to start the execution...

Centurion: Crucify them!

There were four soldiers who attended to each criminal. Jesus was lain on the rough, wet pole. His back, full of raw flesh cringed. They held him tight, stretching his body. One soldier sat over Jesus' right arm to keep it from falling as he thrust the first nail, big and rusty as it was...

Soldier: Easy, young man, bite your tongue and take it easy...!

He drove the first nail deep into his wristbones, raised the mallet and released the first blow, callous and barbarous... Jesus gave out a deep moan, a savage howl that seemed to have come from the bowels of

the earth, rather than from the entrails of a man... Blood began to gush out, his fingers constricted, and all the muscles of his body contracted because of terrible pain... But the soldier continued to nail him until the bones became firmly stuck to the piece of wood.

Soldier: Go on...!

He passed the mallet to the other soldiers who were stretching Jesus' left arm... The second nail was plunged into his flesh....

James: Come, Peter, let's go closer...

Peter: I can't, red head... I can't bear the sight of him...

James: At least, he should see our faces when they raise him up... so that he'll know that we're here with him...

Peter: That's precisely what I can't do, James. I can't even look at him... I've always been a coward...

James: All of us have been cowards, Peter... all of us. You and Judas and I... everybody.

When his arms were nailed to the wooden pole, the soldiers tied him with a rope and started to pull him, supporting him on the black and wobbly vertical pole. Under the rain, old blood from the early victims kept on dripping...

Centurion: C'mon, my men, keep on pulling...!

Soldiers: Eeeaa!

Centurion: One more time!

Soldiers: Eeeaa!

Slowly, the wooden pole on which Jesus' body was nailed, was being lifted... until finally, it found its hook on one end of the other pole, forming the "t" of the cross...

They placed a wooden wedge between his legs to sustain his body. The executioner once again got his tools, bent his legs through his knees, crossed one foot over the other and with heavy blows from the mallet, drove a much longer nail through his anklebones...

Centurion: Now you're on your throne, King of the Jews!

Laughing, the soldiers finally nailed the board indicating his crime, above the head of Jesus... Their job was over. Now, they could start dividing the clothes of the prisoners among themselves and play dice to determine who should get the robe... Dimas, the zealot, was nailed very close to Jesus. The other prisoner, the so-called Gestas, of the movement too, was on the other side...

Gestas: I don't want to die... I don't want to die!... Damn, damn!... And you, Nazarene... didn't they say you're the Messiah who was going to save us?... Damn you too!

Dimas: Shut up, Gestas, don't curse him!... He also fought for the same thing, just like us... Hey, Jesus... what happened, buddy?... What happened to the Kingdom of God?... Didn't you say it was coming soon...?

Jesus: Yes... today... right now...

Gestas: What did he say?... Today?... Ha?

Jesus: Have faith... We're still alive... God cannot fail us... Today, the Kingdom will come... Today...

A Man: What did the prophet say?

A Woman: That the Kingdom of God is coming today...

Another Man: That the Kingdom of God is coming today...

Another Woman: That the Kingdom is coming today...

Another Man: That the Kingdom is coming today...

What Jesus had said spread from one mouth to another. Everyone, with whatever hope remaining, lifted their faces to heaven, hoping it would open at any moment, hoping against hope that the God of Israel

would do something to stop the injustice. But the rain-drenched sky remained sealed above our heads like a huge tombstone....

Mary: John, please, tell those soldiers to let us pass... I want to be near him...

John: Come, Mary, let's go....

While we tried to go near the soldiers' cordon which was sealing the way to the crosses, the group of relatives and servants of the priests and the magistrates of the Sanhedrin, the very same group that shouted in the Antonia Fortress clamoring for Jesus' death, arrived in Golgotha...

A Man: Look, he's there!... So the Kingdom is coming today?... Isn't he the king? Well, well, what a throne he has got for himself!

Another Man: Didn't they say he cured so many people?... C'mon, doctor, cure yourself right now! Get down from there, c'mon!

They were making fun of Jesus and they were laughing at us. One of them took a piece of stone and hurled it on the cross.

A Man: Here, take it, you liar!

Another Man: Shabby prophet! Impostor!

Another man was a better marksman and hit Jesus' face with a stone... The people, enraged, bent to get some stones too and soon they were seen flying everywhere....

Centurion: Damn it, out of here, all of you!... Soldiers, disperse the crowd!... Out of here, all of you, out!!!

The Roman centurion, fearing more disturbances, ordered the clearing of the slope of Golgotha, where friends and enemies of Jesus as well, were shoving one another...

Soldier: You heard him!... Everybody, out of here!

Mary: Please...

Soldier: You can't go through, ma'am. It's an order.

Mary: Please...

John: Have a little pity, soldier. She's his mother.

Mary and Susana, as well as my mother Salome, and the Magdalene too, Martha and Mary of Bethany, went close to where the soldiers were. I too was with them...

Soldier: Okay, okay, you may pass, but don't make any trouble... Or else, I'll kick you out of here...

Mary started to run until the foot of the cross. She was biting her lips to keep herself from crying.... Above those two poles, Jesus was struggling to seek some form of relief, in vain... His body was cringing in total pain... But he could not escape from there....

Mary: My son... my son.

Mary could not contain herself. She embraced the black pole that was dripping blood and placed her forehead on Jesus' feet, crushed by an iron nail... Jesus recognized that voice and, with enormous effort, inclined his face toward her...

Mary: Son... my son... my son...

Jesus looked at his mother. He wanted to smile at her, which ended up in a grimace.

Jesus: Mmo...mo...mother.... Mama...

Then I felt his glazed look, almost vanished in agony.... He was looking at me...

Jesus: John... look after my mother.... take care of her...

John: Yes, Moreno, of course...

I didn't have the courage to speak more... The women beside me started to pray in a low voice, asking God for a speedy death to spare Jesus of more sufferings....

Women: Help him, Lord, let him rest from all his weariness... God of the humble, God of the poor, give him rest...

Jesus: God, oh God, why have you forsaken me?... Why did you fail me?... Why did everything fail... why?!...

There was a deathly silence. Jesus' face was black and blue, the veins on his neck were about to burst and he began to breathe heavily.... He was asphyxiated....

Jesus: Water... water... I thirst...

A soldier took a rag, dipped it in the wine mixed with myrrh, took it with the tip of his lance and drew it to his lips... Jesus could hardly taste it...

Jesus: It's finished... everything is finished...

The final hour was near. The women, sensing it, began to scratch their faces, pull their hair and beat their foreheads against the ground that was drenched with blood and water. Only Mary clung to the black wooden cross, her face clinging to the bloodied feet of her son... Jesus raised his head. He was catching his breath... His eyes were fixed on the still, gray sky. There was no sign whatsoever.... He felt wild pain running through his entire body... In a final, spasmodic effort, he stirred, clenching his teeth... He could not bear it anymore.... Hanging between heaven and earth, he mustered all the strength that was left in him....

Jesus: Father... into your hands I commend my fate.... Father! Father!!!

It was a heart rending cry... Then, he inclined his head. His whole body collapsed heavily on the pole... That was about three o'clock in the afternoon of Friday, the 14th of Nissan.

Golgotha (an Aramaic word meaning "the skull") or Calvary (a place of the skull), was a small hill situated outside the walls of Jerusalem. The custom was to conduct all acts of crucifixion in this place. Surrounding it was the cemetery. There were various individual tombs. In one of them Jesus was buried, and the others were common pits for the bodies of the crucified. The gate of Ephraim, which was open in the northeastern part of the walls, was facing Golgotha. Since the place was a little elevated, one could see from the city the crosses and the persons crucified on them. The executions were made public so they would serve as a warning to the people. In the case of Jesus, the authorities tried at all cost to avoid a people's uprising.

In the present-day Jerusalem, the most important place for the Christians is the Basilica of the Holy Tomb, a huge building standing on the place where Golgotha was, with Jesus' sepulcher right beside it. Today, the basilica's interior has several altars, images, and chapels where one can see a portion of the authentic rock of Golgotha. Before the altar of the crucifixion, one can even touch this rock which was drenched with the blood of Jesus. This place is full of historical authenticity.

Death on the cross was practiced by the Persians, the Carthaginians, and to a lesser extent, the Greeks. This was most of all used by the Romans, who considered it as the most cruel and degrading form of torture ever. They reserved it for foreigners and only on rare occasions were the Romans crucified. This was a death penalty applied to the slaves. Free men could be crucified for crimes of homicide, theft, treason, and above all, for political subversion.

It was the practice to strip the crucified naked, to add to their humiliation. Lying on the ground, their arms were nailed on the transverse pole, which the victims themselves carried up to the place of martyrdom. The nails were sunk into the wrists, in between the two bones of the forearm. Having been nailed on the palms of the hands, the body would get crushed from the scaffold for lack of support. When the arms were nailed, the criminals were raised by means of a rope in order to position them on the

horizontal pole over the vertical, which was already planted in the ground. Then the feet were nailed, introducing the nail through the anklebones. The pain was indescribable. Finally, the piece of wood indicating the crime committed was placed on the topmost part of the cross to be read by all.

The cross was not thin, as ordinarily shown in paintings. It was rather short. The victim's feet remained a very close distance from the ground. In between the legs was a piece of wood, protruding a little to support the body, which remained in a half sitting position. This was intended to avoid the victim's collapse downwards, not out of pity, but to prolong his agony as much as possible. Many of those crucified remained agonizing for days on the cross, in the presence of the curious on-lookers, and exposed to the birds of prey. If Jesus died so soon, it was because he was already beaten down from the tortures received before he reached his place of martyrdom. Generally, the death of the crucified was due to asphyxia. The tense and unbearable position of the entire body resulted in the difficulty of breathing and the irregular circulation of blood, immobilizing the dying victim.

From the testimonies of the four evangelists, we have the "seven words" of Jesus on the cross, his last words on this earth. The first of them – "Father, forgive them..." – refers to a religious custom of Israel. By understanding that death in any form had an expiatory value (of pardon, of redemption), even the delinquents were exhorted to declare the so-called "expiatory vow" before death in the following manner: "Let my death serve as an atonement for all my sins!" (My God forgive me). Jesus wouldn't say this. Up to the last minute, he vindicated his innocence, and not out of pride nor obstinacy. That is why he subverted the formula: may God forgive the murderers, they are those who are in sin and they know not what they do.

In this episode, the second word reflects the hope sustained by Jesus up to the last moment of his life, that God would intervene in a manner unknown to him, but in a manner so efficacious that it would save him from death. Jesus waited in Golgotha for the liberating hand of the Kingdom of God, for which he had fought during all his life. He was not cowed by disappointment; he did not accept that God could fail him and he hoped against hope. The time frame "today" he was explaining to his companion of torture, showed the immediacy of the change he was waiting for. Up to his final hour, Jesus was a man who loved life, who believed in life. Such was the life he was claiming and expecting from his Father in the midst of agony.

The third word is addressed to Mary his mother and his friend John. It must be pointed out that in the last moment, the women were more faithful to Jesus than the men. They, the "weaker" ones and the more "cowardly" ones, according to the male cliché, stayed put before their agonizing friend, showing their fidelity to Jesus and exposing themselves to the mockery of the authorities who ridiculed Jesus up to his final moment.

The fourth word has been preserved by the evangelists in Greek, while they translate it to create greater impact to the reader, that he may stop to ponder on this phrase. Jesus feels abandoned by God. He no longer expects anything; he feels all his life to be a failure. "Eli, Eli, lema sabaktani" is the phrase in Greek. (Mark initiates the Aramaic form, "Eloi, Eloi"). Jesus does not call God the way he ordinarily does: "Father" (Abba). He calls him God. He feels him so distant, so silent. Psalm 22 starts with these same words. The evangelists are showing us that on the cross, Jesus prayed with this touching cry of anguish and abandon in this psalm. Reading it, we can discover the feelings he felt in his heart before succumbing to that brutal torture. Like any other person, Jesus experienced an evolution in his conscience, a growth. His faith likewise underwent some kind of development and he learned more about the meaning of doubts, the vicissitudes of life and fears. This fourth word on the cross is one of the most significant moments through which to appreciate the profound humanity of Jesus, the way of his faith and hopes, which is a difficult and painful way.

The fifth word is an indication of the horrifying thirst experienced by the crucified victims. It was one of the major tortures on the cross. The continuous bleeding as a result of the nailing dehydrated the criminal. At that moment, Jesus was given a kind of drug to alleviate his pain. The sixth word – "All is finished" – shows his awareness of his end. Jesus did not lose his consciousness. Although he was extremely exhausted on account of his tortures, he clearly saw his death coming. His last "word" in this world was a loud cry (Mk 15:37), an expression of a supreme pain as well as his ultimate surrender into

the hands of God in whom he had put his trust and whom he called his Father. In order to manifest this fidelity up to the end, Luke gave that inarticulate and heartrending cry with which Jesus' life came to an end, a form of prayer full of trust (Lk 23:46; Ps 32:6).

Jesus died. He really did. His life on earth came to an end. When he expired, he did not know, nor did he imagine that God would resurrect him. He could not imagine it because in his frame of ideas about his faith, this belief in an "individual and immediate" resurrection never entered into the picture. Had Jesus died knowing he would resurrect within a few days, then his death would not have been real or human or painful. When he commended his fate in the hands of God, he believed and hoped in God, with the same faith and hope with which we, believers, do in time of death. And we do it blindly, amid terrible pain, to end it all. In death, as in life, Jesus was our brother. In death, as in life, he experienced uncertainty, putting in God a difficult and painful hope at the end of his life. He in whom we believe is a crucified man. Centuries of history, of culture and art have made of the crucified man a gem, an adornment, a decorative motif. And the cross was nothing but a horrendous scaffold. The crucified, a cursed one (Deut 21:23). We ought to see in the cross a cruel instrument of torture. Seeing in Jesus a bloodied tatter hanging on a pole makes God's revelation scandalous. We should not become accustomed to it, but Jesus must continue to scandalize us always. This means, he must always jolt us, if we want to renew in our own experience the original meaning of Christian faith.

In itself, death on the cross meant the exclusion from the community of Israel and the Roman community. Jesus was killed outside of the walls of Jerusalem, cursed by the law of his people, expelled and outcast by the imperial system. The political, religious and economic institutions expelled him from his very bosom. We, Christians, believe in this outcast. Our Messiah is a "curse" of the authorities, and therefore, the unjust powers will always "curse" the true Christian. The true Christian will also be thrown away, like Jesus.

(Mt 27:33-50; Mk 15:22-38; Lk 23:33-46; Jn 19:18-30)

123

Inside A New Sepulcher

Pilate: That's fine. Let those damned priests in! They can't even let you sleep in peace!

A Priest: Governor Pilate, it's almost dusk. Very soon, the afternoon star will announce the coming of the Great Sabbath...

Pilate: Ha! I don't give a damn! Since dawn it hasn't stopped raining. The sky is darker than a tomb... and you expect to see a star!

Another Priest: You're right, Your Excellency. Just the same, we only have a few hours left before the Great Sabbath of the Passover...

Pilate: You've already said that. What do you want?

Priest: It's about the three rebels who were crucified in Golgotha, Governor. They can't stay there at the start of the feast... Our custom prohibits that... It would be a grave impurity.

Pilate: So, where do you want them to be...?

Priest: In the pit, Your Excellency. Under the ground. Better for them to die well and to be buried well.

Pilate: No one has ever told me they're dead.

Priest: No, of course not, but why don't you spare these cursed ones a long agony? After all, they have been purged of all their rebellion.

The three were still cringing from the pain of having been nailed on the cross. Jesus had already expired, at about three o'clock in the afternoon. Dimas and Gestas, the two zealot rebels, who were

likewise crucified but less tortured than Jesus, lingered much longer. Beside them were their weeping mothers, awaiting their death... Beside the cross where Jesus' lifeless but still warm body was hanging, the women and I were seated on the wet ground by the hillside, weeping and consoling each other....

Mary: John, my son, what will they do with Jesus now...?

John: I dunno, Mary... I dunno....

Magdalene: Look Mary, as a Magdalene, I'm telling you, they aren't going to throw Jesus into the pit... We'll bury him... like a great man!

Mary: Young woman, you know we don't even have a piece of land for a sepulcher... not even a few dinarii with which to buy a decent sheet... I don't know what to do...

The hill of Golgotha was sown with blood-drenched poles of crosses. Around it were several deep pits excavated out of bare rocks, where the bodies of the victims were thrown away...

John: I dunno... Perhaps, if we could speak with this Nicodemus... he was a friend of Jesus... We saw him here in Jerusalem before the incident in the Temple... He is a very influential man... If this damned Pilate could give him the body to be buried in another place...

Magdalene: That's it, John! I hope they don't throw his body into the pit. Oh my God!

Peter, Andrew and some members of the group stayed close to the walls, daring not to step further to be near. After Jesus had died, only a few people stayed in the vicinity of Golgotha. Only a few hours were left before the Great Sabbath of the Passover, and a number of them, tired and weary after a long and gloomy rainy day, returned to the city to enjoy the warmth of their houses....

Tulius: Hey you, are they dead?!

Soldier: The Nazarene, yes, but not the other two. Look at them!

Through the gate of Ephraim appeared three soldiers with their clubs and lances. They climbed through the bare rocks with great strides...

Tulius: This must be done fast. Orders from the Governor. The feast of the Jews starts at sunset and these bodies can't stay here.

Soldier: What do we do?

Tulius: Let's break the legs of these two to finish them off.

Soldier: That's a good idea, damn it! I'm sick and tired of so much rain and seeing so much weeping....! Then you're paid for what is due you.

Tulius: Hey, women, get away from here, stay away from the crosses!

Women: Murderers, murderers!

Tulius: I told you to stay away from here... go away!

Two soldiers went near the crosses where Dimas and Gestas were grappling with death, and raising their thick clubs, they landed violent blows on their knees and legs, crushing the bones of the two...

A Woman: Oh my God, let this hell come to an end....

It did not take long for death to claim its toll. The bodies of the two young men, losing the support from their legs, collapsed, and very soon, they could no longer breathe. Their faces grimaced in terrible pain during that final moment....

Tulius: What about this other one? Are you sure he's dead...?

Soldier: Yeah, after giving out a loud cry, just a while ago, he expired....

Tulius: That's strange. So he died fast....

Soldier: He wouldn't have lasted long.... He came here very badly beaten...

Mary: Please don't touch him anymore... He's really dead...

Tulius: Get away from here, woman... We've got to make sure he's dead.... These are the orders...

Magdalene: Damn it, once and for all, leave him in peace!

Tulius: C'mon, hooker, I told you to stay away from here!

One of the soldiers gripped his lance and drew it close to Jesus' dead body... In one certain stroke, he pierced his heart... The last drop of blood that remained of that crushed body came dripping through the heart...

Tulius: That's it. Job concluded. My, what a day!

The soldier took his lance and with one corner of his old red cloak, removed the blood from its tip....

Soldier: Know what, Tulius? This man, I dunno... I have always said that it is only in death where one really gets to know the people... This one was a good man... I think he is innocent...

Tulius: Hey, something must've hit you.... Didn't you say you got his clothes?... C'mon, let's stop being sentimental... Bring them down fast and throw them into the pit. We must return to the quarters and report to the Governor. We'll be seeing you there! They say good wine will be served at dinner tonight!

Soldier: C'mon, you... let's get them all down!

Mary: John, son, run and look for this man, Nicodemus... Let's see if he can do something...

Magdalene: I'm going with you, John!

John: No, Magdalene, you stay here! I'll be back soon!

John: At last I've found you, Nicodemus...

Nicodemus: I know he's dead, I know.... I saw him from the walls... Just a while ago, I've been pacing the floor like a fool... Damn it! Why weren't we able to prevent it?

John: We need your help now, Nicodemus... It's about the body of Jesus.

Nicodemus: Joseph, the friends of the Nazarene need us... You have an access to the Governor. He knows your wife very well, doesn't he? Well, go and ask him to give you his body so he can be properly buried.

Joseph of Arimathea: Don't worry, Nicodemus, I'll go and see Pilate right away.

Pilate: So, the man has died?

Soldier: Yes, Governor. He is dead, just as I am standing right before you now. I pierced his heart with my lance.

Pilate: Very good. You can go...

Soldier: As you wish, Governor...

Pilate: And you, Joseph of Arimathea... since when have you become a follower of this crazy prophet...?

Joseph: The crazy ones are we who did not know how to defend him.

Pilate: What?... Are you having some remorse?... Well, take it easy, man, it's nothing serious... What do you want? His body? Well, you can have it. If that will please you, then I give you my permission.

Joseph: Give me a written authorization, Governor.

Nothing was talked about in the streets of Jerusalem except the incident in Golgotha. During those hours in the afternoon, the rain began to cease and the sun timidly warmed the terraces of the houses... The people, saddened by the event, and trying to bury everything in oblivion, started busying themselves preparing for that grand sabbatical respite....

Nicodemus: Of course, John!... You don't have to worry about the money, nor the place. I have already spoken with my friend Joseph and he can bury Jesus in a new tomb which he has intended for his family. It's just near the hill. Now, go back to the women, it's not good to leave them alone... I'll take care of whatever is needed. The stores will soon close and we have to hurry....

When I returned to the hill of Golgotha, they had already brought Jesus and one of the zealots down from the cross. They were bringing the other down... Jesus' body, his arms stretched, was still in the form of a cross, and was resting on the ground, on Mary's cloak. In a squatting position, beside him, his mother was looking at him in silence.... The women were standing, as they wept, biting their lips... Matthew and a few others had gone near, overcoming their fear. No one, in that completely disfigured and bloodstained

face, recognized the much-loved features of our friend...

Peter: This has been a nightmare, John, a bad dream....

John: Come, Peter. Let's talk to the soldiers. We have an authorization to bury him nearby.

While Peter and I were talking to the centurion, showing him our permit, Mary lay down the wounded head of Jesus on her lap and began to clean it with her rain-drenched scarf...

Mary: You look different, Jesus.... What have they done to you, my son... I told you, I was afraid... When you went to Capernaum, I told you: "Don't get yourself into trouble, son"... You ignored me and you even had me trailing behind you.... You said: "Mother, you were always courageous and a fighter"... No, my son, that was nonsense... You were the brave one... Up to the end, Jesus, up to the end... Like your father... If Joseph had seen you.... I could almost hear him say: "Woman, let the boy be brave that he may stand up for the rest. This is what we have to teach him, this is what God wants from him." You learned it my son, and well... "Now he has to go back to Nazareth, to till the land, to fetch water from the well, and harden his hands with work..." Then how many years later, "Neighbor Mary, neighbor Mary, here comes the Moreno to see you!"... You'll return no more, son.... You'll never go back. What will I do now that I'm alone... without Joseph and you?... Why didn't you listen to me, son? Jerusalem is bad, don't go to Jerusalem... I was so afraid then... you see... but I'm so proud of you, for all that you have done... All that you said always lingered in my heart... when you were away, in Capernaum... Yes, son, I also believe God gives his kingdom to the poor... to those who weep... I can't, son, I can't... my son...

John: Mary, let's go, it's getting late...

With no time to clean Jesus' body, we anointed it hurriedly with a mixture of perfumes of myrrh and aloe, brought by Nicodemus in accordance with a custom in my country in burying the dead. Then we wrapped his body in a big fine sheet which Joseph had bought... Nobody uttered a word. We were in great haste and there was so much sadness in us... The rain had stopped and a fresh wind fluffed up our wet robes... Peter and I carried Jesus' body. Very near Golgotha was a garden where Joseph of Arimathea had a new sepulcher. No one had been buried there yet. There inside the deep cave which was carved out of rock, we placed Jesus' cadaver. We closed the entrance with a thick round stone, which was like a wheel.

John: Let's go, Mary. The Sabbath has started...

For a few minutes, Mary rested her forehead on that humid slab... Then, she reached for my arm to keep her from slipping and started to walk. We returned to Jerusalem with her... The afternoon was coming to an end over the walled city and the Temple's trumpets announced the start of rest of the Great Sabbath.

Jesus died on the Friday of the week of the Passover, which was a "day of preparation" for the Jews, since the following day, Sabbath (Saturday), no one was supposed to work. It was a day of rest as imposed by the Law. Since it was the great Sabbath of the Passover, that day was even more solemn than the rest of the Saturdays of the year. The great Sabbath began in the afternoon when the first stars started to appear in the sky. The corpses of the victims were "impure" and, according to the law should not mar, with their presence, the feast of that day. This explains the urgency with which the execution ended and Jesus' interment had to be carried out.

Some crucified victims remained hanging on the cross for days, in endless agony. The Roman laws had provided for a faster death: by fracturing the bones of the legs through violent blows. The crushed or smashed condition of the entire body triggered the fatal asphyxia. This brutal method was applied to the revolutionary zealots. In the case of Jesus, there was no need to break any bone. He had died soon enough. The piercing by the soldier was a way to ascertain that the victim was really dead. It was like a "coup de grace" or a death blow.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, of the ruling class, sympathized with Jesus, although clandestinely, and at the last moment, they dared to claim the body and have it buried with a certain

dignity.

A classic image and very much loved by the pious people through the centuries, has been of Mary with her dead son in her arms. It is “La Pieta,” sung by musicians and poets, and immortalized in paintings and sculptures. Jesus’ death was the ultimate proof of Mary’s faith, who, like her own son, did not count on the resurrection. Mary, who had vaguely understood his son’s projects during the first moments, and who had tried to share with him his risks and hopes, must have felt on that day an infinite solitude, a profound feeling of failure, of sadness, of nothingness. She must have felt the pride too, for the courage shown by her son.

For the Israelites, a respectable burial was of great importance; it was a show of affection for the dead. That of Jesus, because of the circumstances, had to be done with the minimum of traditional requirements. The corpse was cleansed and anointed with oil. The myrrh was an aromatic resin of great value, and this was also used to anoint the bride and groom on their wedding day. The aloe was a fragrant essence from the sap of certain trees from India. It was used to perfume bedding, dresses and shrouds. A sheet was used as a shroud, or canvasses as sashes, although it is not known exactly how these were placed on the body of the deceased.

Since the ancient times, Israel buried her dead in natural caves to spare arable lands. Jesus was placed in a private tomb, bought by Joseph of Arimathea for his family and in which no one had been buried before. By making use of the natural excavation of the rock, the place was set up in the form of a room, with one or a few stone tables where the cadavers were put. Sometimes, niches were dug along the walls. In many cases – and one was that of Jesus’ sepulcher – this room or sepulchral chamber was preceded by an antesala or a small hall. The entrance to the tomb was sealed with a heavy, round stone that could turn like a wheel.

After two thousand years, the stone bench where Jesus’ cadaver was desposited is still preserved in the exact place where that garden near Golgotha was found. Inside the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher, in the Arabic barrio of Jerusalem, is this place, so transcendental for the Christian faith. In spite of the abundant decoration accumulated through the centuries, the structure of that cave can still be perfectly distinguished: the anteroom, and a notice: “He is not here. He resurrected.”

Ever since Saint Helen, the mother of the Roman emperor, Constantine, discovered the exact location of the Calvary through excavations ordered by her within this area of Jerusalem, the so-called Holy Places (initially Golgotha and the burial place of Jesus) were converted to centers of pilgrimage for Christians from a number of neighboring countries. This happened about three hundred years after Jesus’ death. The Holy Places also became a reason for cruel wars. About a thousand and hundred years after Jesus’ death, these places were in the hands of the Muslims. Men from all over Christian Europe became involved in wars called the Crusades. Aside from the other political and economic motives, they tried to recover these Holy Places. The Crusades lasted for two hundred years including some intervals. They failed to redeem the Holy Sepulcher. What was worse was, that in the name of the cross of Jesus, all sorts of plundering and crime against the Arabs were committed, who also fought the Christians with great violence.

(Mt 27:51-61; Mk 15:38-47; Lk 23:47-56; Jn 19:31-42)

124

The Great Sabbath

The first morning lights hanging on a narrow window slowly woke us up. That Saturday, the day following Jesus’ death, was a day of rest and a grand holiday in Jerusalem and in all the land. Since the

afternoon of the previous day, the eleven of us and the women were hidden in the basement of the house of Mark, who was Peter's friend. We were all hoping to return to Galilee. Our eyes, heavy from a terrible night and so much weeping, had soon become used to the darkness of our hiding place, where the old wine-presses and some barrels of oil were kept...

Peter: It must be morning now, buddies...

John: Did you get some sleep, Mary...?

Mary: Just a little... but...

Magdalene: C'mon, lie down again and get some more rest... Susana and Salome are preparing something warm for us... We've got some olives and loaves of bread... Just relax...

Soon my mother and Susana brought a bowl of soup and a handful of olives... We sat down to eat in silence and with little appetite. The sadness of what we had lived the day before hovered over us like a heavy cloud....

John: Mark was here a while ago, when it was still dark... He left again... but he'll be back at noon to bring some food...

Susana: He'd better... knowing how hungry we are... Hey, Mary, eat some more bread...

Mary: No, Susana, I can't...

James: Any news in the city...?

John: They...er... they've found Judas... hanging...

Peter: What did you say, John? Where?

John: In Gethsemane... where we had been last Thursday evening... He hanged himself from an olive tree...

Magdalene: Oh my God, what's all this about?! A nightmare? Damned city! I swear by my dead ones that never again shall I set foot in this city of the devil for the rest of my life!

John: Cool it, Magdalene... It's no good to make such blabber...

Andrew: Poor Judas... he was a good fellow...

James: No use to regret, Andrew... He was the culprit of all this.

Andrew: Really, James?... He was a crazy man who allowed himself to be used, only God knows why... but he wasn't the only one to blame for this...

John: We already know who the culprits were... May we all be confounded, damn!

Peter: That's right, red head... With Judas, we could have ended up understanding each other... He was one of us... but the group from the Sanhedrin and the Roman dogs.... But why didn't we do anything, why did we behave like we were imbeciles, with all our arms akimbo...? And I was the first to act like one, yes, yes... don't look at me... but I was the first to act like a fool... Damn it, we're simply a bunch of good for nothing fellows. We're nothing but scum...!

Nathanael: Let's not talk about it anymore, Peter... What for? It's all over...

The incessant rain of Friday caused a little flood to the small terrace facing our hiding place. Since that night, the dripping waters had formed into pools on the ground...

Susana: Why don't we all pray, huh? Prayers are good in terrible moments like this... Let's ask the Lord for better days ahead... What do you think?... Mary, do you want to begin?

Mary lifted her face, which seemed to have aged from pain, and looked at Susana with her weary eyes....

Mary: No, you do it... We will follow...

Susana: Well, then... "God, at daytime we seek your help and at night we invoke you... Come to our aid...."

Some: Come to our aid, for we are calling you...

Susana: I'm waiting for you, Lord, please answer me...

Some: I trust in you, Lord, please answer me...

Susana: You are my God, I seek you, help me, for my enemies... have set a trap for me...

We found it difficult to pray. The words did not come out from our lips, even when they were uttered. They were empty and without meaning. On the floor were the half-filled jugs, and we had barely eaten the pieces of bread...

John: Mark says he'll come for us tomorrow at dawn, so that we can go back to Galilee through the coastal road... He knows the road very well, so we shall have less problems... Besides, since a number of pilgrims are going back to the north on Sunday, then we can conceal ourselves better...

Matthew: Won't it be risky...? Maybe it's better to wait for a few days more...

John: No, Matthew, it's more dangerous for us to stay here... At this time, they're probably looking for us...

Philip: Bah, what more do they want to get from a bunch of cowards like us?

John: To finish off the group, Philip...

James: There's nothing to finish off, John... The group is no more...

Peter: Is that right, red head? And where did you get such an idea? Do you think we can't go on doing things together?

James: What things are you talking about, Peter? Tell me...? Now everyone is going his own way....

Peter: This can't be... We must continue what Jesus had started....

James: Well, why don't you just go back to your stone-throwing job like before... and continue boasting around... let's see if this will bring you somewhere...

Peter: Hey, look who's talking, huh?... And what are you, huh?

James: Bah, Peter, you're a barking dog that never bites...

Peter: Oh, yeah? You talk as if you'd done something to save Jesus... Yeah, you were hiding through all nooks and corners...

James: Yeah, fine, but... at least...

Peter: At least, what?... C'mon, say it, say it once and for all... Damn you, James! It's always the same.... Yes, fine, I was a coward! I denied having known him! But, what would you have done if a sword had been aimed at you and...?

Susana: For God's sake, for God's sake, will you shut up.... Do you really have to fight today? Can you just keep quiet, out of respect for Jesus, may he rest in peace!

Mary looking blankly beyond those four dirty walls, heard us and she continued weeping in silence. She was inconsolable. She was distraught... Seeing her, all the tears that I had tried to contain the previous day flowed from my eyes....

Philip: Hey, John, man, don't cry... Just think that in a few days we'll be at the lake once again, far from all this hassle...

John: That's why I'm crying, Philip. It's because of that....

Susana: It's okay, son. Let him pour it out...

John: I can't believe we'll be casting nets again, going fishing again, then to the tavern... and that Jesus... as if nothing had happened... as if everything had been a dream...

Philip: And it was, for me, it was... Wasn't it a dream to believe that the Kingdom of God was near, and that we, a bunch of hungry rascals, were pushing it...? This will be the first and the last time they'll get me for the same stuff....

Susana: Life is like this, it's just like this... It's more bitter than an almond before it ripens....

Thomas: Why do g..g..good men always end up like this?

Andrew: It's not yet over, Thomas... Jesus can't be finished.... It'll be difficult for the people to forget the Moreno...

Susana: Son, everything will be forgotten with time... Time takes care of putting everything into oblivion....

Peter: But Susana, it can't be the same with Jesus... He was... different... a great man, this son of yours, Mary... The best friend I ever had in all my life...

James: Do you remember when we met him at the Jordan, Peter? That was the time of John the baptizer...?

Andrew: Of course, James. I'll never forget that...

Philip: And you, Nat...? We walked with him from Magdala to the river... He was a great talker... He was always tellings jokes and stories... That's why the people understood so well... Who would ever think he would end up this way...?

Matthew: But Jesus had sensed it... That night, when we were in Caesarea, on our way to the North.... He was already having some premonition... And when we came to Jerusalem....

Susana: We shouldn't have come....

John: The Moreno was a courageous man. Yesterday, I heard one of the soldiers... He was beaten up in jail, you saw how he was, but not a word from him....

Peter: And the truth about this thief Annas, he told it to his face... And according to this friend of yours, John, this old cheat was there when the devils took Jesus away...

Andrew: He did the same to Pilate and Caiphas... he told them what had to be said... That was what we had planned, do you remember?... After the incident at the Temple, we're supposed to confront the rich of Jerusalem, to expose their crimes to their faces... Jesus complied with the plan... only he, did...

John: The Moreno did not yield, up to his last... They tore him to pieces, yes, but they did not bend him...

Mary: But why, my God, why? Why didn't you save him from death. Why?...

Mary, who until that moment, just listened to us in silence, drowning herself in tears and sorrow, began to weep like a river that had overflowed. Her forehead almost touched the ground, her hands covering her face. Susana and my mother were supporting her...

Mary: Why, my God? He was a good man... He didn't have to die... I needed him.... The poor of this country needed him... Why, oh why?... He didn't deserve such a horrible death... Why did he have to end up this way?... With so much death, Oh, God, so many abuses, so many crimes by those people... Why did they win? They must be rejoicing by now, and my son is dead... Until when, oh God, until when will you allow the unjust to get away with their sins.... Until when...?

Susana: Come now, Mary, easy... Bring her some water, Magdalene... C'mon, c'mon....

Exhausted, Mary rested her head on my back, shut her eyes and her memory went back to the previous day, to the dead and bloody face of Jesus whom she would never see again...

James: Do you think the people from Capernaum know what had happened...?

John: There's no time, James...

Matthew: Don't be so sure. News spread faster than fire...

Thomas: Y...y...you're right...

Peter: The moment they find out in Capernaum...

Philip: Nothing will happen, Peter, nothing... The people won't do anything... We, the poor are so used to drowning our tears...

Magdalene: This is precisely what we've got to do. We stop weeping and go on... I'm not saying this because of you, Mary. You've got all the right, more than anyone else, to cry all you want... But I believe that, if Jesus were alive, he wouldn't want to see us like this, looking forlorn and whimpering... something must be done... we've got to go on fighting...!

James: Stop that yelling, Magdalene! What do you want? Do you want to get caught?

Magdalene: I don't care anymore, whether they catch me or even kill me! He died for a worthy cause...! And if only for this, they can kill me if they want...! I don't give a damn anymore!

Susana: My child, what're we going to do now...? Everything is over... Tomorrow, we wash his body as

God wants us to do, then put some perfume on him.... Then, we all go back to Galilee... May God help us all! There's nothing else we can do, young woman, nothing we can do...

The long hours we had spent during the Great Sabbath, were like long years spent in hiding in the basement of Mark's house. We stayed there together, sometimes in silence, other times, weeping, remembering every word and gesture of Jesus, who was reunited with his people, in the silent kingdom of the dead....

Our faith tells us that Jesus' death was not the end of his life, but that it was the coronation of his activity and the road to his glorification. Through the cross, he passed from death to life and by resurrecting him, God made of that peasant who was killed by the Roman empire and by the religious institution, the Lord of history and the hope of all. But neither his disciples nor his mother, Mary, knew about this. For them, what happened was the end of all their hopes and the failure of the plan of the Kingdom of God, for which they had worked with Jesus for several months.

The apostles never thought nor did they imagine that Jesus would resurrect. Proof of this was the fear they felt and their desire to flee to Galilee to start life anew in their region, without worrying anymore about the Kingdom. With Jesus' death, they thought everything had ended.

Sometimes, in a simplistic manner it is affirmed that Jesus had announced his resurrection, that he knew about it, but that his disciples would not believe him until they saw with their own eyes. Thus, the three predictions in the gospels (Mt 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19) made by Jesus about his death stand out. Jesus, who was constantly threatened and persecuted during all his life by the authorities, had to expect a violent death, that his fate could never be different from that of the prophets: that of persecution and death. But this is no reason for us to say that they are seers, but that they simply are aware of the risks they run into, because of their honesty and courage. In these predictions of the passion of Jesus, there is reference to a period of "three days," after which "he will resurrect." By writing it this way, the evangelists are interpreting the events after they have taken place, after they experienced the new life of Jesus. That is why they put these words in his mouth, thus giving a complete idea of what really had happened, of everything that was to take place.

On the other hand, we must realize that in Aramaic, "three days" means "soon," "in a short time." In languages like Aramaic, there is no word equivalent to "various," "a couple," "some." The lack of these words was often supplemented by the phrase "three days." This phrase, "on the third day, he will resurrect," which the evangelists had put in Jesus' mouth, must be read as: "in a short time the Kingdom will come." For Jesus, this coming was at hand, it was something imminent. But he could not count on an individual or immediate resurrection.

In this episode, despair dominates the whole scene. There is fear, too, as well as deceit, pessimism, wonderful memories of Jesus, and also the impossibility of finding a way to continue his work; confusion, etc... These are feelings born out of despair, of lack of hope. In order to show, liturgically, this emptiness created by Jesus' death, "Holy Saturday" is never celebrated in any of the Christian temples or gatherings. There is no eucharistic celebration, there is no assembly. It is a way of symbolizing the void that Mary, the women and the apostles felt during that Saturday in Jerusalem, when Jesus had just been buried.

No word suffices upon the death of our loved ones. It is difficult to find consolation in prayer or in what our faith teaches us. Only one question matters: Shall we see our beloved dead again? Shall we meet each other again? The name that we wish to find in God at the threshold of death is the name of a God who saves life. Only in a God who resurrects our dead, who allows us to embrace them once again, can we find solace for our sorrows.

(Lk 24:1)

The First Day of the Week

Magdalene: Hey, Susana... come up here...!

Susana: I'm coming...

Magdalene: Salome!

Salome: Psst! Not so loud, Magdalene, you'll wake the men up...

Magdalene: Don't worry, they won't budge, not even when there's an earthquake... Look at them... sleeping like logs....

Mark: Ahumm.... And who told you they're sleeping...?

Salome: Hey, Mark, why are you up so early?

Mark: This is precisely what I want to ask you... The stars are still up there... You still have time to catch some sleep...

Salome: We've got to go to the tomb to wash the body and wrap him in a shroud.

Mark: But Peter told me you're going back to Galilee today and you wanted to start early.

Magdalene: That's why we got up early.

Salome: Listen, Mark, when they wake up, tell them to gather all our things so we can start our journey at once... We'll be back soon.... Have we got everything?

Susana: Yeah, we've got the myrrh and the perfumes... Towels, clean sheets...

Magdalene: Hey, Susana, where's Mama Mary?

Mark: She got up ahead of you. I saw her leave a while ago....

Salome: Where did she go?

Mark: Well, as a matter of fact, I didn't ask...

Susana: Where else would she go but to the tomb and weep there?... My God, what this poor woman must be suffering...!

Salome: C'mon, Susana, it's getting late... let's not waste time...

On the first day of the week, when everything was still dark, Salome, my mother, Susana and the Magdalene, left hurriedly with the perfumes for anointing the dead. They wanted to finish washing and embalming Jesus' body. They didn't have time to do it last Friday; and on Saturday, which was a rest day, it was prohibited...

Susana: We should have asked Mark to go with us... Or we could have awakened some of the men.

Salome: What for, Susana...?

Susana: So they could turn the stone open for us... We haven't got that much strength to push it open...

The streets of Jerusalem were deserted.... The sun had not come out yet and the residents of the city of David were still sleeping soundly after the great feast of the Sabbath.... The women crossed the barrier of Zion, left the walled city through the gate of the Angle, then started to walk through the sandy road to Golgotha...

Susana: I can't believe all this...

Salome: Everything is over, Susana. It's finished. Let's all be resigned to this... nothing more....

Magdalene: No, I'm not going to... never! He was all I have loved in this life... how can I accept all this, knowing that the worms will be feasting on his body?

Salome: C'mon, Magdalene, child, take it easy... Of course, you'll have to accept this... Is there another choice...? C'mon....

They passed through the hillside, sown with black and blood-stained poles, where a couple of days

before, they had shed a sea of tears... At the back of the macabre hill, beside the communal pits, were various caves. Among them was one that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, and which served as Jesus' tomb...

Susana: Isn't it this one, Salome...?

Salome: No, it's over there... Come.... Gosh!

Magdalene: What's wrong...?

Salome: Either my eyes are deceiving me, or the stone is rolled open....

Susana: I told you so... Mary had come ahead of us...

Magdalene: Who could've helped her turn the stone?

The women went near the entrance to the cave... The stone, round and cold, was rolled to one side...

Susana: Mary!... Hey, Mary, are you down there?... Mary!

Magdalene: Nobody answers...

Salome: She must be weeping beside his body... Poor woman, she's so distraught...

Susana: That's natural... he was her only son... and for him to end up that way... Every time I think of it.... Oh...this has been such a great misfortune...!

Salome: For God's sake, Susana, there you go again... You, too, Magdalene... It's all over now, stop thinking about it.... Come, let's all go down and console Mary... then let's all get to work...

Magdalene: No, no, I can't go inside. I can't bear to see him again...

Salome: Magdalene, child, you've got to be strong... We must comply with this final obligation. Jesus has done a lot for us... At least, he deserves a decent burial... Come, turn on the lamp and let's go inside...

They lit the oil lamp. Their robes were hitched up and bending low so they would not trip, the women went down the damp and narrow steps until the end part of the cave...

Susana: Mary!... Hey, Mary isn't here...

Salome: How can that be?

Magdalene: Oh, God, oh Holy God, look...!

The Magdalene brought the lamp to the stone bench where last Friday, before sunset, they themselves had left Jesus' cadaver, hastily wrapped in a few sheets...

Salome: But where's the.... Give me some more light, Magdalene!

Magdalene: It's not here!!... Look!... They have stolen it!... Damn it, it was stolen!

Susana: But, how is it possible that in this country, not even the dead are spared?

Magdalene: Gosh, oh my God, great God, what a great disgrace to man, oh!

Salome: Calm down, Magdalene, child!

Magdalene: How can I? They've taken his body away and I don't know where they put it!

Susana: Who could've done such an evil thing? Who would want to hurt us?

Salome: Perhaps Pilate's men have desecrated the tomb, taken his body and thrown it in the common graveyard, like a dog!... That's what could've happened...

Susana: That can't be, Salome. It was Pilate himself who ordered the body interred here!

Salome: Then it must be Caiphaz and his cohorts who could've wanted him nailed on the cross again to serve as warning to the pilgrims.... This is not the first time they've done it...

Susana: Oh, what a terrible thing. I don't want to hear any more of it! I'm feeling nauseated...

Salome: I'm having shivers in my back.... Let's get out of here...

The three women hurriedly left the burial cave... They were as pale and white as the sheets they were carrying....

Susana: Pff!... What do we do now...?

Salome: Let's hurry and tell the men... They've got to know what's happened...

Magdalene: Oh, I'm going to faint, oh, oh, I can't bear it anymore. Oh God, I feel something heavy on my chest, oh!

Susana: Magdalene, stop lamenting now and let's all run and inform Peter and the rest...

Salome: It's okay, Susana, let her cry... Come, let's go... You, Magdalene, stay here with the myrrh and the perfumes... We'll be back at once...

Susana and Salome went back running toward Mark's house, where everyone had been hiding since Friday.... Mary of Magdala, held her face close to the round stone slab, weeping disconsolately....

Susana: Mark!... Peter!... Wake up!

Salome: They took away Jesus' body and we dunno where it is!

Peter: They what?

Susana: Are you deaf, delinquent? They've stolen the body!

Peter: I can't believe this!

Salome: That's right! The cave is empty and the stone was rolled to one side!

James: John, Philip, Nathanael, lock the doors at once and close all the windows! We're in danger!

Mark: And you, screamers, did anyone see you come here?

Susana: Oh, Mark, my son, I dunno, I don't care anymore!

James: We've got to leave for Galilee as soon as possible! If they catch us, then we'll all be hanged!

At this moment, someone knocked at the door....

Peter: Damnation! They've found us. We're doomed!

Magdalene: Open the door, open the door!

Susana: Don't be a chicken, Peter. It's only the Magdalene, don't you hear? Run and open the door!

Mary, from Magdala, came inside the basement, our hiding place. Her hands were on her head and her eyes were bulging...

Magdalene: Oh, oh!

Peter: What the hell is happening now?

James: Close that door, damn it!

Magdalene: Oh, oh!

Susana: But woman, for heaven's sake, speak fast! I'm getting nervous...

James: Speak up, once and for all, you wreck! What's the matter? Are they following you?!

Magdalene: Yes!

James: They're after you?!... Did you see the soldiers?... Pilate's men?... Herod's police?... Damn, speak up!!... Who's following you?!

Salome: Let her catch her breath, James... Can't you see her tongue's getting twisted?

James: Well, she'd better loosen it, fast! Speak up, woman. Who the hell did you see?

Magdalene: Him!

Peter: Who?

Magdalene: Him!

Peter: I swear by Moses' ass, whom did you see?

Magdalene: Jesus!

Mark: How's that again? Did they find his corpse?

Magdalene: No! I saw him alive!

Todos: Who?

Magdalene: Jesus! I've seen the Moreno!... I've just seen him...

James: What nonsense are you talking about?

Magdalene: I've just spoken with Jesus.... It was he, I swear...

Salome: I knew it, this young woman here has not eaten anything since Friday, and...

Magdalene: I've seen him with my own eyes, just as I'm seeing all of you now!

Susana: Of course, child, of course... Come, take something to warm your stomach... Calm down a little...

Magdalene: It was he! It was Jesus!... I talked to him a while ago....

Peter: Easy, Susana. Just let her talk.

Salome: Poor thing, she's cried a lot...

Susana: The same thing happened to Aunt Domitilla when the husband died. It made her crazy and she continued talking until evening... Come, Magdalene, lie down and get some rest...

Magdalene: No, I'm not going to lie down... let me tell you what happened, oh, gosh!

Mark: That's it. Let her speak, let her unburden herself... Later, she'll be able to sleep well...

Susana: Let's see, child, tell us what happened...

Magdalene: I was there, beside the empty tomb when you left. I was weeping and my eyes were all red like a tomato because of so much crying. Suddenly, I heard some footsteps behind me. I looked up and turned around... I couldn't see clearly because of the tears in my eyes.... I thought he was the man guarding the place and I said: "Hey, countryman, if you have taken away his body, then please, tell me where the hell you have hidden him. I'm going to get the body..." And then... then...!

Susana: Then, what happened, child?!

Magdalene: Then he said: Mary!... He called me by my name, do you hear?... I was shocked... It was he! I'm sure! Who else could he be, he spoke just like Jesus, and laughed like him...?

Mark: C'mon, Susana, give her the soup to warm her up or prepare a poultice to cool off her brain.

Magdalene: You've got to believe me! He said to me: Mary! And I said: Moreno!... I threw myself down at his feet!

Mark: And he must've told you: "Let go, you're tickling me," is that it?

Magdalene: He said: "Run, run and tell my brothers! You, gosh! Tell them that if they're going to Galilee, I'll be there waiting for them! And likewise, if they stay here! They'll see me soon.

James: So it was the keeper of the cemetery who scared the hooker to death!

Magdalene: No, no. I've seen him. I talked with Jesus before coming here... You went with me, Susana and Salome, you have seen that empty space, believe me... Oh, look, he's there!

A shadow passed through the transom of the basement. We were all shocked and the Magdalene rushed to open the door... It was Mary, Jesus' mother, who entered...

Susana: Oh my gosh, Mary, at last you came... Where have you been?

Mary did not say a word. She just looked at us, her eyes radiating with joy. In my whole life, I have never seen such a joyful look like that one....

Susana: *Comadre*... what happened to you? Where did you come from? Hey, Mary!

Without moving and with our mouths open, we all awaited what this brown, diminutive peasant woman, who was Jesus' mother, had to say... Then the Magdalene went near her, looked into her dark eyes, as dark as the mourning veil covering her head...

Magdalene: Mam Mary, you saw him too, didn't you?... Didn't you see him...?

Mary: Yes, yes, yes...! I saw him!... I've seen my son!... I've seen him!

There were still stars in the sky. Jerusalem was still in deep slumber under the watchful and round eye of the bright Nissan moon... It was still dark, but it would be dawn very soon.

Wake up, wake up, arise, Jerusalem!

You who have drunk the cup of sorrow.

Look: God is taking this cup from your hands,
and you will never drink from it. Wake up, wake up!

Don your holiday dress, Jerusalem, Holy City!...

Shake that dust off, and get up,
break the chains from your neck!
Arise, Jerusalem,
shine,
for your light comes forth
and the glory of the Lord dawns upon you!

All Christian faith is anchored in an event that has been transmitted to us for about two thousand years by Jesus' group of friends: ignorant men and women, fishermen, artisans, people looked down upon by the "decent ones." This band of the poor has passed the news from generation to generation: God resurrected Jesus of Nazareth, who was killed. He is alive, he has a life that pushes history onwards. In the first century, Paul said to the communities in Corinth that "if Christ had not resurrected, all our faith would be a void" (1 Cor 15:12-24).

*We have faith in the resurrection of Jesus through the words of his disciples. This faith is transmitted to us by way of the gospel. We also open ourselves to faith in the resurrection through the experience of the Christian community where there is love between men and women, where they share and work for justice, like Jesus. In this way, Jesus shows himself to be alive. In this account, all the episodes corresponding to the narrations about the resurrection, aim to highlight this significant aspect of theology. That is why the voice of Jesus cannot be heard again. We only hear the testimony of those who have seen him, those who have talked to him, those who ate with him after the resurrection. Thus, the **community** is shown to be the mediator of our faith. We no longer hear Jesus in the episodes. The disciples themselves communicate their experience to us, the way it happened two thousand years ago. The first Christian groups were structured upon this transmission from mouth to mouth of a common hope creating a community of life. Today, the Church is built upon the same. Jesus did not resurrect by himself. Resurrection is not a miracle Jesus performs on his own body to bring back his life. The first Christian formulas revealed how we should understand this truth about faith: God raised Jesus from the dead and we are the witnesses (Acts 3:15). Jesus' death, caused by unjust powers, reveals the sin of the world, killing the innocent. The resurrection is the definitive confirmation of liberation from death as announced by Jesus. Through it, God shows which is history's destiny and shows Jesus as Lord and Christ (= Messiah).*

The resurrection is a historical fact. It is not a hallucination of the minds of the apostles and the women, of his own imagination, a frenetic desire for Jesus to continue being alive. No, it is an event that has really taken place in history. History cannot give an account of the event directly, but only of the experience of those men and women. Since that Sunday, they experienced that Jesus is alive in a definitive manner. It was not a simple reliving; it was an indestructible life (Rom 6:9). It is an experience which we find difficult to understand exactly, but it is not because the same becomes less certain. Such experience is likewise shown historically, not only through the testimony of his word but also through his life, starting from the attitudes which the disciples had been adopting as a community. The life of the first Christians – among them were the disciples – shows the resurrection: they overcame fear, shared everything they had; they continued the work of Jesus, they gave their lives for the faith.

For the first Christians, the "empty" tomb meant that Jesus was really buried, that his death was a reality. This explains the importance given in the detailed description of his interment.

Jesus' condemnation by the authorities of Israel had made the apostles doubt God's justice and fidelity, as Jesus had taught them. In contrast to John the Baptist and the other Jewish martyrs, Jesus did not give his life for the faith, nor for believing in the God of his ancestors. He was "condemned" by God (Deut 21:23 and Gal 3:13). The Paschal intervention of God changes the whole process and confirms all the preachings and actuation of Jesus.

The expressions "appeared to," "allowed himself to be seen" (1 Cor 15:3), are the same ones formulated in the Old Testament in order to announce the Theophany (Gen 12:7; 17:1). Thus these expressions are replete with an intense Christology.

We should not reduce resurrection to a series of visions of a revived ghost who appears and disappears. The accounts about the resurrection, added later to the evangelical text, aim to show in a plastic form, picturesque perhaps, and always alive, what the faith of the disciples was when they attested to the resurrection. The most primitive of these accounts is the apparition to the women (in the gospel of John, it only deals with the Magdalene). It takes a prostitute to be the first to witness that Jesus is alive. In Israel, the women could not serve as witnesses in trials, as they were regarded as liars and troublesome. However, a woman was the first in witnessing to the resurrection – a woman, who, to make matters worse, was a whore. The subversion of values characterizing the life and mission of Jesus continues after the Passover. The faith of the Church that is born moves on through the passionate testimony – which at first, was not believed – of a woman belonging to the lowest social class.

Although the gospels are not consistent about the moment in which the mother of Jesus experienced her son as being alive, tradition has ever since considered it was Mary who was the first to see him and experience his having resurrected from the dead. In her, more than anyone else perhaps, would resound the jubilation announced centuries ago by the prophets, when they sensed what God had reserved for human history in the future (Is 26:19; 51:17; 52:1-2; 60:1-2).

(Mt 28:1-10; Mk 16:1-11; Jn 20:1-2 and 11-18)

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A Familiar Laughter

James: But Mary, for God's sake, how are we to believe such a thing?

Mary: Oh yes, it was he, I'm sure! How should I not recognize my son, Jesus?

Magdalene: And I saw him too, my golly!

Mark: What I see is that you two are even crazier than King Saul!

The sun of that first day of the week started to warm the roofings of the city of David and to paint the Oriental walls with golden color. Jerusalem was still sleeping, weary from the holiday spree and from having drunk too much wine, after the great feast of the Passover. We, who had been hiding in the dark basement of Mark's house, were jolted by the women's news that Jesus' tomb was open and empty. To top it all, after Mary of Magdala came Mary, the mother of Jesus, claiming she had seen her son alive, and had talked to him...

James: Well, well, I've heard enough of your stories. We've got to leave for Galilee as soon as we can and there's no time to lose.

Philip: I agree with James. So, get your cane and your sack and let's get moving!

Peter: We can't leave just like this, buddies, without knowing what has happened.

James: Nothing's happened, Peter, don't you understand? Are you telling me that you buy the stories of these two crazy women?

Magdalene: It was Jesus and nobody else! I saw him and talked to him!

Mark: Shut up, young woman! Shame on you, you're like a parrot, always repeating the same thing!

Peter: Listen, buddies, whatever it is, we must look into this. John, come with me. First, we go to the tomb and see what the hell is happening. All of you, wait here. No one moves from here and don't open the door for anyone, not even for the prophet Elijah, if he comes!... John, cover your head with a rag, so no one recognizes you...

John: Don't be a coward, Peter. There's no one in the street yet...

Peter: So what... After what had happened, I don't trust even my own shadow anymore.... Hurry up!

Peter and I crossed the patio and headed for the solitary streets of Barrio Zion... Up ahead, at the back of the aqueduct, shone the white marbles of the Temple... Around it were piles of houses where thousands of pilgrims, with the holidays over, would start going back to their villages in the interior within a couple of hours...

John: Hey, Peter...

Peter: What is it, John?

John: Peter, do you think the... the...?

Peter: Nonsense, John. Who is to believe the stories of these women?

John: What if it were true...?

Peter: If it were true, if it were true! Ha!... If my mother-in-law too, had a wick on her head, she would be a candle!... No, John, if anyone dies, he dies. That is the only truth... Hey, let's run, so we don't lose time!

We started to run down the street. We passed through the plaza of the fruit vendors, through the marketplace, leaving behind us Herod's palace. We crossed the first wall...

Peter: Hell, John, don't run too fast, wait for me...!

I was always ahead of Peter. Without looking back, I crossed the gate of the Angle and headed for Golgotha. Behind that hill, round and bald like a skull, was the tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea where we had placed the crushed body of Jesus last Friday, at nightfall.... The round stone door, which I myself had pushed, was now moved, as the women had claimed.... I peeped through, but didn't dare enter alone through the dark and humid opening of the cave... In a few seconds, Peter came, gasping....

Peter: To hell with you, John, you run faster than a hare!

John: Psst.... Don't shout.... Look, troublemaker.... The women were right.... The tomb is open....

Peter: That's true... Who could've done it...?

John: There's not a single soul around, not even the guards...

Peter: They must be still sleeping, drunk from yesterday's feast...

John: What do you think, Peter?... Shall we go down...?

Peter: Pff...! I dunno...

Juan: Are you scared of the dead?

Peter: The dead, no, but the living... Hello!... Anyone down there?... Hear something, John?

John: Nothing.

Peter: Well, then... go down, John... I'll wait for you here....

John: No, man, you first, Peter... I... I'll be the rearguard...

Peter: Oh, yeah?... Fine... I'll go ahead. But don't stay far from me. Hold on fast to your dagger... just in case... Let's go!

We groped through the humid steps of the tomb... The first rays of the sun timidly sneaked through and we saw that the cave was empty...

John: Look, Peter, the shroud and the sheets are here... but not the body.... Here, take a look...

Peter: Something fishy's going on here.... What a big fool I am! Why didn't I realize that at once?

John: Hey, what's wrong? What's the matter with you?

Peter: John, let's get out of here fast!

John: Yeah, and better to inform the rest to come over and....

Peter: No, John! That's exactly what these people want! The mouse is caught by baiting it with cheese. They have left the tomb empty... and this is a trap! They're not interested in a dead man.... they're after us, the living.... Don't you see?

John: Do you think so, Peter?

Peter: I'm dead sure! This is a trap!... If we don't get out of here fast, then we'll be buried alive!... Hurry, John, let's go!

Filled with fear, we crawled through the slippery steps and hurriedly left the cave....

Peter: Wait, John... don't leave me alone here...!

John: I'll see you in Mark's house! Goodbye!

Peter: To hell with you, John...!

Without looking back, I ran as fast as I could, getting lost among the narrow streets of Jerusalem.... Peter was trailing behind, trying to overtake me, in vain.... Soon, I stopped running. I was tired. I continued walking slowly, waiting for Peter... While we were almost at the house, I felt him right behind me... He came like an arrow, unaware that he was overtaking me....

John: Hey, where have you been, troublemaker...? And whatever happened to the big nose?... Was he bitten by a bug or something? Peter, wait for me...!

I hastened my pace and in a couple of minutes, I was in the house. Peter, who had overtaken me at the last minute, was seated on the basement floor, panting and surrounded by the whole group. Susana and Salome were fanning him with a piece of rag...

James: Now, John, tell us what happened...

John: What do I know, James! I know nothing...!

Susana: Weren't you with him, young man?

John: Well... Peter was left behind... then, he came speeding by, for reasons I'm not aware of.... I dunno what's the matter with him...

Philip: Neither do we... but ever since he came, he hasn't stopped laughing... something must be tickling him to the bones...

James: Damn you, Peter. It's okay now!... C'mon, what's the joke, huh?... What the hell has happened to you?

Peter: Buddies... listen... I... I thought it was an ambush... so we left hurriedly... John went ahead of me... I was behind him, as always, no matter how I try, this brute always beats me... Then I leaned against the wall of a house to catch my breath.... And there, breathless as I was, with my tongue sticking out, I turned my head and saw a man in the other street... he was kind of weird... and was looking at me....

Philip: Who was he, Peter?

Peter: How would I know, Philip?... I continued to walk, as if I had seen nothing... but I was all alert... and then, I felt his footsteps behind me... I quickened my pace, and he did the same... I reduced my speed and he did likewise... Damn it, he was trailing me!

Susana: So what did you do, Peter?

Peter: What did I do? When I got to the corner of the street, I turned at once, ran as fast as I could and sneaked through the first patio I saw... Psst! Then I hid behind some barrels and waited.... He walked past me.... I thought I had lost him... Then I tiptoed my way to the wall where I leaped quietly, and walked the opposite direction up to the street of the potters.... I looked from one side to the other... there was no one... So, I continued walking up to the corner where I was going to cross... then I felt a hand on my shoulder!... Holy God, all my hair stood on end...! There he was again, this fellow, right in front of me!

Mark: So what did you do?

Peter: What was I to do? I gave a leap but he had me cornered... I stepped back and glued myself against the wall like a slug... but the man was getting nearer and nearer... After swallowing hard, I asked: Who... who are you?... What do you want from me?... Then I could speak no more.... Now, I can't help but laugh at it.... Ha, ha, ha...!

Reclining against the basement wall, Peter continued laughing.... All of us surrounded him, as we bit our nails, waiting for every word he would utter....

Susana: Give him room, damn... He needs some air...

Philip: Go ahead, Peter...

Peter: ...Can you imagine this man getting too close and asking me: "And you, who are you?... What're you doing here?" Then I realized he spoke like all of us, from the north... He was a Galilean... I thought he was one of Herod's policemen, those who go under cover, you know....

James: Did he carry a sword?

Peter: No, but it seems I've heard his voice before,...

Susana: Finish it, man, you're putting us all on tenterhooks!

Peter: That's exactly what had happened to me! I was hoping somebody would pass by to give me assistance, but there wasn't a single soul in the street. Then this man asked me again: "Who are you?" He was much closer now, and every time, I moved closer to the wall.... His eyes were fixed on me and he had a certain smile that terrified me no end.... Again he said: "You're Peter, aren't you, the troublemaker, as they say, the fisherman from Lake Tiberias?".... Having said this, I got tongue-tied, my blood rushed to my feet, believe me, buddies, like what happened to Lot's wife. He recognized me.

James: So, what did you say?

Peter: I told him: "No, no, no, I'm not that man you're saying I am." "Oh yeah, you are." I said no, but he said yes. So I said: "Look, buddy, you're mistaken, my name is Jullian, the potter, and I haven't been in the sea."

Mark: You're a coward, Peter!

Peter: That's exactly what he said: "You're a coward, Peter!..." And he began to laugh! The more he laughed, the more horrified I became!

Susana: And so...?

Peter: I closed my eyes and pretended to be dead. But the man laughed and continued laughing... filling the entire street with his laughter... damn it... where did I hear that laughter before, where?... Suddenly, it dawned upon me.... Do you know who this man was before me?

All: Who was it, Peter?

Peter: Jesus! It was Jesus! Ha, ha, ha...!

James: What did you say...?

Peter: It was Jesus! That laughter belonged to the Moreno, and nobody else!

Mark: Oh, Peter, please...

Peter: Ha, ha... Yeah, it was his... And I asked: "Is that you, Moreno?..." He said: "Of course, Peter. Can't you see? God always ends up winning. He always laughs last..." When he said this, I rubbed my eyes to be sure I wasn't dreaming. I wasn't, I was even more awake than Jeremiah when they stepped on his corn. So, that's it, buddies. I came here running to tell you about it!

James: Open your mouth, Peter... c'mon... You're drunk, Peter.

Peter: Who, me?... I haven't even tasted a drop since Thursday!... No, no, it's not that... Mary was right! ... So was Magdalene! Ha, ha, hay...!

Magdalene: So, it's all woman's talk, right?

Philip: What's all this nonsense? One scratches his back and all the rest follow!

Peter: So, you don't believe me, huh? Do you think I'm out of my mind? Well I'm not, I'm very lucid and I'm not seeing visions! I've seen Jesus with my own two eyes!

Philip: Look, Peter, how can we believe such a crazy idea?

Peter: Ha, ha, ha...! Fine, I don't give a damn. Don't believe it, if you don't want to... but I saw him!

Susana: Pour cold water on him, it might bring back his senses!

Peter: Ha, ha, hay...! Hot or cold, it doesn't really matter! But I saw him!... It was Jesus!!... It was he!!! Ha, ha, hay!!!

James: Shut up, Peter, you're waking up the whole city.

Peter: Well and good, so they will know!... But I saw him!... It was Jesus! It was he!...

Peter was acting crazy. He ran through the streets of Jerusalem to bring us the good news that Jesus was alive. And now, he was laughing incessantly, looking at everyone with a joyful glow in his eyes that we had never seen before...

How beautiful are the messenger's feet standing on the mountains to bring peace.
He brings the good news,
and proclaims salvation.
He tells us: The Kingdom of God has come!...
Laugh and rejoice,
you forlorn of Jerusalem,
because the Lord has consoled your people.
He has freed them from bondage!

The idea that the Jewish leaders had stolen the cadaver of Jesus – the first interpretation offered by the group to the news brought in by the women when they saw the empty tomb – was perfectly logical. That Pilate had allowed a decent burial for a political criminal had surprised the Jewish authorities. That was something unusual. That is why, it would not be surprising that some of them should carry out the ultimate revenge by taking the corpse from the tomb to be thrown into the common pit, the ultimate destiny of the delinquents, according to the laws of the Sanhedrin.

Jesus' appearance before Peter is solidly anchored on the most ancient Christian tradition, although in the gospel there is no account of such an encounter. Peter's confession of faith (1 Cor 15:1-5) mentions it especially, and the first clamor of the Passover particularly highlights this act: the Lord has appeared to Simon! (Lk 24:34). This can offer us a clue to help us understand that the apparitions were not only the ones narrated in the gospel, but that with them is an attempt to summarize an experience of faith which certainly is extended through the passing of time. These accounts tell us in narrative form what is essential of the feelings among the disciples as a result of the resurrection: hope, surprise, disbelief, the overcoming of fear, the spirit of community, etc.

Jesus did not return to life in order to die again. His life now is definitive, new and whole. But this does not mean that there is a rupture between his life before death and his life now, as if one had nothing to do with the other. In the resurrected Jesus, there is a continuity between the past and the present. Because of his Passover, Jesus is not stripped of his previous human condition. Resurrected, he becomes the new man, with a human condition brought to its plenitude. In his new life, he assumes all his past history.

That is why Jesus continues to be a funny person, one who is fond of telling jokes, who keeps on making fun of Peter. He is the same, with the same laughter, just as when he was in Capernaum. The resurrection brings his life, his way of being to fullness. What is new is that this laughter will never end. Jesus' laughter is a sign of God's joy in forgiving, in uniting with the poor (Zep 3:17) and it is also a sign that God laughs at the unjust men plotting the death of people (Ps 2:4; 59:8-9; 37:12-13). He laughs at them because he knows they are not going to succeed, and that victory belongs to the humble. That is the resurrection of Jesus: a fruit of the definitive laughter with which humans will see the conclusion of history; a joyful message of God announcing this end, where we expect to laugh with him in his house, without fear of any failure.

If the whole gospel of Jesus is good news for now, for history, his resurrection also finds an echo in this society that we are building today. After the resurrection, those who pretended to be the judges became the culprits. The condemned was right after all, and consequently, those who dared commit the injustice were definitely condemned by God. The end shall be life. It will be by means of struggle and death, but the ultimate word shall be an enormous and endless laughter, of which the risen Jesus is the messenger (Is 52:7-9).

(Lk 24:12; Jn 20:3-10)

Through the Road of Emmaus

That first day of the week, the neighbors of Jerusalem, in spite of the feast of the Sabbath, woke up very sad, perplexed, unable to believe what had happened that Friday on the hill of Golgotha. It became household talk in the entire city, the bad luck of the prophet of Nazareth, killed by the rulers of the capital... We were still in hiding for fear of the guards who were watching every street. Since the first hour, our fright heightened when Peter and the women came telling that the tomb was empty and that they had seen Jesus...

Mark: Okay, let's get this over with, once and for all. Are you planning to return to Galilee or are you staying here...?

James: We dunno, Mark...

Peter: Yes, we do, James!! We're staying. There are strange things happening here. Until these things are clarified, nobody moves from here!

Mark: Hey, you listen to me... take it easy!

Peter: I'm listening to you, Mark, and I'm cool. I'm telling you what I've seen. Pull out my tongue, and my teeth if you want, but I'll go on saying this: Jesus is alive! Don't you understand what has happened, you fools? The powerful didn't get what they wanted! God has reversed everything! Like he promised: the poor, who are always the last, shall be first, and the dead are brought back to life. The Kingdom of God has come! I've seen it!

Mark: Okay, okay.... I'm sorry for you, troublemaker, really... I don't think there's anything we can do about you...

Magdalene: And that goes too for Mam Mary and me, doesn't it? C'mon, will you have an open mind, for once? We're telling you the truth!

James: No, that's all nonsense, which is worse! If everyone goes on like this, we'll all become crazy!

Mark: Fine, so you're not going back to Galilee. Whatever you wish... There's nothing much left to eat here. I'm going to buy something. Maybe, with some chicken peas in the stomach, you'll get back to your senses.... I'll be back right away! Lock the doors well and don't let anyone in!

Near the aqueduct beside the small market, Mark met Cleophas, an old friend. Cleophas was a doctor. His hooked nose rested on his beard and a multi-colored scarf covered his bald head. In Barrio Ophel, he was better known as a quack doctor.

Cleophas: Hey, what's with you, Mark, you rascal? I haven't seen you for ages!

Mark: Blazes, Cleophas, that's what I'd like to ask you, quacky.... But with what is happening these days... you heard about it, didn't you?

Cleophas: You mean what happened to Jesus...

Mark: What else? You know damn well I'm a friend of his group. What happened was indeed terrible...

Cleophas: God seemed to have abandoned us. People who are depressed talk of nothing else...

Mark: You should see Jesus' friends...

Cleophas: They must be distraught, I guess.

Mark: No, but they're crazy. Three of them are worse. The mother, a young woman from Magdala and Peter, whom I know very well. They're all out their minds. Imagine, they claim having seen Jesus this morning, and they even talked to him...

Cleophas: Poor ones... it must've been such a big blow...

Mark: You must go with me to the house, Cleophas.... You can cure them with your herbs and whatever.

They're awful, believe me... Say, why don't you join us for lunch today?

Cleophas: These chicken peas are very good indeed... Hmmm...

Magdalene: Naturally, we're the cooks here, Doctor Cleophas... Madam Mary and I prepared them. The rest do nothing but whimper, while we just sing our blues away! See how nice the food came out!

Mark: You see? They're as happy as a lark. What do you think? Aren't they completely insane?

Cleophas: A little bit high, yeah. Maybe an application of the belladonna will do them good... and a lot of sleep....

Mark: And Peter too, I suppose...

Peter: I don't need anything, Mark! I've heard you! You brought Cleophas to cure us, but no one is sick here. My brain is intact! My eyes and ears too! We have seen Jesus and spoken with him! That's right, I dunno why God has done such a thing, but He did it! Why don't you want to believe?

Magdalene: It's okay, big nose.... They'll eat their hearts out when they themselves see him. It's okay, leave them alone...

Cleophas: Well, my friends, it's been a pleasure to meet you. But now, it's getting late, and I've got to go.

Mark: But it's too early yet. Where the hell are you going?

Cleophas: Not far from here, to the village of Emmaus. I've got some business there to attend to.

Mark: Well, you're not going there alone... Isn't it in Emmaus where you find the hot springs? They say this is good for pimples and black fever. Why don't you bring Peter along? The waters might cure his obstinacy....

Peter: Will you leave me in peace, Mark! I'm not getting out of this house. You go and immerse your head in the waters, to make you believe, unbeliever!

Mark: Well, that's a good idea. Yeah, I'm going with you, Cleophas. All this talk and all this darkness have been nauseating. A little journey might clear this mess in my head.... C'mon, let's go....

When Mark and his friend Cleophas left, we closed the door with three padlocks. After eating, Peter and the women again narrated what they had seen and heard. Sick and tired of the same story, we did not believe a word of theirs....

Hours had passed. It was already dark and we had lighted a couple of lamps when the basement shook from incessant knocking at the door....

Cleophas: Open the door!... Open the door!

Mark: Peter, John, open the door!

James: Hell, who would be knocking at this time of the day?!

Magdalene: It sounds like the voice of Mark, don't you hear?

Peter: Open the door, James. Be careful... It could be a trap...

When my brother opened the door, Mark and Cleophas, who were pushing it, came in like lightning. They were drenched with sweat, but leaping with joy....

Mark: You're right! We've seen him! Cleophas and I have seen him!

Peter: Wait a minute.... really now? Bring them the belladonna, Mary!

James: Hey, what have we got here? A cage of demented people? How come a doctor like you should....

Magdalene: Shut up, James, and let them speak.... Tell us, how did it happen and where? Tell us!

Cleophas: Listen! We were heading for Emmaus by way of Jaffa.... We were talking.... and we were in a hurry... and talking:

Cleophas: That's terrible, Mark... Poor people... But it's of little wonder, though. In my whole life, I haven't seen an injustice worse than the judgment meted to the Nazarene... It can make you lose your sanity, you know...

Mark: Know what? I had known Jesus for more than a year... What a man, this guy Jesus. He's the kind who enthralls you instantly... An upright person. I was telling Peter: If he's not the Messiah, he's very close to being one... God was with him, Cleophas. And the poor people too... He was one of us...

Cleophas: He shouldn't have died.... So you see how things have been... only the good die young... they easily get rid of those who serve the people...

Mark: God has abandoned his people. This is hopeless... damn it...

Mark: So, we reached the height of Gabbatha. And on one of the bends, we saw one of our countrymen walking with a cane....

Cleophas: He came toward us and engaged us in a conversation... He said: "Why that sad look in that face? Is anything the matter?"... I said to myself: "Damn, where did this sneaky fellow come from?"

Mark: I told him we were talking about Jesus... And this countryman, seemed not to know anything about the event last Friday....

Mark: Well, you might be the only pilgrim in Jerusalem who didn't know what happened...

Cleophas: Right, how come you didn't know what happened to Jesus? Since that uproar in the Temple, nothing but this has been the talk of the town.

Mark: He was a prophet... or more than a prophet. Now you wouldn't know who he really was... He performed great things and he spoke with great candidness.... He was very frank, do you understand? The Galilean confronted Pilate and Caiphaz fearlessly, and how he reproached them!... We thought God would mete us justice through him, how we had hoped he would free Israel from all these ruling thieves...

Cleophas: But things turned out the other way around... Neither the Kingdom of God came, nor had anything else happened... They killed him, like they did to anyone who spoke the truth... And now, back to carrying the yoke on our necks... just like before!

Mark: That countryman of ours remained silent, listening to us intently... He seemed to be a nice person. Anyway, just for the heck of it, we even told him about your scuffle with the women this morning, and with Peter, everything.... That we didn't believe a thing, naturally...

Cleophas: It was then we heard him say that we were the foolish ones, that we were the pigheaded ones... The truth was, I was kind of peeved by him. I said to myself: "What an obtrusive fellow! He can go to hell if he wants!"

Mark: And right there, he unleashed himself as well as all the spittle he accumulated in his mouth while listening to us, lecturing to us on a string of truths about the Scriptures. He knew them inside out.

Cleophas: He spoke of great things, things you will never forget... That those who fight for justice perish, but God takes note of their death. They are like seeds that are sunk into the soil; they spring forth once again and bear fruits. He told us not to be sad, because death never, never has the last say.

Mark: He also added that everything had been like the Passover in Egypt, during Moses' time. That the Messiah had to cross the Red Sea of blood to be able to get into the promised land. That we should dry the tears in our eyes, for the Kingdom of God had already begun... Well, I dunno how to say it exactly, but that countryman of ours had a way of saying things that would give you the goose pimples.

Cleophas: His words penetrated like burning coals...

Mark: But the best thing is yet to come... When we reached Emmaus...

Cleophas: Hey, are you leaving now...?

Mark: Could you.... could you stay with us...? Look, it's getting late, it's almost night... Stay with us, man, there's enough room for three...

Cleophas: How we wanted him to stay. And he did...! So we sat down to have dinner in Samuel's inn.... We became ever more excited during the conversation...

Mark: Then, when we were eating, this countryman took a piece of bread, blessed it, broke it and gave each one a piece... just like what happened on Thursday evening... it was exactly the same. It was Jesus... I'm sure of it, buddies!

Magdalene: You see?!!! I told you, the Moreno is alive! He was not buried beneath the earth!

Cleophas: Yes, my friends, it's hard to believe it, but it's the truth, nothing but the pure truth! Jesus is

alive! We've seen him! We must announce this to the four corners of the earth! So that everyone may know! Jesus is alive!!!

Ascend the high mountain, joyful messenger for Zion!
Shout out loud, joyful messenger for Jerusalem! Shout out without fear,
Tell the cities of Judah: "There goes our God!"
He is here to console the weeping,
to change our ashes into a crown,
our mourning robe into a festive garb,
our sighs into songs of victory!

All accounts of the Passover in the gospel clearly show that the disciples refused to believe in the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Certainly, in the religious thinking of Israel, nothing ever existed which was similar to a resurrection "within history" as an event that could happen in the present. If there was a talk of a "resurrection of the dead" about 150 years before Jesus, it was understood as a promise for the end of time, but not as something that was to happen within life on earth. This is what the texts tell us about what the disciples had experienced: that Jesus lived within the context of his own history, that he was in community, that he was with them on the road, as in the case of the disciples of Emmaus.

In the episode, the disciples were Mark and Cleophas. The latter appeared as a doctor by profession. In Jerusalem, as in all cities and villages of Israel, there were doctors. They were considered artisans. They were only concerned with external medicine: application of bandages, compresses, ointment, and their knowledge of how the human body functioned was limited. Since medicine then had a lot to do with magical remedies, sometimes there was strong resistance against doctors who were considered charlatans or people taking advantage of other people.

Emmaus was a village about 30 kilometers from Jerusalem, in Shephelah, with an extensive flat land area, situated between the mountains of Judah and the coastal plains. During the war of Judas Maccabeus, it was here where the Israelites had encamped (1 Mac 3:57). At present we cannot point out the exact place of Emmaus as referred to in the gospel. In a small Arab village, El-Qubeibeh, is a church reminding us of this account of the Passover. Traces of a Roman street in Jesus' time can still be found in this village. Another nearby village, Amwas, also claims to have been the venue of said events.

The coming of the Messiah, which for centuries had inspired the people of Israel, was becoming a reality in different ways through the times. After the resurrection, the disciples recognized the much awaited Messiah in Jesus. The life and death of Jesus identified him with the Servant of Justice that the prophet Isaiah had spoken about (Is 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 53:1-12), more than with the triumphant king, the mysterious heavenly character, or with the vindictive prophet that other people had imagined. Then they realized that the liberation brought about by the Messiah demanded willingness to give up one's life. But the risen Jesus came to tell them suffering was never the ultimate word; because in the end, there would be life and triumph for those who had committed themselves.

The disciples recognized Jesus "in the breaking of the bread." In Israel, bread was never cut with a knife. All meals started with this gesture of breaking the bread, performed by whoever presided over the meal. Jesus must have had a particular way of doing it when he ate with his companions, and this was how they were able to identify the unknown pilgrim. In this text, Luke, aside from giving us a Paschal account, also presents to us a Eucharistic scene. The scene of Emmaus is a catechetical account describing the meaning and what the eucharistic gatherings of the first Christian communities were. Through the Word (symbolized here by the conversation between Jesus and the travellers, where the former interpreted the Scriptures for the latter), and through the breaking of the bread (in the communion at the table), the resurrected Jesus makes his presence felt among his disciples.

(Mk 15:12-13; Lk 24:13-35)

What We Have Seen and Heard

It had dawned and night had fallen during that first day of the week. The residents of Jerusalem were in deep slumber after that boisterous night of farewell: through the four gates of the city of David, the caravans carrying thousands of pilgrims had made their exit. The feasts of the Passover were over. Everything was back to normalcy. Everyone was going back to his house. Everyone, except us...

Peter: I've seen him! You've got to believe me!!

Magdalene: So have I! I've seen him, just as I am seeing all of you now!

Philip: I dare you, swear you've seen him!

Magdalene: I swear I saw Jesus! I've seen him alive and kicking!... You don't believe me, do you?

James: No, Magdalene, of course not...

Hiding in the basement of Mark's house, whose doors were locked, we were seated on the floor around an old oil lamp and still discussing the same stuff...

Magdalene: I swear by my mother, my grandmother and my great grandmother!

Philip: Go on ascending, till you end up swearing by Adam and Eve. But nobody buys your story, do you hear me?

Nathanael: A woman's oath doesn't hold water, and much less yours, because you still have milk teeth. Let's see, how old are you, Mary dear of Magdala?

Magdalene: As a matter of fact, I don't remember, but I'm more than fifteen and less than twenty.

Philip: Ha! So, a snotty-nose like you wants to convince me that a dead man has risen again?

Magdalene: So Mam Mary is snotty-nosed too, is that it, Philip? Mary, come over here a minute!

James: Leave her alone, Magdalene. Mary is the mother... and mothers who weep see a lot of visions. This is always the case, you know....

Magdalene: All I know is that Peter hasn't given birth to anyone... and yet he saw him!

Peter: I'm already a sly, old fox, do you hear me, red head? When you were still on all fours, I was already hurling stones at the dogs in Bethsaida! I'm telling you that Jesus is alive! I saw him!

Mark: And we did too! This quacky here and I even ate with him in Emmaus!

Philip: In Emmaus!... Isn't it in Emmaus where the dead spirits go up and down the boiling waters of the fountain?

Mark: Fine, fine, if you refuse to believe. I'm laughing at all of you, men without faith!

Philip: Same here, for you are a gang of demented ones!

Nathanael: I've never seen anything so funny... Do you know what's been going around the city, huh? That we were the ones who stole Jesus' body.

James: Tell me, who said that?

Nathanael: The leaders. Those of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus came to tell me about it.

Philip: Well, I say they themselves have stolen it, that we may fall into the trap and get caught.

Magdalene: Nobody stole no one because Jesus is alive!

James: Shut up, Magdalene, and stop yelling!

Thomas: Well, well... y...y...you continue with your fighting... I...I...I'm leaving.

Thomas, who was listening in one corner of the basement, stood up and shook his robe...

Thomas: I...I...I'm leaving.

Philip: Where the hell are you going, stutterer?

Thomas: To M...M...Ma...Matthias' h...h...house.

James: What's wrong with Matthias?

Thomas: N..n..nothing. He c..c..came to celebrate the P..p..passover and now he's going back to Jericho. I'm g...g...going with him.

Nathanael: Very well. I guess this is what everyone has to do, to get out of this damned, crazy city once and for all.

Philip: Most of the pilgrims are already gone. Why don't we pack up all our things and start for the road to Galilee early morning, tomorrow, huh?

Magdalene: No, I'm not leaving Jerusalem!

Peter: Neither am I, until everything is clear to me!

Thomas: I d...d...don't care anymore... I'm g...g...going to Matthias' house.

Peter: Wait a minute, Thomas. Don't go. Don't you understand? Jesus is alive!

Thomas: Y...y...you're all stupid!... Goodbye!

Thomas headed for the street, turned to the corner where the tanners were, and ran down the street toward Siloam where his old friend, Matthias was staying, near the pool...

Matthias: Oh, Thomas, it's you! I was already wondering where you had been, my friend!

Thomas: Where else should I be? Since that Friday, we have been hiding in a basement, l..l..like s..s... scared m...m...mice.

Matthias: I can just imagine... Damn, with so much hope, and then everything's gone down like a house of sand.... Oh...! My grandma used to say that he who is born potbellied has no use for a sash. This is what happens to poor people like us, Thomas. We are worth nothing.

Thomas: That's right, Matthias. We can't believe in anything, nor dream of anything.

Matthias: John the Baptist came clamoring for justice, and zas! he was beheaded! Then came Jesus proclaiming changes, and you saw what happened.

Thomas: Why do things turn out bad, for us, the p...p..oor, Matthias?

Matthias: Perhaps we're unlucky, buddy.

Thomas: Yeah, for h...h...having bad mothers like them.

Matthias: This country is hopeless. Things are going from bad to worse... Anyway, what's the use regretting, when everything's come to an end?... Tell me, Thomas, how's the Nazarene's mother? And his friends?

Thomas: I've just been there.

Matthias: C'mon, tell me about them.

Thomas: Worse too.... Some of them have snapped.

Matthias: Of course, I understand... They've suffered a lot. It's always like this at first... Later, things will take their natural course...

Thomas: All I want to do is go back to m...m...my h...h...house... When are you leaving, Matthias?

Matthias: Tomorrow, at the first hour. We can travel together, if you want.

Thomas: S..sure, I'm g..g..going with you... and tra...la...la... the story of the Kingdom of God is over. So, I'm g...g...getting my things now, say g...g...goodbye to my friend, and I'll be r...r...right back...

Matthias: Don't talk too much, so you can get back soon... I'll be waiting for you!

Thomas went back to Mark's house... He was sad, his head bowed down and his hands inside his pockets. He bent to pick up a stone and furiously hurled it against the wall...

Thomas: D...d...damn it, everything's come to an end. Everything's o...o...over...!

He continued walking through the dark, solitary streets of Jerusalem... The sky, dark and brilliant, laden with countless stars, was descending... Thomas entered the barrio of Zion and turned to the street of tanners...

Thomas: B..b..but what's happening h...h...ere? It's almost m...m...midnight...

In spite of the hour, no one slept in Mark's house. The noise coming from the basement could be heard in the street.... When Thomas opened the door, he found all of us laughing, leaping and screaming with joy...

James: Thomas!! At last you're here!

Nathanael: Did you see him, Thomas, did you see him?

Thomas: Yeah.

Philip: So did we! Everyone has seen him!

Thomas: B...b...but how? M...M...atthias has not left his house.

Magdalene: What Matthias are you talking about? It's Jesus!...He's been here with us!

Peter: Why did you leave, Thomas? Had you stayed, you would have seen him too!

Thomas: B...b...ut, how is it p...p...ossible? All of you are now singing the same song?!

James: Thomas, sit down and listen to me. You've heard me before, haven't you? You know I'm a stubborn man, with a very closed mind. I didn't believe a word of Magdalene, nor Peter, not even Mary... but now, I've seen him! Everyone here has seen him, Thomas! Jesus is alive!

Thomas: I knew it! My uncle used to tell me how contagious madness could be.

Philip: No, Thomas, this is something else. The greatest thing that ever happened in this world! God has given us eyes to be witnesses to it!

Thomas: You must've seen a g...g...ghost...

Magdalene: Oh yeah? I didn't know that ghosts nowadays were dark and bearded! Ha!

James: No, Thomas, it was he. It was Jesus! He was right there where you are. He came, he greeted all of us and we became breathless. Then he began to laugh when he saw us scared to death...

Thomas: I repeat, it was a g...g...ghost.

Magdalene: He's no ghost, my goodness, ghosts don't eat and this one gobbled a fish tail and some honey we had reserved for you... Look, look at the bowl where we had kept your dinner...! Jesus has eaten everything! He drank wine and my, how he blew his nose! So ghosts do these, huh?

Thomas: Jesus is d...d...dead. How can he be a...a...alive when I saw him dead?

Philip: Exactly. How can he be dead when we have seen him alive?

Thomas: You must've seen his s...s...spirit. They say the souls of the d...d...dead linger seven times before they rest in p...p...peace...

Magdalene: No, he was Jesus in flesh and bones! The same Jesus he was, laughing the same way, doing the same things, but a happier one... what more... what else.... I dunno how to tell you... but he was the same Moreno!

Thomas: Well, I don't b...b...believe it.

James: Listen, Thomas: when you left, we were fighting, remember? We were arguing whether to go back to Galilee or to stay in Jerusalem. Suddenly, Jesus came in. And he said: "You have to go out to the world to announce the triumph of God"...

Nathanael: And he looked at each one of us and said: "I'm counting on all of you! You have to continue fighting for justice, even if it will cost your lives, like what happened to me... But don't be afraid. Death does not have the last word. It's the word of God that is final.

Peter: Do you understand, Thomas, do you understand what happened? Jesus was the first to recover from it all! And we shall all follow him!

James: Jesus trusted in the Lord and now God is trusting in us.

Philip: The Kingdom of God cannot be stopped by anyone, not even the rulers, nor the armies, nor the devil, no one, not even death!

Thomas: That sounds very b...b...beautiful... too b...b...beautiful to be true...

Peter: But Thomas...

Thomas: No. I don't believe such stuff. These are stories... stories and visions... Just like the thirsty cameleers in the desert, seeing water where there is none... No, I don't believe it, damn!... The only truth I know is that we a...a...are sad... We have lost the best friend we ever h...h...had... and with him went our

hopes too... Everything is finished, everything...

Peter: No, Thomas, listen to me well: Last Friday, in Golgotha, it seemed like heaven had caved in on us forever. But God kept this surprise for us... The first to be surprised was Jesus himself, when God raised him from the dead, can you imagine that...! Those bandits thought they had won. But God knew it all along and stretched his hand to Jesus... Why don't you believe, Thomas?

Thomas: Because I don't. And in order for me to believe... I must first feel the wounds in his hands with my own... No, please, stop deceiving me, for I don't want to have any illusions... No, I may have a c...c... crooked tongue, b...b...but I still have a l...l...lucid mind.... Tomorrow, I'm l...l...leaving with Matthias...

But after a few hours...

Thomas: Matthias! Matthias!... Open the door!

Matthias: Hey, what's the matter, Thomas... what's up...?

Thomas went inside his friend's house like a whirlwind...

Thomas: Matthias! It's true that Jesus is alive, much more alive than the two of us! I said I wouldn't believe if I didn't see, but it was true. We were all in the basement, with the doors closed, and I said no, I didn't believe, they said yes, they did believe and so forth and so on, when Jesus came and sat with us, just like a member of the group, as usual. Then he looked at me and oh, he tickled me in one arm and then in the other, telling me: "I'm no ghost, Thomas, and don't be so stubborn!" Jesus was in front of me, just like the two of us now and said: "C'mon, give me your hand, Thomas!" I almost dropped dead saying: "Moreno, you are the Messiah!" Then he said: "I was like you, too, Thomas. For a while I thought God had abandoned me. But no. I entrusted my fate to his hands and as you can see, He did not fail me. Do the same, Thomas. Have faith, even if you don't see nor understand. Now, run, run and tell everyone that it's not all over yet, that this is just the beginning..." That's why I came to tell you, Matthias, I had to tell you!!!!

Thomas' stuttering tongue straightened up as he told his friend what he had seen and heard. Matthias believed and began to announce what happened to the whole barrio of Siloam, until the news spread everywhere... We, too, are announcing it to you, sharing our joy, knowing that Jesus, from Nazareth is alive forever!!!

The gospel account on Thomas' unbelief and his act of faith is replete with "material" details: that Jesus ate fish and honey is very specific, that Thomas touched the wounds in his hands and on his side... These aspects are emphasized in order not to imagine Jesus rising from the dead like a ghost, an ethereal spirit, somebody "not physical." In the Christian world, when we speak of resurrection "of the flesh," or "of the body," we are proclaiming the unity of humans, of all people. We are also referring to his body, to the material through which the spirit manifests itself. God is concerned with humans' bodies for as long as they live – that is why the gospel is for this life on earth, and when a person dies, God is also as concerned with the resurrection of our body.

The mentality of Israel has always conceived of persons as a unity, that the body and soul were not separate, as the Greeks have likewise thought. There is no despising the body, the "material" in the tradition of Israel. For an Israelite, man is "basar" ("flesh" in relation to physical debility, intellectual limitations or sin). It is at the same time, "nefesh" ("soul" in relation to spiritual values and to God). Persons in their unity are inspired by the "ruaj," the Spirit of God. It does not therefore, aim to separate the material from the spiritual, the soul from the body, but to consider the whole person as weak or full of possibilities, to see persons as instruments of death or as giver of life, etc. When Saint Paul speaks of resurrection as the transition from a "carnal" to a "spiritual" person, he is precisely referring to this: through death, a person transforms finite self to an infinite one (1 Cor 15:35-49). In any case, it is practically impossible for us in this world, to fully capture this reality of resurrection we hope for in faith.

It is like explaining to a child in his mother's womb how life is like outside, what it means to breathe, and what the colors are. In his fetal existence, enclosed, dark and floating, the infant would be absolutely incapable of even imagining it.

The Paschal accounts, which are schematically presented, help us understand that the disciples did not experience the resurrection of Jesus as a singular act of God in the course of history, but that it was going to continue from that moment to the present.

The disciples experienced something else: that with Jesus' resurrection, the "end" was to begin, or more exactly put, "the beginning of the end". The war against sin was already won. It had to be won in some battles, but with Jesus resurrected, it became obvious where human history was heading. The disciples were witnesses, on account of that Paschal experience, to Jesus' entry to the thus proclaimed Kingdom of God. The testimonies of the disciples, of the first Christians and the first basic communities that were organized then, tell us that for these men and women, "to believe" was to live in the new world of God, to savor beforehand the definitive triumph, to anticipate what the end of time would have in store for us: the coming of God's justice.

This faith, experienced and lived, will save us. When we say that Jesus saves us, that he is our savior, we are affirming that on account of his resurrection, he has become a model that will guide us, that our life may become meaningful, that it may be "saved" from the absurd, from egoism, from fatalism, from passivity and finally, from death. This means, "we are saved" when we follow the way of Jesus: his commitment, generosity, concern, love for others, struggle for justice, communitarian spirit, fraternity, equality among men and women. This road is the "savior" of human life. By raising Jesus, God has given credit to the validity of this road. To follow him entails a lot of risks, since the values of the gospel are not of this world. Well then, when death is interposed as the price of Christian commitment, God is telling us in the Paschal event that the life of those who live like Jesus will never end. It has so much quality, so much strength, that it can overcome death.

Jesus overcame death and his resurrection is a guarantee that after him, and following in his footsteps, we shall also surpass it. The risen Jesus frees us from death, and also from fear of dying. This is a question crucial to the Christian faith. The authenticity of our faith is measured by our attitude toward death. If we see death as a form of defeat, we shall be paralyzed by fear of the unjust who cause it or by a fatalistic attitude toward the limitations of human existence. This lack of freedom will prevent us from giving full testimony of commitment in favor of life that characterizes the Christian. Seeing death as failure, we will not see in Jesus crucified a savior, but another victim of the system. We will not believe in the resurrection. Seeing it as such, then Jesus is nothing more than an "example" of the past. But if we free ourselves from the fear of dying, then death becomes a source of life.

(Mk 16:14-18; Lk 24:36-49; Jn 20:19-29)

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One Hundred Fifty-Three Big Fish

Shortly after that suspenseful and joyful first day of the week, we left Jerusalem and began our journey to the north. There were hardly any more pilgrims in the capital during that time. We took every precaution not to call the attention of the soldiers guarding the gates of the city after the holidays. The rulers of Israel whom we had left behind in their palaces thought that Jesus was no more than a memory soon to be buried into oblivion. We, who knew that God had raised him from the dead, walked hurriedly toward the direction of the Galilee of the gentiles, to bring the good news to our countrymen...

Peter: In Capernaum, they're probably thinking that we've been swallowed by the earth or that Pilate has ordered us beheaded!

Philip: It's been a month since we left the lake and... so many things have happened since!

James: The moment they find out what happened to Jesus, they'll all be scared to death...!

Peter: Well, they'll be greatly relieved the moment we tell them how God put an end to all this. I'm dying to see the expression in their faces when they know what we know!

After three days of journey on the road, we set foot in Galilee. We talked for three hours with our neighbors in Capernaum, who swarmed around like flies gorging themselves with honey, giving them a detailed account of everything that had taken place during those days in Jerusalem. We all wanted to speak at the same time... My father's house seemed so small, taking in the whole barrio who came in anticipation of our news...

John: Weep no more, grandma Rufa, you'll get to see the Moreno again, and very much more alive than all of us here!

Rufa: I understand, son, I understand... I see how you've all been on the rack of great sorrow...

James: No, old woman, no! We've witnessed it ourselves! First the women, and then, the men... Go, speak with Jesus' mother... let her tell you what happened!

Zebedee: What a great misfortune! My wife, Salome has gone mad, and my two sons are even worse...! And Jesus is dead! This is Satan at work!

Philip: But this is no devil's work nor anything of that sort...! God cast the dice and he won the game over all the demons taken together! They killed Jesus, but God defeated death and raised Jesus from the dead! He's alive, Zebedee, the Moreno is alive!

Zebedee: Shut up, Philip, and stop that nonsense!... Holy God, what fever has got into them?

Our throats ran dry narrating to them over and over again the same thing. But they did not believe us. For the poor like us who were always losers, and had become callous over the centuries, that event was too good to be true...

It had been three days since we had returned to Galilee. It was noontime and we had gathered everyone by the lakeside... We had to give them an account of what had happened to us that very morning... Old Rufa, Rufina and Peter's sons, Jonas, my father Zebedee, my brother James' wife and some neighbors were all seated, squatting on the earthen floor of Peter's house. They were looking at us, anticipating what we had to say.

Peter: Didn't we tell you? Well, he's here! He's been here! We've seen him here in Capernaum, just as we've seen him in Jerusalem!

Rufa: Peter, son, don't you think it was just a dream?... You always have vivid dreams, remember?

Peter: What dream are you talking about, grandma Rufa?! How can that be? You mean all of us dreamed of the same thing at the same time? We were aboard your boat, Zebedee, and the seven of us saw him! We saw him!

Zebedee: Okay, okay, fine... It wasn't a dream nor a nightmare... So, what happened?... Tell us exactly what happened, step by step, Peter...

Little Simon: Clearly and step by step.... Tell them, Papa...

Rufa: Shut up, little man...!

Peter: You better listen to this well, Little Simon! One day you will tell the same to your children...! And so he started....

Peter: Hey, buddies, with these clouds and wind, I smell a good catch!

John: D'ya think so, troublemaker?

Peter: I'm sure, John. My sense of smell never fails me... C'mon, let's try our luck!... We'll be lucky, you'll see!

Peter: Andrew, the skinny one, John, the red-head, Philip, Nat and Thomas, who always got seasick,

went up to the boat with me. It was about dawn. The stars shining above seemed to be falling out of the sky to land right over our heads...

Peter: Hey, Andrew, why don't we cast our nets over there! I have this gut feeling we can find a school of fish right there... Hell, we'll get them fast and easy! I'm sure!... Go on rowing, James, c'mon!

James: Pff... There's nothing here, Peter, nothing at all!... nowhere!... I guess you read it all wrong...!

Thomas: So we won't have a...a...anything for b..b..breakfast!

Peter: Don't lose hope, Thomas... C'mon, let's go up a little, toward Bethsaida. We might catch some good dorados over there!... This time, I'm sure of it!

John: Are you sure, Peter...?

Peter: I swear! And I mean it. Trust me, buddies. Let's go!

Peter: What the.... We've spent the whole night casting our nets again and again and... nothing yet... Such bad luck, I was telling myself. But I kept on trying, as I was already desperate... All in vain. We caught nothing the whole night...

John: Ahmm! Blazes! I'm very sleepy!

James: Philip and Nathanael have been snoring for sometime....

John: But it's almost dawn...! Ahmm! This will be the last time we'll ever be doing this for you, big nose...!

Peter: Fine, it's okay... Let's go home... and take something to warm our bellies...

Peter: We started rowing toward Capernaum, and when we were almost there, about two hundred cubits from the wharf, that of the Seven Fountains, we saw a man from afar by the shore making signs at us... At first, we couldn't figure out what he was saying.... He wanted to know if we had caught anything... Bah, that was funny, no?... Furiously, I shouted at him: "Nothing, man, nothing at all! And there is no need after all!".... But then, he told us to cast our nets on the right side, for there we would find what we needed... He got me pissed off here, but then... I couldn't understand why... well, we cast our nets... in an instant, they were full of fish!

John: Well, I guess you know who that guy was...

Rufa: Oh son, couldn't he be Serafin? He's an early bird, you know...

John: Of course not! He was the Moreno! Yeah, it was Jesus in person!... when I told Peter about it, he put on his robe, as he was half-naked, and jumped into the water...

Peter: The truth is, I swam faster than an eel and got to the shore first. The rest followed on the boat filled with fish.... In the wharf, Jesus had prepared a bonfire over which he was broiling a dorado... He had obtained some bread too, from I dunno where... He told us to bring over some fish for breakfast...

Philip: Hey, buddies, look at our catch...! One hundred fifty-three big fish!

Peter: It was Jesus! We were with him this morning while all of you were snoring...

Zebedee: Who's going to believe your story, liar?

Peter: What d'ya mean who's going to believe me? Let these six liars who were there with me tell you...!

Zebedee: You must be dreaming... After spending one whole sleepless night...

Peter: Why don't you go to the wharf, Zebedee, and take a look at the nets... in good condition... After such a good catch, there's not even a hole in them! Go and count the fish yourself, if you want... There you'll see the one hundred fifty-three of them intact, minus the eight pieces that we ate...

Thomas: What we're t..t..telling you is t..t..true. Jesus is a..a..alive!

Zebedee: Okay, okay, I'm the king of Babylon! I don't believe anything of this sort. Either you're all out of your mind or you intend to pull our legs!

Rufa: Hey, old man, don't talk like that.... Who knows... These boys say things with such aplomb, it gives me the creeps.... Look, Zebedee... God can perform that miracle and a thousand more which are greater than this. He's not God for nothing, I tell you!... Peter, son, what else happened? Tell us more... So you had breakfast with Jesus... then what?... What did he tell you?

Peter: He told us... Well, or better, what he told "me." Ehem... After breakfast... He spoke very clearly and told me that from now on, I was to be the leader and I should take charge...

James: That was not so, Peter!! Don't change the story to your advantage!

Peter: Oh, yeah? It wasn't so? And how was it then, red head?

John: I heard it very well: Jesus asked you if he could count on you...

Peter: That was it exactly, John.... And I told him: "How could you ask me such a question. You know fully well you can... until death, Moreno!" And Jesus was so happy, I could see it... because he knows that I....

John: Of course, he knows that you.... That's why he asked you again, and again, and again. Three times! ... He was asked three times, do you know? There must've been a reason...

Peter: Okay, fine, he asked me three times, so what?... There's no need to wash our dirty linen here.... Yeah, he asked me three times and three time I told him he could count on me...

Rufa: Then what, Peter?

Peter: Then, Jesus, who knew me like he had given birth to me, who knew me through and through, said: "Peter, take care of my sheep, lead them in the way, teach them what to do... Ehem.... In other words... now you know..."

John: Damn, where the hell did you get all this nonsense, Peter?

Peter: Jesus told me himself! He said he's giving me the voice of command now.

John: No! He said he was counting on you, that you should follow him, but not for us to follow you....

Peter: That's practically the same. I go before you and you, after me.

Philip: How can that be? Where have you ever seen such brazenness? What nerve!

Peter: There's nothing brazen about it. Jesus gave me the staff of command.

Thomas: W..w..what he left you was a t..t.towel for washing feet...

John: Listen to me well, you arrogant big nose: Jesus made it very clear that in the Kingdom of God we all go hand in hand and we shall all be equal!

Peter: Yeah, we all go together but not in disorder!

James: Oh yes, in disorder too, Peter, because here no one is above anyone, men and women, the young and old, married or single, or widows or widowers... everyone is the same. No one is first nor last!

Peter: But someone must lead. Otherwise, who will organize, huh?

Philip: To hell with the troublemaker, he wants to be everywhere...

Peter: Why blame me if Jesus has chosen me for this task? Jesus needs a man he can trust, shall we say, a leader... like me!

James: God is our only leader, Peter. All of us are brothers, and here, the problem is not to command, but for everyone to be pushing altogether! Open up your mind and understand!

Peter: Well, that was not the way I understood him...

John: So, you misunderstood him... You were wrong, Peter.

Peter: No, I wasn't. I don't make mistakes!!!

James: Really? So, you don't make mistakes, huh? To hell with you, Peter! That's the least that we want to hear!

Rufina: Well, I'm his wife, and I've heard worse things than this, you know? Ha! This is what he loves to do, to call the shots and make everyone listen whenever he opens his mouth!

Peter: You should be the first one to shut up, Rufina!!

Rufina: You see? See what I told you? So much talk about justice, yet, he's worse than King Nebuchadnezzar!

Peter: I said, shut up!

Rufa: Peter, son, go down a little, as there is no God who can put up with you!

Peter: You shut up too, mother-in-law!

Little Simon: You shut up too, Papa! Ha, ha, ha!

Peter: You snotty-nosed little devil...! What's going on here? Is everyone in cahoots against me?... What do you want me to do? To get down from my chair so that you may sit on it, right?!

John: No, Peter, no... We don't want any chair, nor throne, nor any post. We want to sit on the floor, with everyone, as Jesus has taught us, so that we can talk, with no one to silence anyone, do you understand?

The troublemaker remained sulking for quite sometime. Later, since he had a good heart, he made peace with Rufina, his wife, with her mother-in-law and with us. It was difficult for Peter and for all of us who knew Jesus, to understand what he repeatedly told us: that he who is sent is not worth more than he who sent him, that the greatest among us had to make himself the least, and that the first should be the last. This had been very difficult for us, but we learned from Jesus himself... For, who is greater, the master who is at the table or the servant that serves him? He who is seated at the table, is that right? Well, Jesus, who was the Master and the Lord, was in our midst, serving us.

This text, which concludes the gospel of John, is a "lesson" on the egalitarian spirit that should reign in the Christian community in order to remain faithful to Jesus, who insistently proclaimed radical equality of all people before God, the only authority, and the only Father (Mt 20:25-28; 23:8-12). In John's account, this is the last time that Jesus appears before his friends and he appears to highlight this aspect of equality and service, which is fundamental among Christians.

Along the banks of the lake of Galilee, within the zone of Tabgha, is a church made of bricks of black basalt. Inside is a large stone which tradition refers to as "the Master's table." The church is a reminder of the encounter of Jesus with his friends, the food they had partaken of at this natural "table," and his conversation with Peter. Beside the church, there still remain a few stairs of stone which were part of the wharf that existed in Jesus' time.

All evangelical texts describe Peter as a man passionate in his love for Jesus, vain and boastful at the same time, so sure of himself, with a certain degree of self-sufficiency. Peter did not understand that Jesus wanted to be "equal" to all of them. That is why he protested when they talked of failure (Mk 8:32-33) during their journey to Jerusalem. When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples like he was a servant.... He understood the leadership of Jesus in the style of the rulers and leaders who wanted to rule this world.

If in Israel the shepherd symbolized the king, the Messiah, God himself, the verb "to shepherd" was also used to mean "to govern" (Ps 78:70-72, in reference to King David). But Jesus changed the meaning of shepherding with his attitude as well as with his words, just as he changed the meaning of lordship and royalty. To be a shepherd, to be king, to be Lord means only one thing: to serve God and the people until death. Jesus rid these titles of all traces that would imply being superior, to dominate, command, impose, annul, condemn... Our relationship of faith with Jesus is that of a friend, of an equal (Jn 15:14-15).

All details of this text tell us this is a lesson for the community. Jesus and his friends ate bread and fish, which are the symbols of the Eucharist. On the other hand, there are 153 fish. One hundred fifty-three is a figure taken from three groups of 50, to which three are added. Fifty in the mentality of Israel is synonymous to maturity, from the term Pentecost (= 50 days after the Passover). Three is the number of divinity (God is three times holy, he appeared to Abraham in the form of three travellers, etc.). The fruit of the work of the apostles (their fishing), represented by 153, indicates communities (each group of 50), multiplied by God's presence in Jesus (the number 3). And this is the message of history: The Christian communities will reach their maturity and obtain the true spirit of Jesus only when all become servants of one another. The Church, which is a community of communities, naturally requires an organization and a coordination in order to better fulfill her mission of service. These functions, manifested in the different ministries, should help the charismas in which the essential aspects of the gospel are expressed: prophetic censure, the preferential option for the poor, the proclamation of justice, the fight for life and the rights of

the lowly. In the Church, the authorities must be of service to the people and not expect the people to serve them. This is exactly what Jesus did.

(Jn 21:1-19)

130

High Above the Clouds

Young Woman: Don't tell me, neighbor!

Neighbor: I'm telling you: Tomorrow morning, Jesus of Nazareth will appear on this hill. On this very site the miracle will take place, never seen before by anyone: a dead man rising to life! They say he's been seen here and there for forty days, and now, he's going to ascend into heaven!

Young Woman: On my God, who's going to prepare the food and take care of the house?

Neighbor: Forget about it, young woman! I couldn't care less, even if they rob me, or the food gets burned! I wouldn't miss this for anything, not even for the entire wealth of Solomon! So, hurry and inform the hunchbacked woman, old man Nemesio and my *comadre* Tilita... Inform everyone! Everybody must come!

Young Woman: Don't you worry, neighbor. The whole barrio will be here! Even Martin, the mad man, shall be here tomorrow!

There was no need to announce to everyone. The news that Jesus was going to appear by the lakeside of Tiberias on the hill of the Seven Fountains, spread like wild fire, and before sunset everyone had already been informed. That night, nobody slept in Capernaum.... When the cocks proclaimed the new day, men and women, old and young, everyone left through the gate of the Consolation and trekked through the hill where the miracle was to take place.

Young Woman: I feel so excited...! Hey, feel my hand.... See?

Neighbor: My gosh, your heart is leaping...

Young Woman: This is something I haven't seen in my whole life, neighbor....

Neighbor: Neither have I, my child. Imagine, at this age of mine, the greatest miracle I've seen so far was when my husband suddenly got rid of those stomach cramps... other than that....

Young Woman: Many things also happened before: the sea was split into two, the sun stopped in the middle of the sky, people were swallowed up by whales, but now that God has become more stingy...

Old Woman: Don't say that, woman of no faith!... God is great! And today we shall witness marvellous things! They killed him in Jerusalem, but he appears alive in Galilee! Blessed be God!

Neighbor: And blessed are they who see him! So you'd better clean your face now, young woman, for today, you shall be a "witness" to something incredible! Come, let's go closer!

Like a swarm of ants in pursuit of sugar, the residents of Capernaum walked through the green slopes of the hill where Jesus, many months before, had announced that God was offering his Kingdom to us, the poor and the hungry. Tiberias Lake, like a great blue eye, woke up with the first rays of the sun... But today, there were no white sails of the fishermen crossing the lake in sight.... The boats were moored in the wharf and the nets were left hanging under the palm trees. Today, no one went to work in the whole city.

Bartholomew: Where's he coming from? The east or the west?

Neighbor: From above, *compadre*! Just like a ripe fig falling!

Bartholomew: Then it will fall with a big bang!

Neighbor: Don't be silly, you dope! Remember how the angels went up to heaven and down to earth in Jacob's dream and yet, nothing happened to them?

Old Man: But they used a ladder, my friend, and that made the difference!

Neighbor: Well, Jesus will also use something to go down! Don't you think so?

Neighbor: Jesus doesn't have to! Don't you know that even the angels and saints can fly like birds?

Old Man: Oh, yeah? Well, Elijah was a saint and yet, a carriage was sent to him so he could go up!

Old Woman: Oh brother! Nothing of that sort! Do you know how Jesus will appear? Up above the clouds! The prophecy says: "Every eye will see and every ear will hear."

All: Amen, amen!

Old Woman: "He will come in a cloud, and will disappear in another!"

All: Amen, amen!

Old Woman: Say, grandma, where is this cloud? For today the sky is as clear as spring!

There was not a single cloud in the horizon. Blue as zapphire, the sky of Galilee merged with the waters of the lake... The sun, rising from the valleys Gilead was shining radiantly...

Clete: Tell me somethin' Bartholomew, do you really buy the story that Jesus of Nazareth was nailed on the cross and then rose from the dead?

Bartholomew: Look, *compadre*, I know they killed him because my uncle Micah was in the capital during the holidays, and he saw it with his own eyes... But I'm not sure about the other one...

Clete: A lizard whose tail is cut off still continues to wiggle its way... But for one whose head has been cut off, or one who has been nailed on the cross, that's the end for him.

Neighbor: But Peter, Andrew and Zebedee's sons have seen him alive. It's like God getting so furious with Pontius Pilate's sentence that he said: "No way!" Then he took action and brought him back to life to embarrass those scoundrels who had him killed, do you understand?

Clete: Don't you think Peter and his friends made up the story, neighbor...?

Neighbor: Well, I dunno, this is what they say, but... by the way, where are these rascals? Aren't they here yet?

Bartholomew: Yeah, I've seen Philip and the red head, James... they're just around....

We were all there, mingling with everyone. We never knew who spread the news that Jesus was going to appear in the mountain. Just in case, the eleven of us went, as well as the women...

John: What do you think of all this hassle, Peter?

Peter: I dunno, neither do I know what to tell you, John... There's something strange here.

John: People keep on saying that Jesus is coming this time to say goodbye, since we'll never see him again. Do you think this is true?

Peter: All I can say is there's something odd here. Know why? The other times that we saw the Moreno, how shall I tell you... he was different...

Vendor: Candies, candies! Buy my candies with honey and cheese! Want to try some, countryman?

John: Not now, old man, later...

Peter: I dunno, John... He was different... At least there were no candies for sale then...

The vendors, carrying their baskets on their heads, pushing their carts, shouted out a thousand wares, as the crowd multiplied all the time... Then a thin white cloud formed in the middle of the sky...

Old Woman: Look up, look up!! He's coming!!

Several: He's coming!! He's coming!!

A Little Boy: Who's coming, Mama?

Female Neighbor: Shut up, snotty-nose, just look above!

Male Neighbor: Hey, little lady, don't push. I came here first!

Everyone had his eyes on the thin cloud that was slowly forming in the blue sky....

Bartholomew: Yes, now is the beginning of the Kingdom of Israel!

Female Neighbor: My goodness, that was long overdue! Ever since Abraham set foot on this earth, the

poor like us had been waiting for justice, in vain!

Clete: And the story ended up there, since Jesus is now high above anyone else! See how he comes leaning on the cloud!

Girl: Now he'll sit on the throne to reign, so they say!

Neighbor: And we'll be by his side, don't forget...

The thin cloud, pushed by a gentle breeze from the lake, was getting closer to the sun... then it disappeared like foam...

All: Ohhhh...!

Clete: What now, old woman?

Old Woman: Don't be impatient, my goodness! That was just the start of it!... The king is following from behind!

One hour passed, and another and another... The scorching sun, suspended in the middle of the sky, was burning our heads... But we stayed on, without budging, and waiting... Suddenly...

Old Woman: Look up, everybody look up! He's coming!

Old Tilita once again raised her long and rugged arm like a branch of olive pointing at another cloud that was crossing the sky toward our direction...

Neighbor: Tighten your underwear, buddies, this thing about the Kingdom of God is really getting serious!

Some of the old folks began to pray... The excited women held their children closer to them, in anticipation of the great moment... Looking above, with their mouths agape, that sea of heads swayed from one side to the other, following the direction of the wind blown cloud...

All: Ohhhh...!

But the second cloud had the same fate as the first. The blazing sun of Galilee had burned it and the blue mantle of the sky once again became completely cloudless and clear...

Old Woman: Don't lose heart, my children. Noah had to wait longer inside his Ark for the floods to subside!

Clete: Well, a drop of water will do us some good!... How hot it is!! Look, my flesh is becoming flabby.... like melted wax!

Bartholomew: I'm taking a dip in the lake... I'll be right back!

Old Woman: Don't stray too far! Have faith, my brothers and sisters, don't be discouraged! Jesus is coming soon, and this won't be long!

Martin: Look up, look up!! Ho, ho, ho!

Neighbor: What's got into him, huh?

Young Woman: He's the crazy man, Martin...

Neighbor: Hey, you idiot, what're you looking for? Get away from here, this is only for sane people...! How dare you make fun of Jesus, the Messiah!

Martin: I'm Jesus, I'm Jesus!!

Old Woman: Shut up, insolent one!... Your kind pisses me off, do you know that...?

Some time had passed... The men, who were dripping with sweat, started to tell jokes in order to kill time.... The women covered their heads with palm leaves as they fanned themselves with their scarves....

Clete: Damn this heat!

Vendor: Candies, candies! These are good candies, with honey and cheese, with cheese and honey!

Little Boy: Mama, I'm hungry, I want some candies!

Young Woman: Do you want me to wring your neck, little imp?

Little Boy: I want some candies!

Female Neighbor: Don't scare your son, woman!... You know something? Children like him shall be the

first to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, as Jesus clearly said that... Ay...!

Bartholomew: What's happening to her now?

Old Man: Can't you see? She's fainted!

Neighbor: What...?

Young Woman: Get hold of her, get hold of her...!

Clete: She was saying something about the Messiah and... that's it... The poor woman is pregnant....

Young Woman: Give her some air...

Neighbor: Why does she have to be in this mess, knowing that she's having a baby? How irresponsible...!

Old Woman: No, she's not! She did right, because even the baby in the mother's womb is crying out to see the miracle!

Clete: The only miracle here is that we haven't melted until now!... Look how my head is burning hot.

Neighbor: Did you know that I skipped breakfast just to come here? I'm so hungry, my legs are trembling... it beats David's shaking while dancing before the Ark of Covenant...

Bartholomew: C'mon, folks, let's go! No one's coming up nor going down here!

Old Woman: Please don't go away! Good things are worth some sacrifices, my goodness! Jesus said he was coming, and he'll come!

Bartholomew: And I said I was leaving, and I am!

Old Woman: There he is!!! See where he's heading for!

The old woman raised her arm again, pointing at a cloud, thick and round as cotton, appearing suddenly above our heads...

Male Neighbor: That's right! This time around, he's coming!

Female Neighbor: What about an applause, my friends! For the Messiah who's coming to rule the world!

All: Long live the Messiah! Long live the Messiah!!!

Bartholomew: No, no....

Old Man: Hey, go kid somebody else, will you? I'm not in the mood for jokes now....

Neighbor: I'm breaking my neck looking up and down!... Goodbye to all!

Old Woman: I don't understand what's taking him so long...

Martin: There's no one coming up nor down here! And nobody's gone to work either!

Young Woman: Will you silence this idiot?

Clete: Leave him alone, he's simply telling the truth... Imagine, we've been wasting our time looking up at the sky, for nothing....

Bartholomew: Do you know what time it is now?... It's almost sunset already.... C'mon, let's go....

Tired and weary, and with bowed heads, the people started dispersing down the hill of the Seven Fountains, toward the direction of the fishermen's barrio and the marketplace, filling up the streets of Capernaum, on their way back home, as the sun buried itself once again in the Great Sea, by the end of the Carmel.... How long had it taken us to understand and make our countrymen understand that there was no need to look above us, but to our brother who was right beside us!

How much time had we spent scanning the skies just to see the coming of Jesus through the clouds, without realizing that from the time God had risen him from the dead, his Spirit had been filling the earth, that where two or three fight, suffer and wait, he is right in their midst!

How long had it taken us to understand that the Jesus, with whom we had eaten and drunk, had been named by God, Lord of heaven and earth, and raised above all the people of this world, had not gone away... On the contrary, he'd always remained with us, with the people, all days until the end of time!

If we consider the ascension of Jesus as the going up into the air of an extraordinary "astronaut" in a spectacular or marvellous act, or his departure from this world to be by the right side of the Father, or as a farewell after a completed mission on this earth, then we are distorting the whole theology of ascension.

The manifestations of the resurrected Jesus before his disciples and the first Christians (as in the case

of his appearance to Paul: 1 Cor 15:8) were events of the most diverse kind, taking place for a long period of time, perhaps for several years. Nevertheless, the book of Acts deals with apparitions during forty days, saying that after this period, Jesus “ascended into heaven.” Number 40 is a symbolic number and this is how it appears throughout the Bible. Forty years are equivalent to one generation. That is why it is said that the people of Israel journeyed for forty years through the desert until they reached the Promised Land. This means that the pilgrimage lasted for “one generation.” The number 40 also indicates a long, traditional period. That is why, when one speaks of a reign that lasted for forty years, it means a period that left a mark, showing an epoch (2 S 5:4). Likewise, if a period of peace has lasted this long, it means it was a period of plenitude. To say that the risen Jesus appeared before his disciples for forty days signifies a sufficient or complete period, a period marked by very special characteristics. That during that time, (we will never know exactly its duration) the disciples of that first Christian generation experienced the living Jesus, felt his presence in the community in a unique manner. Their faith was strengthened with this experience, and since then their lives changed and they were led to following the way of Jesus. After these events, the Christian faith began to spread through Israel and the Mediterranean world.

Our faith tells us that Jesus is alive, that he is with us, fighting on our side. It is precisely this presence of Jesus which fills the world with the Spirit, directing human history toward a definitive triumph, that explains the meaning of the “mystery” of the ascension.

The evangelical texts, in giving a narrative framework to the ascension of Jesus, do not coincide with geographic information. Matthew situates the event in Galilee while Luke refers to it in Jerusalem. Mark does not specify any particular place. It deals with something that is totally secondary to the understanding of the theology of the ascension, since no event that can be localized or situated is described. After the resurrection, what Jesus had said to the Samaritan woman was completely fulfilled: Neither in Jerusalem nor in Gerizim, nor in any other temple shall we find God, because He is in those who live in the Spirit and in truth (Jn 4:21-24). The resurrected Jesus, whom God made Lord and Messiah, opens the way for us to be able to live in the Spirit and in truth. Thus, the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit (Jesus Christ = Jesus the Messiah), continues to live in us and in the community, making us free, and teaching us the truth (Jn 14:15-17; 16:12-14).

The story of the ascension is full of theological symbols characteristic of those that are used in other manifestations of God throughout the entire Bible. Jesus ascends: the place where God dwells is always at “the top.” That Jesus ascends means, therefore, that God has raised that peasant from Nazareth to the distinction of Lord of history, so that what he himself had said might be fulfilled: “he who humbles himself shall be exalted.” A cloud conceals him from the sight of his disciples. In the entire Old Testament, the cloud accompanies all apparitions of God: in Sinai, across the desert... The cloud is God’s chariot, his tent. The Messiah will come through the clouds, and the day of the Lord shall be a cloudy one. In the gospel, the cloud also appears in the scene of the Tabor. This symbol shows the transcendence of the risen Jesus, in whom God reveals himself to us in a definitive manner. The last book of the Bible announces that Jesus shall come with the clouds at judgment time (Rev 1:7).

Angels likewise appear in the context of the ascension. In the Bible, angels are always harbingers of God’s important messages. This time, their message to the disciples, to the people of Capernaum, is of great importance. There is no need to look up to heaven (or the sky), for God is not in the heights. God is where Jesus is. And Jesus is where he had always been during his life: among the artisans of peace, among those who risk their lives for their brothers.

(Mt 28:16-20; Mk 16:19-20; Lk 24:50-52; Acts 1:3-11)

A Child Will Be Born

Seven weeks after the Passover, we celebrate in our country the feast of the first fruits, the feast of the start of harvest. So, the eleven of us, together with the women, went to Jerusalem to celebrate it. We arrived in the city of David a couple of days earlier, when the streets were already beginning to be filled by pilgrims with sunburnt bodies who wore crowns of flowers on their heads. As in other times, we lodged at Mark's house... I remember in those times, after God had raised Jesus from the dead, a strong desire was born in all of us, to know more about his life... It was during one of those nights before the feast of the Pentecost that Mary searched her heart for cherished memories about the first years of the story of her son and which she recounted to us...

Mary: My memories of him?... But how can you be so curious, huh?... Let me see now.... It's been a long time, and there've been a lot of things... I don't remember exactly and... all right, all right, we'll have to start with Joseph... That's right, we'll have to start with him...

Joseph: Good morning, Mary!... Happy are the eyes that see you...! And happier are these eyes of mine that behold you!

Mary: Here you are again with your ribbings... Oh, Joseph, you're impossible...!

Joseph: It's all because of you!... Look, young woman, if I were made of wax, I would melt by your looks alone... But if I happened to be made of stone, it would be the same, anyway. How many times do you want me to tell you this...?

Mary: You've said that seven hundred times already, and look, you haven't melted yet.... So, go on with your style, liar...

Joseph: But of course!... I'll never stop telling you that you're the bright star in my dark nights, the healer of my wounds, the shield of my way, the oasis in my desert, the dough of my bread, and the water for my thirsty throat...! Oh...!

Mary: Hey, what's wrong with you, Joseph? Are you out of your mind?

Joseph: As mad as can be! And blame it on the most beautiful Nazarene lass of this country!

Mary: Nazareth was an insignificant little town.... Smaller than a nut... At that time, I remember, there were four young bachelors.... And there were three of us, young women... I was very fond of Joseph, a bachelor, who was a jack of all trades, who could fix a door, press grapes in the presser and likewise, fit a pair of horseshoes on the mule.... We played together since we were little children. Then, as we grew up, we started to like each other. I remember how both of us blushed whenever we met at the farm and then he began to court me... and he laughed a lot... I laughed even more... My father, Joachim, was also fond of Joseph, because he was a very hardworking man... So, one day, he went to see Joseph's father... They were going to negotiate for the wedding...

Compadre: Well, my friend, Joachim, I see that these children of ours seem to have a certain understanding.... Don't you think so?

Joachim: You're right, *compadre*. As they say, when a fruit becomes ripe, then the time has come for a man and a woman to be talking of love, as the late Ruben would say...

Compadre: It's not for anything, *compadre*, but my son, Joseph, for whatever he is, a little crazy like the rest of our young people these days, is an honest young man... His wife will have an upright man...

Joachim: Look, *compadre*, this much I can say... My daughter, for all her defects, as no one comes around here perfect, is very proper and as happy as a lark... and so full of grace like no one else is!

Compadre: Well then, there's nothing more to say, *compadre*...

Joachim: I got nothing else to say either. Is it a deal?

Compadre: It's a deal! And may he be damned, who does not comply with it!

Joachim: And may this pair of lovebirds beget as many children as they can, that our house may be filled with our grandchildren, what do you say?

Compadre: Naturally! Say, speaking of children, have your sheep given birth yet, *compadre*? Mine are about to....

Mary: In a few days, we became engaged. I was fifteen years old then, while Joseph was eighteen....

Joseph: Now there's no turning your back from me, Mary! Lararara...! I'm as happy as can be! Lararari...!

Mary: After the engagement party, life went on as usual... Joseph got jobs everywhere, in the farm of Ananias or even farther away, in Cana or in Sepphoris... God gave him a hand and, at times, he was lucky. He wanted to save some dinarii for the wedding... I continued with my usual chores: together with my two sisters, I helped my mother, Anne, who was a little indisposed then.... There was always something to do at home, as there were many of us... Everything went on the same, but for me, things had changed. I was no longer a child. I had a boyfriend, and soon, I would be leaving the house... I was very happy then...

A Female Neighbor: Mary, child, you're very lucky.... This guy, Joseph, loves you so much and is very proud of you... He has only nice words for you....

Mary: He exaggerates a little, you know.

Female Neighbor: Well, he's not so good-looking, yes, but what he lacks in looks, he compensates with integrity...

Young Woman: Hey, where did you ever get such idea...? Are you saying that Joseph is ugly?... What with that broad back of his like a wall and those eyes....

Female Neighbor: Watch out, Mary, this young woman here might snatch him away from you... Ha! Listen to me, Tina, don't push yourself too hard, the well never gets dry.... Okay, now, young woman, it's your turn and your mother is waiting for you.

Mary: I went near the curb of the well and started to pull the rope for fetching water... I don't remember anymore what had happened.... I saw stars in my eyes and then I didn't know anymore....

Female Neighbor: Hey, the girl has fainted!

Young Woman: Take her jug, Sarah, and help me take her to the house!...

Female Neighbor: Give her some air... She's nauseated.... With this heat, it can happen to anyone...!

Mary: Weeks passed and these fits of nausea continued. I didn't feel well. My legs weakened at the slightest thing... My mother would apply some basil plants on my forehead and give me all sorts of herbal concoctions. But they didn't help... One day, I realized what was happening to me.... My gosh, how I tossed in my sleep, there were times, I couldn't even sleep a wink... I prayed fervently to God for help... I remember I wept a lot... I wanted to talk to my mother, but I didn't have the courage... I didn't know where and how to start... My God, how scared I was! I was in anguish!... One day, after having mustered all courage, I went to see my grandfather, Isaiah.... I think my grandfather was the oldest man in Nazareth... He lived in a very small hut at the end of the town. In spite of his years, he was sturdier than an olive tree, and he had very few white hairs in that long beard of his... He never wore sandals. He worked in the farm the whole day and at sunset, he would sit at the door of his hut, chewing dates and getting some fresh air... That's how I saw him that afternoon....

Isaiah: Oh, look who's coming...! Greetings to you, Mary!... Hey, young woman, your mother told me you're not well, Is that right?... How's that, young woman?... Anne is worried about you...

Mary: Yes, I'm a little indisposed...

Isaiah: Just a little? Or very much. C'mon, put out your tongue...

Mary: Ahhh...

Isaiah: It's okay. Let me see those eyes.... Red as an apple... I've already told Anne to give you some barks of the carob tree... They're good... I've got some here... Take them...

Mary: Well....

Mary: My grandfather remained seated on the stone. He spat out a seed and smiled at me...

Isaiah: I know you, child... I saw you come out of this world... C'mon, tell me, what is it?... You're here to tell me something of importance... Am I right?

Mary: Yes, grandfather, but...

Isaiah: Tell me what's bothering you... God gave us tongues for us to speak with them....

Mary: Grandfather, I don't think I'm sick, but...

Isaiah: Of course, you've been thinking of the wedding, haven't you? That's natural, my child. All young women get scared when the time comes.... Everything will turn out fine, you'll see...

Mary: No, grandpa, it's not that... I mean, yes, yes, but...

Mary: My God, I couldn't tell him... My grandfather looked at me with his gray and moist eyes, like the sky on a rainy day, while he kept smiling at me....

Isaiah: What's the matter then, Mary? Are you too shy to tell me...?

Mary: Grandfather... I... I'm pregnant!

Isaiah: What did you say, child?

Mary: You heard it, grandpa.

Isaiah: Mary, my child!... Why couldn't this rogue, Joseph, be a little patient? Oh, these young people nowadays!... Why didn't you tell him to wait till the wedding?

Mary: No, grandpa... I haven't slept with Joseph... The problem is not with him....

Isaiah: So, with whom, child?... What happened to you?

Mary: I don't know, I don't know.... I don't understand...

Isaiah: Who did this to you, then?... Was it Timothy... the son of Ezekias?... Or Benjamin? These two are naughty boys!

Mary: It's not them, grandpa... no one... I don't... there's been no one.... I don't.... The truth is, I haven't slept with any man! I swear it! I swear!

Isaiah: Well, then, my child, don't weep... Probably you just thought about it... you may not be pregnant at all.

Mary: But I am, grandpa, I am... I feel the child inside me. I'm sure of it.

Isaiah: Are you, really, Mary?

Mary: Yes, I am....

Isaiah: And what did your mother say?

Mary: I haven't told her... I can't....

Isaiah: And your sisters...?

Mary: They don't know... You're the first to know about it.... Help me, grandpa, help me, please...!

Mary: My grandfather put his hand on my shoulders and drew me close to him....

Isaiah: Let's see now, Mary.... Those cameleers who stayed in your house, on their way to Sepphoris... Could it be possible that...? That was a few months ago, right?... You know, these men use some strange herbs from I don't know where... to put people to sleep.... Could it be that someone...?

Mary: No, no, I didn't take anything... I don't remember... Well, I don't think so.... Oh, grandpa, now I don't even know what to believe...! Help me, please, grandpa!... What will Joseph think of

me?... He might refuse to marry me... He might leave me.... Nobody will ever want to marry me, once they find out.... I don't understand this, grandpa... I'm confused... I swear I did nothing wrong. This I swear!

Isaiah: I believe you, my dear Mary, I believe you... C'mon, take it easy....

Mary: But no one will believe me... They'll say I'm this and that... I love Joseph, and he'll leave me... and he'll never want to see me again.... Oh, I'll go out of my mind!... Why is this happening to me?... Why, grandpa?... When my friends find out.... They'll tell me to kill the child... so that no one will know... What am I going to do?... What shall I do, grandpa?

Mary: I cried disconsolately, distraught by the burden of that child I was carrying inside....

With tears in my eyes, I looked up to my grandfather in search for an answer. I didn't utter anything, but he looked at me with joy and serenity, with a smile I could never forget... It was the same face with which I think God looks at us when we are forlorn and confused... Then, he lifted me from the ground, held me by the shoulders. As I stood, I felt his strength. He was full of hope....

Isaiah: Rejoice, Mary!... Be happy, and weep no more, for the Lord is with you!... No one has died, young woman. On the contrary, a child shall be born, you're going to have a child... Is there a joy greater than this, Mary?... For every child born on this earth, it is as if God were starting the world all over again... Be happy, Mary, and be not afraid!

Mary: Those words seemed to have come from a distance, a very remote distance, that crossed through the hills and mountains embracing Nazareth... It had taken a long, long time for these words to be uttered....

Mary: But... but, how is this possible when I haven't slept with any man?

Isaiah: With God everything is possible, young woman. He always has big plans.... You must find what His plans are for you and this child He has given you... Remember Sarah?... With a barren womb, lost hope, and in her ripe old age.... God had made her smile and gifted her with Isaac... Think of Samuel's mother and that of Samson.... They were barren and never bore fruit. And God remembered them and put a child in their arms.... God is great, Mary, and does marvellous things.... And not only during ancient times but even at present... Didn't you know that your Aunt Elizabeth, in spite of her age, is also expecting a child...?

Mary: So, grandpa... do you think God has something to do with this?

Isaiah: Of course, young lady! C'mon, say yes to the child, Mary. Bring him to life... Say yes to the Lord... Whatever it may be, everything will be for the good....

Mary: And trembling, I said yes. And God's breath, the strength of His spirit, hovered over my body, like it was the beginning of the world. My grandfather was teary-eyed when he saw me off.... I went home repeating his words one by one... That day, the flowers of the almond trees started to bloom....

Rejoice, daughter of Zion!
Rejoice and shout out with joy,
daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord your God is in you,
The King of Israel,
a powerful Savior!

Narrating the events of Jesus' infancy up to the end of his life is not only a literary recourse. It is a way to understand better, the origin of these accounts in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Neither Mark nor John say anything about the infancy of Jesus. One must bear in mind that the gospels were not written in the order of the chapters as we read them today. The account of the passion and death of Jesus was the first to be put in writing. These were followed by the Paschal events – each evangelist had chosen some. It was believed that Jesus' passage from death to life constituted the essence of the Christian faith. Besides, it was what had remained in the memory of a greater number of people. Lately, the life of Jesus was being

structured on the basis of the different stages of his prophetic activities: in Galilee, in Jerusalem, phrases, preachings, healings.... This structure is not the same in any of the evangelists. It was only at the end of the account that Matthew as well as Luke added to the story of the adult Jesus some accounts to show his infancy. This means, what we read first in these two gospels was actually the last to be written. It is very possible that hardly anyone knew about the first years of Jesus' life, how he was then, or what he used to do. No one of his disciples or the first Christians had been with him during those years. This is so, because until he went to the Jordan to see the prophet, John the Baptist, Jesus' life was a completely gray area, with nothing special that would make him stand out from among his countrymen in that obscure nook of Galilee called Nazareth. Nevertheless, after proclaiming the Kingdom of God, and most especially after his death and the experience of his resurrection, his disciples understood who Jesus was, what God's plan was in the history of humankind, what the good news he had announced to the poor really meant. This would arouse their interest to know more about Jesus in whom God had spoken to them in such a definitive manner. At this point, it is possible that only Mary, Jesus' mother, would be able to respond to this curiosity to dig into old memories. That is why in this account it is Mary who narrates the infancy of Jesus, she who cherished in her heart everything about her son.

In the light of the Paschal events, Luke as well as Matthew wanted to highlight in the period of his infancy not so much the historical events but, from the outset, what was to be the destiny of that child who in time would bring hope to the people of Israel and would give a very decisive push to human history. For this, they had to make use of literary sources that were typically Oriental and biblical. There are angels, signs, prophecies that are being fulfilled, stars, and magi... There is an all "marvellous" setting through which the readers are made to understand who Jesus is from the time of his birth. However, we would fall into a serious error if we took these texts to the letter, because more than history they are theology largely constructed on the basis of the schemes of the Old Testament. In all the episodes about the infancy of this "certain Jesus," there is a serious attempt to inject real flesh and blood to these texts, which contain valid information for reconstructing history, while trying largely to remove all ornaments that might confuse us and make us see a Jesus much different from the one who really lived among the people.

His infancy, adolescence, youth and practically the early period of Jesus' maturity are virtually unknown to us. There exist hardly any historical memories that are verifiable. Most of the little things we know are deduced from some information from the gospel, and especially from the environment in which Jesus was raised, which we get to know through socio-cultural studies of that period. It is important to see clearly that Jesus was an unknown little boy, just like many others of his time, a young man who did not dazzle anyone either by his "wisdom" or by his "power," who "enters into history" when, impressed by John's preachings, he allows himself to be baptized and responds to the call of God.

Jesus' infancy helps us see more fully what the mystery of incarnation is. God has revealed Himself to us in the most humble of peasants from a truly miserable farm village almost unknown in a province of ill-repute, of a country exploited by the most powerful imperialists of that period. Jesus emerged from among the poor. Like theirs, his life was anonymous until he began his mission.

In Jesus' time in most of the countries in the Orient, it was the father who decided the marriage of their daughters. Nevertheless, in Israel, this was valid only before the daughter was twelve years old. Starting from this age, the daughter's consent was needed in order to conclude the compromise. In any case, the dowry was always the responsibility of the daughter's father. The amount varied greatly, from one town to another, depending on the capabilities of the family. The engagement period prepared the daughter's passage from the father's responsibility to that of her spouse. Sometimes, this would take place when the betrothed was only a six or eight-year-old girl. The average age though, was twelve or twelve and a half years. At this age the girl was already considered an adult. In Israel, women got married very young: thirteen or fourteen years was the common age. The men were a few years older: seventeen, eighteen...

In the cities, there were several cases of marriages with relatives, because, since the women lived a cloistered life, it was difficult for them to have the freedom to meet other men of marrying age. This would not happen on the farms. Men and women worked together since their young years, planting and

harvesting, and during which time they would normally nurture their friendship. Besides, in such a small place like Nazareth, it was easy for everyone to know each other.

Marriage was always preceded by engagement which we must not confuse with simple courtship as we understand it at present. Being engaged was practically being married. The engaged couple were called “husband” and “wife.” The woman’s infidelity during the engagement period was already considered adultery, even if the union between the two had not been consummated. The engagement was much more than a word given. It established a very strong juridical and familial relationship. This explains Mary’s fear of being repudiated by Joseph once he found out she was pregnant. The time between engagement and marriage is not exactly known. Ordinarily it was one year, although this depended on the place, the family customs, the time of the year, etc.

The gospel gives very little information about Joseph, Mary’s spouse. But the customs of the period and life in Nazareth may give us some perceptions of him. He must have been a strong, young man at the prime of his life at the time he was engaged to Mary. A farmer, a laborer, a believer, like many of the young men of the time, hoping for the liberation of their country, and living the poverty of their social class. Ironically, tradition has shown him to us as an old bearded man. In their life together, Mary and Joseph understood one another and opened themselves to God ever more. From this love-filled relationship, Jesus would receive a decisive influence during the first years of his life. Nazareth was an insignificant village lost in the fields of Galilee where about 20 families lived during that period. For their houses, the farmers made use of caves dug into the hill upon which the village was located. In the present-day Nazareth, – a rather big and very populated city – water still springs from the well that existed in the village in Mary’s time, where she had to go hundreds of times with her friends and neighbors. This is found in the interior of a small, beautiful Greek orthodox church dedicated to Mary. Part of the water from this fountain has been channeled to another fountain, more recently constructed in the middle of the street, where the Nazarenes drink and fill their pails with water. Everyone calls this “Mary’s well.”

Luke, with his account of the angel’s visit to announce the birth of Jesus to Mary, wants to tell us many important things. For this purpose, he utilizes Biblical images to show this with intensity. In the Bible the angel is always used to tell us that God is going to act. The angel is God’s messenger. In this case, it is Gabriel, the same angel who appears in the book of the prophet Daniel announcing the coming of the day of the Lord the end of time (Dn 8:15-18; 9:20-24). Gabriel’s appearance in the annunciation means that with Jesus comes that much awaited day in which God manifests His justice and love, that with him comes the “end of the times” where the unjust triumph, because God will intervene in favor of the lowly. This text of Luke is inspired by several prophecies in the Old Testament: Zep 3:14-18; Is 7:14 and 9:6.

Throughout the whole Old Testament there appear children who are born in a surprising manner, by the “grace” of God, as a gift to their mothers who are sterile or old, who had no more hopes for childbearing. This is the case with Isaac, the country’s patriarch, the son of the ancient Sarah and Abraham (Gen 18:9-14). Also Samson, the great judge of Israel, was said to be the son of a sterile woman (Jdg 13:1-17).

Samuel, the first Israelite king, was the son of Anne, another sterile woman who continually prayed to God to give her a child (1 S 1:1-18). Such, too, is the case of John the Baptist, in the New Testament. Before such great men like Isaac or Samson or Samuel, the narrators of their lives want to show, from the time they were born, that they were God’s “blessing” for the people, that they were a gift from God, more than the fruit of an act by which their parents had begotten them. These stories likewise mean, that where man and woman are found to be incapable, where hope is already lost, God is capable of drawing out new life. Because God is always the master of life, from Him comes life, He fertilizes the earth and the woman’s womb.

When Luke writes his gospel and tells us the story of the annunciation, he is aware of all these stories from the Old Testament and makes a similar account. Mary does not know any man, she is a virgin. But this notwithstanding, she is going to have a child that comes from God, the greatest grace given by God to human history, surpassing everything that humans can do or even imagine. Luke tells us that Jesus’ birth is in the will of God, in order to save humanity. God will bring forth a son from a virgin: one who cannot by

herself conceive, who has nothing (this sense of lack or wanting is what the virginity of Israel was); God will draw out a life that will eventually overcome death. Only God can do something like this.

In this episode, no angel appears. But here is Mary who questions, doubts and wonders what is happening to her. This is exactly what is told us in the gospel. She will get hope from her grandfather, Isaiah. There is symbolism in this man, similar to what Luke has done with calling the angel Gabriel. Isaiah was the prophet who announced, eight hundred years before Jesus, that a boy would bring peace and justice to Israel, a boy who would be called “Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us” (Is 7:13-14; 9:5-6).

Grandfather Isaiah asks Mary the same thing as the angel in Luke’s episode, and as God asks of every woman when she is pregnant: to accept life, to rejoice with it, to receive it as a gift, to welcome it with the hope that if God begins a work, God will finish it. In this “yes” to life, Mary began a long and difficult way to faith that would end up on the cross, where Jesus lost that life given him by his mother. This faithfulness, becoming ever more mature, makes of Mary the new and true “daughter of Zion” about whom the prophets had also spoken as the symbol of all the people (Is 60:1-2).

(Lk 1:26-38)

132

A Visit To Ain Karim

Gathered in Mark’s house, during those days prior to the feast of Pentecost, we asked Mary, Jesus’ mother, a lot of questions. She kept on sharing with us old memories of her youth, and of the time when God began to fulfill His promises to Abraham...

Mary: When my mother, Anne, learned about my condition, oh, God, she put her hands on her head, crying and shouting, telling a thousand things to my face... Now, I can only laugh at the memory, but in those days...!

Anne: Oh, what a shame! Mary, my child, what a humiliation! This is a disgrace to the family! From your great, great grandparents, I never knew there was ever such scandal!... And now you...!

Mary: But, Mama, I already told you, this is God’s doing....

Anne: Oh, yes. First, we commit the indiscretion, then we blame the slip on God!

Mary: For God’s sake, Mama, you’ve got to believe me...

Anne: No, no, no! Let’s not start all over again, nor should you speak more! How could a decent and well-bred girl like you ever have done this....

Mary: Mama, I’m fifteen years old, I’m no longer a child....

Anne: I know, I know... You are an insolent, shameless woman!

Mary: Mama, I... I....

Anne: All right, don’t cry anymore, child... Oh Lord, how can we ever get out of this mess, Holy God!... Look, Mary, whatever happens, you’ve got to leave Nazareth. This village is too small, and the neighbors have such malicious tongues.... You’ll stay in the house of some relatives in the south. Come back when the child is born. We’ll tell the neighbors that you found him in a basket, like Moses or something....

Mary: But, Mama, I can’t leave this place... Joseph and I are getting married... I want to be by his side.... He’s my boyfriend...

Anne: He'll cease to be once he finds out... He can stone you to death... and for a reason!

Mary: Mama, please help me....

Anne: Oh, my child, you should've thought about this first. There's nothing we can do now. It's no use crying over spilt milk.

Mary: But I haven't done anything... I... haven't....

Anne: Listen, Mary dear, your brother, Yayo, is taking a trip to Jerusalem next week with one of the caravans of those selling wheat... You'll go with him... I'll tell him to bring you to the house of Elizabeth and Zechariah.... Remember them? They're our distant cousins. It's been a long time since they left to live in this little town they call Ain Karim, near the capital. They'll take good care of you there. Besides, since Elizabeth is also expecting a baby, which will just be a matter of months, well, you can give her a hand. This way, you won't just be a stinking guest, do you understand?

Mary: Yes, Mama....

Mary: So, the caravan carrying wheat passed and Yayo, who was the eldest of my brothers, saddled a mule for me and we set out on the road with them, toward the south. The truth was, I was so scared. I was wearing a green, striped robe, the only one I had, and a new scarf that Susana had lent me....

Yayo: Pff! How hot it is... I feel so hot and starved!... Hey, what did you bring in your basket, Mary?

Mary: Some doughnuts with honey that Mama prepared....

Yayo: Yeah? Gimme one, at least, that shortens the journey, somehow....

Mary: Oh no, they're for Aunt Elizabeth....

Yayo: Just gimme me a piece. That won't make a difference...

Mary: I know you, Yayo. You ask for one and you end up eating everything....

Yayo: Okay, okay.... Ha! So, you're bringing these doughnuts for Aunt Elizabeth.... Why?... Because you're hiding something?

Mary: What did you say...?

Yayo: Oh, c'mon, don't be shy.... Tell me, it was Joseph, wasn't it?... He did it, didn't he?

Mary: What're you talking about, Yayo...?

Yayo: Don't deny it, my little sister... I know everything, do you hear? Everything. But don't you worry, when I get back from Jerusalem, that whippersnapper will see who I am...!

Mary: But what're you talking about, Yayo? Are you out of your mind?

Yayo: What I'm saying is, a swine like him cannot disgrace a sister of mine just like that! I've never seen such a brazen person...!

Mary: For God's sake, Yayo, don't scream, I beg of you...! Joseph is not to blame for anything... he has not even lifted a finger on me...

Yayo: Ah, no?... Who did it, then?... C'mon, tell me!

Mary: I don't know, Yayo, I really don't know....

Yayo: You're not telling me it was a bee that bit you and made your belly swell... C'mon, tell me the truth!

Mary: No... do you still want a doughnut, Yayo? Here, take it....

Mary: We took the route to the mountains. I had never left the house and to me, everything was new and strange.... the trees, the towns, the people... After three long days of journey along the road, we arrived in the barren and sun-drenched lands of Judea.... We were very tired.... We could see Jerusalem at a distance, but we separated from the caravan and entered through a path leading to the small village of Ain Karim... It was called this because of the fresh spring water in the middle of a large vineyard.... Our distant relatives lived in a small house here....

Yayo: Well, sister, I know you can take care of yourself. I shall proceed to the capital, as it is getting late.

Mary: For God's sake, Yayo, don't leave me alone... I'm embarrassed to introduce myself like this, without knowing anyone...

Yayo: You should have been embarrassed before and not now.... Goodbye, Mary, good luck!

Elizabeth: So, you're Mary, the daughter of Joachim and Anne. I can't believe this! You're so pretty, my child! And how you've grown! But, what're you doing here, who brought you here....?

Mary: I came with my brother Yayo, who was going to the capital....

Elizabeth: Oh, Mary, how happy I am to see you! And what a surprise! I'm glad your mother has thought of this! Oh, wait, my baby is moving!... Here, touch me, put your hand here, do you feel it? Know what, Mary dear? I'm expecting a child!... There's no fool like an old fool, so they say...! Come on in, and meet your uncle... Zechariah, old man, look who's here to visit us! Poor man, when he learned he was going to be a father, he got so shocked, he lost his speech....

Zechariah!... Now tell me, how's your mother, and how's everyone over there?...

Mary: Aunt Elizabeth was very affectionate with me. She treated me like her own daughter.... She taught me many things: how to weave and to loom with fine thread, as this was never known in Nazareth.... She also taught me how to cook red beans... the very ones that Rebekah cooked for Isaac. This was how the women were assured of their men.... The truth is, I couldn't ask for more. Aunt Elizabeth helped me a lot and gave me self-confidence... especially that day I was washing the clothes in the patio... and I tripped....

Elizabeth: Those dizzy spells, today, yesterday and last Saturday... That's too much in a row, don't you think so?

Mary: It's the heat, Aunt Elizabeth...

Elizabeth: Could it be something else?... Look, my child, I'm already old and I can distinguish a blind man sleeping and a lame man seated...

Mary: Aunt Elizabeth, I... I've got to tell you something...

Elizabeth: You're pregnant, aren't you?... Come, young woman, let's talk under the shade.... Unburden yourself.... Look, the soul is like an intestine, when it becomes full, it gets indigested....

Elizabeth: So, you're going to have a baby... Well, we'll be on equal footing! First, you help me with my baby, then I help you with yours. What do you think, Mary dear?

Mary: But Auntie, do you believe what I've told you...?

Elizabeth: Of course, my dear. Why not? God is great and He makes great things. I should know...! Look at me... I was as barren as Abraham's wife, do you understand? Zechariah was already old. Was there any hope left? Nothing. Oh, my child, how many nights had I spent praying to God to take pity on me, to give me a child! Only God knows how much I have wept during all those years!... And Zechariah, who was always a grouchy person, was getting worse everytime and laying the blame on me. I could only weep. But what could I do, tell me?... Until the day of the Lord came. Yes, my child, God has his own time and moment. That morning, Zechariah went as usual, to the Temple with the other priests, to burn incense. He remained a long time, praying in the Temple. In the afternoon, when he got back, with those sad eyes, I told him: "Rejoice, old man, and go get yourself a place in the matting for we shall have a visitor soon." He asked: "Who the hell is coming to the house?" Then I told him: "A little angel, a child of yours! I'm pregnant, old man!".... Oh Mary, after I said that, he became dumb, because he didn't believe it, of course. He had already lost all hope. But look how happy he must be, now that I'm going on seven months. He hasn't recovered his speech yet.... This is the work of the Lord!

Mary: What a beautiful story, Aunt Elizabeth!

Elizabeth: Yours is even more beautiful, Mary. You'll see.

Mary: God was merciful with you...

Elizabeth: You bet, my child. Because if it were not for God's hand, with Zechariah alone, it would be futile. You know what? I like what you said: mercy. That's a pretty name. If this child is a boy, we

shall call him “John”, because of “mercy”....

Mary: The time came, and Elizabeth gave birth to a big, strong, baby boy. The whole neighborhood of Ain Karim went to greet my aunt... They brought with them chickens, sweets and jars of honey which was abundant in the mountains...

A Female Neighbor: My goodness, Elizabeth, what they say is therefore true: Better late than never! Look! What a boy! Praise God! He’s a little darling!

Mary: On the eighth day, as it was the custom, the rabbi was called to circumcise the newly born child... Zechariah’s little house almost burst with people, songs and celebration...

Female Neighbor: Congratulations, Elizabeth, and God bless the child! He’s so cute, my gosh, I feel like devouring him!

Elizabeth: Oh, please don’t, neighbor. He’s the only one I got, and it took me a lot of work to make him! Well, in the end, God took pity on me!

Female Neighbor: Say, how will you call him?

Elizabeth: Well, he’ll be called John.

Male Neighbor: John? But why? There’s no one by that name in your family.

Elizabeth: Neither was there anyone in the family who had difficulty in childbirth. We shall call him John!

Female Neighbor: Of course, you should take advantage, since old Zech can say nothing... Here he comes.... Hey, Zechariah, come over here... What do you think? What name will you give your son?

Zechariah: Humumumu....

Female Neighbor: Wait a minute, not even wise Solomon could understand you...

Zechariah: Humumumu....

Elizabeth: Bring him a board. He says to bring him a board.

Female Neighbor: How come you understand this jargon of his, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Oh, my child, thirty-five years of staying together, isn’t that enough...!

Mary: They brought him a board and a writing tool. Uncle Zechariah scribbled the letters of the name that my aunt and he wanted for their son...

Female Neighbor: What did you write there, old Zech? Lemme see...?

Male Neighbor: John? Oh no, not John! No way!

Zechariah: Humumu.... John, yes! John is his name, blazes!!!

Female Neighbor: Did you hear him, Elizabeth? Your husband can speak!

Mary: Uncle Zechariah’s face brightened up and his eyes were filled with tears, those eyes which had gone weary for having waited so long. But now there was radiance in them, for the joy of being a father, for the happiness of having brought a child into this world....

Zechariah: Praise God!!

Elizabeth: So, you can speak, old man?

Zechariah: Blessed be God who is merciful, for He has made you fertile, woman! Blessed be our country! Her liberation is coming! The Lord gave that promise to our father, Abraham. He announced it through the lips of our prophets, and He will fulfill that promise soon, very soon, so that we can serve Him without fear, in our free country! God bless you my son, my son of mercy! You will go ahead, making way for the Lord, preparing for Him a new people who are willing, until the Light of the Almighty shines in the midst of darkness, so that we may tread every path of peace.

Female Neighbor: Good, Zechariah, very good, it has even made a poet out of you, imagine!

Mary: I’ll never ever forget that party. The neighbors of Ain Karim gave a toast to John, the little son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. They regaled him with some poems of good luck and danced in the patio

until dawn....

Elizabeth: So, you see, Mary?... See how well God makes things happen? Don't be afraid, young woman...

If God has chosen you, and blessed the fruit in your womb, then He will take care of everything for you... Then the day will come when they will compliment you, the way they have complimented me now... and there will be many such days, Mary...

Mary: Yes, God was good with Aunt Elizabeth, and so was He with me. The truth is, He has been very good to me, and I'll never stop thanking Him. You've seen whom He has chosen.... This is the way of the Lord.... He brings down the powerful from their throne, while He lifts the humble from their misery... The rich, He renders empty. And He feeds the hungry... He gave a child to the sterile Elizabeth. And with me, He made the greatest miracle, because He made me see with my own eyes my own son, Jesus, raised from the dead.... Sometimes I think that everything that has happened is what God had promised to Abraham and to our fathers, what we have been waiting for, for generations.

The kinship of Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, to the family of Mary, is not a historical piece of information that can be verified. This relationship was not necessarily that of a "cousin" as it has been traditionally presented. In any case, whether they were relatives or not, Luke presents them as such by means of family ties. With this, rather than speak of blood relationship, Luke is showing more of the spiritual ties between Elizabeth's son – John the Baptist – and Jesus, who is Mary's son. The two were in the same line of the great prophets of Israel, men of God and of their people.

According to an ancient tradition of about five hundred years after Christ, John the Baptist ought to have been born in Ain Karim, a village situated in the mountains of Judea, about 7.5 kilometers west of Jerusalem. There is an abundance of olive trees and vineyards in this area. Ain Karim means "fountain of the vineyard." Its fertile land, which is in contrast with the desert land in the surrounding areas, provides for a very beautiful panorama. Among the many churches and convents built in memory of the Baptist, we can mention the Church of St. John where the birthplace of the prophet must have been, and the Church of the Visitation, big and surrounded by gardens, where the house of Elizabeth and Zechariah must have been located. Along the whole cloister of this church can be seen mosaic tiles containing the text of the song of Mary, the Magnificat, written in tens of languages.

Aside from the high priest and the family priests of the sacerdotal aristocracy of Jerusalem, there was in Israel a great mass of simple priests. They are estimated to have been more than 7,000 in the whole country, although in Galilee, there were only very few of them. These were men from poor families, almost all of which had to practice manual work in their towns in order to survive, because of limited resources (carpentry, stonecutting, selling, animal slaughter). They had a house, a wife and children. Their simple life was in contrast with that of the chief priests – the privileged and the rich – and this explains why this lowly clergy shared a common cause with the people in an uprising against the Romans in the year 66 after the death of Jesus. One of these priests was Zechariah, John the Baptist's father and Elizabeth's husband.

In Jesus' time, the priests were divided into 24 classes or groups. Each one of them took turns in weekly service in the Temple – from Saturday to Saturday.

Those who lived outside the capital – like Zechariah – traveled to Jerusalem just for this and remained there during this time. It is estimated that each section or group should have 300 priests. During the week of service, daily work was assigned by drawing lots. In the morning, there was an offering of perfumes, burning of an animal, and there were libations too... In the afternoon, the altar was purified, perfumes were burned, etc. Firewood had to be brought for the holocausts. Private sacrifices of the faithful had to be attended to, etc. Zechariah – who belonged to the group or family of Abiah – was offering perfumes (incense was burned to provide good scent) at the time of the afternoon sacrifice, when he learned that his wife was going to bear a child.

In order to write the story of the birth of John, Luke was inspired literally by the "miraculous" birth of Samuel (1 S 1:1-28). Elizabeth lived her pregnancy, like Anne – the mother of the prophet, Samuel – and

like Mary herself, knowing that God did something beautiful and amazing. She was already old when she became pregnant, for she was sterile prior to this. Given these data, Luke likewise points out – as in the case of Jesus – that John is God’s gift to his mother and people. He shall be the precursor prophet of Jesus, who will mobilize Israel toward the promise of liberation. His name – John – means “God had mercy.” Elizabeth and Zechariah, who had lost all hopes of having a child, acknowledged God’s immense gift to them by giving that name to their son. Zechariah’s verses in celebrating the birth of their son, like the song of Mary when she met Elizabeth, are poems with which Luke, the evangelist, wanted to express the joy that those children gifted by God to their mothers were to bring to history. The song of Zechariah – called the “Benedictus,” the latin translation of its initial word – is interspersed with phrases found in psalms and uttered by the prophets themselves. All these reflect the longing for freedom in every Israelite’s heart when John appeared in this world.

Mary’s song – the “Magnificat” (exaltation), also named because of the Latin translation of its initial word – is inspired by the song of Anne, that barren woman who was the mother of the last judge of Israel (1 S 2:1-10) and from the other expressions of the psalms, the prophets and the book of Genesis.

Even before Jesus’ birth, Mary, his mother, sang what would be the good news proclaimed by his son, where he revealed God’s plan: the hungry shall be fed and the rich shall be hungry the powerful shall fall from their thrones and the humble shall be raised... It is the subversion of the values of an unjust world. Jesus shall promote this with his word and his life. If by any chance we are tempted to think of Mary as a woman solely of prayer, one who remains silent and one who obeys, it will be good to remember these words with which she starts the gospel, to reread this song of liberation and hope which Luke had put in her lips....

(Lk 1:39-79)

133

A Night of Uncertainties

Overflowing with pilgrims, Jerusalem joyfully awaited the feast of the harvest, which was near. The eleven of us from the group, and the women, who were gathered during those days in Mark’s house, were listening to Mary, Jesus’ mother, about her reminiscences, as if she was drawing old and new things from her hidden treasures within.

Mary: ...a vast hell for such a small country, so they say. And this is true, because in Nazareth one cannot even cough without the whole neighborhood knowing about it. You can imagine, of course, that we were composed of barely twenty families... And although my mother had sent me to the other end of the country in order to avoid gossip, my neighbors’ tongues continued to wag...

A Female Neighbor: You mean you know nothing? Oh, woman where’ve you been?... Up there in the clouds?... Joachim’s daughter!... Yes, yes, this Mary who looked as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth....

Another Neighbor: Why, what happened to her, tell me?

Female Neighbor: What happened to her? Just like leavened bread... swollen...!

Female Neighbor: Holy Lord, what a scandal, what a shame!... So this guy Joseph lost no time, huh?

Female Neighbor: Nonsense! Better pity him... If the woman “has made a cuckold out of him, lalarin, lalarin...”

A Male Neighbor: I told you, this brown skinned woman was too happy.... How she laughs, how she

dances, and how she plays... and of course, there's this other game! I tell you, the youth of today is confused!

Another Neighbor: I tell you, if she were my daughter, I would give her a nice beating that would make her butt more red than the Red Sea! This is what I call a loosening of morals, *compadre!*... During our time, a decent woman would not peep through the window nor remove her veil from her face... Now, even their ankles are exposed... and then, they resent the consequences!

Male Neighbor: Exactly!... I wonder, *compadre* what the boyfriend has said. I understand that Joseph has nothing to do with this belly. What's he planning to do?... He must be gathering some stones by now.... Don't you think?

Neighbor: Well, first of all, he must be informed about it. The poor guy hasn't the slightest idea.. That's right.... Joseph doesn't know about it yet....

Joseph: Hey, what's happening here? Am I afflicted with leprosy, that no one seems to come near me?... I walk and everybody stares at me. I go to work and one begins to laugh while another starts whispering.... Damn, what the hell is wrong with me?

A Male Neighbor: Nothing's wrong with you, young man. The problem is with your girl friend.

Joseph: With Mary?... What's happened to her? Tell me.

Male Neighbor: I'm sorry, Joseph, but I've got to tell you... The matter stinks more than rancid cheese and the longer it lasts, the worse it will be....

Joseph: Straight to the point, please.

Male Neighbor: Well, you see, your girl friend is going to have a baby.

Joseph: How's that again...?

Male Neighbor: She's pregnant. That's it... Since all of us think that you were not the one... well....

Joseph: That's not possible... no, no, it's not possible... I can't believe Mary could do this to me....

Male Neighbor: Well, you've gotta believe it, young man. Had Noah not believed in the deluge, the fish would have gobbled him up...

Jack: Good day, Joseph!... What's with you, buddy? Have they told you about your girl's indiscretion?... Damn it, all these girls are the same!... Either they commit the same fault or some of them do worse! Ha, ha, ha...!

Joseph: Shut up, Jack...!

Jack: But it's okay, man, they also played the same joke on Hosea, and see, he even became a prophet!... Hahahay...!

Joseph: Beat it man, or I'll break your neck!

Jack: Okay, okay.... "If they make a cuckold out of you..."

Joseph: Go to hell, insolent one!

Jack: You too!.... Hahahay...!

Mary: That was indeed hell for Joseph!... I feel kind of remorseful, every time I remember...! Much later he told me that on that day he locked himself up in the house, not wanting to eat nor talk to anyone...

Mother: Joseph, my son, why don't you take something...? Joseph....

Joseph: I don't want anything! All of you, go to hell and leave me alone!

Mary: He was desperate... He lay on the mat, closed his eyes and tried to get some sleep....

Joseph: Shameless woman, now you will know who I am!... After all those sweet words and caresses, now this!... Wait till I grab you by the hair to bring you here and drag you through the village.... Do you think you can make me the laughing stock of the town?... Damn you, I'll reject you and I'll bring you naked before your father and tell him to his face: "Take her, I'm giving her back to you, I don't want any trash in my house!"... This will teach you to respect your promise... I said I wanted to marry you and you said you wanted to marry me too, and now... now....

Mary: Joseph bit his tongue so that his brothers would not hear him weep. He tried to suppress his tears with his hands, but they just flowed like a river.

Joseph: You've broken my heart, Mary... You've left it all shattered.... Why have you done this to me?... I loved you.... I've always loved you since the time we were kids playing in the hill... You're my reason to live... I never set my eyes on any other woman but you, Mary.... What am I to do now? ... I'll go away, and only the devil knows where... till I find another woman... There are other women, more beautiful than you, do you hear?... and who can cook even better...

Mary: Joseph was restless on his mat. Then he covered himself with a blanket and tried to sleep... in vain....

Joseph: No, I can't leave without seeing you before... I've got to see you... if only to hear the truth from your own lips... c'mon, be brave enough to tell me to my face... yes, yes, I've got to see you...!

Mary: Then he sat on the mat... He was sweating profusely, in spite of the cold night breeze....

Mother: Is there anything wrong, son...?

Joseph: No, Mama, nothing... I'm not sleepy...

Mary: He was smothered. He couldn't stay put. Gropingly, he stood up, put on his robe and without saying goodbye to his mother, opened the door and left... He did not bring any knapsack nor cane with him, and the road was very long... This did not matter to him.... He had to get to Ain Karim as soon as possible to where I was staying during those months.

After two days on the road, he reached the mountains of Judah where he could see the village from afar.... He stopped. His heart seemed to be bursting in his chest.... He took a deep breath, then, hastened his pace toward my uncle's little hut.

Joseph: Is this where...?

Mary: Joseph!

Joseph: Mary!

Mary: Joseph stood still at the door, before me, his eyes fixed on my bulging tummy...

Mary: Joseph, what're you doing here?

Joseph: I came to see you...

Mary: Well... here I am...

Joseph: Yes, I know... I see...

Mary: I'm expecting a child, Joseph.

Joseph: I'm waiting for an explanation, Mary... Then, I'll go away, and you'll never hear from me...

Elizabeth: You're not going anywhere! And before you become too sullen, you'd better show your respect for the people here!... My goodness, what's become of our youth nowadays? They come to your house and they treat you like you were a sack of flour... You're Joseph, aren't you? I'm sure. It shows in your face... So, are you visiting or something?

Joseph: Well, yes, Ma'am, I... I came to talk to Mary...

Elizabeth: About something and a lot of things. There's enough time for that... First, you must wash your feet and take something...

Joseph: It's okay, Ma'am, I don't mean to bother you... I...

Elizabeth: C'mon, young man, you can't deny it.... Your eyebags are bigger than the folds of my robe.... I guess you haven't taken anything warm since you left Nazareth, is that right?... C'mon in... I'll call in the old man.... Zechariah, come and meet Mary's boyfriend!.... Hey, easy now, little John... that's my son, you know. He was one month yesterday.... It's not because he's my son... but tell me, Joseph, isn't he as cute as a cherubim?

Mary: How well my Aunt Elizabeth treated Joseph! She let him in, cooked food for him and made him rest in the small room at the back.... Then, Uncle Zechariah showed him his garden and his chickens he was raising by the side of the well.... There was a warming of the hearts between the two.... Later, at sunset, when everything becomes cool, and one sees things with more serenity, Joseph and I sat down to talk, beside a green olive tree in the patio....

Mary: Well, I don't know where to begin...

Joseph: Neither do I...

Mary: What did they say about me in the village?

Joseph: It's all silliness.... They're too good at tongue-wagging...

Mary: At what...?

Joseph: They gossip a lot, Mary... They do nothing but wag their tongues.

Mary: Tell me, Joseph... Will you believe more what I'll tell you, or what your friends have told you?

Joseph: Who's the father of the child?

Mary: I don't know.

Joseph: How can that be...?

Mary: I don't know, really... Look at this tree... I don't know who planted it, but how many people has it given shade to?

Joseph: Be more specific...

Mary: We never bother about the bow that releases the arrow, but the direction it is heading for... Listen, before I came here, I consulted with my grandfather, Isaiah and he said that....

Mary: And this is all that I know.

Joseph: Why didn't you tell me before, Mary?

Mary: Because... because I was scared... I was so scared, Joseph...

Joseph: And I was so furious, did you know?

Mary: Aunt Elizabeth has been a great help to me... She advised me a lot...

Joseph: And I was all alone...

Mary: Tell me, Joseph, do you believe everything I've told you?... Do you believe me?

Mary: Joseph looked at me in my eyes, firmly held my hands and remained quiet, for some time...

Mary: Do you believe me, Joseph?

Joseph: I love you, Mary. I love you... and if you say that the hand of God is in all this, then let's see where He's going to take us... And whatever it is, Mary, you're still my girl and I'm going to marry you, happen what may!... And I will treat this child like my own!

Mary: How good you are, Joseph!

Elizabeth: You bet, young woman. Nowadays, you don't always find nice people around anymore!

Mary: Oh, Aunt Elizabeth, what have you been doing there...?

Elizabeth: Well, this is my house, after all. So, shall we hear wedding bells soon?

Joseph: Yes, Ma'am. Mary and I are getting married soon. So, get your things ready, for tomorrow, we shall take the road to the north...

Mary: To Nazareth? Oh, what will they say the moment they see us and...?

Joseph: Let them say what they want, we don't give a damn, is that right, Ma'am Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Of course, young man. Let them waste their breath! Only the two of you and the baby matter most... By the way, what name will you give him, Mary, dear?

Mary: I don't know. The truth is, we haven't thought about it yet....

Joseph: Why don't you let me give him the name?... If the baby is a girl, then we'll call her Mary, like you.... If it's a boy, we'll call him... Jacob. Right, Jacob was a brave man... or better, Jesus, like the one who led the people to the promised land... That's it, Jesus, a name of freedom!

Mary: Very early the following day, we set off for Galilee. The neighbors of Nazareth laughed the

moment they saw us together. They were laughing at me, and at Joseph, especially. But Joseph didn't lose heart because of this, and began with the preparations for our wedding as if nothing had happened...

Rabbi: Joseph, take Mary as your wife, in accordance with the law of Moses. Love her, take good care of her, be true to the word that you have just given before all of us, and may the Lord, our God bless you with many children and may one of them become the Messiah we need.

All: Amen, amen!

A Male Neighbor: Long live the newly-weds!

A Female Neighbor: May they live happily and be blessed with many children!

Jack: And may they not make haste this time!

Male Neighbor: C'mon, let there be music and dance, and let the party last till dawn!

Marriage was formalized in an engagement, although this should not have been consummated nor did it even exist in the marriage contract, which was established only in the wedding proper. But the engaged couple – and such was the case of Joseph and Mary at this moment – were already considered husband and wife. To such a point that if the man died, the woman was considered a widow, for legal purposes. If the woman was found to have committed adultery, she was condemned to death by stoning. If the man wanted to, he could also reject her, by presenting her a suit for divorce. Everything seemed to be tied up to this matrimonial commitment.

Upon learning about Mary's pregnancy, Joseph thought of various options. One was to repudiate here – divorce her, thus, breaking the engagement – using any reason allowed by law (for example, some defects he might have discovered in Mary, physical or moral). Another one was to charge her of adultery, unfaithful to her word, for which Mary could have been stoned to death by her neighbors in Nazareth. Or that of leaving the village, making him a coward in the eyes of his neighbors and then, due to Mary's condition, become the laughing stock of all his countrymen.

Because of his love for Mary, whom he loved deeply, Joseph chose another way that was not legalistic nor cowardly, that of fleeing. He accepted what had happened, he trusted the word of his wife and accepted the child like his own, protecting Mary from the whole village, that no one would ostracize her. It was a decision inspired by his love for her, the decision of a "just" man, as the gospel says. Just in its most profound meaning, which is never that of the one who acts according to the law, but according to the spirit, of the one who acts according to the most profound feelings of affection, solidarity and trust.

In order to dispel the terrible doubts experienced by Joseph, the evangelist Mark makes an angel appear in his dreams, to give him back peace and strength to take the decision of accepting Mary and the child to be born. In the Bible, the angel is always God's messenger. In this case, his message is that of hope. Joseph must not fear, God always loves life and asks Joseph to accept the life that is beginning to form in his wife's womb. On the other hand, to speak of a dream is a way of telling the lectors to relate this Joseph of Nazareth with the patriarch, Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. In his dreams God revealed to Joseph what was going to happen to him, to his brothers, to his people, during those years of the beginning of slavery in Egypt. He also interpreted the pharaoh's dreams (Gen 37:5-11; 40:1-15; 41:1-36). In his dreams, Joseph of Nazareth was informed of the definitive liberation from all forms of slavery through Jesus, the son that Mary was to have. The relation between these two Josephs, just and faithful men, is decisive in understanding the meaning of this evangelical text.

Mary and Joseph were a man and a woman who found their way of faith through doubts, conflicts and tension. In accepting Jesus, the two accepted life and the God of life who gifted them with the child. That was an act of faith and hope, made easy by their love for one another. When they got married, they did not know what would become of that child, what would become of them... Palestine in those times was a territory rocked by great political and social pressures. The life of the farmers was difficult; it meant hard work and utter poverty. These were the years that preceded the definitive incorporation of Israel as a province of the Roman empire. Insecurity was the patrimony of the poor. In spite of this, and

notwithstanding all personal problems, Joseph and Mary welcomed that boy, whom they would bring up with all enthusiasm.

In a rustic setting like that of Nazareth, weddings were occasions in which the whole town participated. The celebration, which lasted up to seven days, consisted of singing, dancing, and drinking much wine. The latter was an essential element of any wedding. After these days, it was customary for the couple to live in the house of the groom's family. There are no existing data regarding this aspect of Joseph and Mary's life. Yet, in Nazareth they were able to preserve the posterior wall of a stone cave which has been venerated as the "the house of Mary," since the 2nd century, where the family was believed to have spent those years in Nazareth. This piece of the house is found in the interior of the Basilica of the Assumption, a very huge temple built a few years ago in Nazareth. This is evidence of a well-confirmed historical authenticity, showing the extreme poverty in which Jesus grew up. Near this place is another house which is venerated as the house "of the holy family," although this is not historically confirmed.

(Mt 1:18-24)

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In the Middle of an Open Field

We were in Jerusalem, and in Mark's house, a few days before the great feast of Pentecost, when Mary came up with her memories of Bethlehem, the town where Jesus was born....

Mary:I was about to give birth when the Romans called for a census in the whole country... Those were difficult days, my God! The announcement of that law, which all of us Israelites had to comply with by hook or by crook, reached Nazareth when the weather was getting cold....

Female Neighbor: How unfortunate!... If the Maccabees brothers could see what's happening...! They would cut off the heads of these bandits!

Old Man: What do these Romans want...? They think they're our masters!

Male Neighbor: You bet they are, *compadre!*... Or were you born yesterday? For forty years, they've held us by the neck!... Remember Egypt with Moses!... It's the same thing!...

Another Neighbor: And now, the census! They want to have a head count of all, one by one, like sheep, so they can bleed us dry of our money!

Mary: The census law ordered each head of the family to transfer to the birthplace of their ancestors as soon as possible in order to be registered there.... My countrymen from Israel came from different tribes, so every family packed up their things, loaded their mules and set for the road reluctantly.... Some journeyed near, but others had to undertake a long trip.... Those were the days when Galilee was filled with caravans cursing the Romans while crossing the country... Since Joseph belonged to the tribe of Judah, of the family of David, we had to take a long trip to the south...

Joseph: We're going to Bethlehem, Mary, to the other end of the country, no less!... This is disastrous!... what with your big belly and the roads, too muddy on account of the rains.... And all this happening at the same time!

Mary: Why don't we stay here, Joseph? Let's not go anywhere!

Joseph: Okay, that's what we shall do...!

Mary: They can't drive us away anytime it pleases them, my goodness!.... So what do we do now,

Joseph?

Joseph: Pfff... Then, you better get the two mules ready, Mary. If we don't register, we're in for more trouble later... You know how they control everything....

Mary: But that's quite a long trip, Joseph... The baby is almost due...

Joseph: Would you rather have us imprisoned and the child born in jail?...

Mary: So off we went to Bethlehem. I was mounted on a half dead mule.... The truth is, I didn't feel uneasy at all, neither did the pregnancy weary me. I was scared at the thought that I would be far from my mother in a strange place at my due time... Up in Nain, those of us heading for the south banded together in one big caravan which was on its way to the same... There were several women in my condition. Although the trip was terrible for many, I was in very high spirits then...

Man: Where are you heading for, countrymen...?

Joseph: Bethlehem, can you imagine that?... And you?

Man: To a much nearer place, Siloam... I see that your wife is due... like my wife...!

Joseph: That's right... Well, as long as the baby is not born in the middle of the road...

Mary: For God's sake, Joseph, don't say that...!

Man: Tell me, do you want a boy or a girl?

Joseph: All I want is for the baby to become a courageous person, that's all!... If it's a girl, she must be like Deborah, the woman fighter who's got courage more than a man.... If it's a boy, he must be something like Moses....

Man: Oh let it be what it ought to be, blazes!

Joseph: I hope they're not twins, huh, Mary?... With that big bulge of yours.... No way!... Life is already too difficult to feed two mouths all at the same time.

Mary: After three days on the road we arrived in Bethlehem, which they call "the house of bread"...

Old Man: Attention, folks, Bethlehem is in sight!

Man: Take off your sandals, countrymen, this is holy land! This is where the great David came from!

Woman: And so did his great grandmother. If Ruth hadn't fallen for Boaz, things would have been different! So, let's move on and look for a place!

Mary: When we entered Bethlehem, the place was teeming with people.... and it was beginning to rain...

Mary: Where are we going to stay, Joseph?... Many people have come for the census... Apparently, David had sired more grandchildren than rabbits....

Joseph: Don't worry, Mary... I was told that the Galileans have found a place over there, in an open field... The inns here are only for the rich... These people here are known for their exorbitant fees....

Mary: We tried to cross the town on the narrow, winding and swampy roads.... Alongside, the white houses with round roofs crowded together....

The camels and the animals of the caravans were shivering, their rain-drenched hair tangled up.... I leaned on Joseph to avoid falling. Joseph supported himself on his long cane, as he pulled the rope of our mule.... The stubborn beast moved by fits and starts....

Joseph: Are you okay, Mary...?

Mary: I'm tired... Look... I've got a feeling it's coming.... This baby is moving a lot... It seems in a hurry to come out...

Joseph: Maybe it'll turn out to be a dancer, like King David.... At least it should get something from him if the baby's to be born here...!

Mary: The rain didn't last long. Then a fresh wind swept the clouds away. And at night the sky remained clear, and full of stars. We Galileans had our encampment in the open air, in a plain sown with palm trees, from where the stars of Bethlehem could be seen...

A Man: If you want some more olives, here they are! Or you can have some dates if you like!... Tonight, anything goes, folks!

A Old Man: Including your lice, man!

Mary: I remember we built a big bonfire and we gathered around it to take something. Some men began to sing old songs of the land which they learned from their grandfathers... The children who had come in the caravan played by the fire.... We were so happy... We huddled together so as not to feel the cold, as we rested after the long trip...

A Man: Imagine making us cross the entire country just to have our names listed in one of the papers. Shame on you, Romans!... You'll pay for all this when the Messiah comes... He'll make you eat all those papers and all those laws, and that'll be the end for Augustus Caesar.

Another Man: That'll be a day of great rejoicing, yesiree, like a day of great harvest...! A day of feasting!

Another Man: That'll be the day, old woman! They say that the prophets have announced great things to come.... Do you know what my grandfather used to say? That on this day, the wolf and the lamb shall be friendly neighbors, and the cow and the bear shall be sleeping together with their young.... Can you imagine this?... It'll be a life of peace and tranquility...!!

Old Man: Well, well, go ahead young men, with your nice talk; the night is beautiful and so are your words... But, you know what I think? Either God has gone asleep or the Messiah has lost his way... Look how my teeth have gone yellow, and yet, I haven't seen anything...

A Woman: C'mon, old man, don't despair... God has His own time... He keeps His word.

Mary: Oh, Joseph, oh, oh, it's coming, Joseph, it's coming...!

Joseph: What's wrong, Mary, oh God...?

Another Woman: What do you mean, what's wrong with her? Man, the baby wants to get his head out!

Mary: I don't remember how it happened... Joseph and the other men had to carry me....

A Man: Where do we put her, Simon?

Simon: In that cave over there...!

A Man: But it's full of animals...!

Simon: We'll get them out, man!... Go and scare them out!

Joseph: Hey, ma'am Noemi, come with us... You're a midwife, aren't you?

Noemi: No, we'll all have a hand in this!... We all go!

The whole encampment was astir.... Beside the clearing where we were, by the hillside there were some caves where the shepherds kept their sheep.... The women ran toward us... Everybody wanted to help.... The men didn't fell short of our expectations.... My God, what a hassle!

Man: Hohoo.... Out!... Out you go!... C'mon, little lambs... out to the open air... This Galilean needs shelter!... Out you go!...

Mary: They took me to one of the caves and lay me on a pile of dry straw...

Old Woman: Well, young woman, this is your first, so it'll be a little difficult... but everything will turn out fine.

A Woman: All the men, stay out!... This is only for women!

An Old Man: Hell, something stinks here!

A Woman: So stay out! You're not needed here! Hey, you better have that wick lighted, keep it away from the straw. We don't want any bonfire here.... Hey, I told the men to stay out!

A Man: I thought.... Hip... we said tonight was for everyone.... So, this baby is also ours, yesiree! Hip...!

An Old Woman: Oh, yeah?... okay, deliver the baby yourself, rascal!... Out, out!...

Joseph: Let me stay...! I'm the father, damn!

Woman: Well, if you are, do something useful.... Bring in some hot water in a jug and some clean cloths...!

Mary: The night entered its first watch... I was there, lying on the straw, bathing in sweat, in my tremendous struggle in childbirth, clasping the hand of one of those women helping me...

Woman: C'mon, Mary, everything will be okay... Help him get into this world... that's it, take a deep breath... fine, fine...

Mary: Oh...! Oh...! Ohh....

Old Woman: My, my!... Yesterday it was Rebekah, and now it's Mary... Two childbirths in a row! ... At the rate they're going, we Galileans will be filling up the whole country!

Mary: Those were long hours for me!... The pain kept on coming back like the waves of the Great Sea... The cave, still half-dark, was filled with women.... Outside, the men talked and sang, in anticipation of the coming child.... Everybody stayed awake that night...

Woman: Is everything okay...?

Old Woman: Of course.... I guess this is a big child...

Old Woman: Give one last push, Mary, c'mon....

Old Woman: Put a wet cloth on her head, Annette, to soothe her...

Woman: Hey, it's coming!... Noemi... that's it...

Mary: Ohh.... Oh... Oh...!

Woman: Push some more, Mary... the head is almost there!

Another Woman: It's here!... Praise the Lord!

Old Woman: It's a boy! You've got a son!

Woman: Run, Chichi and tell the father!

Mary: Joseph came running...

Joseph: Mary!!

Mary: Isn't he cute, Joseph...?

Joseph: He's a darling... and he looks like me! Heck! At least I must say something, no?... Oh, Mary, I love you...

Old Woman: Enough of the cuddling, young man. Your wife needs to rest!

Woman: Oh, these men...! Just because they don't experience such labor!

Mary: The women washed the baby, wrapped him in a clean cloth and lay him beside me, on the straw... They brought a little lamp near so I could take a good look at him....

Woman: Watch out, young woman, the smoke is bad for him!

Old Woman: Can you feed him now, my dear?

Mary: Yes, I guess so...

Old Woman: Go ahead, breastfeed him now.... Poor little thing.... He must be hungry...

Woman: Look, my dear, this is how you do it... like this....

Old Woman: Everyone may go inside now to see the Nazarene's little boy!!

Man: Hey, come over here and see God's perfect little boy!!

He was born amid his people, those people who for thousands of years, had waited for him, in clamor for justice... He was welcomed to this world by the calloused and suffering hands of the women of Galilee... He was born in the middle of the night, and in silence. The stars shone to announce the joyful news that he was in the middle of the open air, among us and like one of us....

Mary: The people who walked in darkness saw a great light... and you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,

have not been the least of the villages of Israel, because in you has been born the one who will free the people and bring the promised peace...

In him shall rest the Spirit of the Lord, fluttering as in the beginning of the world, and its wings shall cover the breadth and width of his land, Emmanuel....

We do not know the exact year of Jesus' birth. The reference by the gospel of Luke to a census ordered by Rome gives us an approximate clue. The information shows that Jesus came into this world in the years immediately prior to the final annexation of Palestine to the Roman empire, or a little later. It was during this period that the census was ordered, although nothing is certain about its duration and its exact dates. The census was an instrument of control employed by Rome over her dominions. What was implemented in Israel, according to Luke, was ordered by Publico Sulpicio Quirino, legate of Rome in the province of Syria.

The census had of two phases: the registration and the collection of taxes.

The first phase consisted of putting up the official listing of persons and properties all over the country. In the second phase, each was informed of the corresponding taxes to be paid and collection of the same would start here. The second phase – which some researchers simply refer to as “census” – seems to have taken place toward year 6 after Jesus' birth. If we accept these data, the birth of Jesus would have occurred during the first period: that of the registration. In any case, Luke was particularly interested in this historical and political aspect, since the trips from one region to another on account of the census justify the transfer of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Giving birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, the city of David, established between him and the great king of Israel, a relationship which is not only symbolic but familiar as well.

The census was received with real indignation by the men and women all over the country. That law formalized the submission of the people and the nation to the Roman empire. At the start of the census, Palestine was constituted as a province of Rome. According to the imperialistic organization, since that time only the right of the Israelites to use the property (to cultivate and administer it) was recognized, its ownership being reserved for Rome. For the people, this was not only a form of political and economic domination, but a real blasphemy. For the people of Israel, the land was sacred. God was its sole owner and it was God's will that no one should permanently possess it. The social laws of Israel underscored the above essence or meaning. From the start of the imperial domination, alongside such measures was nurtured a mute but fierce resistance to the troops and the imperial officials. The national ruling classes (priests, theologians) were also disturbed, reacting in a general manner, and trying to make the new order “acceptable” to the people. They sought nothing else but to retain their positions of privilege and power before the new foreign authorities.

The journey undertaken by Joseph and Mary, as well as many of their countrymen, on account of the census – from Nazareth to Bethlehem – could have lasted about five days on the road. Bethlehem was an important city at the time of Jesus' birth. It is situated about 10 kilometers from Jerusalem, toward the south of the capital, in the lands of the family of Ephrath. (That is why we say “Bethlehem of Ephratah”). The name Bethlehem means “house of bread.” David, the most beloved king of the Israelites was born here. He was a shepherd and was tending the sheep in the fields of that city when he was anointed as king of his country (1 S 16:1-13). The prophet Micah had also announced that from Bethlehem would come the future king of Israel, the new David who would shepherd the people (Mic 5:1-5). Luke as well as Matthew introduce Jesus as heir from David's lineage and say that in him shall be fulfilled the prophecy of Micah's announcement of the place of origin of the awaited Messiah. They make catechesis with this, explaining at the start of the gospel, “who” Jesus was and what was to be his mission.

Bethlehem at present is a beautiful Arab city, with small white houses piling up over a hill. Stands out in the midst of all these is the Basilica of the Nativity which was constructed one thousand five hundred years ago. It still exists, and is one of the oldest churches in the world. It is a big church, with a narrow and very low entrance door, because it was built during the war. Having no other door than this, no armed

horsemen were able to enter the temple. In the interior – ravaged by time, by the smoke from candles, and by the passage of thousands of pilgrims – there is a small grotto as a reminder of the place where Jesus was born. A star on the floor points to the very spot of his birth, in a manner more pious than historical. The following inscription is written: “On this spot was born Jesus of the Virgin Mary.” Very near is an excavation in the grotto venerated as the manger. These are dear and touching spots for any believer. Through the centuries, thousands of Christians have gathered in this cave to celebrate the Eucharist and to sing traditional Christmas carols.

Hundreds of years of tradition, images, songs, carols, clay figurines and other beautiful manifestations of popular art have made Christmas the most deeply-rooted of feasts among the Christians and non-Christians in countries influenced by the western culture of the whole Christendom. Christmas is also a religious feast where one “sees” more. But, because of a literal interpretation of the evangelical text or because of the weight of several artistic traditions, we have “seen” the new-born Jesus as a child born “mysteriously:” in solitude, in the silence of the night, away from everyone. Without denying the beauty and the history earned by these representations, it may be useful to see Christmas in another perspective. The traditional scene separates Joseph and Mary from their countrymen, who would have been under the same predicament during the period of the census. Then it separates the new-born babe, making him the only child and different from the rest. This imagery negates something essential to the mystery of the incarnation. God wanted Jesus to be like the rest, and his family to be one of the Galilean families. If Jesus was born for all, then it is important, right at the start of his life, to be born within the sight of everyone. It was precisely in our midst, in this encampment which is the world and human history, that he wanted to put up his camp (Jn 1:14). In Bethlehem, as in all relatively important cities of Palestine, there were inns, big lodging places for those who are on their way to Jerusalem or other cities. That “there was no place” for Joseph and Mary in one of those huge “caravansaries” (place for the caravans, where some people and animals stayed: horses, camels, donkeys...) was not due to the “unkindness” of the innkeepers who rejected the Son of God even before his birth. There was no room because the above-mentioned places were already filled or, probably the prices were so high that Joseph and Mary could not afford to pay them. Certainly, the businessmen took advantage of the census by charging more for accommodations. In any case, when the Galileans went to Judea, they tried to stay together. It is no wonder they put up collective tents, more so because of the special circumstances of that compulsory journey.

Mary gave birth to Jesus. Her baby did not come out miraculously over the straw. Jesus was born like all of us, the fruit of the labor and pains of his mother. It is completely logical that she be assisted by her countrywomen, who were more knowledgeable about childbirth than she at that moment. When the baby was born, his umbilical cord was cut, he was cleaned and was wrapped in swaddling clothes.

He was also rubbed with salt as according to custom (Ez 16:4). The first thing to do was to inform the father so that the community could greet him.

We do not know if Jesus was born in the months of winter or summer, much less on the 25th of December. This date, which has been the date of the Nativity for more than 1500 years, has its origin in the great Feast of the Sun which was celebrated in Rome and the whole empire with great popular rejoicing. The first Christians changed the original meaning of the feast and began to celebrate the birth of Jesus on the same day. This was so because they would see in him the light that guided them, because his birth meant the dawning of a new world, because Jesus had conquered death by offering his life and receiving from God the resplendent joy of resurrection as His response.

(Lk 2:1-7)

A Feast With The Shepherds

Jerusalem, like a vain woman, was adorned for the coming feast of Pentecost. Branches and flowers lined up the streets, torches were lighted by the walls, and the children of Israel segregated their first harvest as an offering in the Temple, in thanksgiving to God for the new harvest....

A long time had passed, but no one could ever forget what Mary had shared with us during those days....

Mary: I remember it was still night when Jesus was born. It took a couple of hours more for the sun to rise to the mountains and rid the cold, black sky of Bethlehem of those stars...

Mary: Right after I had given birth, the cave was filled with all the Galileans who were in the encampment.... They came then left, to see the baby and to congratulate Joseph and me...,

A Woman: Praise God, and what a beautiful little boy! For a first born, he really is...!

A Man: Now you know, Joseph, once a thief, always a thief.... See to it that the rest will come out as beautiful and well-formed as this!

Another Woman: So it's their own thing, huh? Thanks! What about the mother?... Some men... and how they brag...!

Old Woman: I believe this little Galilean will wage much war... what with the way he was born...!

Man: But the mother is okay, isn't she?

Old Woman: Let the mother rest.... Don't make her talk... Wet her lips, will you, Annette?... The poor woman has perspired a lot....

Woman: You should've seen the father. He was more scared than the ass of Balaam!

Another Woman: Look how the babe sucks his mother's milk...!

Man: Hey, little man, don't be a glutton, the spring won't run dry...!

Another Man: Hey, folks, it's not every night that a child is born... one was born tonight... and this calls for a celebration... Hik! Let music play and let wine flow...! Hik!

Woman: Unless you yourself get some wine, nothing much remains of it....

Man: Much or little, tonight we celebrate.... Hik!... Nobody sleeps tonight!

Old Man: Anyway, soon the cocks will crow.... For once, let's all have a sleepless night...

Woman: Well, I'm so sleepy I could drop dead...

Old Woman: Well, you can take a nap on that straw... if you clean it of the animal manure.

Man: Why talk of sleep now, buddy...? C'mon, Tina, belt out a song, and let the fun begin!

Woman: Okay, okay, lemme see... Here goes... "Hail to the most beautiful / like the pilgrim's flower / let her live in pain / giving birth to her first babe."

Man: I've got something better... "Little lemon, little lemon / you have stopped blooming / weep no more little boy / no one will love you ever."

Mary: Near the cave, on the other side of the palm grove, some shepherds were spending the night quietly, tending their sheep. They had built bonfires to keep themselves warm and protect themselves from wolves. They took turns guarding the fire...

Cheph: For heaven's sake, what noise is that?!... I'd say it's coming from yonder, from the cave.... That's weird... at this time... Listen well, Cheph.... Yeah, I hear music for feasting... Hey, Samuel, Sloppy, wake up boys...!

Sloppy: What the hell is going on?... I dreamed I was eating a plate of red beans and....

Samuel: And what?... the wolves came?

Cheph: Hey guys, I've got good news.... Don't you hear what I hear?

Samuel: Yeah, but... what feast are they celebrating tonight?

Cheph: I dunno, but, it sounds so near.... Hey why don't we go see for ourselves!

Sloppy: Hmm...! If there are pretty lasses, we still have time to flirt with some of them!

Samuel: Well, let's go before it gets dawn!

Ceph: And before they run out of wine!

Sloppy: Let's bring the sheep.... Sheep!.... Sheeeep!.... Let's goooo!

Mary: I was very tired, I couldn't open my eyes... Half-awake and half-asleep, I could see those who were sleeping in the corners of the cave... They were muddled up in their blankets, lying on the damp straw on the ground.... Outside, my countrymen were dancing and singing.... You know fully well that any occasion is a good chance for the Galileans to get excited.... Joseph who was also singing with gusto, would take a peep every now and then to wink at me.... The shepherds came with their flock when it was almost dawn....

Woman: "Praise God in heaven / and on earth / let there be peace in the world / for those who fulfill their work."

Man: "And for those who fulfill their work / let them rejoice too. Because God loves the people / day and night."

Ceph: Hey, you, young man, what's the occasion here, huh? You're making a lot noise. You took away half of our sleep...

Man: Why, didn't you hear the good news, my friend? A fellow-countrywoman has just given birth tonight!

Sloppy: So what?... The women of Bethlehem do that everyday, but we don't make a big fuss out of it...

Man: But this is different.... A Galilean born outside of his land must be welcomed with high esteem.... Besides, we owe it to ourselves to celebrate, after a long, long trip, man!

Ceph: And where's the baby?

Man: He's there inside the cave, behind the palm grove...

Ceph: You mean, in "my" cave.... This place belongs to me and my sheep.

Man: Hey old man, don't be a grouch...! Come, so you, too, can see him and give him a toast... There ought to be some dates and wine left...

Ceph: Leave the sheep in this clearing, guys...

Man: Hey friends, these shepherds are here to celebrate with us!.... They heard our music, so they rushed here...!

Ceph: That's right... Where's the baby's father?

Joseph: I'm the one, old man.

Ceph: Is he your first-born, son?

Joseph: Yeah.

Ceph: I hope you'll have many more. Show me your baby...

Mary: When the shepherds entered, the cave was filled with people...

Ceph: Where's this lady who sneaked into my cave to have her baby...?

Mary: I'm here, grandpa... Why don't you give my baby your blessing...?

Ceph: May God bless you, son! He's very good-looking.... Not one of my sheep has had a lamb as beautiful as your son, woman.

Mary: The old shepherd with the gray beard went close to Jesus and caressed his head.... The other two, young and robust, tanned by the sun of Judea, did the same... They were probably his sons.

One of them went near Joseph...

Sloppy: Here, take it. This is my present to him.

Joseph: What's that for?

Sloppy: A little lucky bell. We hang it on his neck when a lamb is born. This will counteract bad luck and the animal will grow strong and properly bred.... Put it on your son...

Joseph: Well, I...

Sloppy: C'mon, put it on, man. It won't do him any harm...

Cheph: Listen to me, you strangers: I just thought that if this child is born in a shepherd's turf, then he'll become a shepherd too.

Old Woman: That was exactly what I was telling them outside.. if he was born where the sheep are, then a shepherd he's got to be...

Joseph: As far as I'm concerned, it won't really matter, whether he is a shepherd, a carpenter or a fruit vendor, or whatever I can teach him.... What matters more to me is that he grow up to be strong and to be able to fight hard for our country.... Do you know how we shall call him?... Jesus, the fighter.

Cheph: I like the way you speak, young man!... We are in need of fighters, because our country is like a lost flock. Our leaders aren't bad shepherds, they are *extremely* bad!... They gratify no one but themselves... They milk us like cows, shear us, put the yoke on our necks and in the end... have us beheaded!... But they say everything will turn out fine in the end....

Samuel: But if God does not lift His cane to lead us to the right path...!

Sloppy: Yes, buddy, how God wishes His little child to be one of those leading his flock to where there is good pasture.... How I wish so, too!

Woman: Well, well, you've been here arguing if the boy will be this or that, but not one has even thought of reading his luck.... Am I right?

Old Woman: Well, you are... Let's see... will you tell Charlotte to stop dancing and to come inside, as she is the expert in this matter...

Cheph: And how do you do that, woman?

Old Woman: We, who come from the north, read it in the palm of the mother's hand.

Samuel: Well, we shepherds do it with the umbilical cord of the child.

Old Woman: What?... Holy God, this we have to see!

Man: Palm or umbilical cord... it doesn't really matter.... What is important is you make a prognosis of the boy...

Woman: Let's see what's in store for this Nazarene!

Mary: An old, wrinkled woman, with silver rings hanging from her nose and wrapped in a dark blanket, slowly went near the pile of straw where I was lying down...

Charlotte: Gimme your hand, Mary... your right hand.... "If you wouldn't grow up, my child / if you remained a child, / but time will pass/ sooner than a wink...." Will you bring that lamp closer, my child, so I can see... so I can see.... This is the footline... Yes, it says this boy will cross the country northbound and southbound and then, vice-versa.

Man: Then he'll have to use up lots of sandals!

Woman: Psst!... Quiet, man, this matter is a serious one...!

Charlotte: This is the heartline.... I see several children... Mary's son's gonna have a lot of children... as many as the mature grains of wheat in a spike...

Woman: Hey, Mary, your house will be too small for your grandchildren!

Charlotte: Now, the money line... Hmmm! It's blurred! I suppose, if this child does not make it in a raffle, then he'll have to walk down the street with his hands covering his private parts....

Man: Old woman... that's how we've always been in this country... hik! walking like Adam did before the great sin...! Hik!

Woman: More prognosis, please, Charlotte...!

Charlotte: You still want more?... no, let somebody else do it. I've already said a lot for free!

Man: I'd like to see how this is done through the umbilical cord, as the shepherd has claimed.... Tell us, old man, how do you read one's luck this way?

Cheph: Where's the cord?

Joseph: Must be some place here...

Cheph: Go, get it!... Without it, no prognosis can be made!

Woman: Look, it's here!

Cheph: Let's go outside... this must be done in an open field!

Cheph: See?... The cord is thrown upwards while everybody prepares to catch it...

Woman: Then...?

Cheph: Whoever catches it will have good health, good fortune and love!... Here goes!...

Man: I got it!... I got it!

Woman: Again!!!! Again!!

Cheph: Ha! Bring it here, son.... Whoever catches it this time, will have a hundred years of happiness!... Here goes!...

Mary: From the cave, where I lay over the pile of straw, I could hear the laughter, the applause and the excitement of the party organized by the Galileans and the shepherds. They said my son would bring them good fortune and deep inside me, I was praying the same from God.... It was already dawn when my eyes became heavy and I fell asleep, while holding Jesus close to me....

Old Woman: "The night has gone mad / because my countrywoman gave birth to a baby / and in the feast we had for him, / the night had caught us."

The surrounding areas of Bethlehem were appropriate for pasture. Those were the same fields where David had nourished his sheep before he became king of Israel. Until now, the Arab shepherds lead their flocks through the vast terrains surrounding Bethlehem. Outside the city, in the so-called "shepherds' field," there is a church in the form of a Bedouin tent which reminds those shepherds from Bethlehem of their enthusiastic celebration in honor of the newly-born babe from Galilee.

The shepherds from Bethlehem, like the rest from other parts of Israel, were not "affectionate, charming and sweet," as they are generally portrayed in stories about Christmas. They were not only men from the lowest social ladder, they were also considered "dangerous" elements. The shepherd was a real outcast in that society. He was regarded as a delinquent, a thief, and a cheat. Although there were no proofs, they were always suspected of leading their animals to properties not their own and of stealing part of the produce of their flocks. Some "religious" communities had prohibited purchase of wool, milk or young goats from them. In disregard for a number of important texts of the Old Testament, where God and His Messiah are represented as shepherds, or of the traditions showing Moses and David as shepherds of their flocks before becoming leaders of the people, the literature of Israel, specially that of the time of Jesus, is replete with very critical judgments against the shepherds. If the gospel of Luke presents the shepherds as the first to know about the birth of Jesus, he is not only providing us with a historical information, but basically he contributes to us a theological element. It is not a coincidence, much less a poetic detail, but it is a clear indication from the beginning of the gospel of who were beside Jesus, who were around him when he was born, and for whom he was born. The good news, the joyful news was received by the shepherds, who readily understood they had a liberator in their midst. Those men, poor and despised, represented in their poverty the people to whom Jesus would proclaim the gospel. Those "poor of Yahweh" had nothing but hope in the Lord, the desire to be free from centuries of oppression. As in the text of the annunciation to Mary, Luke, in this narration, employs the angels once again as messengers of the news of liberation. If, in biblical language, the figure of an angel is used, the purpose is to give solemnity to a given moment, to highlight the importance of the narrated event. It is very important that the awaited Messiah be born among the poor and refer to his community, the "least of all" as the first; and that "it is necessary" that the angels should appear. Matthew, the other narrator of the infancy of Jesus, who also wants to underscore the universality of the message of Jesus – vis-à-vis his countrymen's nationalism –, would say that wise men (with another religion) from the Orient came to Bethlehem. This would show that Jesus did not come to solely liberate Israel but all the peoples of the earth, that he would break barriers among nations. A manifestation of this is inspired by the prophecies of Isaiah (Is 49:12 and

22-23; 60:3-6). The mention of a star is a reminder, at the time the gospel was written, of an old prophecy of a foreigner, who, in the beginnings of the history of Israel, saw a star, announcing the coming of a king, who was to rule all the lands of the earth from Israel (Num 24:15-19). The birth of a child is a reason for celebration in all cultures. Surrounding this event is an infinity of popular customs. Burying the placenta in the cultivated land, asking God for fertility, or sprinkling mother's milk over the furrows of the land for good harvest are some of the many rituals involving childbirth in a number of towns. The Nativity, a feast deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, ought to look for more profound, popular roots, in order to get closer to the origins of Jesus. An excessive and artificial consumption, utter extravagance that is common these days, have nothing or little to do with the birth of that child, who was himself surrounded by great joy and celebration, but never by pomp.

Through the angels, Luke gives a proclamation that is traditional song and acclamation among the Christians: "Glory to God in heaven and peace to men on earth," whom He loves so much. This, in synthesis is the meaning of the birth of Jesus for mankind. The "glory" of God throughout the Bible is the revelation of God's authority and Holiness. In this poor child, born like the rest, amid a group of rejoicing countrymen, is found all God's glory, His definitive revelation. From now on He is there, amid the people, from whom we must seek God, where He wanted to reveal Himself. Jesus' birth also signifies "peace." In the Bible, the word "peace" is one with the richest of meanings. Peace ("shalom" in Hebrew) may be translated, for example, twenty-five ways in Greek. Peace is health, salvation, joy, contented life, complete life, full life; well-being, material and spiritual prosperity for each one and for the community. All this is what that child born in a cave for the sheep has come to bring us, and for whom the shepherds of Bethlehem had feasted with great rejoicing.

(Lk 2:8-20)

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A Name For Freedom

Mary: Well, yes, in fact, the old psalms are justified in saying that one goes away with sadness, and comes back rejoicing. Because, look, Joseph and I were protesting our journey to Bethlehem, complaining about the hassle of that census. Then, on our way back to Nazareth, we were so delighted with our new bornson whom we carried in our arms...!

There were a few days left before the Pentecost, the great feast of the harvest. Seated on the floor in the upper floor of Mark's house, we all listened to Mary, Jesus' mother, as she went on with her reminiscences, sharing with us the first memories of her son's life...

Mary: Oh, you should have seen the excitement in the whole village when we arrived. Well, they were excited over the boy, who had no name yet, as he had not been circumcised....

Anne: Oh, what a cute little darling! Hey, men, look at this fat and rosy little angel... lalarin...!

Joachim: Well, I find him a little skinny, don't you think, Anne?

Anne: But, what do you expect, Joachim? He's just a week old, mind you, and you expect him to be as stocky as Samson? Now, we've got to nourish him.... Mary, my dear, you must give him a lot of your milk first, after which a lot of chick peas will do him good.

Joachim: Put him under the sun, it's good for the boys!

Anne: Where did you get such an idea, Joachim? What a brute! How can you put a fragile little creature under the sun? And besides, what do you need that for, he's already brown like toasted bread from the oven! Oh my, I love children of this color, not the ones that are white as snow! Oh, my cute and handsome moreno, give your grandma a little kiss!... C'mon...!

Mary: My parents were so happy and proud of their grandson. My neighbors just had to come to congratulate us and to pry into the boy's looks and find out whom he took after, for reasons you already know...

Jack: Lemme take a look at my little countryman, and see how good-looking he is...!

Susana: How dare you Jack! You're pushing too hard...! Well, my *compadres*, by what name will you be calling this cherubim? What do the grandpa and grandma say?

Anne: I don't know what the grandpa has to say, but last night, I dreamed of a beautiful, white dove, flying down from heaven...

Jack: ...and he was carrying an olive branch in his beak, as the story goes....

Anne: Well, I really don't know if he was carrying an olive or marjoram, all I know was the dove was flying, then perched on the head of the boy.

Neighbor: What's the meaning of that dream, Madam Anne?

Anne: Look, had this child been a girl, as it was my wish, we would call her Paloma....

Jack: He was born a boy, so.... Palomino!

Joachim: Not Paloma nor Palomino!... No way!... I say that the children should follow the good path of the parents... or of the grandparents.

Susana: Which means, Joachim wants the baby to be called like him....

Jack: Yeah, man, and let the boy acquire a little of his "stinginess." I mean, his honesty...!

Neighbor: If you'd allow me, and knowing we are in bad times, I'd put a Roman name... something like Julius... or Aurelius.... Say what you want, but in this way, when they begin to destroy us, they may probably get confused, and so, he might be spared....

Jack: Hey, shut up, you cowardly traitor! Don't count on that, because the moment they draw their swords, not even God will be saved. No, no, nothing of the Roman names. I've got a better idea. Why don't we call him.... Casimiro.

Susana: What's that again?

Jack: Casimiro.

Joachim: And may I know, Jack, why that very weird name?

Jack: Well, oh... Ca-si-mi-ro.... I've been looking intently, but I have yet to "see" who the father of this creature is!

Mary: When Jack spoke with such impertinence, Joseph leaped at him like a mad dog....

Joseph: I'll break your neck!... I'll strip you naked!...

Man: Pull them apart! Pull them apart!

Anne: To hell with these men! You've got no respect for women who've just given birth! Get out of here, all of you!... Out, out!... You may visit another time... my daughter is exhausted from the trip... it's been only a week since she's given birth!

Joachim: That's precisely what I've been pondering about, woman. Tomorrow is her eighth day and nothing has been done yet.... Hey, Joseph, what do you say?... C'mon, man, forget about Jack's stupid remark. He's not worth your time...

Anne: As Joachim has said, instead of gossiping, you should be starting to work. C'mon, ladies, give me a hand in the kitchen. And Mary, my dear, get yourself some sleep.

Joachim: Right now, I'm going to inform the Rabbi. Tomorrow, this little moreno has to be circumcised. And, whatever his name is, what is important is that very soon he'll be one of the children of Abraham.

Mary: With all the preparations for the celebration, Joseph eventually cooled off. The following day, the eighth, was the circumcision, according to our custom. The whole of Nazareth was there, of course. They came to greet us and also to try the doughnuts with honey that Mother had prepared.... The house patio was filled with our neighbors.... Joseph had also adorned the walls with flower garlands. He also invited two old neighbors to play the drums...

Neighbor: Here comes the Rabbi! Hey, tell the mother to get ready!

Susana: Mary, Mary!

Joachim: They'd better prepare the boy, who'll receive the incision.

Mary: During that time, Rabbi Manasseh still had all his teeth and good vision and he spoke beautifully of the things about God...

Everyone in Nazareth loved him a lot. In the small synagogue of the village, he taught the children how to read. He was the only one who could remember the ancestors of each family in the town...

Rabbi: Peace be with you all!

Several: And also with you, Rabbi!

Rabbi: Pfff... What a hot day...!

Joachim: C'mon, Manasseh, have a drink first, to refresh you, before you speak....

Rabbi: Thanks, Joachim.... Ahhh.... Well, let's start.... Where's the little boy?

Anne: One moment, Rabbi, we're changing his clothes.... My God, this baby is always wet!

Mary: Soon, I came out with the baby in my arms....

Susana: Good health to the boy and to his mother who brought him into this world!

Mary: I sat down on a bench, at one corner of the patio, and gave him my milk to silence him, so that the Rabbi could speak...

Rabbi: Well, dear neighbors, today is a happy day for everyone, isn't it? From now on, we shall have another star in the sky and another grain of sand in the sea, as God had promised Abraham. This boy, the son of Mary and... well, let's not talk about it now. This boy, as I was saying, will be an addition to the chosen people of God. As you all know, the God of Israel had made an alliance with our forefathers. That was several years ago. Since then, with no exception, all the Israelites have in our flesh the mark of this alliance. Now, we have to circumcise this new-born child, that he may be called son of Abraham, too.

Mary: I stood up and delivered the boy to the Rabbi who carried him and put him on his knees covered with a white cloth...

Rabbi: Okay, bring me the knife.... And you, little boy, don't protest and be a brave little man!

Mary: Joseph passed a flint knife to the rabbi who very carefully cut a piece of skin covering the penis of the boy.... The towel was drenched with blood.... Then the rabbi drew his mouth close to the wound and firmly sucked it to contain the blood...

Rabbi: Okay, it's over...

Mary: Then he wrapped the small wound with a clean cloth. Jesus was crying very hard....

Rabbi: And you, young women, keep that little skin, as you know, there is no better medicine for the barren...!

Mary: Come now, my dear boy, it's all over... C'mon... You'll get well soon.... Come now....

Rabbi: By the way, you haven't told me his name!

Anne: Well, Rabbi, I told them to put the name....

Joachim: It's okay, Anne. This is not your problem. There's nothing to discuss here. You have the final word, Joseph.

Mary: Joseph moved forward with a big smile, wet his fingers with the blood from the boy's wound....

Joseph: He shall be called... Jesus.

Mary: And with the blood he wrote the letters of the name of Jesus on the angular stone of our

house....

Rabbi: Jesus!... What a beautiful name.... So, you'll be called: Jesus, which means Liberator!...
Neighbors: this little boy has been circumcised as God has wanted it and he has a name, a name for freedom! Now, my children, sit down and listen to me. Every time we repeat the sign of alliance, we must also recall to mind the history of those who had sealed it with the same tradition. And you, snotty-nosed, you little kids, open your ears, for someday you will have to tell everything to your children and grandchildren, and explain to them where we came from and who we are....

Mary: Everyone sat in squatting position, surrounding the rabbi, Manasseh, who looked at us with eyes seemingly lost in memory....

Rabbi: Look, my children, it all started in the country of the Chaldeans, with Abraham, that old shepherd whom God had called and promised a son. Sarah, his wife, who was also well past her youth and her childbearing age, just laughed it off. That's why, when a son was born to them, they named him Isaac. Isaac, which means, "the son of laughter," later married Rebekah and bore a son, Jacob, the father of the twelve children who populated this earth. One of them, Judah, got himself involved with a certain Tamar, who was somewhat of a hooker. Well, after all, not everyone in our country is clean. Tamar bore Perez, who bore Ezron. Ezron sired Aram, who sired Aminadab, who was the father of Nador, who was the father of Salmon. Salmon also got himself entangled with a so-called Rahab, who was a real prostitute. But God does His things, because, she bore Boaz who consoled Ruth, the Moabite. So here you have a foreigner. I'm saying this for those who pride themselves to be of pure race... Well, going back to Ruth, I was saying that she bore Obed, who was the father of Jesse and the grandfather of the great King David, blessed be his name!

All: Blessed be his name!

Rabbi: Well, my children, the paths of God are rugged, because look, David was a great warrior, a very brave man... but with just one weakness: women. He had an affair with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Out of that sin was born no less than the wise man, Solomon.... That's why, don't lose hope, Mary. God will figure out something great with your son, whoever has sired him.... Ehem.... Well, to continue with our family history.... Solomon had a son, Roboam, (Rehoboam) who had a son, Abijah, who had Asa. Asa sired Josaphat who sired Joram, who in turn, sired Uzziah. Uzziah sired Jothan, who sired Ahaz. Ahaz had Hezekiah, who had Manasseh, who had Amon, who had Josiah, and who had Jeconiah... Ahh...

Neighbor: Wait a minute, not so fast, Rabbi....

Rabbi:and the children of Jeconiah went to settle in Babylon.

Anne: Well, let's have some rest in Babylon. Come and have a little drink to warm us up...

Rabbi: Thank you my dear, thank you.... Ahh.... Well, where were we, huh? Oh yes. We were talking about Jeconiah. It turned out that after undergoing difficulties, working in the canals of Babylon, our ancestors finally returned to this land of promises. Then, Jeconiah sired Shealtiel, who sired Zerubbabel, who sired Abiud. The latter was the father of Eliakim who had a son named Azor, who was the father of Zadoc, the father of Ackim, who was the father of Eliud. And you know the rest, because Eliud became the great grandfather of Jacob, the father of Joseph, passing through Eleazar and Mattan, may they rest in peace. Then Joseph, the son of Jacob, married Mary, the third of the daughters of Joachim, and who is the mother of this "morenito" whom we have just circumcised today, and named Jesus.

Susana: My gosh, Rabbi, what a memory you've got! May God bless you!

Rabbi: My dear, may the Lord bless us all, specially this little creature.... Now, Joseph, take the boy.... In the name of the community, I now deliver this little Israelite to you....

Mary: Joseph went near the rabbi, took the boy with his strong and calloused hands and raised him before everyone... I remember, it was noontime and the sun was shining bright...

Joseph: Jesus, my son, now you won't understand what I tell you, because you're still a baby... Your mother and I have given you a name by which you shall always be called. Never forget what we expect of you. Jesus, may you be a free man... that you may help our people obtain their freedom!

Mary: Joseph gave me the boy and went back to our neighbors. He was radiant with joy...

Joseph: And now, let's all sing and dance! Play the flutes and beat the drums!

Anne: Right, go on with the celebration, but this little creature should have his milk, after the butchering they've done to him! Isn't that right, sweetheart?

Mary: And while the neighbors were feasting, I sat on the bench with Jesus. Yes, it was true, from Joseph's family tree, came a shoot, a new bud from the roots of our people.... A child had been born, a son had been given to us.... And he was called: Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, Faithful Father, Prince of Peace.

The circumcision consisted of cutting off the skin (a tissue covering the penis). This was done with a sharp stone knife. This custom had been and still is being practiced in many countries. It is possible that Israel learned this from Egypt in the beginning of their history as a people. Until now, the Jews continue with this practice. In several countries, circumcision is done during adolescence, as a rite of initiation to sexual life. In Israel, especially, it is a symbol of the alliance made between God and the people and it is an indication that the Israelite becomes part of the community.

For Israel, and for all the countries in the Orient, as well as for the majority of the ancient cultures, the name is not only what distinguishes a person from another, but it is an essential element of the most profound personality of the individual. The name makes the person, shows their identity and their destiny. For this reason, giving the boy a name was of enormous significance. It was not just a simple routine, nor a purely, social procedure. This manner of understanding what the name really is, explains the reverence by the Israelites for the simple act of pronouncing the name of Yahweh, the name of God. They believed that, in a way, the name represents what the name says of the person bearing it. It was also understood that calling another person by his name was a sign of familiarity. That is why the name was never mentioned at the start of a relation, until such time when there was already a certain degree of knowledge and affection. It was also believed that he who knew the name of another person had power over him. When God revealed His name to Moses, He was revealing who He is. And when, in the last book of the Bible, he promised us a "new name" for the Kingdom of God (Rev 2:17). He is telling us that we shall be "new people." Then and only then shall we become who we really are.

The children in Israel were given names that were profane or religious in nature. The former would be names of animals (Rachel = sheep), (Deborah = bee), names of things (Rebekah = ribbon), names that would indicate the joy of the parents for their child (Saul = the desired one), (Noemi = my delight), names that made reference to a quality of the child (Ahab = like the father), (Esau = hairy), (Salome = sane). The religious names combined various words to show how the parents who were believers represented the relationship that God would have with the child or what they expected God to do for him. These are names recognizing the act of God (Jeremiah = God consoles), showing gratitude (Matathias = gift of God), proclaiming how God is (Eli = God is great), etc. These names, used for centuries by the people of Israel, very well express the faith of the community and that of the individual persons.

Jesus is the Greek form of the name in Hebrew which sounded like "Yeshua." Before, it had the primitive form "Yehoshua." It means "God liberates." It was one of the most popular names among the Israelites for centuries. It was also used by Joshua, the leader who replaced Moses after his death and who entered the Promised Land with the people. The author of the book "Sirach," Jesus Ben-Sira had it. Many other known and unknown Israelites had this name. In Jesus of Nazareth, the name indicates his mission of liberation. Through his word, his life and above all, his death and resurrection, God liberates us from all forms of slavery. For about five hundred years before Jesus, after the period of the exile, the ability to show that one was a true Israelite was gaining importance in Israel. During the exile, there were a number

of marriages among the pagans, and upon their return to Palestine it was considered that only those with clean ancestors could be the basis for the reconstruction of their devastated country. And so, the use of genealogical trees was being imposed. In general, all Israelites knew their ancestors several generations back. Nevertheless, in order for marriage to take place – especially if solemnized by a priest – there ought to be some written proofs that the genealogy was pure, at least for five generations. Likewise, candidates for public posts ought to present proof of legitimacy of their origin. It is therefore not strange that Matthew as well as Luke were consistent in their gospel about the genealogy of Jesus. Luke does it, starting from Jesus upwards, until Adam. Matthew presents it inversely, starting from Abraham. Through genealogy, each Israelite family showed to which of the twelve tribes their lineage belonged, to which branch of the people of God their family was related. The relationship with the tribe of Judah paved the way for a number of genealogical trees. Furthermore, within the tribe of Judah was that of the family of David. This is understandable, because he was the king who highlighted the history of their people. Until about a hundred years before Jesus, the civil leader of the Senate was always chosen from the members of this family. On the other hand, the Messianic hope was linked to the descendents of the family of David, and whoever was related by blood to his royal family sought to flaunt such a distinguished origin. In Jesus' time, the descendents of David's family within the tribe of Judah were abundant.

Matthew, as well as Luke, wrote about the genealogies to establish the relationship of Jesus to the family of David, thus giving a "historical" proof that he was the Messiah. Said genealogy was always established in relation to the ancestors of the father and not of the mother. It was Joseph, then, who belonged to the family of David, and not Mary. These two genealogies shown in the gospel find parallelisms from the patriarch Abraham to King David, but after this point, they become different. Matthew continues this through Solomon, and Luke, through Nathan. The two were sons of David. We again find parallelisms in some aspects. Nevertheless, we must not look for information that is exactly historical in all the ancestors of these genealogies. There are errors and omissions in them. And in theology as well. Even in the number of generations that are counted, there are numerical symbols. It's the particular style of the evangelists, who, more than making history the way we understand it today, were more concerned with providing a catechesis to their lectors.

The genealogy presented by Matthew is the one followed by Rabbi Manasseh in this episode. Basically, he aims – and this coincides with that of Luke – to show that Jesus is not a Messiah who came down from heaven, a stranger to history. Jesus was a man who was part of the history of the people of Israel, and through these people, he was in solidarity with the history of mankind. Like each one of us, through the family, through some of our ancestors, through a town, a nation, we form part of the immense family that is humanity. It is important to point out that Jesus was an Israelite, a Jew; and therefore, all hatred for the Jews, all disdain for this race, all criticisms against the traditions of these people boomerang on Jesus himself, on Mary, Joseph, the apostles and practically on all the people that we come to know through the Bible.

In Matthew's genealogy several women appear (none in Luke's). In doing this, as in including other ancestors, Matthew is doing history and theology at the same time. Jesus appears as a member of an "impure" history, in relation to race, blood and origin. There are foreigners and women of "questionable" morality.... Jesus' ascendancy starts with Abraham, a converted idolater, and passes through all types of social classes: patriarchs, nomads, slaves in Egypt, kings, soldiers, people without category, Tamar – an astute and bright woman – (Gen 38:6-26); Ruth, the foreign migrant (book of Ruth); Rahab, the prostitute (Jos 2:1); Bathsheba, an adulteress with David (2 S 11:4)... A history filled with loopholes, "smears," and pitfalls. That was the story of Jesus, much like the story of each one of us. There is, therefore, no "blue blood" in Jesus, even if he was descended from the royal family of David, but red blood instead, of the most ordinary of all mortals.

(Mt 1:1-17; Lk 2:21; 3:23-38)

The Blood of the Innocent

Mary: Jesus had just been born when King Herod – not the same king as now, but his father who was as wretched as he – killed a number of countrymen in the south, remember?

Matthew: But you were already in Galilee, weren't you, Mary?

Mary: Oh, yes, thank God we had already gone back to Nazareth with the boy. Just the same, Matthew, we were so scared then...!

Matthew: And rightly so. Those remaining years of old Herod were the worst. Maybe he sensed it was his end, so he became more and more cruel.... Tell us what happened to you in the village, Mary.... C'mon, tell us....

I remember Matthew very well. He was collector of taxes, who was listening intently to those stories told by Mary, Jesus' mother to all of us, members of the gang, while we were all gathered in Jerusalem, waiting for the feast of the Pentecost...

Mary: You do remember, Matthew, since the trouble started with your colleagues, when this bandit, Herod, increased the taxes. His collectors mushroomed everywhere. Of course, they were well protected by the police in case "anything happened".... They went from town to town, from village to village, telling the people of the increase. Imagine, half a shekel of silver per head. That was preposterous. That was too abusive....

A Man: Half a shekel!... where the hell shall we get this amount when we can't even afford a handful of dates? Damn! What does this son of the devil think, that he can squeeze our necks anytime he pleases?

A Woman: A loaf of bread for three copper coins, milk has gone up to four and the price of oil is impossible! A plague on him!

Another Man: Well, we won't pay our taxes. No sir, and that's final. I'm not paying half a shekel nor half a cent.

Man: Neither am I. They may cut our heads off if they want. After all, seeing my children die of hunger each day, I might as well end it all up with one blow of their sword!

Mary: When Herod heard of the people's reaction, instead of softening up, he became even worse....

Herod: So, they're protesting against the new tax, huh?... Oh, that's too bad! My subjects don't understand the need to adorn this Temple, which is God's abode, and this palace, where I, the god of the earth, dwell. Well, he who refuses to pay shall go to jail.

A Soldier: The rebels are numerous, your majesty. They won't all fit in jail.

Herod: Then kill them. There is enough room in the pit, isn't there? Ha, that'll be faster and better. After all, it's not good to have so many farmers in our midst... they are so difficult to control....

Mary: How many must have been killed for refusing to pay their taxes! This happened not only that year but while this ruthless man ruled the country, all crimes and abuses were committed!... Oh, I don't know, sometimes I wonder how God can allow those murderers to live long enough to wreak such havoc, without anyone demanding an accounting of too much innocent blood shed...!

Matthew: Did you also have problems in Nazareth, Mary?

Mary: Well, the abuses committed were greater in the south. We were also scared to death in Galilee. The men from the village as well as those from the neighboring places had even thought of leaving the country in order to avoid so much anguish....

Old Man: But *compadre*, what can you expect from a man who kills his own men? Herod did this to two of his sons. And to a certain Mariane, who, they say, was his most beloved wife. Didn't he order her killed, too?

Joseph: If he can kill the people he loves, where does that leave us? What can we do?

Neighbor: Flee, Joseph, that's what is left for us to do. Go to a far away place, get away from this damned country once and for all...

Joseph: How could you ever say that, Reuben? And where the hell shall we go? We haven't even got a cart to carry our belongings.

Neighbor: Wherever. To the mountain. Or to the Greek cities. Or to Egypt, if need be. And forget about the cart, buddy. We even have to leave our sandals behind, if we have to run.

Joseph: And leave our house and our lands?

Neighbor: What do you really want, Joseph? We've got to save our skin and our children's lives, and whoever else's lives are in danger. Think of your little boy, of Mary, your wife. Now, tell me, old man, am I right or wrong?

Old Man: Well, young man, you may be right, and we may have to set for the road.... But it is not as easy as you paint it! Obviously, you haven't been on the other side of the world.... I have, and I've spent some years by the other side of the river. And I'm not going back, not even to recover my own soul, which I might have left behind...!

Joseph: Aren't Nephtali and his family staying over there, in Perea, beyond the Jordan?

Old Man: Yes. And look how it's going for him!... The other day, he was with the caravan of the Moabites, and I knew they were having a terrible time. It's got to be. Can you imagine what it is to be in another town, with no neighbors, nor friends, without understanding a word of what the others are talking about, since their language and customs are different from ours? Even their food, blazes, is different from what we have been accustomed to. Our wine, no matter how bitter, is still sweet to our taste. Then you go out and beg for work, which you don't get, as there's not even enough for their own folks. And so, day after day, you see that your children cannot adjust to their new life, as the other children regard them as some kind of a plague. Your wife just whiles away her time inside the house, since she is ignorant of the language of the place, and therefore, cannot manage even in the marketplace. To make it worse, you feel like you're being like an intruder... Then you begin to feel that nostalgia.... Damn it, this is a lonely feeling of being alone, being far from everything your very own...

Neighbor: Well, old man, going away doesn't mean letting yourself die. Look at Moses, he too, was on exile, but later on, he returned. Therefore, if one goes away, he brings with him the hope of coming back.

Joseph: I'm not bringing up my boy in a foreign land. I'm not leaving.

Neighbor: Children are always children. We go away for their sake, and for them, we stay. Know what's on my mind, Joseph? That this is not the time for impregnating women. I mean it, really. Do you know what a cameleer from Bethlehem told me? That in some villages in the south, women are taking I don't know what concoction in order not to get themselves pregnant.

Old man: And why is that so, young man?

Neighbor: They say they don't want to have children. What's the use working hard in order to have them and care for them, only to be butchered by the guards later on? It's one pain over another. So, for as long as this blood-thirsty Herod is on the throne, they'd rather not bear any children at all. And I think they're damn right.

Old Man: Well, I don't think that's right. On the contrary, don't you see that this is what they want? That there be less and less of us, so that the yoke may fit us so well. If we don't sire children, what hope is left for us to rid ourselves one day of the bar that has been placed in our necks?

Joseph: The hope is in the Messiah, as the Rabbi has said. But at the rate we're going, if we don't make a little haste....

Old Man: No, my son, no. The Messiah won't make haste unless we ourselves hurry. Freedom won't come to us, we've got to look for it. Look at our hands. Don't you see?... The Messiah is in our very hands. Close your palm like this. Here is the strength of the Messiah. Our strength is in our hands. Our army is our children. That's why they want them killed, because they are scared of all these hands joined together, and all the closed fists, that together we may all topple down the throne of the tyrant. They are scared, that's why they kill. The emperor of Rome also kills. All of them believe they are very strong because they can kill, but deep inside them, they tremble, knowing that sooner or later the people will drive them away. Remember, remember what happened in Egypt a thousand years ago. When our ancestors went down the land, during the time of old Jacob, there was only a handful of them. But through the strength of the working men and the women bearing children, they increased and filled the country.... Then trouble started with the pharaoh, who was the big shot of that place....

Pharaoh: Damn! What the hell is happening to the Hebrews who multiply like sand?

A Servant: As you already know, your excellency, since the poor have nothing else to do to amuse themselves, they go to sleep early... and that's it, of course!

Pharaoh: That's not funny to me.

Servant: Why, not? The more there are of them, the better. You'll have more slaves to work for you!

Pharaoh: And more heads protesting!

Servant: And more manpower to build the pyramids!

Pharaoh: And more people to make war against me, you fool! They should be crushed!

Old Man: The stewards of Egypt had done this to our forefathers. Life became bitter for them since they were forced to make bricks, and work like beasts.... But our great grandmothers continued to bear children, like nothing....

Pharaoh: Damn!... They are increasing, and they keep on increasing, they're like mushrooms, I see them everywhere...

Servant: Your excellency, the slaves say they can't go on working, because they're too hungry...

Pharaoh: They're all lazybones, that's what they are! Listen to me well: If anyone protests, lash him!

Old Man: Forced labor was accompanied by threats, maltreatment, imprisonment and... crimes. Anyway, the situation was getting worse each time. Like now, more or less, whenever a ruler gets swell-headed, he thinks he is god of the earth. But the people continue to increase and fill up the country, like a river that overflows...

Pharaoh: Damn! These Hebrew women are as prolific as rabbits... Something must be done about it. Send in the midwives immediately!

A Midwife: At your orders, Pharaoh.

Pharaoh: Listen well, midwives. When you attend to the Hebrew women, if the baby is a male, grrr! Do you understand?... The females may be allowed to live. In a few years, they can be useful in amusing my soldiers! Ha, ha, ha!

Old Man: But those midwives had a good heart and spared the lives of the girls as well as the boys....

Pharaoh: Curse of all curses! Don't they have respect for the pharaoh's word? Why were my orders not complied with?

Midwife: Dear Pharaoh, the Hebrew women are very strong. And they are not as dense as the Egyptian women. By the time we get to assist them in child delivery, they've already given birth and cut off the umbilical cord of their babies...

Pharaoh: I'll have the two of you beheaded for having lied to me! Are you making a mockery

of me? Now you'll see who I am! Hear this, all of you, soldiers...! I am giving orders to kill all Hebrew boys who are below two years old...! Drown them in the river, put them under knife, or whatever is easier for you!... Let no one be spared!

Midwife: But, Pharaoh, these children are innocent...

Pharaoh: Innocent?... Yes, now they are, but very soon, they will start making trouble, they will join their fellow slaves and form a strong group. No one, nobody can stop them! Now is the time! My orders are to kill every one!

Old Man: The guards of the pharaoh of Egypt obeyed the brutal order and so much blood of our sons had been shed.... They say even the heavens heard the lamentations of mothers.... They were like Rachel weeping disconsolately over the death of her sons...

Old Man: The pharaoh thought he had succeeded! What a fool!... He didn't know that right in his own house he was raising someone who was to knock him off. This was Moses, who brought him the ten plagues and stirred up the people against him.

Neighbor: Yeah, old man, so it was Moses...

Old Man: ...and today, it could be any of our boys. Look at Benjamin, Rebekah's son.... Look at Tine, who is Anne's son... and look at Jesus, the son of Mary.... Our children are born and so there's hope. They will continue the path that we have started. Moses did not get to step on the promised land. But those who came after him, did. The exile lasted for forty years, but no more....

Mary: That night, when Joseph came home, he was very worried. He told me about our *compadre* Nephtali, who had left. Ishmael and his wife were also leaving. He also spoke of a number of our neighbors who were itching to leave for a distant place. Those were indeed difficult times. I tell you, Matthew, that that old man from Nazareth was right. What we were experiencing was very much like what our forefathers had undergone in Egypt.

Matthew, who was a tax collector before, did not miss a single word of Mary, and he very carefully recorded everything in his memory. A few years later when he took up his pen to write his gospel, he borrowed those ancient stories of our country and people, and spoke of Jesus as the new Moses, the son whom God had called from Egypt to liberate his brothers and sisters.

When Jesus was born, notwithstanding the Roman influence strongly prevailing in Palestine, the country was still under the rule of King Herod the Great. Herod was not of Jewish blood. His father was Idumean, a mayor in the court of the high priest and his mother was the daughter of an Arab sheik. His astuteness to win for himself the favor of Rome led him to the throne and gradually he became powerful in the entire country. He ruled for forty years, and during his reign the wealthy classes of Jerusalem and his own court wallowed in luxury and extravagance which until then were not common in the country. Taxes given annually to Herod the Great amounted to 1,000 talents (about 10 million denarii – the denarius was the daily wage of a laborer or a farmer). But his personal luxuries, those of his family and his friends in court, were such that the said amount would not suffice. His private fortune was known to be immense. The reign of Herod the Great was known for the number of constructions built all over the country. The most important was the Temple. (It is called "the second Temple," since the first, constructed by Solomon, was razed to the ground by the Babylonians during their invasion of the country, 587 years before Christ.) Herod's private life (he had 10 wives), the enormous and increasing taxes with which he burdened the people, his cruelty and lack of scruples, the continued extravagance in his court, had made him a king feared and hated by his subjects. In his time, the country was impoverished. Only the industries for luxury goods prospered. Upon his death, and with the division of the kingdom into four parts (one of them, Galilee, was for Herod Antipas, who is mentioned in the gospels), the annexation of Palestine to the Roman empire was finally realized. Herod was fully aware that his subjects hated him. This made him live in constant fear. That is why he created a huge personal security force, which was the repressive army, safeguarding the "security" of that kingdom built with the blood and sweat of the people.

When Matthew wrote the gospel, in narrating the first years of the life of Jesus, he referred to Herod and attributed to him the killing of the innocent children, linking this event with the coming of the wise men from the Orient to Jerusalem, and to the flight of Joseph, Mary and the infant to Egypt. These three accounts, the magi, the slaying of the innocent and the escape to Egypt are theological sketches. Herod's cruelty is historical and so is the fact that during that period, there were important colonies of Jewish immigrants and exiles in Egyptian cities.

The account of the magi coming from the Orient is a way of saying that the gospel's message is a message not solely for the people of Israel, but for all the peoples of the earth. Thus, Matthew proclaims that Jesus has come "for those who are near and far" (Is 57:19; Eph 2:14-17). The stories of the killing of the innocent and the flight to Egypt show Jesus in relation to Moses, the great liberator of the people. Just as when Moses was born, the Pharaoh had decreed the death of all the male born of Israel (Ex 1:15-22), so when he became an adult, Moses had to flee to the south of Egypt, and from there, returned to free his brothers (Ex 2:11-15). Matthew repeats these same events in the life of Jesus. In his catechesis, Jesus is presented as "the new Moses." The reign of Herod the Great was a time for the powerful to enrich themselves and for the poor to experience all sufferings. In this atmosphere of repression, anguish, poverty and uncertainties, this episode situates the exile of several Israelites who were contemporaries of Joseph and Mary. They were escaping from misery and persecution. On the other hand, for centuries before Jesus, there were close relations between Israel and Egypt. The Egyptian cities of Elephantine and Alexandria, seat of Jewish immigrant colonies, were of great importance. The "Diaspora" (Jews in exile) was estimated to be more than four million individuals, compared to the half a million who lived within the territory of Israel. Such large scale migration consisted of Israelites, who were forced to leave the country due to periodic famines, or exploitation to which the farmer and artisans were subjected. Naturally, there was also a migration of big time businessmen who did not want to settle in Mediterranean cities which at the time were the most important commercial centers.

Being in exile is evil, since it uproots the individual in exile and his family. Love for one's own country is a very human feeling, and because of this, people have always felt the strength to work and fight for their compatriots. The long period of exile may help us perhaps, put love for our country side by side with internationalism which knows no barriers, making our place of work our own country, and all just men and women our compatriots. Internationalism is a feeling and experience that plunges one's roots deep into the essence of the gospel of Jesus.

(Mt 2:13-18)

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A Hopeful Old Man

The expanse of the Temple of Jerusalem was crammed with vendors. Since very early in the morning, the sheep were bleating, the pigeons were fluttering about, and pilgrims, who came to the capital in droves to celebrate the feast of the Pentecost, were ascending the steps to offer their first harvest before the Lord.... I remember those days of waiting... Mary, Jesus' mother, recounted to us the time when Joseph and she also went up to Temple, carrying their new-born child, in accordance with the custom of my compatriots of consecrating to God all first born babies....

Mary: Since a baby boy was born to us, I just had to comply with the law, offering him to God.... Anyway, on the fortieth day of my childbirth, I was travelling back to the south... How well I knew the road... even

blindfolded...

Mary: After a three-day journey, we arrived in Jerusalem. Then it was not as modern as it is now, and there was not so much confusion... We had some rest in an inn run by Galileans, in Siloam, I think. Then we went up the Temple...

Vendor: Money changer, money changer! I change your Greek and Roman money!

Another Vendor: Sweets!... Some delicious sweets for you!

Vendor: Wanna have some blessed water, to cleanse your big and small wounds?

Vendor: Hey, friend, don't go away... you don't have to pay for looking!

Mary: Oh, Joseph, look at those beautiful scarves....

Vendor: They're made of fine wool! Try this one, young lady and see how nice it is on you...

Mary: Hold the baby for a while, Joseph...

Vendor: See.... How well it fits you...

Mary: Do you like it, Joseph?

Joseph: Well, no, but if you do.... Let's see... hawker, how much is this scarf?

Vendor: Cheap, cheap enough.... Touch it, my friend. That's fine wool from Damascus!

Joseph: I was asking how much....

Vendor: One denarius and the lady has it on already.

Joseph: A what?... A denarius for this piece of old rag? What do you think of us, stupid? Come, Mary, take it off, and let's go....

Mary: Oh, Joseph, this is so pretty...!

Vendor: Give it as a present to your loved one. King David won Bathsheba with a scarf....

Joseph: Well, I've won my loved one and I don't need this... Leave that, and let's go. Here, take the baby... Oh women.... anything that fancies them...!

Mary: According to the law of Moses, all first-born sons must be offered to the Lord. And usually the ransom price was a sheep or a calf, if the parents could afford it. If not, like for us, two pigeons would do....

Joseph: I need to buy a pair of pigeons.

Simeon: Here you have them, young man.

Mary: He was an old man, about a hundred years old. I remember, he had no teeth, his eyebrows gone, and he had plenty of wrinkles, like a fig leaf in autumn.... Beside a post was a pile of cages with pigeons inside them....

Joseph: Give me two... Yeah, the black one and the other one... That's it... How much, old man?

Simeon: Four copper coins for two pigeons.

Joseph: Four what?

Simeon: Four copper for two pigeons.

Joseph: To hell with you hawkers! Just because we come from the north, do you think you can fleece us like this?

Mary: For God's sake, Joseph, will you stop it!

Joseph: I didn't start this, Mary. These are cheats who want to take advantage of a farmer like me....

Simeon: Look, young man, these are beautiful doves here...

Joseph: Beautiful doves! Ha! This one hasn't any feathers, while the other one is infected with pip.... C'mon, old fox, give them to me for one copper coin and I'll take them!...

Simeon: How's that again? A copper coin? No way, man.... For two pigeons, pay me four copper coins.

Joseph: Blazes! But how...!

Mary: Joseph, please, don't quarrel with him! Give him the money and let's go. It's getting late.

Joseph: But, are you crazy, Mary? How can I pay him four copper coins for these sickly pigeons! For as long as I'm called Joseph, I'm not paying more than a coin!

Simeon: For as long as my name is Simeon, I'm not going down from four!

Joseph: Well, then, goodbye, old thief, keep your pigeons in your ass!

Mary: Joseph, for God's sake!

Joseph: ...I said, to put your pigeons back into the cage. Goodbye!

Simeon: Wait a minute, compatriot, don't go away.... Oh my, what temper have these Galileans got...!

Joseph: What do you want now?

Simeon: You shouldn't behave that way, man... Look, since you've got a charming little lady here, you can take another pigeon for the same price...

Joseph: How's that again?

Simeon: I'm giving you three pigeons for four copper coins...

Joseph: What a deal! And what the hell do I need three pigeons for? I need only two for offering in the Temple.

Simeon: Of the third, you can make a nice, warm soup for your baby. Am I right, young woman? Of course, this is what I do if I don't sell them...

Joseph: Look, old fogey, there's nothing more to talk about. Take these two coins of mine and give me the pigeons. Is that okay?

Simeon: No way. We leave it at three.

Joseph: Go to hell! I'm not paying more than two.

Simeon: Not lower than three!

Joseph: Two!

Simeon: Three!

Joseph: Two!

Simeon: Three!

Mary: Will you stop it, for God's sake! The boy is getting scared with your screams!... C'mon, my baby, that's nothing... it's okay, sweetheart...

Joseph: Listen to me, stingy, old man, if I had a lot of money, I wouldn't be here buying pigeons from you, do you understand?

Simeon: What a joke! If I had a lot of money, neither would I be here selling them!

Joseph: You're a leech, feeding on somebody else's blood!

Simeon: Me, a leech? How can that be when there's not even a drop of blood left in my skin? Look at me, son... I'm almost dead, look...

Joseph: Well, you'll be real dead the moment the Messiah comes and with his whip, scares all your pigeons away, while he gets on you and kicks you on the ass, do you hear?

Mary: Joseph, don't forget your manners....

Simeon? Do you think the Messiah will do that to me?

Joseph: Yes, Methuselah, to you and to all the bandits making business out of God's things!

Simeon: Not me, son, not me. I sell doves in the Temple like I'm selling eggplants in the square or anything, in order to survive. Look at me well... I'm a simple man.... I'm not scared of the Messiah, you know, because maybe he's got lice in his head, just as I do. Probably he hasn't taken any warm food for seven days, like I haven't. And maybe he has no place to sleep, as I have none. So, don't you think the Messiah and I will understand each other well?

Joseph: Well, I agree with you there, old man....

Simeon: You and I can also understand each other well, young man. Look, both of us do starve to death, is that right? So, what's the use of quarreling with one another, tell me.

Mary: That's what I've been wanting to say....

Simeon: Save that whip of yours, young man, for the leeches in the palace... They're the ones who will battle with the Messiah when he comes.... Come over here.... Do you see those money-filled

tables over there and all those cattle and livestock? All these belong to the family of Betho!... "Betho's sons are too religious and too pious..." With their lips invoking God and their pockets full of what they steal from us.... Oh, son, if I could only tell you!... But the day of light will come, it will come!

Joseph: Very well said, grandpa, now you're talking!

Mary: Hey, don't create a scene, my goodness! There are so many people here you don't know!

Simeon: I shout when I please and I don't give a damn!! Look at this Temple, young man! For twenty years, this scoundrel, Herod, has been making it beautiful, installing marbles and coating it with gold. And what for, tell me? To make God more comfortable? No, God has no need for this. The Lord stayed with Moses in a tent when they were in the desert, and that was enough. All this comfort is for those who lift their hands to God, yet bow their heads before the golden calf!

Mary: How dare you wake up the baby with your noise!

Simeon: Poor thing.... You see, one gets excited running into enlightened young people like you.... Sad to say, during my time, things were different.... The youth spoke of the Messiah, then we would argue and quarrel just to see the children of the Maccabees.... Now, it's different. All that the young people of today want is to enjoy themselves and have fun.... Once they see a new scarf, they fancy buying it...

Joseph: That goes for you, Mary...

Simeon: Some people come to me and say: "Forget it, old man, for this world is hopeless.... You'll die, but everything will be the same." I'd say this is what they want, for us to accept that things will never change. Of course they will! With young people like you, we can do something!

Joseph: With us and with the help of those who will push from behind, grandpa... Look at this Morenito... Know what name we've given him? Jesus, the courageous one. We shall raise him with the milk of a she-camel, that he may be as obstinate as Moses before the pharaoh, did you hear that, my son?...

Simeon: Jesus... a beautiful name... for a very good-looking boy... just like my children when they were small....

Mary: Do you have children, grandpa?

Simeon: I had two, young lady. One died very young... He caught a fever, and my poverty could not afford a doctor.... The other one was killed.... When he was your age, he joined these groups in Perea... Herod's soldiers killed him, and... ahhh... brace yourself, young lady... if you bring up this kid to become a fighter, a sword will one day break your heart, just like mine....

Mary: Oh, God, grandpa, please don't say that...

Joseph: Cheer up, old man.... with this heat, you can have sunstroke, you know!

Mary: Simeon, that old man selling doves, tearfully asked me to let him carry my baby....

Simeon: What a handsome boy you've got, young woman! May the God of Israel bless him from head to foot!

Mary: Oh yes, may God hear your prayer!

Simeon: I pray that you take good care of him, that you see him grow up and become a man....

Joseph: You too, will see him such, grandpa....

Simeon: Oh, my son, I have one foot buried in the ground already, and the other one is almost there.... These eyes of mine have witnessed a lot... so much violence committed under the sun... so much weeping of the innocent, waiting in vain to be consoled... so much sneering of the brazen fools with no one to stop them.... For one hundred years, I have been waiting for the liberation of my country.... But now, as I hear you speak, as if a spark has been lit in the middle of the night.... Now, I'm sure. God will not fail in His promise. Our people shall be free one day....

Mary: Then old Simeon kissed the boy and said....

Simeon: Take him, young woman. Now I can die in peace. In this boy, as well as in the rest to come, is the salvation of Israel... and the hope of all those who are suffering like us. Yes, yes, soon we shall be free, I can feel it in my heart! The Messiah is near, very near us!

Mary: Old man, for God's sake, please don't scream!... There's a strange woman coming.... I think she's been watching us for sometime....

Simeon: Who? That old woman?... No, my child, she's one of us.... Anne, come over here!

Mary: My mother's namesake. She's a fat, old woman, all dressed in black; she has a chubby, smiling face....

Anne: What's wrong, Simeon?

Simeon: Nothing, woman, I'm just having a chat with this couple from Galilee who have come to present their little son...

Anne: Lemme take a look.... Oh, what a cute, little darling.... Cucucu... Teach him how to pray, young woman.... mold him while he's young....

Simeon: That's the only thing you can do... pray and pray... as if by doing so, you could intimidate the Lord....

Anne: At least, I exercise my jawbones... you know... and I forget about my hunger....

Joseph: What do you pray to God, grandma?

Anne: What'll I ask Him, son? For eighty-four years I've been asking Him the same thing. Since I became a widow, which was a long time ago, I have always told the Lord: "Listen to me, either you send me another husband or you send me the Messiah who will give me justice, I can't stand it anymore...!" I swear, God will get annoyed with this same story of mine, but this won't stop me!

Simeon: You know what, Anne?... I think God has heard your prayer... With young people like them on our side, we shall get by... We're in the twilight of our lives, Anne... but the torch of Israel shall not die...! Hey, young man, take your two pigeons and offer them for this little boy!... And you better hurry, for they might close the gate on you!

Joseph: Wait a minute, grandpa.... Here, take the four copper coins you were asking from me....

Simeon: No, young man, it's my present for you... it's yours...

Joseph: No, grandpa.... you need to eat.... please take these four coins...

Simeon: No, it's my gift to you, I said!

Mary: Good heavens, now it's the other way around!

Mary: So we ascended the steps facing the atrium of the women in order to perform the rite of purification and to present our son before the altar of the Lord.... When we left the Temple, we didn't see old Simeon anymore.... The other day, we looked for him, but Anne, the praying woman, told us he was very sick.... The following year, when we traveled to Jerusalem, we asked about him, but no one could tell us what had happened to the vendor of doves....

The laws of Israel pertinent to "purity" rendered the mother "impure" before God after childbirth. It was believed that childbirth, just like the woman's monthly period or man's seminal discharge, meant a loss of vitality, and in order to recover it, certain rites had to be performed for them to reestablish the union with God, who is the source of life. If a woman had given birth to a baby boy, she was impure for a period of forty days; and if she had a girl, she was impure for eighty days. After this time, she ought to present herself in the Temple to purify herself by offering a sacrificial lamb and a turtledove. If she was poor – such was the case of Mary – it was enough to offer two turtledoves or pigeons (Lev 12:1-8). The women were to be purified by the priest gathered in the Temple, at the gate of Nicanor. This gate was connected to the atrium where the women could enter the men's atrium. Here, were purified lepers who were cured. Likewise, women who were suspected of having committed adultery were tried here.

Jerusalem was the most important commercial center of the country. Products coming from all regions

as well as abroad were sent to the capital. There were several markets: for cereals, fruits, legumes, livestock, lumber.... There was also a place for exhibiting and selling slaves – who were always foreigners. Everything was announced by shouting in order to excite the customers. One had to be specially careful at the time of purchase, because here they used a weight measurement different from that of the rest of the country. They also used their own currency. Everything was more expensive, especially food, wine and livestock. If in Jerusalem one could buy three or four pieces of fig for a copper coin, in the farm, one could have as many as ten to twenty pieces for the same price. Side by side with the big businessmen were the small businessmen or retailers and a number of ambulant vendors. The stalls for the animals being sold for the offering of sacrifices – lambs, kids (young goats), calves, doves – were positioned in the esplanade of the Temple. In this atrium, everyone was allowed entry: men, women and foreigners. It has often been said that the old Simeon was an official priest of the Temple, although the evangelical text does not give a reason for such a tradition. In this episode, he appears as one of the small businessmen who earned his living by selling animals for sacrifice in the Temple.

From his vantage point as vendor, Simeon would be a perennial witness to the daily activities of the Temple. He knew all those who were in the service of the grand priests – businessmen and main beneficiaries of whatever was being sold in the Temple. He also knew the religious sentiments of the people gathered in that august building, dazzled by its enormity and wealth. This was the daily ambience of old Simeon. In his midst, he knew how to keep the flame of his faith in God burning, his hopes for a change, his longing for justice, his desire that with the coming of the Messiah, that God “imprisoned” in the Temple, would certainly become close to the poor. Under this atmosphere, old Simeon must have also become “disillusioned,” a skeptic. His old age had given him wisdom, had taken away his enthusiasm for things not relevant and certainly had opened his eyes. He was like Qohelet (chapters 1-6 of the book of Ecclesiastes), who left in the Scriptures a wisdom that was profoundly human, fruit of his observation of life and his desire for God’s justice. Old Simeon and the old woman, Anne, remained hopeful of the coming of the Messiah. And in that poor and young couple with a new-born infant in their arms, they knew how to nurture that hope that life in its beginning always brings.

(Lk 2:22-38)

139

Everyday Concerns

John: Was Jesus a quarrelsome boy, Mary?

Mary: A quarrelsome boy?... More than the horses of Nebuchadnezzar.... Thank God! He was always restless.... Joseph used to say that he was made of lizards’ tails....

One night, in Mark’s house, Mary shared with us her first years of marriage in Nazareth, that poor, little town of Galilee, where Jesus spent almost all his life...

Mary: A piece of tomato looks like another tomato, is that right? Well, the same thing could be said in Nazareth: every day seemed the same.... When the cocks crowed at dawn, the en-tire household was already stirring like a pot of boiling water...

Mary: Well, another day begins...

Jesus: Grandpa, wake up... it’s morning...!

Grandmother: My goodness... little man, you come in too cool-like fresh cucumber....

Jesus: Grandpa, grandpa, c’mon... get up....

Mary: Jesus, son, let your grandpa get some more sleep....

Jesus: But he said he'll teach me how to make knots...

Grandmother: He might end up tying up your tongue... Hey, why is this dog everywhere!... Jesus, get him out of here!

Jesus: That's where he sleeps, grandma...

Mary: There were many of us at home: Joseph's parents, his uncle Lolo, who was so sick he could hardly move; we had to do everything for him... Joseph's two nieces orphaned at a very young age, and the three of us.... And oh, Mocho, a puppy whom Jesus found in the field.... He was like his brother with a tail.... He slept with him, ate with him and went with him everywhere.... He was a black puppy with white ears, I still remember....

A Cousin: I want some milk, Aunt Mary!

Another Cousin: I want an egg!

Mary: Wait a minute... Be patient, like Job, will you?... Hey, Jesus, bring me a jug of water to wash up your Uncle Lolo...

Jesus: Is Uncle Lolo very ill, mama?

Mary: Yes, he is.

Jesus: He doesn't play with me anymore.

Mary: Exactly, because he's very sick, son.... Look at your father, still sleeping like a log.... Joseph, get up, man!... How can you go on sleeping with this noise? C'mon, on your feet, for the sun's out!

Joseph: Ahumm...! You know what I dreamed of, Mary? That I got a job, and guess how much I was paid for it... five denarii a day! Did you hear?... What do you think, huh?

Mary: Well... I think... it's just a dream... That's it. That would have been nice....

Joseph: Something will come up today, you'll see... I'm going to Cana right now.... See you, love!

Mary: Aren't you going to take something hot?

Joseph: Later, when I get there.... It's better to walk with an empty tummy... Wish me luck, Mary...

Mary: God bless you, Joseph...

Joseph: I'll be back in the afternoon.... Goodbye, son!

Jesus: A little peck for Mocho, Papa, or he'll get jealous...

Joseph: Oh, goodbye, you little fool!

Cousin: Aunt Mary, I want some milk!!

Another Cousin: And I want an egg!

Jesus: What spoiled cousins, Mama!

Mary: Well, just like someone I know.... Jesus, son, could you check if the hens have lain some eggs?... Bring one for the little girl, c'mon....

Jesus: Right away, Mama. C'mon, Mocho...!

A Neighbor: How's everything, Mary?

Mary: Well, God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.... That's it...

Mary: At mid-morning, we, the women, would gather around the fountain to wash the clothes... All of us were friends, some were more gossipy than the others, but all of us were ready to give a hand....

Neighbor: Has Joseph found a job yet?

Mary: He left for Cana today... Let's hope he finds one... There's nothing sure, really.

Neighbor: Everything will be okay, woman... Hey, Nunie, will you pass the stone!

Mary: You don't know what appetite Jesus has got... He's got an enormous appetite since the time he was growing teeth... Of course, he's a growing child....

Neighbor: A growing child and a naughty one.... Always up and about.... The boy is getting mischievous....

Mary: And how...! Only God knows where he is right now...!

Mary: Jesus used to play in a hill behind the town, with his friends...

Jesus: Okay, it's your turn to roll over this mudpool! Over this mudpool, do you get it! Go ahead, Boy...!

A Playmate: Only three, that's nothing!... Look at this...

Boy: Five!... You're king!

Jesus: Wait, it's my turn!... I'll have seven!

Playmate: You won't even score a two, Jesus, not even a two... You will see!

Jesus: Stay here, Mocho, and look what I'll do... You'll see!

Boy: Five!... It's a tie!

Playmate: Let's break the tie between Jesus and me!

Boy: How...?

Jesus: Well... well... let's see, whoever pees much longer... becomes the winner....

Playmate: Stay over there and don't pee on me!...

Jesus: Three, two and one!... I won, I won....

Playmate: Hey, the girls are coming....

Jesus: Hide yourselves... we're going to scare them!...

Jesus: Mama, what's the food?

Mary: The usual stuff. Lentils and... my God, Jesus, where've you been?

Jesus: We've been tumbling and I was splashed with mud. Mocho, too... but he's okay now....

Mary: It's all over your body.... Just like Adam in paradise...

Jesus: Who's Adam, Mama?

Mary: Better ask the Rabbi this afternoon.... Go and take off your clothes at once....

Jesus: You mean I'll stay naked?

Mary: Of course not! You may wear your father's robe...

Jesus: I'll be dragging it along!

Mary: It's you and your ears I'll be pulling! Go now!

Mary: We were seated on the ground, with the pot of lentils in the middle. There was always not enough, with so many mouths to feed...

Jesus: I want some more, Mama.

Mary: There's nothing more, son....

Grandmother: Give him an egg. Eggs are good for the bones!

Cousin: I also want an egg!

Jesus: You're like a hen, who always cackles.... Here, take it, chicken!

Joseph: I'm back...

Mary: Oh, Joseph, I thought you'd be back in the afternoon...

Joseph: Well, I'm here, you see....

Mary: So...?

Joseph: Nothing.

Mary: Nothing...?

Joseph: You heard it... nothing. There's no job in the entire Galilee.

Grandmother: Naturally, all the work is found here in this house.

Joseph: This isn't the time for jokes, grandma.

Mary: Sit down, Joseph and take something.

Joseph: I'm not hungry... I'm going to see Jack. He'd been in Nain. Maybe he found some job there... Damn, what a life!

Jesus: Papa is sad, Mocho.... Isn't he, Mama?

Mary: Yes, Jesus. One's got to work to be able to eat lentils and eggs.... The rich don't have to work

to fill their stomachs, but we....

Mary: There were times when Joseph didn't have a job... I tried to make both ends meet...We extended our soup by adding more water, while we sang our sorrows away.... We didn't have any choice....

Mary: Is the dough ready, mother-in-law?

Grandma: Yes, my dear.... At least, at least we have bread.... Hey, where could be Jesus right now, huh?

Mary: In the synagogue. That will keep him still for a while...

Grandma: I'm sure Mocho's gone with him.

Mary: Of course, grandma. Do you know that Mocho must learn the Scriptures too? Jesus says dogs too, sing praise to the Lord when they bark!

Mary: Jesus went to the synagogue in the afternoon...

Jesus: Rabbi, Mama said I was like Adam.

Rabbi: She said so because you are a son of God like the first man on earth....

Jesus: No, Rabbi, she said it while scolding me.

Rabbi: Then, you must have been disobedient, Jesus.

Jesus: I didn't disobey her. I was just dirty.

Rabbi: Now I know why, young man... God took Adam from mud. Maybe you were full of mud then, is that right, Jesus?

A Boy: Rabbi, this boy spat on me!

Rabbi: Now, now... You listen. You should not spit.... Let's read that part when God created the first man out of the dust of the earth....

Mary: Every afternoon, Rabbi Manasseh, that very patient old man, who was already a little blind, and who had circumcised Jesus, would unroll the sacred books in order to teach the children of Nazareth how to read them.

Rabbi: C'mon, son, bring that book... closer.... I can't see the letters well.... That's it.... Come, Jesus, read this part... yes, this one....

Jesus: "We shit out of hunger."

Rabbi: What did you say, son...?

Jesus: We shit out of hunger. It says here.

Rabbi: Let me see... We seek the Maker!... Go on, continue...

Jesus: "Call them to obey"...

Rabbi: Continue.

Jesus: "Call them to obey"...

Rabbi: What are you saying...? "According to our image"...

Jesus: According to our image...

Rabbi: And...

Jesus: And...

Rabbi: our....

Jesus: our....

Rabbi: sin...

Jesus: sin...

Rabbi: sin...ce...ri...

Jesus: sinfulness...!

Rabbi: What?

Jesus: It says here...

Rabbi: Sincerity! What a boy!

A Boy: Jesus can't read! He can't read!

Jesus: Neither can you!

Rabbi: Silence boys!

Mary: The hours in the afternoon passed by peacefully. At sundown, the farmers would return to their homes, tired, after a day of hard work. After washing their feet, they would go out and play dice.... At night, the cool breeze from the north blew over Nazareth. It was the right time to get together and chat.... Since everyone was asleep, including Mocho, and the house being so small, we could hardly pass, Joseph and I would go out and there on dry ground, we would lean against the wall of our house....

Mary: Ufff... I'm dead tired....

Joseph: Mary, this noon, I was a little cranky... you see....

Mary: That's okay, Joseph.... I understand... after having walked so many miles under the sun...? Tell me, what did Jack tell you about the job in Nain...?

Joseph: They'll probably hire another dozen men to work in the field....

Mary: So, hang on to this group.... Or else....

Joseph: Or else, all we've got is air in our tummies...

Mary: No, man, don't be so pessimistic... God won't forsake us... Look how fast our boy is growing up.... We'll manage, all of us.... You and I love each other.... What more do you want, sir...?

Joseph: You're right, Mary... well, as always, woman!... For this, you deserve a kiss... Now, let's go to sleep... I must be up early tomorrow...

Mary: Look who's talking, the sleepest head in the whole of Nazareth!

Mary: That was our life... There was practically nothing to talk about during those years... We worked very hard, but we loved each other even more... Jesus grew up to be a strong and tall young man... and he learned a lot of things... God was with him.

The gospel does not say anything about the life of Jesus during those long years of his infancy, adolescence and youth, except that one scene of a boy lost in the Temple. This shows that Jesus' life had nothing special during this period. In order to have a glimpse of this, we must understand the social and cultural environment of Nazareth of that time, the customs of the farmers, etc. Everything we say about this period will always be an approximation, as we can never be absolute about it.

In order to show the "ordinary" life of Jesus during these years, Luke says that "the boy grew in stature, and strength and was filled with wisdom." Like each one of us, Jesus developed physically, intellectually and spiritually with the passing of time. He learned how to walk, pray, read, love and work. He learned everything he saw and heard. He was not born with a package of wisdom under his arm. He had to discover it. He doubted and made mistakes many times. Just as his body was growing and his muscles and bones were developing, even his knowledge of God was being nurtured in his heart. He grew "in the grace" of God: he began to understand God's purpose for him, what his vocation was to be. His life, like anybody else's, was subjected to a process of growth. He developed his body, his intelligence, his will, his faith, his hope... Just like everyone....

The child Jesus did not do any "miracles" nor dazzle anyone during those long years. To make a "model boy" out of him, who does nothing but obey, keep quiet and pray, is to convert him to somebody unbearable.

Jesus played, committed some mistakes, had friends, would quarrel and laugh with them.... Just like any other healthy boy... He learned from the preoccupations of his parents the harsh reality of life, its uncertainties and problems. He knew of God's kindness through the love of his parents and through the teachings he read in the Synagogue.

The only school for the children of a village like Nazareth and the other small cities was the synagogue. Every Saturday, the community gathered here to pray and to listen to the Scriptures. The boys

also learned how to read. It was not considered a necessity for the girls to learn and only well-to-do families from the capital received instruction. The boys learned how to read from the texts of the Bible. Learning, therefore, was not only a mechanical process of joining words and phrases, but a way of familiarizing the children with the history of the country and the traditions of their forefathers. This was a way of transmitting faith in the Lord, the constant protagonist of the pages of those books.

The idea that is sometimes pictured about the “small house of Nazareth” is entirely false. It is described as a poor house, where Mary does her sewing in peace, while Joseph cuts wood while praying in a room at the backyard. This is not a real image. The houses in Nazareth were made out of natural caves in the hill where the village was located. They were very small, intended practically solely for sleeping. It was common to see a big household living inside the cave, as the family was composed of many members. The children’s obligations to their parents, their brothers and sisters, their cousins, were something held sacred and respected by everyone. The atmosphere was that of utter poverty. It was a day to day existence, a continuous pressure for the head of the family to secure some job. The women worked too, doing not only household chores but also farm work, in order to assist their husbands. This was the environment where Jesus grew up, where he became aware of the needs and aspirations of his people, where his faith in God was nurtured. Within this simplicity, of which nothing can hardly be said since there was nothing significant about it, Jesus molded his character, in which God revealed himself to us in a definitive manner.

(Lk 2:39-40 and 51-52)

140

Lost in the Temple

That summer, while waiting for the feast of Pentecost and talking about a thousand things, Mary recounted to us what happened the first time that Jesus came to Jerusalem. He was already twelve years old and, according to the custom of Israel, boys of this age should go and partake of the Passover in the city of David...

Joseph: Holy God, how time flies...! Can you imagine this snotty-nose entering the Temple and reading the Scriptures!

Mary: You’re a grown-up now, Jesus!

Old Woman: Take note, this boy knows all the mischiefs in the world!... Let’s see if he’ll behave in the capital!

Mary: We left Nazareth with the other families a few days before the Passover. After traveling some miles, we joined the pilgrims from Cana and Nain. Among the pilgrims were boys of Jesus’ age. They became friends at once. I remember one of them was a lanky red-haired boy and the other was a fat one. They were fast, they were always ahead of us....

Keeno: They say there’s a big place in Jerusalem for horse-racing and betting, involving a lot of money...

Fatso: I was told there’s a plaza where a pigeon contest is held. We’ve got to see that, Jesus...

Jesus: All I want is to get there.... Excuse me, sir, are we near the city yet?

Old Man: We’ll know in an hour or so, young man, when we reach a bend along the road...

Jesus: Did you hear?... C’mon, let’s race to see who gets there first!!

Old Man: Watch out for ravines, young men, the road is dangerous!... Holy God, what a restless bunch!...

Mary: When we reached the bend called the pilgrims' bend, we started to sing. Jerusalem glowed before our eyes. The towers, the walls, the palaces and, in the midst of all, the Temple, were a welcome sight to us. With the ancient songs of our ancestors, we wished the city peace and happiness....

Joseph: What do you think, Jesus?

Jesus: I never imagined there could be so many things in one place, Papa!

Mary: Move on, we're left behind...!

Mary: Those were wonderful days... I remember all the Galileans partaking together of the Passover meal in an inn in Siloam... Jesus went up and down the city with his friends, prying into all nooks and corners, and talking with everyone... I thought then that Jesus has turned out to be very smart for a farmer.... On our way back to Galilee, we passed by a marketplace...

Vendor: Beautiful bracelets for pretty ladies.... Ladies, here are precious souvenirs that you can bring home from the south...!

Mary: We stayed a while looking at the stalls. I think it was here where Jesus and his two friends strayed away from the group...

Jesus: Pshh!... Hey, come here...!

Fatso: What's wrong, Jesus?

Jesus: Why don't we go to the Temple...? Keeno, are you coming?

Keeno: Hey, that's a good idea.... Come, let's run...!

Mary: During the first hours of the day, there was lax vigilance in the Temple, so the boys were able to sneak through...

Jesus: That's the altar where the lambs are beheaded... No one was allowed to pass there the other day....

Keeno: Not even today, I guess... Look at that man over there...

Jesus: Pshh!... Let's hide behind these columns and when the guard goes to the other side, we'll sneak through...

Mary: Without knowing it, they had slipped into the atrium reserved only for priests....

Jesus: Pshh!... Be quiet, Anton...

Fatso: Look, there's the altar... Let's take a closer look...

Jesus: I want to touch the stone... Let's go!

Keeno: Watch out, Jesus, an old man is coming...!

Mary: They started to run through the columns, but the priest had overtaken them....

Saphed: At last, I caught you!... What does this insolence mean?

Jesus: We... we... just wanted to see the stone...

Saphed: Where did you come from, you rascals?

Fatso: From Galilee. We came for the feast... but we're on our way back...

Keeno: We wanted to see this.... It's so beautiful...

Saphed: Yes, it's beautiful, but you're not supposed to be here. It's prohibited.

Jesus: Why?

Saphed: Because only the priests are allowed here.

Jesus: Oh... but why?

Saphed: Why do you ask?... What a nosy boy you are!.... What's your name?
Jesus: Jesus. And this is Keeno. This other one is Samuel, but we call him Fatso because he's fat.
Saphed: And you, snotty-nosed from Galilee, haven't you been taught that this is a sacred place, a very sacred place...? Only holy men can enter this place...
Jesus: You mean... you are holy?
Saphed: No, no, I'm a great sinner... Oh my God, have pity on this poor sinner!
Jesus: Then, how come you're in this sacred place...?
Saphed: Because I'm a priest, son.
Fatso: Are priests holy...?
Saphed: Look, boys, how should I tell you...? You have to distinguish between the sanctity of the office and the weakness of the officiant...
Jesus: Oh, yeah.... Well, I can't see the difference.
Saphed: Well, you have to. Let me give you an example. Rabbi Aziel says that if we take a fruit with a bitter skin.... No, no, he says that if we remove the skin of a fruit.... Oh well, now I don't remember it exactly.... And besides, so much for this. I can't waste my time with foolish kids like you....
Another Priest: What's going on here, Master Saphed?... And these kids, where did they come from...?
Saphed: That's what I'm asking.... I don't know how they got here, but I know where to send them out...
Another Priest: This happens often. Yes, Master Saphed. These kids want to have a closer look at the immaculate beauty of the house of God.... Is that right, children...?
Fatso: Yes, we wanted to see....
Priest: Go ahead, sons... look.... Everything here is beautiful...!
Jesus: Master, what's there inside...?
Mary: Jesus, pointed with his soiled fingers toward the direction of the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place in the huge building that was the Temple of Jerusalem....
Priest: Inside?... There, my son, is the Presence of God!
Fatso: The Presence of God...!
Jesus: Have you seen God, Master...?
Priest: No, son, I haven't.
Jesus: Then, how do you know God's there?
Priest: Because He's there. It's a mystery.
Keeno: They can't see Him, Jesus... My grandpa used to say that whoever sees God, dies.
Jesus: Is that true, master?
Priest: Yes, son. Whoever sees the face of God dies.
Jesus: God must be very ugly then....
Priest: No, son, don't say that. God is not ugly nor beautiful, not tall nor short, strong nor sickly.... God is a very pure spirit!
Fatso: What's this "very pure spirit"?
Priest: Very pure spirit?... How should I say.... It means that God is intangible, inalterable, infinite, inodorous, colorless...
Fatso: Inodorous.... So He need not take a bath?
Priest: ...indescribable, incomprehensible, unimaginable, incommensurable... Now, do you understand how God is?
Fatso: Yeah, now it's clear....
Jesus: Master, and everything you have said fits inside?
Rabbi Siphar: What's this gathering here...? You can be heard from that door....
Priest: I'm glad you came, Rabbi Siphar... Come and meet the boys... They are very intelligent.... They'll be good for our school...

Siphar: Really? Would you like to be with us, sons...?

Keeno: Where?... We're going back to Galilee...

Siphar: Would you like to attend the school for priests? A lot of young people are there. They become worthy servants of the Temple.

Jesus: What do they do in that school...?

Siphar: They meditate on the Scriptures day and night...

Fatso: Day and night...!

Keeno: Why do they do this, master?

Siphar: In order to know God better.

Jesus: What for...?

Siphar: In order to understand His word better, son.

Jesus: And then...?

Siphar: To continue meditating. You never end up understanding the Holy Scripture, son. You have to meditate on it constantly.

Priest: Nevertheless, the same Scripture speaks of the peace of the just, Rabbi.

Saphed: But this is not the case here, Siphar.

Siphar: Yes, it's a similar case. Besides, that has nothing to do with the boy's question!

Saphed: Oh yes, it has something to do with it!

Mary: We were already leaving through the Gate of Fish when we realized that Jesus was not in the caravan of the Galileans...

Mary: *Comadre* Elisha, have you seen your son...?

Elisha: Oh no, Mary, I thought he was with your son...

Mary: I know, but they're not here...

Elisha: The last time I saw them was with that fat boy, Fatso....

Mary: Oh, my God, they might have gotten lost in this city! It's too dangerous here!... Joseph!... Joseph!

Joseph: Hey, what's all that screaming about, Mary?

Mary: Is Jesus with you?

Joseph: I thought he was with you...

Mary: They must have been bumming around one of those streets and lost their way! He's with the sons of Elisha and that lady....

A Woman Neighbor: Oh my Samuel, my little Samuel!

Joseph: Take it easy, Ma'am. If they got lost, we'll find them... Let's go back.... They shouldn't have gone very far yet....

Mary: While the caravan of our countrymen had left the city for the north, Joseph and I, and the parents of the two boys turned back to look for our children amid that sea of people... I was really shocked about that incident!... Joseph seemed more relaxed, but I guess he didn't want to alarm me.... We returned to the market, we went through all the streets where we had been... but nothing.... There was no trace of the boys.

Saphed: It's the sanctity of the office! And the boy questioned the weakness of the officiant!

Priest: And the nerve of these boys to speak of the Lord as "not having to take a bath!" Can you imagine?

Siphar: The boys were talking of the peace of the just, not of the unjust!

Mary: At noontime, it occurred to us to enter the Temple...

Woman: Oh, Samuel, my little Samuel!

Mary: We've lost him, Joseph!... This is like looking for a needle in a haystack...

Joseph: Take it easy, Mary. Jesus is a smart boy. He would know how to go back to Nazareth alone...

Old Woman: Pardon my curiosity, but why are these women weeping?

Joseph: It's about our three sons, old woman. We lost them near this place this morning...

Old Woman: How do they look?

Woman: My son is fat, very well-bred and he's wearing a green tunic.

Elisha: My son's hair, Keeno, is the color of a carrot.

Joseph: They are with someone who's a little naughty. He is brown-skinned and wearing a dirty tunic....

Old Woman: These boys.... I think I've seen them inside the Temple...

Mary: We passed through the women's atrium, asking each and everyone about them, when we saw them leaving....

Saphed: And don't you ever try to sneak in again, do you hear me?!... Never again!

Mary: Jesus! My son!

Woman: Samuel! My Samuel...!

Mary: Jesus, son, where've you been? Your father and I have been looking for you everywhere...

Jesus: We were talking with those teachers there and...

Joseph: Talking about what! Blazes!... You didn't know how scared your mother was...!

Jesus: We couldn't leave because those teachers couldn't agree with one another. One said, God was this, the other one claimed He was that.

Fatso: They were arguing among themselves and they wouldn't let us go...

Jesus: That's right. These people make a big fuss out of nothing... They take care of God's affairs, but I don't think they know Him... God can't be what they're saying about him...

Mary: But Jesus, how can you say that about the teachers?!

Jesus: Because it is true, Mama. Look, they say that....

Joseph: Okay, okay, let's go. You've spoken a lot already... If we hurry, we still might be able to catch the caravan of Galileans!

Mary: And we did catch it. After three days, we were back in Nazareth. Life went on like the watermill and, beginning that year, Jesus would go with us to Jerusalem each year for the feast of the Passover...

Time passed by.... He was growing fast to becoming a man... And I believe that he kept on discovering more clearly that God is, above all, a Father. A Father who is very close to us and who is concerned with everything about us....

The Law of Israel required that everyone should "appear before God" in the Temple of Jerusalem, during the three principal feasts of the year. Those who did not have this obligation were the deaf, the idiots, the children, the homosexuals, the women, and the unfreed slaves, the crippled, the blind, the sick and the aged. This norm simply highlights who were considered the "outcasts" in that society, who were unworthy even to appear before the Lord. The three feasts were the Passover, the first fruits (Pentecost) and the harvest (The Tents). The Passover was the most popular of the three. The poor – who could not spend for the yearly pilgrimages – fulfilled their obligation especially during this feast. Although the women were not obliged, they usually joined their husbands and children in the trip to celebrate the Passover.

The texts of this period show that boys who were thirteen years of age should begin to comply with the obligation to join the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. It was the custom of the people living in the interior part of Israel to bring them along at an earlier age of twelve, to familiarize them with the manner of complying with the precepts that would be required of them the following year. Participation in the feast of the Passover together with the people was a way of consecrating the "majority age" of the boy,

after which he began to act like a real “Israelite,” since it was understood that “Israelite” was synonymous to “he who goes to Jerusalem.”

For the pilgrimages big caravans were formed, composed of neighbors from the same town, friends and relatives. This way, they could protect each other from the main enemy of the road: the bandits. They traveled by foot and when they could get a glimpse of Jerusalem, the pilgrims began to sing “Psalms of Ascent” (Ps 120-134). Jesus, who had never seen the capital, nor the Temple, remained dazzled by its size and splendor. Certainly, it was for him an unforgettable impression.

When Jesus went to Jerusalem, the Temple was still under reconstruction, a work started by King Herod the Great, about thirty years before. The materials used were of good quality: yellow, black and white marbles, stones engraved artistically by brilliant sculptors, cedar from Lebanon for the wonderful craftsmanship. Precious metals: gold, silver and bronze. The Temple was a dazzling edifice, especially for a young boy coming from a small farm village. It is not strange therefore, that Jesus, fascinated by that marvel, should have the curiosity to take a closer look at everything. All entrances to the Temple led to gold and silver-plated doorways. In the atria or patios surrounding the building were huge candelabras of gold or silver. The height of magnificence was, above all, in the edifice of the Temple. The facade was covered with plates of gold with the thickness of a denarius coin. From the beams of the hall hung thick chains of gold. There were two tables: one of fine marble and another of solid gold. From the hall of the building to the “Holy,” there was a grapevine made of golden shoots, to which were attached bunches of pure gold. In this episode, the boys were found in the vestibule (hall), when they were about to enter the place of the “Holy.” This was reserved only for priests who were assigned to offer sacrifices each day. Their entry constituted a grave mistake.

In the “Holy One” were found a candelabra of pure gold with seven arms and a table where the holy bread was consecrated. Separated from this by a double veil was the so-called “Holy of Holies,” an entirely empty space with a cubic shape, and gold plated walls where the presence of God “was.” It was a dark and quiet place. Only the high priest could go inside, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, when he prayed to God for the forgiveness of sins of all the people.

For the Israelites, that was the most sacred place on earth.

Luke is the only one who has written an account of Jesus in the Temple, when he was twelve years old. He wrote his gospel for the foreigners, for the non-Jews, the men and women whose mentality was strongly influenced by the Greek culture. For these readers, the “wisdom” understood in the master-disciple relationship fostered inspiration and respect in them. Luke wrote this narration to concretely show these readers that Jesus is the Wisdom of God, that his mission was to teach us the way of justice, that he was the Master par excellence. In this evangelical text of his, aside from giving us historical information of Jesus’ first trip to Jerusalem at age twelve, he is also transmitting a theological message and is doing catechesis for the Greek lectors.

This explains the “extraordinary” effect that a boy’s story can have, which can stun old teachers. Later on, in the remaining pages of his gospel, Luke himself will show how this “wisdom” should not be interpreted exactly the way the Greeks did, and that Jesus is not a “wise man” according to their criteria (accumulation of culture, alienation from the world, etc.), but that his is of “another” type of wisdom. In his letters, Paul will likewise refer to this topic (1 Cor 1:18-25).

In this episode, the questions asked by Jesus and his replies to the priests are not those of a “child prodigy,” neither are they of a God disguised as a boy who knows everything and who pretends to be a fool in order to catch the elders in their own mistakes. No, Jesus asks questions the way any boy in any part of the world does: with simplicity, with a little mischief, with naivete. In doing so, children always charm the elders, muddle up their arguments, proving then that replying to questions is not as easy as they believe it is. The priests appear to be dominated by law, rituals and theory. Their words were empty, and not related to life. Before the innocent arguments presented by the boys, the priests find themselves in a labyrinth from which they cannot escape. When faith is expressed solely in twisted and difficult words or in ready-made prescriptions, and cannot face up to the questions of a boy, an illiterate, of someone with another culture, it only shows that this faith is just an empty shell, with nothing inside whatsoever.

Sometimes “what is most profound” is identified with “what is difficult to understand.” What is truly most profound shall always be accessible to all, and can be expressed in simpler words which are closer to life.

(Lk 2:41-50)

141

A Just Man

It was the eve of Pentecost. Jerusalem was crammed with pilgrims, compatriots and foreigners coming from all points of the Roman empire to celebrate the feast of the first fruits. During those warm days of summer, in the upper story of Mark’s house where we had experienced a lot of things together, Mary, Jesus’ mother, narrated to us the turbulent years in our country after the death of King Herod....

Mary: I tell you, we were heading from bad to worse. When the old Herod died, his sons, who were as ruthless as he, had a squabble over the kingdom, splitting it into three pieces. Each one grabbed his share, leaving the vast open field to the Romans... Those were terrible years.... More taxes, more people’s protests and more atrocities on the part of the leaders...

Neighbor: You heard it, countrymen! Two thousand crosses and two thousand crucified! This is horrible!

Old Woman: May the heavens protect us!

Neighbor: All the vultures of the country have banded themselves in Jerusalem! This city reeks of dead souls!

Mary: Everyday the caravans brought sad news to our village... It was then that a certain Judas, who had the blood of the Maccabees running in him, stole some weapons in Sepphoris, which at that time was the most important city in our province... Oh gosh, that was an agonizing moment for us!

A Man: Down with the Romans, out you go, invaders!

A Woman: Herod, a traitor!

Another Man: Israel for the Israelites!

Mary: The revenge of the Roman army was terrible. Troops were sent from the capital! They burned down a lot of houses. I think they sent half of the city to jail.... From Nazareth, which was just a few miles from Sepphoris, we could see the cloud of smoke and hear the people screaming while trying to escape.... Since then, Galilee became a battlefield. We lived in constant fear. Leaving the village one would see a dead man here and a crucified one there. Herod’s police and the Roman soldiers made us stay in our homes. They threatened us. Whenever they saw a group talking, they were hit by soldiers; whoever protested landed in jail... And of course, as has always happened, the more the people were suppressed the stronger the resistance became... As far as I can remember, that was how the zealot movement started...

Man: Do you want to join us, young man?

Young Man: Yeah. I’m going with you. What do I need to bring?

Man: Nothing. Just sharpen your knife and swear revenge against those who have trampled our country!

Mary: Jesus must have been about eighteen years old when a group of zealots kidnapped a Roman

captain in Sepphoris. As ransom, they demanded the release of several prisoners. But the whole thing blew up. Well, I don't remember exactly what happened, but that night, everything was still in Nazareth.... All of us locked our doors and went to sleep early.... We were already sleeping when we heard some voices....

A Fugitive: Brother... brother....

Mary: Joseph!... Don't you hear?... Someone's at the door... Joseph!

Fugitive: Brothers, let us in!.... Open the door!

Joseph: What's the matter?... Who are you?

Fugitive: We escaped from Sepphoris. The soldiers are after us.

Another Fugitive: They've killed several comrades from the movement! If they get us, we'll be hanged on the cross!

Jesus: What's going on, Mama...?

Mary: Psst!.... Quiet, Jesus... wait...

Joseph: What... what do you want from us?

Fugitive: Allow us to spend the night here, friend. Please hide us!

Mary: Oh, my God, Joseph, I'm scared... it's very dangerous....

Joseph: I know, woman... It's a big risk, we'll have to take... After all, they are our brothers.

Mary: We don't even know who they are...

Joseph: It doesn't matter. They need us. What do you say, Jesus?

Jesus: Yes, Papa, let them in... if you were in their shoes...!

Mary: And Joseph opened the door of our house for them....

Fugitive: Thanks, buddy, thanks... Pff... We have knocked at several houses in the village, but no one wanted to take us in...

Joseph: They must all be sleeping by now....

Fugitive: Yes, the people are always sleeping when they are needed most....

Joseph: You better lie down over there at the end, and use these rags to cover yourselves... Mary, why don't you give them some bread and... we don't have much, you see....

Mary: I couldn't sleep a wink. Any kind of noise, even that of the crickets, scared me.... By midnight, we heard the Roman horses galloping through the village.... They were looking for fugitives on the road to Cana... Before the cocks crowed, the two men were already up and gropingly went to Joseph....

Fugitive: Brother, we've got to go now.

Joseph: Do you need anything for the road?

Fugitive: Wish us good luck, that's all.

Fugitive: You saved our life, comrade. Thanks. Goodbye!

Joseph: Goodbye... and may God be with you!

Mary: They opened the door and left running...

Joseph: So you see, Mary, don't lose heart in the face of problems....

Jesus: That's what they want, Mama, to have us divided through fear...

Mary: Okay, okay, say what you want, but I felt the greatest shock of my life, worse than Daniel's in the lions' den.

Joseph: Well, woman, you can relax now... It's all over...

Mary: Yes, we thought everything was over. But the following week, one morning, while Joseph and Jesus were working in the field....

Soldier: Hey, you, come over here...

Mary: Me?... What... what do you want?

Soldier: I said, come here.

Mary: Two Roman soldiers on horseback stopped in front of our house. I was squatting, making bread over some embers...

Soldier: What's your husband's name?

Mary: Joseph...

Soldier: We're looking for him. Where's he? Speak!

Mary: He has done nothing wrong... why?....

Soldier: Where's he, I say!

Mary: I don't know.... I don't know....

Soldier: You don't really know?... Now you will...

Mary: The soldiers got off their horses and came toward me with a scornful smile and a leather whip in their hands... Trembling, I had to support myself against the wall...

Soldier: Where's this good for nothing husband of yours, huh?

Mary: He's not here... and he's not coming back till evening...

Soldier: Hah! Did you hear that Nestor?... He won't be back till tonight.... Ha, ha, ha.... Come, Nestor, come, for these peasant women, though they stink a little for not taking a bath, are nice ones.... Ha, ha...

Mary: Let go of me, let go of me....

Soldier: Take this chance, Nestor... it doesn't happen everyday!

Mary: Let go of me... let go of me....

Mary: Holy God, had Joseph not appeared that very same moment, I wouldn't know what could have become of me...!

Joseph: Son of a bitch, let go of my wife!... Let go of her, I said!

Soldier: Huh...? Who's this? Where did he come from...?

Joseph: Get out of my house!.... Out, out, I said!

Soldier: So you wouldn't be home until evening...? You are Joseph, then, is that right?

Joseph: Yes, what's wrong with me?

Soldier: We've been looking for you, dear friend....

Joseph: Well, I'm here now. What do you want?

Soldier: You were hiding rebels in this filthy mousetrap, right?... C'mon, don't put on that face... Everyone here knows... You hid the two rebels who escaped from Sepphoris when the kidnapping happened.... But no one ever makes a mockery of Rome, do you understand?

Mary: Oh, please, don't beat him... he did nothing wrong... Oh...!

Mary: They grabbed Joseph and pushed him. The stronger soldier kicked him on the face like a savage, on his back and between his legs.... The other one obstructed my way, as I was screaming like mad.... Oh, my God, and I was helpless.... At that moment, Jesus came from work... and seeing what was happening, he dropped his tools and lunged himself on the soldier who was beating Joseph.... But with one hard blow on his face, he was hurled to the ground...

Soldier: Damn these farmers. When will they learn to respect authority?... You may leave him now, Nestor, he's all beaten up.... Let's go!...

Mary: Joseph, Joseph... oh, my God!... Jesus, run and ask Susana to come here fast... Oh, my God!

Mary: My *comadre*, Susana and Nuna, and all my neighbors from Nazareth came immediately with balms and bandages....

Mary: How do you feel now, Joseph, tell me...?

Joseph: Oh... worse than Adam.... He had one rib removed from him. From me, it's a dozen ribs...

oh...!

Susana: You must thank the Lord, you're still alive!

Mary: I already told him it was dangerous to hide these men, Susana. These Romans are ruthless and unforgiving...

Susana: Okay, okay, let him rest... And give him something hot in a little while, Mary... Don't allow him to move... okay?

Mary: Since then, Joseph no longer felt well. He continued with his work, but at night, he would drop himself onto the mat like an old, deflated tire....

Mary: You can't go on like this, Joseph... Don't you want me to call a doctor from Cana to see you...?

Joseph: And what shall we pay him with, woman? We don't even have enough to buy our food.... Don't worry... really, it doesn't hurt much anymore....

Mary: But as the days passed by, Joseph was not getting any better...

Mary: Jesus, your father is ill.... I'm so worried.... He says it's just the fever...

Jesus: It was the blows he received, Mama... Those soldiers crushed Papa.... But they'll pay for it, I swear to you, they'll pay for it!

Mary: Call the doctor, son.... Look, take these drachmas I got for the wedding... they're all I've got.... Sell them and use the money to pay the doctor.... Hurry now...

Mary: The doctor came and one day followed another....

Mary: Do you feel better now, Joseph...?

Joseph: Yes, a lot better.... At least, I don't feel any more pain in my kidneys... Now I even have my appetite back!... For eating and fighting, mind you!

Jesus: Well, I'm ready, Papa. As soon as you're up, then we go...

Joseph: Where to, Jesus...?

Jesus: To avenge what they did to you. Francis and I have inquired about the whereabouts of these two soldiers.

Joseph: But, what're you talking about, young man...?

Mary: Jesus, I beg of you, forget it and don't get yourself into trouble...! Oh, holy God!

Jesus: What?... We'll just go on like this? They come and kick you in your own home, insult your mother and beat your father to death, and here you are, simply putting your arms akimbo? The law says "an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth." Is that right?

Mary: Joseph, who was lying on a mat spread on the ground of the house, looked at Jesus with his dark and tired eyes...

Joseph: Listen to me, son: the law says that, yes. But ever since Moses wrote that law, do you think there have been less broken teeth and less gouged eyes?... On the contrary... This is so because fire is extinguished with sand, not with more fire...

Jesus: But, Papa, then....

Joseph: You've got to think of another way, son... First of all, you've got to rid yourself of that violent feeling in your heart... Don't nurture hatred inside, Jesus... He who hates, becomes a slave of his own hatred.... I want to see you free, son.... Yes, you fight, defend your family, and stand up for those who need your help, but never take revenge on those who are violent, for those who do shall end up like the scorpion, poisoned by its own venom...

Susana: Well, well, you better stop those morbid conversations, for this Nazarene is alive and well... Come, Mary and go back to your laundry chores. This husband of yours shall be up tomorrow or the day after tomorrow...

Mary: But he didn't get up anymore. It was a Saturday, at mid-morning, when the sun was shining bright

over the whole village when he passed away.... Jesus and I, and the whole neighborhood of Nazareth stayed by his side... We wept, like we were weeping for a just man... No, I can't tell you more, because I'm getting sad... I loved him so much... When he died, I thought the world caved in on me... Jesus also cried a lot that day... I believe Joseph had taught him very important lessons: he taught him how to till the soil, how to lay bricks... above all, he taught him how to fight... to fight and to forgive...

The death of Herod the Great, after a reign of tyranny lasting for forty years, constituted a specially crucial moment in Palestine which was practically dominated by Roman imperialism. During these years, a series of armed movements emerged in Galilee which had roots among the people and from which the zealots' groups were formed. The zealot movement had a peasant origin. Galilee, in disregard for the existing system of bureaucracy, order and law in Jerusalem, had been the traditional focus of all anti-Roman and messianic movements. Such was the case of the zealot movement, whose birth and evolution Jesus was a witness to, and whose ideals he was perfectly aware of. So much so that when he embarked on his prophetic activities and proclaimed: "The kingdom of God is near!", it coincided with the zealots' proclamation of hope. This proclamation became popular in the entire Galilee as their battlecry against the Roman imperialists.

Some historians attribute the organization of the zealot movement to Judas, the Galilean. During the younger years of Jesus, this revolutionary staged a great uprising against the Roman power. He captured the city of Sepphoris, a few kilometers from Nazareth, which was then the capital of Galilee. There he gained influence with an important group of guerrillas. Quintillius Varus, the Roman governor of Syria, crushed this unrest. Sepphoris was razed to the ground and hundreds of zealots were crucified in the city. This was such a big blow for the revolutionary movement and it had taken years to reorganize it. In spite of the continuous repression of the zealots until the year 70 after Jesus' death, the movement was not totally wiped out by the Romans, since it enjoyed the much needed support of the Galilean peasants and the poor sector of the society.

In Israel, as in most Oriental countries, hospitality is one of the virtues deeply rooted among the people. To deny it was a grave shortcoming, and to refuse it was not accepted. Hospitality included gestures of greeting, service, protection and companionship afforded a house guest. All this should be done even without the expressed provision of the law and with no expectation of any remuneration or reward. Hospitality must be extended to all, including foreigners or strangers. Joseph, who was a just man, had to be hospitable, and opened the doors of his house to all, even in crucial moments, when the guests were obvious risks, as narrated in the episode.

The story in this episode is not found in the gospels but it unfolded under a historical backdrop, which is the social uprising in Galilee during those years and practically during all the growing years of Jesus. There is hardly anything said in the gospel about Joseph, Mary's husband, except that he came from the family of David, that he was an artisan, that he took Mary for his wife and that he "was a just man" (Mt 1:19)... Nevertheless, a series of legends and traditions has evolved around his person, with no basis whatsoever on the gospel nor on the customs of the period. But if Joseph was just and an upright man, whose actuations throughout his life were in the manner that we see him in any text of the gospel, then his conduct in this episode is not illogical: hospitable, courageous, willing to risk his life for others, forgiving, benevolent and loving.

The Roman troops, together with those of King Herod, maintained the "peace" and order in the turbulent territories of Galilee. They did it with the arrogance of dominating rulers, thinking they were the masters of the lives of the subjected people. Under such domination, acts of violations, beatings and seizure of properties of the peasants had become commonplace.

If we hardly know anything about the life of Joseph, we know absolutely nothing about his death. We may only presume that his death came before Jesus commenced his prophetic activities, because since then, Mary always appears solo, as a widow. Nevertheless, Joseph has always been "the patron of beautiful death" in the religious tradition, as we likewise presume that, at the time of his death, no less

than Jesus and Mary were at his deathbed. To say that Joseph dies – as it appears in the episode – as a result of the blows he received from the Roman soldiers, is a product of the imagination. But it can also be said that he died of black fever or on account of a work-related accident.... We shall never know what it was. This episode of Joseph's death provides an occasion wherein Jesus would learn one of the most important lessons in his life, which will be transmitted to us later on in the gospel (Mt 5:43-48).

Jesus learned from Joseph and Mary various attitudes toward life. In those times, the influence of the family was a lot more decisive than today, when schools and means of public communication could do the same or even more. In this episode, Joseph's teaching legacy to Jesus is that of forgiveness, rejection of hatred and vengeance, of fighting for justice, to eliminate the blinders that obstruct one's vision. Through this, something very essential to the message of Jesus such as love for one's enemy will not appear in his words as just another form of moralization, but as an experience learned in his own life, and therefore, more authentic and demanding...

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Fire On Earth

On the day of Pentecost, Jerusalem became inundated with thousands of pilgrims who were carrying bundles of their first produce of wheat and barley to be offered in the Temple of God of Israel and to celebrate, as in all summers, the feast of the new harvest... People and camels, the entire caravans from Judea and Galilee were squeezing hard on each other in all the streets of the city of David. This is not to exclude the foreigners from all the provinces of the empire:

Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia and even from far away Egypt and the Libyan colonies of Cyrene.... Greeks and Romans, Arabs and Cretans (Cretes), Jews and Pagans... everyone ascended to Jerusalem and their voices and songs in a thousand different languages resounded within the walls of the city....

That day, at the first hour of the morning while we were chatting in the upper story of his house, Mark, who was Peter's friend, arrived; he was almost out of breath...

Mark: Hey, is everybody here?... C'mon here, and hurry!...

Peter: What the hell is the matter, Mark? C'mon, speak up, man!

Mark: Bad news, folks. The fat man, Caiphas, and his gang from the Sanhedrin are as mad as hell! It's because of us!

Peter: Bah, if that's the case...!

Mark: They found out you've been in the city for a couple of days now and you've been spreading the word that Jesus has resurrected. They say you're out to stir up the people...

Peter: Let them say what they want, Mark.... We couldn't care less.

Mark: The guards were given orders to arrest you...!

Peter: That doesn't matter...

Mark: They're coming anytime from now to get you...!

Peter: Well... in that case, it does matter! Matthew, Andrew, Nathanael, friends, we've got to leave this place! They're after our necks!

John: So let them find us! We'll wait for them here, Peter!

Peter: Okay, you'll wait for them, John. I'm leaving.

Philip: So am I.

John: Cowards! That's what you are, a bunch of terrified rats!

Peter: That's okay, say whatever you want... But I prefer to be a living rat to a dead lion. Let's go... just tell the women we're leaving!

Mary: What noise is this? What's going on here, tell me...?

Peter: Nothing, Mary, but something's gonna happen soon...

Thomas: Mark, are you s...s...sure about the g...g...uards?

Mark: Of course, Thomas. Nicomedes told me.

Peter: What Nicomedes? Nicodemus, perhaps?

Mark: Oh, it's the same. It's this tension that gets me all mixed up. Yeah, the magistrate who is our friend.

John: That story could have been made up to scare all of us.

Thomas: And i...i...indeed w...w...we are... s...scared.

Peter: Whatever it is, we're leaving right away before they catch us empty-handed.... Come, Mary, do something... Mary!.... What're you thinking of?

Mary: I was just wondering what Jesus would do if he were with us.

Philip: I know what he would do, but I...!

Magdalene: I know what the Moreno would do! Jesus never backtracks... The problem with us is we move like turtles, my goodness!

Salome: I agree with the Magdalene, because if only....

Peter: Okay, okay, whatever it is that you want to say, say it along the way! Now is not the time to talk but to leap over the wall and get away from here! Let's go, James!

Magdalene: Go, if you wish! Mary and I are staying, is that right, Mam Mary?

Mary: But of course, woman....

Salome: In that case, I'm staying too! Blood, not water, runs in the veins of the Zebedees !

Philip: Listen to me, you fools. Don't you know that the soldiers are coming?

Magdalene: Even if he is the king of Rome, what do I care?... Go away, go away.... We're staying here.

Peter: Are you out of your minds?... Why the hell are you staying behind?

Magdalene: Now look who's talking!... Tell me, Peter, why then did we come to Jerusalem? To dance in the party? Didn't we say we had to revolutionize the capital and gather all the poor of the city? Aren't we supposed to point an accusing finger at those swines who have broken our bones?

Philip: Jesus started the plan and you've seen how soon they've gotten rid of him!

Magdalene: But God is more powerful, Philip! Tell me, big head, why, do you think, did God raise Jesus from the dead? That he might merit an applause?... Or was it because we had to continue fighting like he did, and that we should not be afraid to face death?

Salome: Well said, Magdalene! They should have given you the sword of Judith, young woman!

Peter: Okay, okay, let's discuss this part by part.... What do you propose to do, scandalous women?

Salome: At the moment, we should play it cool, Peter. Let's not allow this fear to knock us all down.

Peter: And you, Mary, what do you say?

All of us turned to Jesus' mother...

Mary: I don't know, Peter, when things got tough, Jesus would tell us to pray a little, remember?... Why don't we ask God to enlighten us that we may know what to do or what not to do...?

Salome: Exactly, Mary: If we cling to the Lord, we will never slip.

Mary: Let's ask God to lead us through, as our ancestors were led out of Egypt. They too, were terrified when the Pharaoh's guards chased them and cornered them beside the sea.... But remember, it was then when God blew hard and split the sea in the middle to give passageway to our ancestors...

All eleven of us were present. Mathias, Thomas' friend, who had joined the group a few days ago, was there too, and so were the women: the Magdalene, Susana and my mother, Salome. In the middle of all was Mary, Jesus' mother, who was in squatting position, common among the women peasants of my country....

Mary: Father!... Come before us, open us a path of freedom, like you did for our ancestors when You blew the strong wind and let them cross the Red Sea... Be on our side, like You acted by making that column of

fire, paving the way for their passage.... Come, Lord... If You don't come, Lord, then grant that we may stay here... If You are indeed on our side, then give us a little of your Spirit, the same Spirit that You put in Jesus, give us the courage of the prophets!

We prayed. We prayed from the bottom of our cowardice, with a little grain of faith before a mountain of difficulties. The God of our ancestors who saved Jesus from death, who strengthens trembling hands and firms up shaking knees, filled us with powerful Spirit.... Since that morning, God had been gradually snatching away the fear from us, and in His Time, gave us the courage we needed in our daily struggle...

Peter: Well, folks... so much for this cowardice, damn it.... I mean, I'm saying it for myself... Now, I understand why Jesus has left us, so that we would have to handle the reins ourselves.... The Moreno has put a lamp in our hands, and we're not hiding it under the table... It must be put up in a candle holder so that everyone may see.... Do you agree?

John: Of course, Peter.... If we risk our lives the way Jesus did, well, bad luck! Others will follow.... And God will take care of claiming our blood!

Peter: So, buddies, what're we waiting for? Didn't you say the guards are coming? Well, let them find us in the street! What we have spoken of in the shadows, we shall proclaim under the sun!... And what we've been saying in whispers, we shall shout to the whole world!

Euphoric, Peter, opened the door and went down the stone stairway facing the patio, taking two steps at a time... We went behind him.... The street was crammed with a sea of pilgrims during that warm holiday...

Peter: Well... what now, John?

John: Commend yourself to Moses, who was a stutterer, that he may loosen up your tongue! Cheer up, troublemaker!

Then Peter climbed over an old barrel of oil beside the door and from there, he began to gesture to the people who were passing by....

Peter: Listen, friends, compatriots, come, run, for we've got some news for you!... Hey, John, where do I begin? What shall I tell them?... I'm having mental block!

John: Don't get scared, Peter.... Words are like a swarm of bees: one comes out and a swarm follows!

A multitude started to mill around out of curiosity. Peter, who was on top of the barrel, was sweating profusely, not knowing how to begin, and looking from one side to the another, lest the guards were coming...

A Man: What's wrong with you, you over-acting Galilean?... Let's see, are you raffling off some stuff?

A Woman: C'mon, out with it!

Man: This guy is drunk! Don't you see his face is flushed? Ha, ha, ha...!

Peter: No, my friends, we're not drunk... we're not, because it is nine o'clock in the morning and at this time of the day, not even old Noah gets himself intoxicated. It's something else... We've got some news for you. The news is that the Kingdom of God has come! Yes, my friends, some of you have come from afar, and have not heard what happened in this city only a few weeks ago.... There was a man called Jesus... I guess most of you knew him, right?... Well, this Jesus of Nazareth spent his time with us, doing good deeds and fighting for justice like anybody else. He also healed the sick, because God was with him. And this man, who was more upright than a post, and more a prophet than all the prophets put together, was held prisoner by the leaders of Jerusalem. These leaders faked a trial for him by midnight and condemned him to death. Many of you have seen him hanged on the cross, is that right? Well, these swine thought that the victory was theirs. But God did not conform to this in any way. Please tell me, how could God allow such injustice of great magnitude? How could God stand the sight of worms feasting on the body of the best creature on earth? He did not allow it! No way!.... So God took him from his tomb, and raised him to life, and now he is more alive than ever, believe me!.... and God acknowledged him in the eyes of

everyone. I say this to you because I have seen him alive. All of these men who are with me now have also seen him! We are witnesses to this victory of God. We are telling you, compatriots and foreigners, those from the nearby places and those from afar, without mincing our words, that God has made this Jesus whom they crucified Lord and Messiah of all men and women all over the world!

The people who were crowding around us began to applaud Peter, who was talking passionately, with such firmness, that for a moment, I remembered Jesus when he was talking right there at the Temple's esplanade...

A Man: Hey, neighbor, who's this big nose who just spoke to us so clearly?

A Woman: I don't know much about him.... He must be Galilean, judging from his intonation.

Man: He must be one of the zealots, I'd say...

Old Woman: No, man, but he is one of those who was always with the prophet....

Woman: Shut up, old woman, and listen!

Peter: Friends, listen to me: The rulers and the big lords of the capital thought that the matter about Jesus is already over. Well, it's not over yet. Do you know why? Because they are still here, those responsible for Jesus' death: the Herods, the Caiphases, the Pilates, are all sprawled out in their palaces of marble, sitting over the prison cells where a number of our tortured countrymen are languishing; they are feasting lavishly while our people are starving to death. This will go on and on as they continue to kill and rob and abuse our people! But Jesus continues to be with us too as we confront them!.... They are alive, but Jesus is more alive than they! They mock us, the poor, but God will laugh the last because this matter about Jesus is not yet over!.... On the contrary, this is just the beginning! It's only now that the matter is getting complicated, countrymen! Now, it's not only one person who is involved, but a dozen... then we shall become twelve dozens! And no one will be able to stop us! The Kingdom of God spreads like a spark in dry field! And there's no turning back, my friends!

Man: Very good, Galilean, very good, that's the way to talk!

Woman: Give it to them, Peter, give it to them!

Peter: How did it go, John?

John: Okay, Peter, but don't gesture too much, you might fall off the barrel...!

Mark: Hey, delinquent, there are a number of foreigners around and I don't know if they understand....

Peter: Friends, among us here are a number of foreigners from other countries and they speak other languages. It doesn't matter. I know everybody understands, because in spite of the differences of languages, our stomachs speak the same language of hunger! We have the same callous hands and our mothers weep the same tears for their sons who lost their lives. The clamor for justice of the poor is the same in all languages! Here no one is a stranger! We come from many different places, yes, but we all go toward the direction of the same land, and this is what matters! A new land, with no boundaries, nor inequality, a land where all of us can dwell! To achieve this, we need to be together, to join hands, work shoulder to shoulder, and inject the Spirit of God in the flesh of the people!

More and more people gathered to listen to Peter... The street became so small that when the guards sent by the high priests and the magistrates of the Sanhedrin came, they could not harm us.... That morning of the Pentecost, the ears of Jerusalem listened to the good news, known today by a great number of men and women all over the world: that Jesus is alive, that the Kingdom of God moves on, that the flame enkindled by Jesus here on earth is not extinguished, because it is God who keeps it aflame and God wants us all to be burned by it.

The Feast of Pentecost (penta = 50) is celebrated fifty days after the Passover. It is also known as the Feast of the Recollection or the Feast of the First Fruits (from "Shavuot"), since the first fruits of the harvest-taking all over the country were brought as offerings to God. It is also called the Feast of the Weeks, as this was celebrated seven weeks after the Passover. It was a feast of great rejoicing and

thanksgiving on account of the new harvest. With the Passover and the Feast of the Tents, it was one of the three feasts during which the Israelites should undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. At present, the Jews continue to celebrate the "Shavuot." Originally agricultural in character, another feast is now incorporated to it, the celebration of the Alliance of Sinai.

For the Christian Tradition, that day of the Pentecost marked the beginning of the Church as a community of brothers and sisters who are committed to continue the way of Jesus. It is also a missionary feast: in such a short time, those missionaries, inspired by the Spirit of Jesus, would spread the gospel all over the world. Undoubtedly, during those days of the feast of the First Fruits, the disciples, together, experienced with a special power the presence of the living Jesus in their midst, and they enabled a multitude of pilgrims in Jerusalem to experience the same presence. A number of authors believe that it is this experience of Pentecost that Paul is referring to, when he speaks of the manifestation of the resurrected Jesus "before an assembly of more than five hundred brothers" (1 Cor 15:6).

The Spirit of God already appears in the first lines of the Bible (Gen 1:2) hovering the waters, the source of all life. In Hebrew it is called "ruaj." It is a word in the feminine gender which literally means "wind" and also "breath." When God created humankind, the Bible says that He breathed into his nostrils (Gen 2:7). When God took His people out of Egypt, He blew hard on his enemies (Ex 10:13 and 19). The Spirit always appears in relation to life. It is the gentle or the tempestuous breath of God which brings life, puts in motion, defends it and enriches it. When the Spirit fails, so life fails (Ps 104:27-30). Never is it said in the Bible that God is "spirit" as opposed to "matter." What is said is that God "has" Spirit, which is like saying that God has life, and transmits it. A life that is manifested as much in the flesh, in matter, as in feelings, in the intelligence, thoughts and creativity.

The mentality of Israel was never concerned with concepts such as "nature" or "person" in relation to the Spirit. To speak of the Spirit as that of "the third person of the only (unique) nature of God" is typical of Greek mentality, which is completely alien to Israelite mentality. What Israel was more concerned with was not with describing the Spirit, but with how the Spirit acted. What Israel discovered was that this Spirit transcends the limited powers of people and makes them a hero or a prophet in a particular moment (1 S 10:5-13) or it remains with them, as in the case of the great prophets, the leaders of the people, Moses, Elijah (2 K 2:9). It was Israel's hope that the Spirit rest in plenitude over the Messiah, bringing peace, happiness, justice, honesty – all livings signs characterizing the Spirit. The Spirit of God is capable of creating a new person and this is what is prayed for in the old prayers of the people (Ps 51:12-14). The Spirit empowered the disciples of Jesus to continue his work, to be able to offer their lives for the sake of justice, just as he had done. It placed in the mouths of the disciples the words of Jesus, making them act in the same manner. To be a Christian today, twenty centuries after Jesus, is no more than to continue in this path, with the same inspiration, to act under this impulse, to move in accordance with his vitality, his breath. The Spirit of God touched Jesus, and it is this same Spirit, God's power and life, that keeps alive in us, that enables us to risk our lives for others, to live in community, to share our properties and life, to pray in community, to face death with hope.

Wind as well as fire are symbols of the acts of the Spirit of God. One and the other can penetrate any space, and spread anywhere. Both have a soothing effect (the coolness of the breeze, the warmth of the fire) and a destructive effect (the devastating hurricane and the consuming fire). Both manifested the act of God in the liberation, from the Exodus: the wind blowing over the Red Sea, opening the road to freedom (Ex 14:21) and the column of fire, guiding the Israelites during their nights in the desert (Ex 13:21-22). Luke uses these symbols in narrating the intervention of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost: a strong wind that echoes through the house and the tongues of fire over the assembled community.

The account of Pentecost cites a number of foreigners present in Jerusalem that morning. They came from well-known nations then: Parthians (known for horse-training, from the kingdom of Parthia, situated in the central part of present-day Iran), Medes (from the ancient kingdom of Media, destroyed five hundred years before Jesus, situated in the north of present-day Iran), the Elamites (inhabitants from the region of Elam where one of the first cultures of the earth evolved, situated in the present border between Iran and

Iraq), people from the Roman provinces of Mesopotamia (region between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, where the Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations were born, situated in the present-day Iraq); from Judea (southern region of Israel, where Jerusalem was situated), from Cappadocia (a mountainous region in the center of the present-day Turkey), from Pontus (a region by the bank of the Black Sea, in the northern part of Turkey), from Asia Minor, people from the regions of Phrygia (a grazing zone, where the legend of the famous King Midas originated, situated in the central part of Turkey); the inhabitants from Egypt (situated in the present-day territory), from Libya (presently situated in the north of Africa), from Cyrene (occidental zone of the present-day Libya), from Rome (capital of the Empire and now of Italy), the Cretes (from Crete, an island in Southern Greece), and the Arabs (from the ancient Nabatean kingdom, part of the present-day Jordan and Egypt), Jews – by race – as proselytes – foreigners converted to the religion of Israel – coming from these places would all travel to Jerusalem.

In his first discourse with the people of Jerusalem, Peter took over what had been the life of Jesus and which, in the beginnings of the Christian faith, constituted the essence of the gospel: Jesus was unjustly killed, God resurrected him from the dead, and the disciples became witnesses of what had happened. From the resurrection, the disciples and after them, we, the Christians, believe that the final victory shall be that of justice and life. With this assurance of our faith, we follow the same way of Jesus. His cause moves on whenever we toil for life's sake, no matter the final consequences.

(Acts 2:1-41)

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Sharing Everything

Since the day of the Feast of Pentecost, when Peter began to speak openly of the Kingdom of God right in the very heart of Jerusalem, life for us in the group had changed. In a few weeks, we spread ourselves through the barrios of the capital and the other cities of Judea to continue what Jesus had started, to make known to our compatriots the Good News that Jesus was alive and with us, keeping our spirits high in our fight for justice, giving us the strength of his Spirit, that we might accomplish things greater than even he himself had done...

John: Well, Thomas, let's see if that tongue of yours loosens up in Jericho! Good luck, buddy!

Peter: Much luck to you in Shiloh!.... Visit us every now and then, and tell us about the group!

Philip: Hey, we've forgotten about the Samaritans. Who's gonna work with them?

John: You're late, as always, Philip. Matthew and Andrew are now saddling the mules for their journey to Samaria...

Philip: Okay. So this is moving.... We'll cast the nets in the north and south, in the east and west...!

Peter: And in Jerusalem, where the big fish are. The stronger fishermen will stay...!

John: You're a show-off, Peter...! Not even the Most Holy Spirit can change you!

Those of us who remained in Jerusalem with Mary, Jesus' mother, the Magdalene and the other women, wanted to gather a few neighbors from the barrio and start from there, as Jesus had done, in forming our group in Galilee. One afternoon, Peter and I were talking to a handful of people at the Gate of Solomon, facing the Temple's esplanade, when some soldiers came....

A Soldier: You dirty pigs!... Get out of here! Out!... We've had enough troublemakers in Jerusalem! And much more, a plague of Galileans!... Out!... Out of here!

The Temple guards, furious, with their swords unsheathed, dispersed the group in one second, laying their hands on us. Peter and I spent that night in jail...

Peter: Are you scared, John?

John: Yes... but I'm hiding it!.... And you?

Peter: Me?... Hmmm.... If I come face to face with these men, I.... I'll take a deep breath thrice and...!

John: And what...?

Peter: And then, I'll tell it to their faces, damn it! Jesus himself, was here not long ago, and he, too, told the stark truth to their faces, remember? Well, we've got to do the same, John....

The following day, we were brought before old Annas and his son-in-law, Caiphas, the high priest who had sentenced Jesus.... With them were a certain John and a certain Alexander, also of the Beth family, the wealthiest people in the capital, and other advisers of the Sanhedrin...

Caiphas: Tell me, you liars, under what authority do you gather the people and feed them with nothing but lies, huh?...

Caiphas tried to hide his fury but in vain....

Caiphas: We've been keeping an eye on you, agitators of the people, good for nothing fishermen, trash of Capernaum, did you know that?... We know a lot about you and your plans!... C'mon, answer me? Who authorized you to stir up the ignorant people!

Peter: Are you asking us?... First, we shall have to ask you in the name of all the poor of Israel, by what authority did you sentence Jesus of Nazareth to death?...

Magistrate: What an insolent Galilean! How dare you speak that way to the high priest?

Peter bit his lips, but he continued....

Peter: You crucified Jesus, but you didn't get away with it, because God raised him from the dead. He is alive, do you hear? Jesus is alive! And we are witnesses to this!

Caiphas: Charlatan! What a crazy man, indeed! Ha, ha, ha...!

John: No, Peter isn't out of his mind. Neither am I, nor anyone of those who heard the Good News of Jesus. You are the crazy ones, because you got rid of him like a piece of rejected stone. But God chose him to be a cornerstone, you must know that!

Caiphas: Damn, get these foul mouths out of my sight right away! Give them some lashings, to teach them a lesson!

Four soldiers pushed us out of the hall and put us in jail in the basement. Caiphas and the magistrates were left pondering and troubled....

Another Magistrate: We've got to do something with this mob, your excellency. They're not only wretched like the devil, but they're also stubborn like camels.... Well, they're not Galileans for nothing!

Magistrate: Well, as they say – and I fully agree – like father, like son. They are as rebellious as that damned Nazarene, don't you think, your excellency?

Magistrate: What is worse is that, for sometime now, people follow them everywhere, your excellency....

Caiphas: "Your excellency, your excellency!".... Isn't there anything you can say but this nonsense?... Imbeciles! So we haven't settled this matter once and for all! It was not enough that we got rid of the mad dog, because the rabies is still there...! We will have them all crucified! That Pilate passes the buck to me for all these street riots makes me sick!

Annas: Now, now, take it easy, my dear son-in-law, this is nothing... These rascals were emboldened by their prophet's gimmick that he is alive... But they are made of weak stuff.... We'll scare them a little.... In the meantime, some nice lashings to warm them up will do... and later, you will see how this will cool off their heads, and even discipline their tongues....

After the whippings, we were brought once again to the hall of Great Counsel...

Caiphas: Listen well, Galileans: this Tribunal strictly prohibits you from talking in the streets about this Jesus, who was crucified for the crime of rebellion in the highest order. Is that clear?

Peter: No, it's not.

Caiphas: And what is not clear, damn you?! This Tribunal speaks in the name of the Living God!

Peter: No, this tribunal speaks in the name of all your interests. The Living God has nothing to do with this!

John: Go on with your prohibitions! We shall obey only God rather than men like you.

They had the money, they had the power, but indeed, they were also scared that the people would rise against them if they did something to us... That is why they set us free that morning. It was the Spirit of Jesus who gave us strength before the Tribunal, and to counteract those whippings from our executioners. Peter and I came out of it with our backs almost torn to pieces, but contented, for having been able to stand up for the Kingdom of God...

Mary: Tell us, tell us, what else did they say...?

In Mark's house, the women and the rest of the group were waiting for us impatiently...

Peter: You know what they told us, Mary? Look....

All: Ohhh....

Peter: So, that's it!

Susana: Poor guys... and look at this back of yours, heavens...!

Mary: This won't heal by our compassion alone. Hey Susana, let's go get some pieces of raw meat to cover their wounds with....

Philip: And what did you do?

John: What ought to be done. We accused them. We told them to their faces that they killed Jesus, but that the matter is not all over yet...

Philip: Then, what?

John: Nothing.... Those arrogant fools wouldn't listen at all. They are deaf...

Susana: Well, it's always like this at the start. But later, God will enlighten their minds...

Peter: Whose minds? Those of the moneybags of the Sanhedrin?... No way, Susana, don't pin your hopes too high. I think these people are so dense, they won't listen to the truth no matter how you shout it out to them. And worse than a deaf person is one who simply refuses to hear.

Susana: That's not the way to talk, Peter... After all, they hold the reins of power.... If they refuse to be converted and soften up a little, then we're doomed...

John: Indeed we would be if we just sit and wait for them to have everything crammed into our throats. Don't be so naive, Susana. Look, have you ever seen a house where the roof is placed before the foundation? Never, right? Have you ever seen a tree growing from the top down to the roots?

Susana: Neither....

John: Well then, neither will you see that things should change from the top.

Mary: Okay, go to the point then. Didn't we say that some have less while others have more? And that all of us are equal in the Kingdom of God?...

So, let's all put together everything we have.... money and things.... and see what happens!

Peter: Mary is right. Let's begin right here, with this group. And let those from Barrio Ophel do the same, where there are lots of widows and orphans... Then we'll ask the group with James to do the same, as well as those with this young woman, Lydia.... Nothing will belong to anyone, but everything will belong to everyone...

It was during these times that we realized that if we put everything in common, then the problems began to find some solutions. This practice took root soon enough among the small groups that were being formed in Jerusalem. The common life of sharing, of not keeping anything as our own, became the sign that we were promoting the cause of Jesus. Thus, the first communities were born.... No one became a member

without sharing all his or her possessions with the rest...

Barnabas: Look, my friends, I sold my land along the road to Japhia. The deal was good. This is what I got.

That was Joseph Barnabas, a Levite from the Island of Cyprus, who soon joined the group and in time, worked for the spread of the gospel....

A Widow: Oh, my children, I am a poor widow, with little money, since my old husband left me with a few savings to get me through... But why should I keep them somewhere when there are several needy persons around...?

She was Naomi, rendered old by age, but always with a big heart....

Stephen: Brothers! You know what?... At last I got a job in Jason's shop, the tanner, remember?... The pay is not much, but at least, I won't be a loafer here.... Now, I'll have a little something to share with the group!

That was Stephen, a good-looking young man, who started sharing his wage and his time for the cause of Jesus, and who, one day, ended up giving up even his life.... Every time, more and more joined the community.... They were men and women of the town who bore years and years of suffering and hope on their shoulders, but were decided to fight and to share. It was difficult, yes... and we had a hard time trying to get used to not saying mine nor yours, but ours. That was indeed a miracle, because we were doing it and we were happy. The Kingdom of God was beginning to gain way in small groups where no one was wanting, no one was hungry, because everything was for everyone.... And together, we rejoiced....

Peter: Father, like the grains of wheat sown on the field to form one bread, gather us all together, the poor of the earth, unite us that we may be strong, bring us close to you that together, we may build the Kingdom of God You promised to us through Jesus, Your Son, our great Redeemer!

All: Good, good! Amen, amen!

On the first day of the week, we would gather in the houses of our companions. Together we prayed to God, the Father of Jesus, and ate together. In the middle of the meal, we broke bread, to give thanks to God for a lot of things... And our numbers increased in the barrios and in the streets and in all corners of the city, like the rising tide, like the bread in ferment. There were many of us, so many of us, but we had only one heart and one soul.

Caiphaz: What's this?... A plague... leprosy... fever?... We'll have to get rid of these mad men once and for all... or they will end up with us...! We still have time!

Gamaliel: Your excellency and colleagues from the Sanhedrin, you must practice prudence in what you have to do. Sometime ago, Theudas stood up, claiming to be the Liberator, and about four hundred men followed him. But he was killed and all his followers were dispersed and that was the end of it. The same thing happened to that other Galilean rebel, remember?... Leave the followers of Jesus alone... Don't get in their way. If this matter is of men, then it will come to an end. But if this is of God, we will not be able to destroy it...

And since the matter of Jesus was of God, it moved on. That little mustard seed that the Moreno had sown in Galilee, by the riverbank, grew up, took roots in Jerusalem and spread its branches all over Israel....

The first Christian communities were formed in Jerusalem, shortly after the events of the Passover. They were composed of Jesus' disciples, the men and women from Galilee or from Judea who had known and followed him in his life, and the other Israelites and some foreigners who came close to the groups and integrated with them. For the "outsiders," what was more striking with these groups was their communitarian spirit. Faithful to the gospel of Jesus, the community's norm of living was sharing.

The first communities shared the common mission of spreading to the other cities of the land the good news of the resurrection. They shared the faith and the hope that Jesus had bequeathed to them. But, what was most important was the sharing of their possessions. The first Christians gave their money, their lands, the fruits of their harvest, their houses, and their wages to the service of the community. "See how they love one another," was the observation of others, who were amazed with the style of communitarian life. Love and charity were translated into living a common life of sharing: "See how they share." From then on, even after two thousand years, sharing everything that one has with his brothers and sisters shall always be a gesture of great love and, and therefore, the best proof of one's fidelity to the message of Jesus.

Those first communities became the "base," in the sense that those belonging to the "bottom" strata of society were integrated into them. Those who followed Jesus during his life were the poor people of Israel, because for them, his message was the good news of the Kingdom. The members of the first communities continued to be poor. Likewise, from its beginnings and during the first centuries of Christianity, to speak of the Christian faith was synonymous to speaking of persecutions. Right from the start, the very same priests who had judged and condemned Jesus to death, persecuted the apostles. The first communities had serious problems with Jewish religious institutions and as the former grew more and more, the persecutions likewise multiplied. Most of the disciples were killed, like Jesus, and during the first three centuries, there were thousands of martyred men and women from those groups, starting with the first of these martyrs, Stephen, a deacon who belonged to the community of Jerusalem (Acts 7:1-60; 8:1-3). These persecutions were proofs that the disciples continued with the way of Jesus and that they were faithful to the gospel.

The first Christians met to celebrate their faith and hope in the Eucharist. In these meetings, they reenacted not only the last supper of the Passover but all those communitarian meals partaken with Jesus in the fields of Galilee and the barrios of Jerusalem. These celebrations were not called "Eucharist," much less "Mass" then, but "the breaking of the bread." This expression tells us that they met to eat together at a common table remembering what Jesus had taught them about sharing. All meals in Israel rightfully started with this gesture of breaking bread, performed by the head of the family or whoever presided over the meal. Bread was never sliced with a knife; rather, it was broken and distributed to all in a gesture of friendship and unity.

The first celebrations of the "breaking of the bread" (of the Eucharist) were not ritualistic meetings in a temple. There were no temples then. The communities met alternately in the houses of some members. These were, therefore, domestic celebrations, where the members partook of family food, during which they experienced the presence of the resurrected Jesus. The texts of the Acts of the Apostles and some ancient documents show that the small "structure" of these reunions would more or less be like this: The assembly started when one of the disciples or missionaries shared with everyone what he had done during those days (problems that were encountered, trips, projects, needs of the orphans and widows, creation of new communities, etc.). Then, the greeting followed – the "kiss of peace" (1 P 5:14) – with which the community meal started, in the middle of which the Eucharistic Bread was shared with everyone. This ended with the communal singing of psalms and prayers. If a letter from one of the apostles from the field had arrived, this would be read in community. Some of these letters are preserved in the Bible: from John, Peter, James, Judas Thaddeus and several letters from Paul. All participants in these celebrations knew each other well, shared in the problems of the rests and felt their involvement in the same project. All these made these meetings very much alive, giving them a profound sense of communion in that Eucharist. To go back to the origins of the Christian faith – in the celebration, in the community of possessions and in the preference for the poor – is to grow in fidelity to Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

(Acts 2:42-47; 4:1-22 and 32:37; 5:28)

Not Even In All The Books In The World

In a short time, the followers of Jesus began to spread to all barrios of Jerusalem and to the other cities of our land. The good news of the Kingdom of God started by Jesus reached the people who had not known Jesus... Well, as you know, the news gets tainted as it goes from one mouth to another....

Mark: Peter!... Peter!....

Peter: What's it this time, Mark?

Mark: Hey, Peter, is it true that Jesus said: "Happy are those who are patient, even if they receive nothing?"

Peter: What?

Mark: If it is true what Jesus said, that first and foremost is to have patience, and the second part too.

Peter: But how could you ever make that up, Mark?

Mark: I didn't invent it, delinquent. Those from Barrio Ophel did. According to them, the Moreno repeated it constantly: "Peace and patience!... Peace and patience!"

Peter: Are you crazy? Who ever said that silly thing?

Mark: You.

Peter: I did?

Mark: They say you taught them that.

Peter: How could I, dope, when it's been four months since they have seen my shadow?

Mark: That precisely could be the reason. No one teaches them... so these things happen! There's still something else. They say that when Jesus was hanging on the cross, he winked at you and said: "Don't worry.... I'll be seeing you on Sunday!"

Peter: But what nonsense is this...? I'll talk to them right now... Pff... I can't take this anymore... My mouth is almost dry.... I've been running here and there... Blazes, I was living peacefully in Capernaum with my boat and my nets!

Such was our life during those beginning years. Peter and Philip and skinny Andrew, and all those who were with Jesus from the time he was baptized in the Jordan up to the day he was raised by God from the dead, would get together with the groups and shared all the things we had lived with him....

Peter: Hey, Mark, what are those bamboos and pieces of paper for?

Mark: I'm learning how to write, Peter.

Peter: And for what reason, may I know? At your age...?

Mark: Because at the rate we're going.... Do you know the rumor going around the barrio of Zion? That as a baby, Jesus wouldn't suck from his mother's left breast... as a form of penitence!

Peter: I have never seen such insolence...!

Mark: But not to worry, Peter. I've made my decision. I shall put in writing everything that Jesus said and did. In writing, do you hear? This way, our grandchildren will have something sure in their hands. What do you think, huh, Peter?

Peter: I dunno, Mark. That's quite difficult, you know. There are things that are not perceived by one's eyes nor heard by one's ears, yet, they have to be recounted.... As regard Jesus, his lice was something very great... it won't hold in any book....

Mark: Much less in the mouths of a handful of men. Something must be done, Peter. Words are carried by the wind. What is written, remains written.

Peter: Fine. Begin writing then. I'll tell you everything in the minutest detail.

Mark: Hey, but don't you exaggerate things, troublemaker... I know you very well, huh!

Peter: Really? Don't you trust me?

Mark: Yeah, I do, just as I trust Philip, Nathanael and grandma, Rufa, who has a memory sharper than Solomon's.

Peter: Better go to Capernaum and make your inquiries there. Be sure to write everything you want to. But not all...

Mark: Why not?

Peter: I mean, there are things that shouldn't be said openly.... For example... what will you say about me?

Mark: About you? Well... that you were one of the first converts and....

Peter: Don't you ever mention that I denied the Moreno three times, do you hear?

Mark: I've got to put it, Peter.

Peter: And why do you have to, tell me?...

Mark: Because that was how it was. Wasn't it?

Peter: Okay... okay.... Fine, write it if you want. But, listen to me, meddlesome.... If you put that, you might as well say that... I loved Jesus as much as I love my wife, Rufina. That's it!

Mark: Don't worry, big nose, I'll take care of that!

So Mark, Peter's friend, began to write about the Good News of the Kingdom of God. The first pages went from one group to another and a number of brothers who did not know Jesus in person, began to know him, by hearing the accounts of his life, how he died and how God raised him from the dead.

Sometime later, Matthew, who had been a tax collector, and who could read and write, thought of a similar idea....

Philip: Hey, what're you doing so locked up here, Mama.... Atchoo!... Matthew?

Matthew: I'm studying, Philip, studying and writing.

Philip: There's a lot of dust around here, damn!... Atchoo!... You'll get sick with all those old papers!...

Matthew: In these parchments, you idiot, are the words of the prophets and the wise men of Israel... Listen, Philip, listen to this: "I see him, but not for now; I discern him, but from afar: from Jacob comes a star, and shines over Israel." Do you understand?

Philip: No, not a thing.

Matthew: The star, Philip! The star that the prophet Balaam saw a thousand years ago was the Messiah. And the Messiah was Jesus. Now, do you understand?

Philip: Not much, but....

Matthew: Here's another one.... Listen: "The kings of all nations will come to you, a caravan of gold and incense"... What do you think of this?

Philip: I dunno what you're up to...

Matthew: To the cave of Bethlehem. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a star shone in the sky and guided the kings of the orient who came to pay homage to the Messiah of Israel.

Philip: If I remember right, Mary said only the shepherds came and I don't think they smelled of incense...

Matthew: You lack poetry, buddy.

Philip: And you're full of fantasy.

Matthew: No, Philip. Our prophets had written about Jesus. All the early prophecies have been fulfilled in our midst.

Philip: No, no, you're cheating, Matthew. No king of the orient nor anything that sort came, and you know that.

Matthew: No, I used to cheat before, as a tax collector in the customs of Capernaum, but now, no more.

Philip: You still do, because the story of the star is not true.

Matthew: The truth is like a flight of steps. You're left on the first step.

Philip: And how many steps have you climbed, huh?

Matthew: I dunno, Philip, but I think the real truth is found behind the letters... And that is what I want to write about. For all we know, with these accounts of mine, many will get to know Jesus and they might be encouraged to fight like him and feel that a star shines in the midst of the night... do you want more truth than that...?

And Matthew continued to lock himself in that small room with his writing tool of bamboo, his ink-stained fingers scribbling over parchments, as he wrote for our Jewish compatriots who cherished ancient prophecies, about the news of Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Shortly after our work in Jerusalem had started, the persecutions also ensued. The rulers, the great lords of Israel, the grand masters of the Law, was not pleased to know about our groups. There was one of them, a bald man of short in stature, who dealt with us brutally. My, what a heartless fellow!... He waged war on us, he dragged us before the tribunals and wished to get rid of all of us "Christians." This was how we began to be called in Antioch, until that little word stuck, in all parts of the world. As I have said, that man made life miserable for us. Later on, when God toppled him down from his horse and opened his eyes, this Paul – as this man was called – put all his effort in the service of the gospel of Jesus...

Peter: But Paul, please understand, we've got to go easy on this....

Paul: No way! The Kingdom of God is in a hurry! Open your eyes, blazes!... You're working here with some groups of stubborn Jews, while over there are thousands of Greeks who wish to see Jesus and know him... A lot of them are converted!... and baptized... but there's no one to teach them the Way!... Don't you agree?... Why then don't you go to Ephesus, to Thessalonica, to Cyprus, to Philippi, to Corinth, to Athens...! The world is great, my brothers, but Christ is greater than the world!

John: Tell me something, Paul. These new Christians from your group, do they know the law of Moses?... Are they circumcised?

Paul: To hell with that stuff! No, they're not circumcised, nor is there a need for it!

Peter: But Paul...

Paul: No! Now is the time to break the shell and get out of it! Jerusalem is not the center of the world!

John: Neither is Rome!

Paul: Of course not! The world is greater than all of these! And we have to sow the seed in all the furrows of the earth! The gospel is for everyone, do you understand? It is for those who are near and far, for the Jews and the Greeks!

Peter: Okay, Paul, okay, but cool down a little, please...!

Paul: No, Peter, I won't. On the contrary, do you know what I'll do? I'll talk to a friend of mine who is well educated and ask him to write the teachings of Jesus in Greek, so that the Greeks can read them. I'll ask him to write the gospel for those who know nothing about Moses, but who love God and seek Him.

And so Luke, that young doctor friend of Paul, and a recent convert to our faith, after having talked to all of us and gathered many data from everywhere, wrote his book so that even the pagans could listen to and read the Good News of Jesus....

Luke: "Others before me have written these things, the way they were spoken of by the first witnesses. I, too, after much research, have decided to write them for you, who love God and seek him..."

Some years had passed. I was then in the city of Ephesus. There, we had organized a group of Christians who were willing to fight. We met in order to share the bread, to share our pockets and to open the eyes of the people. They always asked me to tell stories about Jesus, how he was, how he spoke.... They also asked Mary, Jesus' mother, who had been living with me for many years.... Mary was already very old.... She was about eighty....

Mary: What's that noise outside, son?

John: No one is making any noise, Mary.

Mary: My ears are buzzing.

John: Just like the snails. Even if you take them from the sea, they still keep the sound of the waves inside

their shells. You're here, in Greece, Mary... but your heart wanders through the sea of Galilee, in Capernaum, in your little village in Nazareth....

Mary: Oh, John, my son!... what can I do? So many memories!

John: Well, speaking of memories, look.... Do you know what the communities are asking from me? That I should write too, or else, all the things that Jesus has done might end up in oblivion..., unknown.

Mary: Well, I remember everything, as if it happened only yesterday.

John: Oh yes, Mary, you do. And so do I. But they don't. They did not know your son, and they ask, they want to know... Besides, when we go, who'll tell them what happened and what did not?

Mary: You're right, John, because now I have one foot in the grave... and this nagging pain in my back....

John: So, are you going to help me?

Mary: Help you how, John?

John: To write about Jesus.

Mary: Oh, my son, but my memory is already failing me. I don't even remember what my name is...!

John: But Mary, I thought you said you remember everything?

Mary: Old people like us, say a lot of things.... Go ahead, John, begin writing and tell me later on....

I met with the members of the community and between praying and thinking among ourselves, we began to put in writing our experiences and faith in Jesus.

John: Hey Mary, open your ears and listen to this. Tell me what you think about it...! We just came up with the first page.

Mary: Let's see, John.... I'm curious to know what you've written about Jesus.

John: Hear this.... Ehem.... "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the One who is the Word was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him and without him, nothing came to be." Okay, what do you think, tell me?

Mary: Read it again, John.... I got lost....

John: Listen Mary.... "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

Mary: What are you talking about, young man?

John: The Word is your son, Mary!... The Word, the Word made flesh, the fullness of Life!... Do you understand?

Mary: Oh, John, don't you think that's a little way up...?

John: How I wish I could go higher, Mary!... The Moreno's life was so great, so important, so...! Know what, Mary? I can't find the right words to describe him.

Mary: Then don't describe him.

John: Oh, yeah?... So what'll I write then?... That God is good and that we ought to love one another?... Is that what I shall write?

Mary: That's it... what else? When you become as old as I am, John, you won't be needing so many words, you'll see....

John: No, no, no. I want to write everything that happened, from that first day in the Jordan, when skinny Andrew and I met the Moreno for the first time and spent the whole afternoon conversing and joking with him... I want to write everything, Mary, so that all people in the world may know who your son was...

Mary: If you do, John, then, you'll never hear the end of it... When the well is deep, there'll always be water to drink.

Yes, Mary was right. Mark and Matthew, Luke and I, wrote many things about Jesus. But if everything were written about him and what he did, all the books in the world could never hold it all!

While we have documents written by Paul about himself, and which have remained intact up to the present, we have not a single line about Jesus written in his own handwriting. About thirty years had passed after his death when some of his disciples began to write about Jesus. During all this time, his

words and deeds had been passing from one mouth to another. The members of the communities who had known him personally commented on them. Said commentaries were transmitted to other people who were interested in knowing something about the famous prophet. Beyond the frontiers of Israel, it was indispensable to translate the words of Jesus into Greek, the most commonly known language all over the world then. Suffice it to say that the culture of a people is basically expressed in their language. From Aramaic to Greek, the words of Jesus naturally changed, somehow. There are Aramaic words that are not exactly translated into Greek or vice-versa. All this should tell us that an outright “to the letter” (literal) adoption of what is written in the four gospels as exactly uttered by Jesus’ lips is a historical error, which may be hazardous to the maturation or full growth of the faith.

During the first years, it was enough to depend on oral tradition. That is to say, the good news announced by Jesus was transmitted by words. Since the first Christians were not men “of letters,” they did not think of putting anything in writing. But when the communities began to spread through other countries or when the disciples and the men and women of the first Christian generation eventually passed away, they began to feel the need to preserve what they had seen and heard about Jesus. Thus, the birth of the gospels. Aside from the four gospels in the Bible, a lot more were written, with some texts filled with “marvellous” and “strange” stories that try to magnify the figure of Jesus. The others were not faithful to the first tradition, as they distorted, exaggerated and changed what had really happened. That is why the first Christian communities decided that of all those writings, the only valid ones were the four gospels that we read in the Bible today.

“Gospel” is a Greek word which originally meant the gratuity (tip) given to the messenger bringing the good news to someone. Later on, it came to mean the good news itself. The gospels (the good news of Jesus) are not biographical, since they are not intended to simply give an account of the life of an important man, his deeds and his character. If these were so, then they would have been incomplete. Neither are they books “of memoirs” to keep alive the memory of an important character. Neither are they pamphlets that seek to excite the public with the doctrine of a master, a sage or a philosopher. They would have been lousy and repetitive readings. The gospels were written principally for the communities to have faith in Jesus, so that through this faith, they would be committed to take the very same way (path) taught and lived by him. These are basically the framework of catechesis, of “evangelization,” based naturally on the words and deeds of Jesus, but with emphasis on what can be done to help the community better. They make no mention of what is not relevant to this objective. Some even “create” episodes on their own, some events, based not on the written word but more on the “spirit” of Jesus. This explains why the four gospels are not the same, why there are stories appearing only in some of them, why some scenes are narrated with more details, while others are not, etc.

Neither should we think that it was only one person – Matthew, Mark, Luke or John – who had written the integral text of each gospel. That a gospel is attributed to each one of them tells us to what tradition this text belongs, which communities it emerged from, what its “school” was, the teaching transmitted to the readers, etc. One must likewise bear in mind that not one of the first writings had reached us in the original handwriting of their authors. The very first copies of the gospels were written in papyrus, a kind of paper made from leaves of aquatic plants, which is preserved only in dry and warm climates. In the process of transmittal from hand to hand, from one country to another, these pieces of paper were damaged and some were lost permanently. Meanwhile, more and more copies had been obtained (with possibilities for committing errors), and which have reached us to date. Then, after four hundred years, this problem was considerably solved with the use of parchment (sheepskin), a type of paper made from animal skin. At present, more than seventy pieces or even pages from the primitive papyrus have been found and preserved. From the parchment (sheepskin) writings, a lot more of the original pages have been kept.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK. — This is the oldest of the evangelical texts, and has been attributed to Mark, Peter’s friend, since the Second Century. That is why it has been understood that Mark is writing in this text the catechesis provided him by Peter and which he “interpreted” later. The gospel was written in Greek, about 30 to 50 years after Jesus’ death. Mark utilizes a very primitive Greek language, less elegant

and more simple than the Greek of others. His text is the most spontaneous of all, the least "thought out." Mark's gospel served as the basis for the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which were more carefully and elaborately written. It is centered on the account of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. From here centers the drama of the story that is being told. The beginning of the gospel is a preparation to get to this essential point. The life of Jesus does not appear as that of a man who has everything planned beforehand.

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW. — This was estimated to have been written between seventy five to ninety years after the death of Jesus. An analysis of this text will show that it was certainly written by a Jew who was very knowledgeable in Greek and who had some educational training, a man who had to be like Matthew. This text is attributed to Matthew since the year 140 BCE. Matthew was the publican (tax collector) who collected taxes in Capernaum. The text was written after that of Mark, and is largely based on the latter's gospel. He perfects the crude, literary style of Mark. He also adds a lot of new materials to the text. More than half of Matthew's account is not found in Mark's. The Greek language employed by Matthew is much more educated than what was utilized by Mark, although the constant use of phrases in Aramaic was evident. Although the original that we know is written in Greek, this gospel was intended for the Jewish community. That is why Matthew often cites texts from the OT, gives much importance to the announcements of the old prophets of Israel. The whole gospel seeks to convince the lectors that Jesus is the Messiah awaited for centuries by the people of Israel. Matthew is most interested in anything "Jewish": the polemics with the pharisees and the scribes, criticism on Jewish nationalism, the law, the rituals... His writings are harsh toward racism and the legalistic mentality of his countrymen. It is a very catechetical text. Matthew is more concerned in narrating what happened, in explaining the teachings that the community could benefit from each event. That is why he always looks for its "moral lesson," incorporating this freely, putting it in the mouth of Jesus to give more authority to what the gospel wants to teach to the Christians.

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE. — This text was attributed to Luke toward the end of the Second Century. Luke is a physician and a friend of Paul (Col 4:14), who was also the author of the book of Acts of the Apostles. The gospel of Luke was written more or less at the same time as that of Matthew. It is not addressed to the Jews nor to the people influenced by Jewish culture. It is a catechesis for the pagans, for the foreigners, for people with Greek culture and mentality. That is why Luke sets aside some topics of Jewish orientation and highlights those others with relation to communities to whom the text is directed. The wealth of his vocabulary and his facility in constructing his phrases shows his great mastery of the Greek language, much more than Matthew and Mark. He is a great writer. He plans his writing, being the only one who provides "reasons" in the beginning of the text (of Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-2). Although he comes after Matthew and Mark, he utilizes a lot of materials which are not found in the other two gospels. Luke wanted to write a "history of salvation," and he is the only one who calls Jesus "savior." He is, interested in giving emphasis on the social and human aspects, which, after Jesus, can possibly bring about a new history and a new man. He gives enormous importance to the last journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, making it the focus of his whole text. Jerusalem appears in his writing as the historical and geographical center where the history of the Church unfolds. It is the most "social" of the four gospels. The powerful, the exploiters of the poor are well portrayed and harshly condemned in his gospel.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN. — This gospel has always been regarded as a separate text, since it is entirely different from the other three. It was written approximately at the same time as that of Matthew and Luke, between seventy-five to ninety years after the death of Jesus. Everything seems to indicate that the author was a very direct witness of the life of Jesus on account of the so many small and exact details that only he is aware of. In all probability, John, the son of Zebedee, a fisherman from Capernaum, is considered to be the author of this text, although it could also be a disciple who was very close to him. Tradition also says that the text was written in Ephesus, where, apparently, John, in the company of Mary, Jesus' mother, spent the last years of his life. In any case, the author of this gospel "thinks" in Aramaic, even if he writes in Greek. The readers to which this text is addressed are the Jews who are so familiar with the environment in Palestine, and at the same time, the foreigners, who need a detailed explanation on

the Jewish customs that are totally strange to them.

Unlike in the three gospels, this text has no diversity of topics. Only one topic is developed in different ways: God definitely reveals himself in Jesus. Jesus is God-sent, who tells us his plan for the history of mankind and for each individual person. This text focuses on the end of the ancient religions, ancient worships, ancient ideas about God, and the beginning of something entirely new, a new form of relationship between God and humans. He is the evangelist who cites the OT least, but is most profoundly influenced by the texts of the Scriptures, by the prophets and by the story of the Exodus. His gospel is most rooted in Jesus, appearing principally as the fountain of Life, who is powerful over death.

The first Christian communities from where these texts originate underwent a process, taking root from the death and resurrection of Jesus, and which we are precisely aware of, by way of the gospels. This is a process that must be relived, in one way or another, in every Christian. In Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, they saw Christ, the Messiah (that is why they started calling him Jesus Christ) and they saw the son of God. This was the prophet who proclaimed God's justice which therefore cost his life, and whom they experienced alive in the community. In the gospels' narration, there seems to be a combination of these two levels: 1) the "history" of Jesus and 2) the "confession of faith" of the community in Jesus Christ. These are two planes which we must be able to differentiate well, so that we may experience in ourselves the same process undergone by the early Christians, which is no less than the growth of faith into maturity.

How did the first Christians, who had eaten with Jesus, heard his jokes, slept with him, gotten tired like him, known his village and talked with his parents, experience in him the definitive revelation of God who is not seen nor touched? It was a long process. First, they discovered an important message in the words they heard from Jesus. Then his death disconcerted them: they felt then that he was a great idealist, who "failed" like the others.... After this, came their experience of the Passover, which confused them more. They saw Jesus, they experienced him alive. They claimed and maintained before the rest the assurance that Jesus was alive. As they continued to discuss among themselves, sharing this experience with others, announcing it in other countries, they eventually understood the meaning of it all: God was in Jesus, the God they believed in, but whom they had never seen; this God revealed Himself to them in Jesus. So, they "confessed" their faith: Jesus is Lord, the Messiah, the Word of God, his beloved Son... Having started to live those values of the gospel in the communities, to share and to pray together, they experienced all the more that the life of Jesus continued in them and through them, to bring hope to others. They began to fight and die for what Jesus had fought and died – in God's name, in whom Jesus had taught them to believe: the Father. The faith of those fishermen became the leaven in the dough, the salt of the earth, the light in darkness and therefore transformed the world.

Going back to the origins of Christianity by learning the faith of the apostles and the first Christians is indispensable. It is our hope that Jesus will continue to resurrect in each one of those who commit themselves to sharing, and that he will resurrect anew in men and women who will one day sit at God's banquet table, men and women who no longer hunger nor thirst for justice, because the Kingdom he had announced shall have come.

(Jn 21:24-24)