

Going Further

Freedom in the Spirit

The Lenten journey we have undertaken has the purpose of verifying if and how deeply our life is anchored in Christ, starting from the baptismal gift received in a church with the possibility of a renewed existence. At the First Meeting we contemplated the scene of the Baptism, in which a feature of our humanity stands out clearly, but that is difficult to put into practice: the readiness to receive, rather than struggle for what we need for life. At this Second Meeting we will focus our attention on some episodes in the public ministry of Jesus which manifest another attitude, one that is not always congenial to our sensitivity, inclined as it is to be sedentary, even spiritually. It concerns the will to go beyond our aims and achievements, in order to obtain a profound freedom both for ourselves and for those to whom we place ourselves in a spirit of service. This quality emerges clearly in Jesus' public ministry, even in the words he actually uses to reveal the purpose of his mission of salvation for the world.

After his first successful day in Capernaum, Jesus chooses not to stay, but to leave. He does not allow himself to be retained by the acclamation of the crowd or by his disciples' expectations, finding in prayer the strength to remain faithful to his mission: "And he said to them, 'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out'" (Mk 1:38). After having healed wounded humanity, Jesus rejects the illusion of a form of compassion that becomes a need for approval. His prayer frees him from the temptation of omnipotence and from the need to always be available, exposing the risk of confusing authentic service with the search for personal recognition.

Starting from this singular attitude, which emerges with different nuances in many moments of his life, let us review some episodes in which the profound freedom of Christ and his way of bringing salvation to the world force us to reflect and ascertain to what extent our gestures adhere to the Gospel.

1. Don't trust right away

The Word of God immersed himself in the reality and complexity of human life in a surprising way, revealing a truly original and stimulating personal profile. It seems that the divine nature, present in Jesus, had no need to go beyond the constraints of our human nature in order to unleash all its light and strength. To express this rich and convincing anthropological quality, Jesus chose to take a slow and ordinary path, in which he "increased in wisdom, and in favour with God and man" (Lk 2:52). Growing up is not a predictable and mechanical development process, since it requires a great ability to understand the situation and pay rigorous – but not scrupulous – attention to detail. Thus, by submitting to these demands, Jesus grew up to be a simple man, without naivety. Indeed, in the Gospels his meek, humble

heart, tested in the desert, is shown as fertile soil, able to manage the complexity of human relationships without ever taking anything for granted, not even the first proof.

In the Gospel of John, after Jesus had begun to anticipate the hour of his glorious manifestation through the sign at the Wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-12) and a very strong prophetic gesture in the Temple of Jerusalem (Jn 2:13-22), the chapter concludes with a brief summary.

“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name, when they saw the signs which he did. But Jesus did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man” (Jn 2:23-25).

Jesus’ reaction to the widespread consensus that his actions aroused cannot but amaze us. We are all very pleased — indeed, we are flattered — when someone appreciates and applauds our way of acting. Immersed in a culture in which the values of individualism and unbridled competition dominate, we are extremely pleased when we unexpectedly become more popular. The need to be continually and quickly appreciated makes us ready to easily accept every mark of appreciation in our regard: notifications, a “like” or a look.

Jesus seems to be far from this type of acclaim that is too quick and superficial. Of course, as soon as he began to manifest himself to the world, his attractive person did not go unnoticed: many people, upon seeing his signs, began to believe in him. However, Jesus does not seem to welcome this mark of trust with enthusiasm. Although many had begun to place their trust in him, Jesus does not feel that he can trust anyone yet.

Why this distrust? Isn’t this scepticism perhaps in contradiction with that trusting openness that Jesus would later show to everyone, even his enemies? The text says that Jesus behaves this way because he knows the heart of man well, having assumed it in full and endured it in depth during the temptations in the desert. With the choice of Incarnation, Jesus “discovered” that our heart is splendid, because the spirit and voice of God dwell in it, nevertheless it is extremely fragile, prone to manipulation, fickle and fearful. Precisely in these terms, Jesus will describe it to the crowds, when he tries to explain why the Word of God sown in human beings, encounters many obstacles, before bearing the fruit of new life (cf. Mk 4:14-20).

Jesus does not give in to the temptation to accept our facile approval straight away. In this way he reveals himself to be a Teacher who is attentive to giving not only what can please us, but also what is good for the development of authentic trust. Jesus refrains from opening his arms to welcome us immediately in order to arouse a more understanding and mature response. The ability not to be instantly available, as soon as we feel welcomed, is a precious indication for managing relationships, especially at the beginning. Not to immediately accord much confidence and intimacy to those who approach us, perhaps with some enthusiasm, is not a sign of coldness, but of wisdom. It expresses profound respect for oneself, for the

other person, and for what we might choose to live together in freedom. Important decisions require time. They need to be considered patiently and carefully prepared with dedication.

2. Able to disappoint

The ability not to react instinctively to enthusiasm in relationships and to desist from doing what the other might expect us to do can also take us very far. Popular wisdom has already taught us that it is sensible to count — at least — to ten, before reacting to the stimuli that reality offers us. If we explore this reaction in depth, we find that our humanity is able to inspire goodness — perhaps even the best — especially when it actually disappoints peoples' expectations.

“And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon’. But he did not answer her a word” (Mt 15:21-23a).

During his ministry in Galilee, Jesus sometimes liked to explore the territorial borders of Israel, venturing into those mixed areas where often the most unexpected things and encounters might occur. On one such occasion a “pagan” woman, that is, a foreigner, marked by great suffering, accosted Jesus: her daughter had fallen into great interior torment, due to an impure spirit. What drove this woman to approach Jesus, asking for attention and imploring healing, was undoubtedly a feeling of great compassion for her daughter. This is why she cried out, expressing her desperation and anxiety in a serious and unsolvable situation. Faced with this humble and trusting plea, Jesus' reaction is not only singular, but disconcerting: not even a hint of response, not even the charity of a look.

“And his disciples came and begged him saying, ‘Send her away, for she is crying after us’. He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’”. (Mt 15:23b-24).

The disciples' reaction is also ours. How can we justify Jesus' insensitivity in the face of such great suffering? How can we hide our disappointment, or rather our shock, before a way of reacting that seems to deny not so much the divine, but the human compassion of which every heart should be capable? If we listen carefully to the disciples' supplication, apart from their initial empathy in her regard, we can discern a less clear motivation in their words. The request to intervene promptly is not so much motivated by charity towards the woman, as by the desire to be released from the annoyance of her desperate cries: “Send her away, for she is crying after us!”.

This is often the reason why we act quickly when we hear a cry for help. We immediately and readily assume the role of a saviour, not because we really care about the situation of those in distress, but because offering a helping hand makes us feel important and reassures us with regards to the threats that lurk in real events.

Jesus' response is humble and composed, stating with simplicity the existence of certain limits even in his unconditional willingness to be an instrument of compassion in the hands of God. Jesus is not afraid to put a limit to his will to love and serve his neighbour, because he is not afraid of seeming to be unhelpful or irrelevant. All of us, like the disciples, would like to act quickly to remove the great suspicion that after all, we are not needed. Paradoxically, Jesus — the Saviour of the world — manages to bring salvation precisely because he does not need to “feel” that he is strictly necessary, but always and only useful. In fact, Jesus' reaction of indifference, although apparently cruel, becomes an opportunity for the woman to fully express her desperation and her desire for life.

“But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me!’. And he answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs’. She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table’” (Mt 15:25-27).

When we are not taken seriously at once, we all tend to become indignant very easily, withdrawing into ourselves and playing the victim. Faced with Jesus' silent refusal, this woman does not withdraw into her pride, does not lose courage and does not give up her hope. Indeed, she persists and approaches Jesus, repeating with great dignity her express need, without fear and needless embarrassment. Faced with this fine show of freedom, Jesus decides to speak to her, offering a very precise explanation for his reticence: he came to save, first of all, the children of Israel, not foreign populations. In the language of the time, the ‘little dogs’ were the pagan populations, who were not part of the lineage and faith of Israel. The woman is not upset by this objection, but merges it in a more comprehensive observation. Comparing herself to a little dog that wags its tail under the table full of trust, the woman shows that she believes that, in Christ, the Kingdom of God is close to everyone. In fact, it is not the quantity, but the quality of God's presence that makes the difference.

“Then Jesus answered her, O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed instantly” (Mt 15:28).

In Jesus' eyes, these words were nothing other than a gigantic manifestation of that faith capable of obtaining salvation and healing. It is a faith capable of grasping not only the divinity hidden in his Person, but also of hoping that things can change for the better. In fact, it is not even Jesus who has to perform a miracle: the desire of the woman, so humble and faithful, is enough to change the reality of things. Jesus' indifference therefore became a refined pedagogy, which brought out the precious pearl contained in the heart of this woman, extraneous to the promises of Israel, but not to the trust that an increase in life is still possible.

3. Do not demand

The particular type of indifference Jesus manifests is also evident in his ability to distance himself from the consensus of the crowds. All the Gospels narrate the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish, albeit with different theological nuances. The Fourth Gospel's concern is to highlight the great enthusiasm that the sign Christ worked aroused in those present.

“When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said: ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!’” (Jn 6:14).

The crowd recognized the miracle, but as Jesus himself was to say later, they have not yet interpreted it as a sign to reflect on. Everyone is happy not because they have recognized in the multiplication of the food a provocation from God, but because each one went home with a full belly: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves” (Jn 6:26). Thus, Jesus is recognized as a prophet of the Most High because he was able to transform a real thing quickly, eliminating the limits it imposed. But the sign meant much, much more. The message was more beautiful, even more prophetic, because it sought to reveal something possible not only to God, but also to us.

We can all hope and believe that the Lord enriches reality with his grace. But we struggle to believe that our few resources can become nourishment able to feed many. The multiplication of the loaves and fish is not only a manifestation of God, but also a revelation of what our humanity can be through Christ. It is good news that increases our hope and dissolves the habit of considering ourselves insignificant, always in need of external support.

Ultimately, it is precisely this resignation that makes us into people who are easily manipulated and enchanted by every type of influence and *influencer*. Jesus knows this inner fragility well, which should not be filled in a superficial way or in a way that removes responsibility. For this reason, he knows when it is time to take a step back, leaving us to make the effort to start to believe again, even in ourselves.

But, “perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the hills by himself” (Jn 6:15).

The disciples struggle to understand Jesus' reserve. After waiting for him in vain, as evening falls they decide to head home alone, perhaps disappointed by his behaviour. But as they were crossing the Sea of Galilee, the night became stormy and the wind rose violently. What happens around them reflects their inner turmoil and agitation: the attempt to distance themselves from Jesus has thrown them into a much worse storm.

“When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat. They were frightened, but he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid!’” (Jn 6:19-20).

In the heart of the night, Jesus appears to the disciples as a ghost. But the real ghosts are they themselves, still prisoners to fear and incapable of recognizing the power hidden in their fragility. Only towards dawn, when they rediscover the desire to have him beside them, does the storm calm down. It is a hope for us too: in the darkest of nights, when every landing-place seems far away, we just need to desire his presence to find peace once again.

“Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going” (Jn 6:21).

John does not actually say that Jesus got into the boat, but that the disciples’ desire to receive him took them to the destination they thought was unattainable. Of course, as the other Gospels narrate, we can imagine that Jesus really did get on board. But what matters most is to understand that our salvation does not depend on his visible presence: we just need to recover the desire for communion with him, so that his light can illuminate our darkness once more.

The day after the stormy night, Jesus tries to illustrate the profound meaning of the loaves and fish episode, explaining that it is one thing to satisfy the hunger of the body, another to learn to enjoy the food that leads to eternal life.

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6:51).

Jesus’ proposal also seems incredible and shocking to us today. After two thousand years of Christianity, following the terrible internal divisions in the Church (also) on the mystery of the Bread broken in memory of Jesus, we must realize that it is very challenging to accept the relationship with a God who does not want to give us mere things, but his very self.

It would be easier to accept a God who commands, rather than one who offers himself as food to transform us into love and nourishment for others. Sin pushes us to survive, while the word of Christ scandalizes us because it calls us to live by giving ourselves totally. Indeed, the symbol of the Bread and the mystery of the Eucharist constitute the great “stumbling block”: being loved unconditionally means not being able to escape reciprocal love. In the body of Christ we are children of God and called to live as brothers and sisters. Faced with such a great destiny, it is natural to fear not being able to measure up to it.

“After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him” (Jn 6:66).

Not some, not a few, but many of those who were trying to listen to him and follow him that day, upon hearing those words, decided to stop following him. Verses like this fall into oblivion in our memory, or are scaled down by our habit of remembering only positive results and successes. This moment in Jesus’ life should, instead, be remembered and meditated on very carefully. Not only to retain a more authentic image of the face which God, in Christ, wanted to reveal. But also to be able to interpret and accept those — many —

episodes in life when applause and recognition are not the outcome of our attempt to be what we are and to understand ourselves before others.

Failure and lack of success are the best allies for the healthy and holy growth of our humanity. First of all because they show that a true communion of thought and action cannot be reduced to facile emotion, but is the outcome of a long journey of comparison, which also passes through moments of disappointment and differentiation. Second, recalling the times we happen to be rejected by others helps us to take stock not only of ourselves, but also of who we are willing to be.

Then, “Jesus said to the Twelve: ‘will you also go away?’” (Jn 6:67).

Without hesitation, without even allowing silence and murmuring to pollute an already tense atmosphere, Jesus turns to the Twelve, those closest, offering them an unconditional freedom of choice, which perhaps they would not have been able to take alone. There is no irony and no blackmail in Christ's words, only the great firmness of someone who has no need of constant approval to persevere on his path. Jesus seems willing to lose the closeness even of his friends, in order not to deviate from his chosen direction in life. It is not a question of insensitivity towards others, but of a profound interior freedom, expressed in the ability to never ask anyone else — except oneself — to pay the full price of one's choice.

If we read the Gospels carefully, we notice a progressive reduction in Jesus' use of the imperative. At the beginning of the sequela, Jesus dares to address men and women in search of God by exercising the charm of a strong and incisive call: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mt 4:19). Later, in the effort to be faithful to the path of the sequela, it will be necessary to modify the language, in order to inspire not a forced response, but free adhesion: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). From the strong imperative one passes to the delicacy of a hypothetical, certainly not to lower the stakes, but to place at the centre only the needs of a free and conscious love.

Jesus will dedicate one of his teachings to this theme of responsibility in the form of a parable, now close to his Resurrection. Trying to stigmatize a moralism that was prevalent even in his time, Jesus illustrates the demands of the Gospel through a very simple story, in which a father and two sons appear.

“What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today’. And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’, but did not go” (Mt 21:28-30).

A detail immediately catches the eye: neither of the two sons really wants to work in their father's field. But there is an essential difference. The first has the courage to admit it, while the second chooses to lie to please his father. The sincerity of the first opens the way to repentance, while the pretense of the second turns out to be an illusion bound to crumble, leaving

everything unchanged. From this image, Jesus shows what is truly dear to God.

“Which of the two did the will of the father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you, saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him” (Mt 21:31-32).

The heavenly Father does not expect to have children who are always ready and quick to do his will. He is not an intransigent God unable to tolerate and manage imperfections in his plan of creation. However, if there is something that hurts and worries him, it is having children who are not sufficiently free to express their feelings, even their dissent. In fact, when we close ourselves behind the fence of useless complacency, we begin to become slaves, to ourselves and to the expectations we believe others have of us. If we have the courage to express what we think and wish sincerely, we are already on the path to overcoming our limits and opening ourselves to a fuller life. We may not appear perfect in the eyes of others – and perhaps not even in our own – but we will certainly be closer to the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Our desire to remain anchored in Christ, in this Jubilee time, cannot but confront us with our ability to live the Gospel, even in its less obvious and immediate manifestations. Christ, in carrying out the work of the Father and embodying in his and in our humanity the features of his paternal and universal love, has revealed to us some forms that love may choose and assume.

First of all, letting relationships mature by allowing them the necessary time for their development and manifestation then, not giving in to the temptation to trust too soon. This does not mean basing relationships on doubt, but cultivating prudence and gradualness, essential behaviour, so that our freedom can make true and lasting decisions.

From this approach, arises also the strength to disappoint the expectations of others, not out of contempt or to disappoint expectations, but to ensure that encounters may be authentic and free, avoiding the risk of falling into the subtle dynamics of mutual manipulation.

Finally, all this brings us to express our full respect for our freedom and that of others: the determination never to demand anything from anyone. Truth and love do not need to impose themselves, but know how to wait, letting things mature until they develop into free and full adherence. This is how God has saved and continues to save the world in which we live.

O God, our Father, who in Christ, your Living Word, have given us the model of the new man, grant that the Holy Spirit may teach us to listen to and

put into practice his Gospel, so that the whole world may know you and glorify your name. Through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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