

The door of smallness

Advent 2024 – III Meditation

We began our Advent journey under the guidance of the prophets and their voices, which bring light and order to our journey. We first walked through the door of wonder, in order to admire the seeds of the Gospel in the world and in history. We then walked through the door of trust, in order to return to journeying towards others with a respectful and open heart. Today, in the final meditation, we wish to cross the threshold of a last door, perhaps the most important one, in light of the fact that Christmas opens the Holy Year of the Jubilee: the door of smallness.

1. Converting our gaze

As we leaf through the Old Testament and the New Testament it becomes increasingly clear that smallness is a common thread in the events and revelations of the history of salvation. At first glance, this dimension appears to be part of human frailty, something we often deem irrelevant or inappropriate. However, to the eyes of God, smallness is precious and significant.

We see this, for example, in some writings about the “call”, as in the case of Gideon, who believed he was inadequate for the vocation he had received from the Lord.

And the Lord turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Mid’ian; do not I send you?” And he said to him, “Pray, Lord, how can I deliver Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manas’sseh, and I am the least in my family.” (Judges 6:14-15)

Then there is Samuel’s call. After picturing Saul as a strong king with a well-built physique, he was forced to change his perspective, in order to recognize David as the one chosen by God.

And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen these.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and fetch him; for we will not sit down till he comes here.” And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. And the Lord said, “Arise, anoint him; for this is he.” (1 Samuel 16,10-12)

There are many passages in which God persists in showing us that our smallness is the place in which His choices and promises can be achieved. Some of these passages are proclaimed precisely during Advent, such as the one from the Prophet Micah.

*But you, O Bethlehem Eph'rathah,
who are little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)*

Or the dream visions of the Prophet Isaiah.

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)*

*Fear not, you worm Jacob,
you men of Israel!
I will help you, says the Lord;
your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. (Isaiah 41:14)*

*The least one shall become a clan,
and the smallest one a mighty nation;
I am the Lord;
in its time I will hasten it. (Isaiah 60:22)*

Or even, the sweet and compassionate voice of the Prophet Amos.

*"O Lord God, forgive, I beseech thee!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!" (Amos 7:2)*

Delving deeper into the Scriptures and focusing our spiritual gaze on the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, we discover that smallness is not merely a characteristic that is mysteriously in harmony with God's design, but also a way in which the essence of the Almighty is manifested. Indeed, He reveals himself as a discreet and invisible presence in reality: from the Spirit that was "moving over the face of the water" (*Genesis 1:2*), to the "still small voice" (*1 Kings 19:12*) in which Elijah recognized God's true presence.

These signs of smallness become certainties in the Birth of the Son of God, who appears in the fragility of a newborn, recognized by shepherds and adored by the Magi. As Saint John highlights in the prologue to his Gospel, God's presence in our human flesh is so "small" that it could go unnoticed. Thus, it can be welcomed only by whoever can recognize it.

Jesus' preaching was always accompanied by clear and profound invitations to recognize smallness as an essential element to understanding and welcoming the Kingdom of God. He stresses that only those who know how to make themselves small, humble and available can be in harmony with the mystery of the Kingdom. This smallness is neither a limitation nor a shortcoming, but an inner disposition that allows us to perceive God's presence and cooperate with His design of love.

Jesus calls us to recognize the Kingdom of God in the silence and humble strength of a seed that sprouts, and grows slowly in everyday life, not in loud and eye-catching expressions. It is a meek and often hidden presence that develops gradually and requires eyes that can see with wonder and an open and trusting heart. To welcome this dimension means to recognize that God takes action with patience, without rushing, allowing His work to be fulfilled, while respecting our freedom.

Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 18:4)

It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. (Mark 4:31)

In one of the Psalms from the Liturgy of the Hours, the mystery of the smallness of God and of our own smallness, is intertwined with a verse that is difficult to translate [into Italian].

*Thou hast given me the shield of thy salvation,
and thy right hand supported me,
and thy help made me great.* (Psalm 18:35)

The most recent translation of this verse used by the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI) replaces "thy help made me great" with "thou hast heard me and made me great". The Hebrew root used in the Masoretic Text may in fact be related to the verb "to respond", in which case, the psalmist is thanking God for hearing his prayer and making him great.

There is, however, another possible interpretation, which could be very pertinent to our journey. It points to a different Hebrew root alluding precisely

to “smallness” and “poverty”. Based on this theory, a different translation of the text can be proposed:

*Thou hast given me the shield of thy salvation,
and thy right hand supported me,
and thy making thyself small has made me great.*

These words express a profound and moving truth that reveals the mysterious bond between the Creator’s humility and our human condition. It is as though the passages are showing us that God’s true greatness is His ability to lower Himself to meet our smallness, imbuing it with trust and accompanying its growth.

The legitimacy of this translation is not just grammatical, but also theological. There is no need for grand explanations to understand that this verse could be interpreted by us Christians as the happy and prophetic summary of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word: God emptying Himself into the form of our human flesh, for us and for our salvation. This is the image Saint Paul portrays in his hymn to the Philippians, when he states that Jesus Christ, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (*Philippians* 2:5-7).

The idea of the divine becoming small was also present within Jewish mysticism, in Isaac Luria’s theory of the *Tsimtsum*, dating back to 500. This Jewish word means “contraction” or “withdrawal”, and describes the cosmic process by which God, infinite and without limits, “retracted” in order to make room for creation. Before creation, there was only infinite divine light. Through the *Tsimtsum*, God limited Himself, creating an empty space in which the world could exist. This process expresses the paradox of divine presence and absence. God conceals Himself to give humans freedom, but He remains immanent.

Described this way, smallness is not only a measure that conceals a secret greatness, nor a static condition in which we may feel more or less peaceful. It is also a conscious choice, led by the desire to create authentic relationships, in which we recognize the other’s right to exist, breathe and express themselves freely. Smallness is a gesture of humility that opens spaces for encounter, allowing everyone to be themselves, without imposing themselves on others or overriding their uniqueness.

2. Making oneself smaller

In order to explore this destiny of smallness, which calls us to choose and embrace what is perhaps the most delicate and distinctive feature of our

likeness to God, we can attentively reread Matthew's famous parable (25:31-46), the so-called "last" or "universal" judgment, interpreted evocatively by the Master, Michelangelo, in his huge fresco behind the altar of the Sistine Chapel.

This teaching with which Jesus invites the disciples to reflect on the bond between their daily actions and eternal life, has always been understood as a great reference to the theme of love of neighbour, the nerve center of the entire Gospel. While this emphasis of the parable is irrefutable, it is not quite as easy to understand some of the details in the text in which another profound meaning is hidden.

"When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left." (Matthew 25:31-33)

According to the most solid interpretation, Jesus' return as the Son of man – that is, as a judge – at the end of time will be a moment in which everyone's life will finally be judged on the basis of the parameter of fraternal love. On the right of the Shepherd will happily go all those who had compassion for their neighbours.

"Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'" (Matthew 25:34-36)

On the left, instead will be those who closed themselves off to others, giving up on making the gestures required for fraternal love and human piety.

He later says to those on the left: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me" (Matthew 25:41-43).

A study of the characters in this parable reveals a surprise: The evangelist Matthew uses the term "people" (*ethnos*) to refer to gentile pagans, those who were unfamiliar with Israel's tradition. This is significant because Matthew writes for a Christian community with Hebrew origins that lived in a border territory with pagans, who were unfamiliar with the faith of Israel and that of the Gospel of Christ. Some questions were probably being asked in this

community: How will the other peoples who did not yet encounter and welcome the mystery of Christ receive salvation on the last day?

Starting with this question, we understand that the aim of the parable is not to reveal how the last judgment will unfold, but rather to announce that all the people who still have no knowledge of the Gospel can be equally judged and saved, via objective and shared criteria. The parable should thus not be read as a teaching that clarifies for Christians how one can be saved or damned. After all, a child of God should already know the answer: by loving or not loving our neighbour as ourselves, even when the other is our enemy. Rather, the parable aims to remind Christians that even those who did not hear the word of the Gospel can be saved, simply by paying attention and loving their “lesser” brothers.

At this point, there is another surprise. Precisely these “lesser brothers” are the figures of the parable with which Christians should be able to identify. In the Gospel of Matthew, in fact, this expression alludes (almost) always to Christ’s disciples who, embracing the logic of the Master, have discovered the art of putting themselves in second place, to make the other emerge. A significant example in the history of the Church, which bears witness to this understanding of smallness as a lifestyle, is that of the *friars minor*, the religious family born in the Middle Ages thanks to the evangelic experience of Saint Francis. With their name and even more with their witness, the world was able to see smallness chosen freely, in which the possibility of fraternal love is manifested.

If it is right to hope that one day all people will be able to enter the Kingdom through charity towards “the least of the Lord’s brothers”, then a great, even serious, responsibility for Christians follows. The primary task of the Church is not simply to do good to others, but to allow others to do so, thus expressing the best of their humanity. How can the community of God’s children fulfil this task with intelligence? First of all, by making smallness a criterium by which we follow and are faithful to the Lord and Master. This is the first meaning of the parable which should never be forgotten or mystified: before doing what is good, it is good and necessary to remember to make oneself smaller.

Christ’s disciples are not called to be afraid of the last day, but to take advantage of the present to make themselves so small as to be able to be cared for and loved by their neighbour. God does not just want His children to know how to love. He also wants them to feel at ease with the difficult art of letting themselves be loved by others. In his simple and profound existential understanding of the Gospel, Saint Francis well grasped this point and tried to convey it with passion and intelligence to his brothers.

And when it is necessary, [the brothers] should go for alms. And they should not be ashamed [...] And alms are a heritage and a right due the poor, won for us by our Lord Jesus Christ. And the brothers who work to get them will receive a great reward and enrich and benefit those who give them, for everything which men leave in the world will perish but they will receive a reward from the Lord for the charity and alms they have done. (Saint Francis, Unconfirmed First Rule, chapter 9)

We are used to thinking that in the Gospel Jesus asked us to be good and generous towards others. Saint Francis of Assisi's evangelic intuition pushes us further, reminding us that there is something more important to *do*, that is linked to our way of *being*: to give others the opportunity to be good and generous towards us. It is a way of loving that it is even more refined and profound, in which we willingly give the limelight to the other, to allow his humanity to manifest itself in the best possible way. If we were on a soccer field, we could say that the disciples are called to do good assists, leaving to others the joy of kicking the ball into the net. If this way of playing were to become universal, we could all be happy and satisfied, without the need to be the main player.

Making ourselves small and learning to free ourselves from many useless trappings is the main way to heal the profound trauma of fear and shame that marks our humanity. The Bible account of Genesis reminds us that sin makes us feel profound discomfort about our condition as creatures, perceived as a motive for embarrassment. This distress accompanies us throughout our lives, forcing us each day to face the fear of not being good enough and the shame of not being up to the task. We often try to disguise this weakness by taking on roles and carrying out actions to make ourselves feel bigger and more important. The Gospel however, offers us a better cure: stop hiding and allow others to meet and welcome our fragility.

In the introduction to his Encyclical Letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis referred to the famous trip of Saint Francis in Egypt during the time of the crusades, to meet Sultan Malik-al-Kamil, to whom he wanted to bring the Gospel of Christ. In reality, during that encounter, things did not go as Saint Francis had hoped. Although the Sultan remained faithful to his religion, he welcomed Francis with great cordiality and practical charity. Thus, while the "mission" was unsuccessful from a human perspective, it was not fruitless according to the logic of the Gospel.

Francis did not wage a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; he simply spread the love of God. He understood that "God is love and those who abide in love abide in God" (1 Jn 4:16). In this way, he became a father to all and inspired the vision of a fraternal society. Indeed, "only the man who approaches others, not to draw them

into his own life, but to help them become ever more fully themselves, can truly be called a father.” (Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, 4).

Francis did not change the Sultan’s mind, but he presented himself before him as poor and sick, giving him the opportunity to be attentive towards him. This way of drawing near to the other – with disarming meekness – is an act of true evangelization because it manifests a style of humanity that is extremely generative: putting others in a condition to be truer to themselves, embodying the gestures of fraternal love.

Is this not the profound intention of the missionary mandate that the Lord Jesus entrusted to His Church, when He sent the disciples out in twos to proclaim the Kingdom of God? The disciples are called to bring peace, to draw near to people and in turn to welcome the hospitality they receive along the way. It is precisely in this dynamic of giving and receiving that the announcement of the Kingdom comes alive and present, without any imposition, but with their silent power of sharing and authenticity.

Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace be to this house.” And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages; do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” (Luke 10:3-9)

According to Jesus’s indications, it is sufficient to draw near to others with simplicity, to announce the Kingdom. It is important to freely proclaim the Lord’s peace, and above all, to allow ourselves to be welcomed, nourished and looked at in our basic human needs. When this happens, one can proclaim the closeness of the Kingdom without putting those who welcome us under pressure or making them feel that they have to do more than they have already generously done.

3. Becoming ourselves

The surprises in the parable of the shepherd, who divides the sheep from the goats, without even having to judge, are not over yet . While it becomes very clear what the difference between the righteous and the others will be one day – having or having not been attentive to the least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters – it is not immediately understandable because there does not appear to

be any difference between these two categories of people in the way in which they react to the words of the Son of man, seated on the throne of his glory.

“Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?” (Matthew 25:44).

The attempt of the “damned”, who did not have compassion for the least ones, to justify themselves to God for their negligence, is understandable. Their words are the same ones we use when we try to shake off a sense of guilt for not having been attentive or present with regards to someone’s condition: “No way”. However, it is striking that the reaction of the unrighteous is similar to that of the righteous, after having received the praise of the King of glory, for the way they led their lives.

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?” (Matthew 25:37-39).

The righteous seem equally surprised when they hear the news of their charity towards the least ones. Indeed, the use of the adverb, “when”, three times, makes them appear even more amazed – or perhaps unknowing – of what could have been the moments in which they had the opportunity of exercising the love that is required for salvation. That the unrighteous are upset and confused seems very reasonable, but the fact that the good are as well, cannot but surprise us and challenge us: why will *everyone* at the end of time be equally *unaware* of the good they did or failed to do?

Certainly, an adequate awareness of who we are and of what we do is built over time and when we achieve it, it always ends up surprising us. There are moments in which we deceive ourselves into thinking we are good and that we do good. But with the passing of time we realize that a great part of that good was just a way to reaffirm ourselves over others, feigning generosity. And others obviously notice it. On the contrary, we spend a lot of time feeling that there is something wrong or lacking in us, forced to live each day with a strong sense of inadequacy. And yet, others do not see us this way at all. Indeed, they seek a relationship with us because they feel welcomed and valued.

While life teaches us that it is convenient to give up on easy and systematic judgments, the Gospel exhorts us to come out of this tiring struggle of having to continuously measure ourselves up in front of others. Saint Paul said, “It is the Lord who judges me”, and then urged all Christians not to be prisoners of a task that God seems able to carry out just fine.

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4:5)

Those who discover the fatherhood of God do not feel the need to judge themselves or others. It is not because they slip into apathy or indifference, but because they accept that every situation and person are in a process of continuous becoming. Even manifestations of evil that seem hateful and unbearable to us can conceal something good in the process of purification. This is especially true for ourselves, in our constant struggle to accept our reality and reconcile ourselves with who we are and with what we are able to become.

Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back. (Luke 6:37-38)

Jesus' words in Matthew's parable are in this direction and introduce an additional element. The Judge of history does not want us to judge anything before its time, but wants us to finetune our ability to cautiously and compassionately evaluate things, in order to avoid becoming the most ruthless judges.

Put in these terms, the parable of the so-called last judgment, more than giving us the authority to tremble or make (others) tremble, gives us the authority to give up the need to label all those differences or inconsistencies that still scare us, making us distrustful and aggressive. The parable does not want to reveal details of the judgment that will only take place at the end of time. Its aim instead is to suspend all intermediary judgments that can be an obstacle to the development of the understanding that we were made in God's likeness, which we are learning to accept. More than a parable on the "last judgment", it could be renamed as "the end of all judgment".

If it is not our task to judge, we can focus on what really matters: being committed to becoming ever more authentic, letting love be accomplished in us and in others with a free heart. In short, this is the central message of Matthew's parable and the entire Gospel of Christ: to live the call to fraternal love in a gratuitous way. There were many occasions in which Jesus exhorted the disciples to do good without being concerned about themselves, "without hoping anything", in order to be "sons of the Most High" (Luke 6:35).

The humanities teach us that in order to develop confidence in oneself, it is fundamental to feel valued from early childhood. However, as Jesus warns, to

receive continuous expressions of gratitude can be risky if it happens excessively. To live with the constant expectation of recognition limits our relationships to those who can reciprocate. This attitude creates a dynamic of conditioned reciprocation, preventing us from opening up to authentic, free and disinterested relationships. In order to avoid this opportunistic dynamic, there is no other path if not that of complete gratuitousness. It is not just a matter of emptying the reservoir of expectations, but also of having the courage to eliminate all those things that we still do out of guilt or duty, not in total freedom.

This last step in purification is very tiring because it demands the courage to recognize that many of our daily actions, even beautiful and generous ones, are feeding a logic of slavery to which we gave ourselves up long ago. To stop making these gestures that we usually use to buy others' gratitude is very painful because it involves getting rid of all those mirrors we use to check the way we look and our stature. And yet, it is the only way to overcome the fear of not being worth anything and to begin to donate ourselves to others, allowing them to do the same with us.

The mystery of our wonder at God's last judgment thus becomes clear. What will allow us to enter the Kingdom and eternal life will be the *unconscious good*, what we will have done without even realizing it, like a beauty acquired definitively, which we no longer notice but that others can recognize and experience.

The great surprise at the end of time will be to discover that God had no expectations over us, if not the great desire to see us become more similar to him in love. On that day, what will truly matter is not the quantity of good or bad actions carried out, but if through them, we will have been able to accept and become ourselves to the core.

Conclusion

Smallness is a feature of God that both attracts and repels us. On the one hand it causes some discomfort because it unmask the sin and the constant temptation to lift ourselves beyond ourselves, expanding our image. On the other hand, it fascinates us because it allows us to reconcile ourselves with our humanity, which is at the same time so small and so big.

This Christmas that introduces us to the Holy Year of the Jubilee, perhaps smallness is the great prophecy that we could choose to embody, sharing the hope of the Gospel with the world. As the Holy Father wrote in the Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee, with regards to the unpredictability of the future, no one knows "what the future may bring": trust and apprehensiveness, serenity

and anxiety, hesitation and doubt (cf. Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, 1). The Church feels the responsibility of crossing the threshold of the door of salvation, Christ. In him, we have something like an anchor of hope, in the knowledge that with his grace, we can overcome sin, fear and death.

In order to be credible witnesses of this possibility of a new life, it is not necessary to wait to become better or different from who we are. Indeed, after 2,000 years of Christian history, as disciples of the Risen Lord, we can take the liberty of presenting ourselves to the world with less fear and without the useless shame of being “smaller” than we were, and perhaps also of what we thought we had to be to bear witness to the Gospel.

To walk through the Holy Door of the Jubilee with great sincerity, and without the concern of having to be different from what the Church has been throughout the centuries, could truly be a moment of great hope. First of all, for us believers who so easily forget that we are servants of a humble and poor God. And for the world, which we often perceive as hostile or indifferent to our hopes, while in fact it is only waiting to encounter the merciful face of the Father in the fragile but always loving flesh of his children.

We know this well, but we have to believe it and repeat it with humble pride. In Jesus Christ “we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (*Ephesians* 2:18), in order to be “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (*Ephesians* 3:6).

The Jubilee Prayer

*Father in heaven,
may the faith you have given us
in your son, Jesus Christ, our brother,
and the flame of charity enkindled
in our hearts by the Holy Spirit,
reawaken in us the blessed hope
for the coming of your Kingdom.
May your grace transform us
into tireless cultivators of the seeds of the Gospel.
May those seeds transform from within both humanity and the whole cosmos
in the sure expectation
of a new heaven and a new earth,
when, with the powers of Evil vanquished,
your glory will shine eternally.*

May the grace of the Jubilee

*reawaken in us, Pilgrims of Hope,
a yearning for the treasures of heaven.
May that same grace spread
the joy and peace of our Redeemer
throughout the earth.
To you our God, eternally blessed,
be glory and praise for ever.
Amen.*

Father Roberto Pasolini, OFM Cap.
Preacher of the Papal Household