

**SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD**



# **Catholic Biblical Federation**

## **TOWARDS THE SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD (21.1.2024)**

*20 January 2024 - Online Conference*

## ***HOW TO REMAIN IN HIS WORD?***

### ***LITURGY, CATECHESIS, CHARITY FROM THE BIBLE TO EVERYONE'S LIFE***

*«Thus, we read the Scriptures so that they may “read us”. And it is a grace to be able to recognize oneself in this passage or that character, in this or that situation. The Bible was not written for a generic humanity, but for us, for me, for you, for men and women in flesh and blood, men and women who have a name and a surname, like me, like you. And when the Word of God, infused with the Holy Spirit, is received with an open heart, it does not leave things as they were before: never. Something changes. And this is the grace and the power of the Word of God» (pope Francis, 27.1.2021).*

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# ***HOW TO REMAIN IN HIS WORD?***

## ***LITURGY, CATECHESIS, CHARITY FROM THE BIBLE TO THE LIFE OF ALL***

### **Introduction**

**Ernesto Borghi**

**I**n this fifth Sunday of the Word of God entitled “Remain in my Word”, starting from a splendid passage from chap. 8 of the Gospel according to John, as the Catholic Biblical Federation we thought to consider this not only as an impassioned invitation from the Johannine Jesus, but first and foremost as a fundamental question for each person and for the entire Church of Jesus Christ, starting with the Catholic Church.

How is it possible to remain faithful to the Word of the God of Sinai and Jesus Christ in such a way that the fundamental value of it, that is, concrete love for every human being and for every element of Creation, is proposed first and foremost in daily life?

Reflecting on the normality of ecclesial life, as we were able to do at the Plenary Assembly in Mar del Plata last April 2023, two facts became clear to everyone, from one end of our Planet to the other: even taking into account cultural, social and economic differences, the value of effective love for others, an essential manifestation of love for the God of Jesus Christ, can be practised if the three fundamental dimensions of church life, namely catechesis, worship and solidarity charity, are closely connected to each other starting from their biblical roots and are realised in this way.

Deepening the radical and historical connotations of the Christian faith, living the memory of the Last Supper and other cultural moments in view of one's daily existence, trying to consider attention to others as the axis of one's daily life: these are the three guidelines of ecclesial existence, if one actually wants to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in the logic proper above all of the origins, as recalled, for example, in ch. 2 of the Acts of the Apostles, when it presents - we are at v. 42 - as basic ecclesial characteristics the account of the words and deeds of the crucified and risen Nazarene, fraternal communion, the memory of the Last Supper and prayer. The consideration of the values emerging from the First and New Testament texts as the basis for concrete pastoral choices in the three areas just mentioned: this is the decisive way to give a meaningful future to the Church of Jesus Christ in our multicultural and globalised societies, a future in which the younger generations can find precisely in a modern relationship with the biblical Scriptures opportunities for ever better humanisation.

In order to gather some cognitive elements and practical suggestions on these topics, we asked three colleagues and friends from three different continents - Mariana Zossi from South America, Eric Morin from Europe and George Ossom-Batsa from Africa - to propose us some reflections from the Bible on faith education, prayer and liturgy and solidarity charity respectively, which can help us in considering these perspectives, ancient and always new, of ecclesial life and, in particular, of our Federation. It has a worldwide scope and in the relationship between local and planetary dimensions it is called upon to play its formative role, from the Bible to the construction of a humanism of the heart and mind in a spirit of collaboration with all those who recognise themselves, in the Church and in society, in this logic in favour of the common good.

Each of the three colleagues will speak in his or her fundamental language of reference, and the text of his or her intervention is available, as the Federation has done in the four previous initiatives for "The Sunday of the Word of God", from 2020 to today, in three other languages.

## Presentation of the interventions

First of all, we give the floor to Mariana Zossi, Argentinean, born in Tucuman in 1966, a Dominican nun and a passionate teacher of Sacred Scripture in various academic and pastoral institutions in Argentina. Mariana's talk, focused on the theme of education in the faith, will be in Spanish and is entitled *Un diálogo que abre caminos de fe. La educación en la fe como cultura del diálogo a partir de Mc 7:24-30*.

The second speaker at our meeting is Eric Morin, born in Paris in 1963, a diocesan priest since 1992. Inseigne au Collège des Bernardins (Paris) où il est également directeur des études. Il est également vicaire épiscopal chargé de la formation. Depuis quatre ans, il est directeur du Service Biblique «Évangile et Vie» et de la revue «Cahiers Évangile». The title of his talk, in French, which will deal with an aspect of the relationship between the Bible and religious worship is Romains 8:14-30: quand la Bible nous apprend à prier.

Concluding the speaker series is George Ossom-Batsa. Born in Dzamam (Ghana) in 1959, a Catholic presbyter, he is an extraordinary professor of Biblical Theology (Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana) and involved in biblical pastoral work with catechists and communities, especially rural ones. The title of his talk, in English, which will deal with the theme of charity in solidarity, is *Matthew 25:31-46: a justice possible for all*.

# **A dialogue that opens up paths of faith**

## **Education in the faith as a culture of dialogue**

### **Mk 7:24-30**

**Mariana Zossi**

“Today’s societies are characterised by their multi-cultural and multi-religious composition”<sup>1</sup>. In this context, says Pope Francis, education in the faith today faces two great challenges that are central to the future of peoples: that the proclamation of the faith enables harmonious coexistence between different cultural expressions and that dialogue between societies awakens peaceful relations, in which an “agapic” space for differences is built<sup>2</sup>.

Is it possible to achieve this? Francis challenges us with three attitudes that we can recognise in the text presented to us by Marquise in chapter 7: the dialogue between Jesus and the Phoenician Syro.

The first of these attitudes is the duty of identity, without ambiguity, being faithful to what each one is, without compromises to benefit the other. Then he proposes the courage of otherness, avoiding considering the other as an enemy; being different, we can walk together as companions, recognising the good in the other. Finally, he stresses the importance of sincerity of intentions. Only a dialogue that does not look for ulterior motives, but proposes to walk a path based on truth, will transform our society into a space of peace and hope for all.

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1 “The identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue”, n° 27.

2 *Ibidem*, n° 30. Pope Francis, addressing Jesuits who run schools, urged them “to seek new forms of non-conventional education according to the needs of places, times and people” (7.6.2013).



of intentions. Only a dialogue that does not look for ulterior motives, but sets out to walk a path of truth, will transform our society into a space of peace and hope for all.

In Marcian's work we read how Jesus carries out a process of teaching his disciples to whom he reveals the mystery of the kingdom of God given to them, not to outsiders (Mk 4:11-12). This teaching is not characterised by great discourses, but by small stories and gestures that are revealed along the path of discipleship<sup>3</sup>.

In the first part of the Gospel, up to the Passion announcements beginning in 8:31, this teaching is continually threatened by the incomprehension of "the twelve". In spite of this observation, we find a few characters who are outside this context and who seem to understand the teaching of Jesus. We would like to dwell on one of them in order to recognise how education in the faith can be based on a culture of dialogue in the style proposed by Francis.

In the section of the loaves of the Gospel of Mark (6:6b-8, 26) there are three texts in which it is evident that "the twelve" are incapable of understanding the proposal of the Kingdom<sup>4</sup>, expressed from Mk 1:1 in the identity of Jesus: the Messiah, the Son of God. The kingdom of God in this first part manifests itself as bread (messianic banquet), healing (there is room for the sick and disabled) and human fullness (deliverance from unclean spirits)<sup>5</sup>.

In Mk 6:52 the narrator tells us that the disciples are "closed-minded", they had not understood the loaves after the first multiplication in 6:30-44. For Mark, the disciples' fear and dismay after they witness the calm storm is an expression of their lack of understanding. Mark's reflection concludes with a sentence that clearly bases their fear on their lack of understanding and the hardening of their hearts. This lack of understanding refers to the miracle of the bread, so that it acquires a new link with the walking on the waters of the sea in Mk 8:17-21. Jesus' blunt reproach ultimately describes their unbelief.

Later, in Mk 7:18, Mark makes it clear that the twelve "do not understand" the last teaching that Jesus had just given them about pure and impure food. In this teaching process, the disciples ask Jesus to explain the parable which is confusing for them. Mark does not miss this opportunity to reprove them and reproaches them for the same lack of intelligence that they reproach the people for. The form of questioning, which is characteristic of Jesus' expressions, softens somewhat the rudeness of the reproach and becomes a provocation for them to try harder to understand.

Almost at the end of this section (8:17-18) he says openly that "they are unable to understand" the mystery of the kingdom. Jesus' questions to the disciples are not rhetorical in this passage, they are direct and concrete. Jesus, however, does not mean that they already have the "leaven" of the Pharisees in them, but warns them strongly against it<sup>6</sup>.

In the midst of this insistence on the incomprehension of "the twelve", the narrator introduces a woman in Mk 7:24-30, the Phoenician Syro, who seems to have understood that the

3 *El camino del discípulo*, S. Guijarro, 13-16.

4 *Ibidem*, 91.

5 *Comentario al Evangelio de Marcos*, X. Pikaza, 227.

6 "The words 'not perceiving', 'not understanding' should remind readers of the passage in the chapter on parables in which Jesus had described in similar words the position of 'outsiders' (4:12)" (*El evangelio según san Marcos*, R. Schnackenburg, 211).

banquet proposed by the kingdom is unrestrictedly open to all, to the extent that pagans can sit and eat at the messianic banquet. This realisation comes in the midst of a dialogue between her and Jesus. The woman is unnamed so that the first reader, and all of us who read the text throughout history as empirical readers, can take up this dialogue as our own and embody the challenge she proposes to us.

The woman knows how to wait and proposes a dialogue that respects the identity of each one, Jesus is a Jew and she is a pagan. Jesus and the Phoenician Syro do not present themselves as enemies, but as possible companions in the kingdom. In this encounter, every gesture and word will allow the girl to be healed (as in 6:53-56... all are healed) and to participate in the table of the kingdom.

The dialogue between them is built on the same tension that we underlined earlier: the incomprehension of “the twelve”. It seems that Jesus in this pericope assumes the role of the disciples, showing the closed-mindedness in which they live: they do not understand, closed-minded, incapable of understanding, thus giving narrative tension to the pericope.

As for the literary form, we can consider the pericope not as a miracle story but as a special dialogue or didactic conversation. In this discussion, it is the Phoenician Syro woman who “defeats” Jesus. The teaching that Jesus wants to put forward, and that readers should draw from this dialogue, is the openness of the mission to the pagans, alongside the upholding of Israel’s privileges.

Likewise, Mark alludes to the willingness of the heathen to believe, a willingness that is emphasised throughout the work alongside the recognition that God’s salvation is always a free gift to all. According to Gnllka “the pericope was always an account in which the miracle was subordinate to the dialogue. The miracle is at the service of the dialogue, and the dialogue cannot exist independently of the story that frames it”<sup>7</sup>.

In the section on the loaves of bread there is a change in the teaching and mission of “the twelve”. Until Mk 6:30 the disciples had lived the “first” mission (Mk 6:6-13): preaching repentance, exorcisms, anointing and healing the sick. Surely they expected to meet the Master and tell him all they had experienced, but Jesus invites them to a new mission: “to give food” (Mk 6:37).

We could say that these are not two different missions because the “bread” that Jesus gives out is not only bread that satisfies hunger (a material bread) but the bread of the kingdom, that is, liberation from evil and healing, expressed concretely in the daughter of the Phoenician Syro. Bread and health are the gifts of the mystery of the kingdom offered to all.

As Marquise’s work does, he places the teaching of the Master before any powerful action of Jesus. The miracle of the daughter of the Phoenician Syro has its proper place in the gospel, which comprises the whole of Jesus’ journey. We see this teaching embodied in the dialogue that brings about the transformation of the two and the healing of the girl.

Where the disciples had failed to understand, Mark places this woman in dialogue with Jesus, underlining her identity and otherness. The Phoenician Syro must overcome two barriers: being a woman and a pagan. The text strongly emphasises these two traits of Jesus’ new inter-

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<sup>7</sup> *Evangelio según san Marcos*, J. Gnllka, 321.

locutor. In the social and cultural context of the first century there was a solidly insurmountable division between men and women and between Jews and pagans<sup>8</sup>.

The reader is left in no doubt that this is a pagan, a non-Jewish woman. Moreover, the story emphasises that it is talking about women, sick women, pagan women.

When Jesus and the woman enter into dialogue, they overcome these distances. She recognises him in his dignity, she prostrates herself, just like the other woman in Mk 5:33 (the haemorrhoid). At the same time she recognises her inability to achieve what she needed, because she cannot cure her daughter with her own strength, and she asks Jesus to intervene.

In this didactic conversation, the Master does not act quickly by immediately granting the Phoenician Syro what she asks for, but proposes a dialogue from which not only she but the community behind the text will be able to understand the mystery of the kingdom. One would expect Jesus to set out and accompany the woman to her child tormented by an unclean spirit and to heal her. But, on the contrary, he proposes a dialogue.

The first thing that comes up in the conversation is the refusal of the woman's request. The reason for this is because she was a pagan: "It is not right to take the children's bread and give it to little dogs". This v. 27 is a clear refusal that gives no reason to expect her to change her position later on. It would be unjust to deprive the children of bread and give it to the dogs. The image leads us to the common table at which they eat and where only the sons (the Jews) are gathered<sup>9</sup>.

The words of Jesus are a manifestation of the law and theology of his people.

To these words of Jesus the Phoenician Syro responds with great respect and creativity. She simply expresses what Jesus had been teaching and announcing to "the twelve": it is possible that not only the Jews can eat, be healed and receive the mystery of the kingdom, but all those who need it.

The woman says it clearly: "even the little dogs under the table eat of the crumbs that the children drop". Following the image used by Jesus, the pagan woman understood what the disciples had failed to understand after the multiplication of the loaves<sup>10</sup>.

The leftovers collected in the baskets in Mk 6:43 could be distributed to others: "the little dogs under the table receive the children's crumbs".

The Greek term ψυχίων points to the small size of bread that can fall from the table. The unthinkable response of the Phoenician Syro contains a theological statement: the heathen (πρῶτον χορτασθῆναι τὰ τέκνα without detriment to the privileges of Israel) attain salvation<sup>11</sup>.

The request is not for the future (when the children are satisfied...), but for the present, for this very moment in the urgency of his daughter's healing.

The Master is convinced by the woman's words and confesses: "By this word you have spoken, go! Your daughter is healed" (7:29). Jesus learns from the woman that he is "a uni-

8 Paul presents these differences in his letters (Gal 3:28 and Rom 10:12).

9 *Evangelio según san Marcos*, J. Gnllka, 325.

10 *El camino del discípulo*, S. Guijarro, 93; *Comentario al Evangelio de Marcos*, X. Picaza, 282.

11 *El evangelio según san Marcos*, R. Schnackenburg, 193; *El camino del discípulo*, S. Guijarro, 92.

versal Κύριος”: the banquet of shared bread is now open to all. Thus he overcomes the wall between Jews and pagans thanks to the faith of a pagan mother in anguish for her daughter.

In granting the woman’s request, Jesus advances the teaching of “the twelve” as well as that of the community to which Mark speaks: the bread is not only for them but for all those who want to be open to the proposal of the kingdom of God. “The woman becomes the prototype of the believing pagans who, after Passover, receive the gospel, as opposed to the Jews who reject it. The woman who never doubted in her trust sees her healing confirmed when she comes to her house”<sup>12</sup>.

This pericope opens the way to the multiplication of the loaves in pagan territory (Mk 8:1-9). Not only can the leftovers be kingdom food for the pagans, but they themselves can sit at the table and eat of the blessed bread. It is very significant that from a dialogue in which the identities and differences of a Jew and a pagan were respected, the understanding of the latter made this openness possible. A dialogue that sought the good of the most vulnerable at the time, the health of her daughter beset by an unclean spirit, brought about this transformation.

The number of the baskets that collected the bread left over after the meal of the 5000 men was twelve (Mk 6:43), one for each apostle, as if to teach that Jesus’ banquet was reserved for the twelve tribes of Israel. In Mk 8:8 there are seven baskets, σπυρίδας, which collect the bread left over after the 4000 men had eaten<sup>13</sup>. We can conclude that this number manifests humanity, referred to by the seven days of God’s creation in Gen 1, or by the seven “deacons” serving tables in the Jerusalem Church in Acts 6. The number 7 is best understood by the statement that some came from afar (μακρόθεν) in Mk 8:3<sup>14</sup>.

Finally, I would like to dwell on the word Mark uses to highlight the girl’s health. The text says that when the mother returns home she finds the daughter τὸ παιδίον βεβλημένον ἐπὶ τὴν κλίνην. Our bibles usually translate, “he found that the girl was lying on the bed and that the demon was gone”. Τὴν κλίνην can be considered not only “a bed” but also a “dining couch”, something very characteristic of Mediterranean culture, where people used to eat reclining. The girl, the daughter of a pagan woman, has received the gifts of the kingdom: liberation, healing and becomes a diner at the banquet of the kingdom.

We have started from Pope Francis’ proposal that education in the faith from a culture of dialogue is central to build “agapic” spaces for differences. I believe that the dialogue between Jesus and the pagan woman brings a fundamental element to the teaching process in the understanding of the kingdom that the disciples were living: the universality of salvation.

This teaching would not have been possible without those attitudes that characterised the dialogue between the two: faithfulness to each other’s identity, the woman’s courage and honesty in the search for truth, convinced of what was most urgent at that moment, the health of a pagan girl, without looking for double intentions.

<sup>12</sup> *Evangelio según san Marcos*, J. Gnllka, 326.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, it is not specified whether these 4000 are male or female as opposed to the 5000 men of Mk 6:44.

<sup>14</sup> *Comentario al Evangelio de Marcos*, X. Picaza, 293; *El evangelio según san Marcos*, R. Schnackenburg, 202-203; *El camino del discípulo*, S. Guijarro, 91.

## **Romans 8:14-30**

### **When the Bible teaches us to pray**

**Éric Morin**

This paragraph from the letter to the Romans offers us several elements to nourish our learning to pray: we do not know how to pray properly, but the Spirit comes to the rescue of our weakness (Romans 8:26); the Spirit testifies that we are children of God (Romans 8:14); through the Spirit we can cry Abba, Father (Romans 8:14). Father (Rom 8:14). In the whole of the letter to the Romans, this eighth chapter offers a description of what the Gospel produces, the power of God for those who believe (Rom 1:16).

This is why, at the beginning of this chapter, Paul presents the Spirit who unites the baptised with the risen Christ, making them sharers in that same resurrection (Rom 8:11). But how can we recognise this Spirit at work? This is the beginning of the passage I propose for our reading.

#### **The Spirit and filial experience**

You did not receive a spirit to enslave you and make you afraid, but a Spirit who gives you the gift of being sons and by whom we cry out: Abba, Father (Rom 8:14)<sup>15</sup>.

So the first experience of the Spirit is that of being adjusted to our filial place under the Father's gaze and fraternal with one another. This adjustment justifies our existence, legitimises it. Like children under the gaze of their Father, our human life unfolds without reason, for no other reason than the Father's happiness in seeing us live.

This is the experience of grace, of chance, of the favour granted by baptism. This filial life contrasts with that of the slave who is summoned to do a chore, whereas children come when they want to ask the Father for what they need. For Paul, life in the Spirit is essentially freedom, but that is another matter (cf. 2 Cor 3:17: where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Traduction TOB 2010. <https://lire.la-bible.net>.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Cahiers Évangile n°202: *Se convertir à l'Esprit*.

## **Liturgical experience**

So that this does not remain theoretical, Paul invites his reader to remember his liturgical experience in which he calls God Abba, Father. Here we have the evidence that the Christian community took up in its liturgy this very special expression that Jesus used to address his Father. Indeed, the Aramaic word Abba would be misunderstood by Paul's reader if it were not used liturgically. It is the Spirit who teaches us to pray by uniting us to the prayer of Jesus. Once again, the work of the Spirit is essentially union with Christ.

The liturgy is a school of prayer because the Spirit teaches us the way in which we can merge with the Son's movement towards the Father. This is true of the sacramental liturgy, but also of the liturgy of the hours. The place of the Word of God, as called for by the Second Vatican Council, is essential: it offers the baptised person the opportunity to welcome with heart and intelligence, and therefore freedom, this power of the Spirit that draws us on (as opposed to idols, cf. 1 Cor 12:1-2).

## **Silent prayer**

There is another place where we can recognise the work of the Spirit in the lives of the baptised: silent prayer. This is what Paul indicates in the next verse: This Spirit himself testifies to our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:16). Our spirit, the spirit of man, is a constitutive part of ourselves, the part through which we are able to welcome the Spirit of God; the spirit of man is that point of resemblance between God and human beings which allows a common experience. A point of translation is necessary here: the Spirit testifies to our spirit can also be understood as the Spirit testifies with our spirit. Indeed, even if our spirit sometimes deceives us about ourselves, causing us to forget the filial vocation that constitutes us, the fact remains that it aspires to this filial posture, from which it never totally loses hope. Paul goes on to say: we groan inwardly, waiting for adoption, for deliverance for our body (Rom 8:23).

So it is in the silence shared with the Spirit that the Spirit gradually raises our hope to the height of what the Father has prepared for each of us. So we have a first definition of prayer: letting the Spirit speak within us to bring to our hearts the conviction that we, who are already sharing in these sufferings, are being made to share in Christ's inheritance and glory.

## **Prayer as a vocation**

Prayer is the necessary space for realising the inheritance, in the double sense of the expression. In fact, to realise the inheritance means first of all to become aware of what it is, to conceive of what we are promised. But in French, it also means beginning to benefit from it. Prayer enables us to experience the Spirit's deposit, the first gift that will not be withdrawn.

The experience of the Spirit in liturgical or personal prayer enables us to fulfil our fraternal and filial vocation. To realise means to conceive and already live. For Paul, vocation is not a choice of life, but the ability to transform the present moment in order to respond to God's call, to make every circumstance a good opportunity to love God and our brothers and sisters.

## **The Spirit comes to the rescue of our weakness**

We'll come back to verses 18 to 22 later. In Romans 8:26, Paul affirms that the Spirit comes to our aid to help us in the weakness of our prayer. In fact, we realise that we do not know how to pray properly. In chapter one, Paul has already defined, in contrast to the pagans, what prayer is: giving glory and thanks to the Creator.

The Spirit is given to effect such prayer in the midst of the groaning of the world; to pray, then, is simply to offer our presence to God for a few moments (cf. Charles de Foucault). Through this offering of ourselves, the Spirit uses us as an entry point to irrigate the world with his peace, this world that groans with the pains of childbirth. The work of the Spirit in the prayer of the baptised is therefore thanksgiving for a future, a transformation of the world whose end we cannot yet see. It is in thanksgiving that the believer opens himself to transforming grace for himself and for the world.

Vv. 18-22 are a rereading of Gn 3 to show that the sufferings of this world are those of childbirth, that is, promised to an advent, that of a filial humanity.

## **Prayer as the rereading of a life**

In this humble presence before God, a profound change takes place in our being. This humble presence can be supported by whatever suits us: adoration, silent prayer, lectio, the rosary, etc. But it also offers us the opportunity to become aware that all the events of our lives contribute to a presence in truth. So there is a spiritual history for each of us: predestined, called, justified, glorified.

## **Matthew 25:31-46**

### **A justice possible for all**

**George Ossom-Batsa**

In the Gospel of Matthew, Matt 25:31-46, referred to as the “Last Judgement,” concludes the eschatological discourse in chapters 23-25 and the entire ministry of Jesus. It is placed immediately before the beginning of the passion account in 26:1. There are strong theological links with the immediate literary context as it reiterates the essential elements in the description of the *parusia* in Matt 24:29ff: the coming of the Son of Man and the eschatological gathering of the elect.

With vocabulary and imagery from the apocalyptic tradition (Dan 7:13; Zech 14:5), Matthew presents the ‘last page’ of human history where the secret of the heart is revealed, and the destiny of each person is accomplished at the coming of the Son of Man, who now “will be delivered to be crucified” (26:2). Not only Israel is brought to judgment but with her, all the nations of the earth (25:32). What was announced in 24:31 - “he will send his angels with a loud trumpet to gather *his elect* from the four winds” - has now been extended to include all the tribes of the earth.

Furthermore, the final judgement is linked with the ultimate establishment of the Kingdom of God, already announced in 4:17: “From then onwards Jesus began his proclamation with the message, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand’”. At the coming of the Son of Man in his glory and his enthronement on the judgement seat (25:31b), He will separate all the people gathered into two groups: the righteous and the evil ones. Matthew alludes to a prophetic image to show how the judgement would take place (cf. Ezek 34:16-17): the separation of the sheep from the goats. This renders the passage parabolic.

The interpretive key for the entire passage is the symmetric double dialogue, each of which presents three important moments: the judgement (vv. 34-36 and 41-43), the response of the judged (vv. 37-39 and 44), the justification for judgement (vv. 40 and 45). We find in the judgment declaration and the response from the judged the same list of six “works of mercy”: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome a stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and visit those in prison repeated four times.

These repetitions are literary devices which Matthew employed to achieve a perlocutionary effect on Christian readers and encourage them to assume an open-mindedness towards



charity solidary. Earlier in the Gospel narrative, Jesus had already requested this way of living from his disciples when he admonished “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48; see also 6:1-4). Besides, this invitation and the works of mercy have deep roots in the Old Testament. For example, God visited the naked Adam and Eve and clothed them (Gen 3:21); God visited Abraham when he was sick and consoled Isaac in his afflictions (Gen 26:1-5).

Several examples abound in the Prophets and the Psalms where God is presented as a Shepherd who feeds, protects, guards, and cures his flock (Psa 23:1-3): “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. In grassy meadows he lets me lie. By tranquil streams, he leads me to restore my spirit. He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name.” Notably, these acts of love of the Father are what Jesus invites his disciples to emulate by being perfect as the Father is perfect.

However, in the Matthean text, we do not have simply an *imitatio Dei* or a messianic program in favour of the poor or an ethical program. Rather the King-Judge identifies with the poor and needy and thus considers acts of love shown or negated to the ‘little ones’ in the community as done to him. The uniqueness and theological import of the final judgment is that the King -Judge considers himself not the subject but the object of the acts of mercy: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” These remarks surprise and astonish both those who practised mercy and those who did not because they were not aware that their acts were directed to Jesus.

For Matthew, the final judgement is universal because all nations are gathered for the judgment. Furthermore, it embraces all people whether they recognise Jesus or do not recognise him, and the criterion is mercy towards the less privileged, who could be said to be the ‘sacrament’ of the historical presence of the Son of Man. In the poor and the persecuted, the King-Judge, Jesus Christ is present in our contemporary world.

Though the judgment is universal in character, it is also personal since each person will be rewarded according to his or her deeds. That the ‘entry and belongingness to the Kingdom does not explicitly require knowledge of Christ but ‘welcoming’ a needy brother has occupied the attention of interpreters. Does the Christian have any advantages? What is clear in the text is that he or she will be judged based on practising ‘charity solidary’ - an act of concrete love.

Important for consideration, however, is the meaning of “‘the little one’ of my brothers” (cf. vv. 40.45), whom Jesus identifies with. Who are these? The materially poor? Or the disciples of Jesus? Or the poor and persecuted missionaries? The Greek word translated ‘little ones’ that Matthew used is found in many other places in his Gospel: In 18:6.10.14, the term is used to describe the defenceless and abandoned Christians; in 10:42, it refers to the poor and needy preachers of the Gospel who are to be heartily ‘welcomed’. Though the word ‘brother’ appears in many places, the syntagma ‘my brothers’ appears in only 12:49 and 28:10 to describe a disciple.

In the light of the above analysis, the ‘little brothers of Jesus’ are members of the community, who are abandoned, weak, considered insignificant and forgotten. More importantly, the ‘little ones’ are the poor and persecuted preachers of the Gospel. For this reason, we retain that the final

judgment re-echoes the affirmation of 10:42 “And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of water because he is a disciple, truly I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward”.

Having discussed the meaning of the text, the question that arises is ‘What hermeneutical journey does it propose for us as readers today? In other words, what is the significance of the text for us as Christians? What transformation is required of us?’

First, we need to realise that the message of the final judgment is addressed to all humanity and the Church in particular. All humans are reminded that there is salvation after death and entry into the blissful blessedness of the divine depends on love in concrete terms extended to the brethren, especially the less privileged in whom we encounter God himself.

As a Church and as Christians, the invitation is to recognise that it is not enough to be nominal Christians but to live the Gospel of love and solidarity expressed in the works of mercy; in other words, to embrace the ethics of responsibility. Being a child of Abraham or a disciple of Christ, therefore, does not guarantee entry into the Kingdom of God. The path of salvation entails a humble ‘listening’ of the Torah and responsible obedience to a God who has become one of us, “to bring the good news to the afflicted... to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18). We are, therefore, reminded that the love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the ‘little ones’ of the brothers, we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.

At the end of our lives, both Christians and non-Christians will be judged based on the love of God and the love of our neighbour. Therefore, the text of Matthew has a universal value both for believers and non-believers. For this reason, the heralds of the Gospel are to make the message of love known to the entire world. Here lies the mission of the Church *ad gentes*.

Two Ghanaian proverbs, which readily come to mind, may help us in appropriating the message of the final judgment:

- **“A good deed is like a tree that bears fruit”**. The proverb emphasises the importance of doing good deeds, which can have a lasting impact on the world. Human life in all its dimensions (spiritual, social, political, economic, and religious), as well as non-human creatures, are positively impacted by acts of love towards God and our neighbours.

- **“When you help someone uphill, you get to the top yourself.”** This proverb highlights the idea that helping others can also benefit us in the long run. As one responds to the cries of the afflicted and persecuted, he or she begins on the path of salvation. Where I want to arrive, I should help others too to arrive there.

In conclusion, the road to the Kingdom requires ‘charity solidary’ where the self and the other can experience in the countenance of each other the weakness of the Lord that requests an embrace of welcome. We can witness to the God who has chosen the incarnation as a means of radical solidarity with his creature *only by being a prophetic and solidary community*.

It is for this reason that the Fathers of the Church repeatedly emphasise in their teaching that you cannot follow Christ without recognising him in the poor: “You who are servants of Christ, his brothers and co-heirs, while it is not late, help Christ, feed Christ welcome Christ, honour Christ” (Gregory Nazianzus).

John Chrysostom, for example, reproaches he who honours the “sacrament of the altar” and ignores the poor. The respect accorded the Eucharist should ripple to reach “the sacrament of the brother”: “Do you want to honour the body of Christ? Do not allow it to become an object of contempt in his members, namely, the poor deprived of blankets to cover themselves. Do not honour him here in Church with precious clothing while you abandon him outside to suffer the cold and nakedness. The body of Christ on the altar does not need overcoats, but pure hearts; he who is outside needs much attention...

For this reason, while you decorate the place of worship, do not close your heart to the brother who suffers.” In the same vein, Pope Francis indicates that the only road to travel for a rebirth of our communities is to become a Church “poor and for the poor”.

# **Concluding remarks and perspectives for the future**

**Ernesto Borghi**

What we were able to hear from the effective and passionate words of Mariana Zossi, Eric Morin and George Ossom-Batsa outlined perspectives and made us reflect, we hope, on the essential relevance of a life rich in trust in the God of Sinai and Jesus Christ, which is articulated according to an ever more fundamental and essential logic: to live in an ever more intelligent and intense way the existential deepening of one's faith in catechesis, in worship beginning with the celebrations that commemorate the Last Supper, and in actions of charity in solidarity towards others. None of these three spheres can be lived in isolation or in poor relationship with the other two. The biblical scriptures say this very often, from the First to the New Testament.

When? Whenever they emphasise how much the development of the human being's relationship with God passes through the cultivation of one's interiority in confrontation with the divine loving care for human beings, made up of deliverance from evil and gratitude for the good received.

How? By pointing out that each person is not made to abide by rules and precepts for their own sake, but to live the love manifested by God not first and foremost with folded hands alone, but by using them openly for the benefit of anyone in need, and by seeking in prayer the ability to realise these actions of solidarity in the image and likeness of the choice of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the benefit of anyone..

From the Bible to daily life: this is the path to which the “Fifth Sunday of the Word of God” also calls, in this beginning of 2024, still marked by bloody wars from one end of the Planet to the other, and in particular in the area of the world that saw the birth of the religions that in Abraham see a progenitor of their identity. In the formative path just mentioned, made up of constant re-readings of the scriptural texts and of one’s own existence, from the texts themselves to the values derived from them many centuries after they were written, a fundamental part of the future of the Church of Jesus Christ and the decisive reason for its existence is at stake, we believe. This awareness must be ever more effective in the hearts and minds of anyone who cares about Christian religious identity and, even more, about the happy future of present and future generations.

Remaining in the Word of the God of Jesus Christ is not an easy choice, but it becomes impossible if one does not know well what it is and what the formidable humanising relevance of this Word is, entrusted to human beings, starting with those who call themselves Jewish and Christian believers, so that it may be the basic reference point of their lives and be the passionate and exciting object of their formative action.

Catechesis, liturgy and charity in solidarity, from the Bible to everyone’s life: let us take this perspective of action seriously, from the North to the South, from the West to the East of our Planet, multiplying the occasions in which we can live the relationships between these spheres of ecclesial life, knowing that one is the Church of Jesus Christ in a radical way when one is confronted with the Word of God together with other people.

And today we have so many opportunities, including educational ones, that not to share this course of action would really be, let’s face it, irresponsible in too many religious and cultural, but above all largely human, respects.



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<https://c-b-f.me/DPD2024-EN>

