

Translated version of I_VIVI_NON_MUOIONO_Maggi.pdf

THE LIVING DO NOT DIE, THE DEAD DO NOT RISE
Assisi, 6-8 September 2001 father Alberto Maggi

Note on transcription: in this literal transcription, the composition errors are due to the difference between the written and the spoken language and punctuation is positioned by ear. The passages in which the recording is of difficult comprehension are indicated by (...). Paul D. Manuel, T. Fabrizio B.

This text has not been revised by the author.

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PROLOGUE (Friday evening)

Thanks to La Cittadella who is hosting this ninth meeting, meanwhile I give you forward notice of next year's subject which will be "Disobedient until his death: the transgressions of Christ". With the current climate perhaps we would do well to rediscover the virtue of disobedience otherwise we will all soon find ourselves with a pulped brain.

This year's subject is very delicate because it touches on an aspect of our life that sooner or later will involve us and involves us in a tragic and devastating way: the death of a loved one.

Unfortunately as we become older we will inevitably come across this tragedy, but what makes it more painful is that this tragedy is aggravated by two factors. On one hand we have the wrong ideas about death and the afterlife, the false ideas that still, despite the biblical and liturgical renewal, we carry with us; it is not easy to eradicate what has been taught for many centuries and what has been taught to us. On the other hand we have to deal with that comforting and soothing atmosphere which is wrapped around the person who has suffered a bereavement; and in this case, as we've said before, religious people are always the most dangerous because they always have the ready-made phrases to try and comfort. When a loved one dies, we hear people say: "The Lord called him/her... God knows how happy he/she must have been to be called!" I still remember an acquaintance of mine who's brother had died; he came towards me saying: "Alleluia, alleluia, Alberto, my brother celebrated Easter with the Lord... God knows how happy his wife and children must have been! So the Lord called him, the Lord took him, he was already ready for afterlife". For the ones among us who are of a certain age it must mean that we really are blockheads if we are not yet ready for afterlife.

Or you can hear others saying: "God takes the most beautiful flowers for himself." Or: "An angel of Heaven". Or, and this is the secret key of a certain attitude: "The Lord wants to have the best people with himself", which means that a good dose of evil is an insurance against premature calls from the Almighty.

Years ago, I lived with an older friar who every day spoke about death; every day he was saying that we had to die; one day I said to him: "Brother Donato, can you tell me why every day you talk to me about death?" And he answered: "Of course; that is because the Lord said that he will come when we least expect him". In so doing he was trying to thwart the Almighty's will!

So we have a choice of ready made phrases and expressions that show that, though there is a renewal of biblical research, certain aspects are difficult to eradicate. We are still, as far as death is concerned, the heirs of the 'Dies Irae'. Perhaps the older among you will remember the 'Dies Irae'. It was a Pope, Pope Pius V, who in 1570 inserted the 'Dies Irae' into the Mass for the Dead; something tragic because he took the text of a prophet, the prophet Zephaniah, in which he described a threatening encounter with the Lord. And the pope transposed it to the moment we meet the Lord at the time of our death. Here's an extract to give you an idea of the climate surrounding the death: '*...That day is a day of retribution, a day of distress and tribulation, a day of ruin and of devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of cloud and thick fog...*' (Zephaniah 1:15). Therefore the encounter with the Lord was an encounter to be feared, a terrifying meeting. And the prophet continued: '*...On the Day of Yahweh's anger, by the fire of his jealousy, the whole earth will be consumed. For he will destroy, yes, annihilate everyone living on earth*' (Zephaniah 1.18).

It is important to emphasize this because we have whole generations of people who are not able to enjoy the good news of the Gospel, that is, the news that brings joy and happiness; because they are

victims of a false notion of God, a false concept of how he operates, people lived in fear of God and in fear of the afterlife; not so much of death, but of what followed death, the idea of God's judgement, a ruthless judgement, followed quite likely with a sentence to go to hell. Many Christians, unfortunately, still haven't been touched by the teaching of Jesus (which is only positive) and of a life of such quality that it is able to overcome death. They are still victims of a mentality which has been influenced by Jewish beliefs and elements of Greek philosophy. These ideas have no right of citizenship in the message of Jesus, but nonetheless have infiltrated and polluted it.

In this evening meeting, after dinner, and tired from travelling, we will cover light topics. Let's start from Hell ... Let us see what we believe and what instead is taught in the Bible and in the Gospel. It is important and interesting to understand that in the Hebrew language the expression "eternal life" does not exist; in Hebrew what has been translated as eternal life means a very long time, but which concerns both the past and the future.

About 200 years before Christ, under the influence of Greek philosophy, the idea of the soul's immortality surfaced. In biblical times the opposite was stressed: death was the end of everything, death put an end to existence. All people, good and bad, ended up underground in a place that we soon shall see. Meanwhile Greek philosophy emphasised the immortality of the soul, in contrast to the biblical understanding in the Old Testament. A preacher wrote the book of Ecclesiastes (also known as Qoelet which means "roof") to challenge the doctrine of the survival of the soul. This book is part of the Jewish, as well as Christian Bible. In it we read: *'For the fate of human and the fate of animal is the same: as the one dies, so the other dies; (Therefore the Jews believed that when a person died or a mouse died it was the same thing) both have the selfsame breath. Human is in no way better off than animal—since all is futile. Everything goes to the same place, (and this is a phrase that still resonates) everything comes from the dust, everything returns to the dust'.* (Ecclesiastes 3.19-20)

Remember Ash Wednesday, before the liturgical reform, when ashes were placed on people's heads? And this was said: *'Remember, man, that you are dust and to dust you shall return'* ... a joy to die for! Therefore this was the picture about 200 years before Jesus: denial of the survival of something, the soul, and the belief that death was the end of everything and there was no superiority of men with regard to animals. In biblical times and up to about 150 years before Jesus, it was believed that when one died he would end up ... where? To understand this we must have an idea of how the cosmos was perceived at that time. There was the earth, thought to be flat. Above the earth there was the celestial vault, composed of seven heavens—an expression that we use, *"Seventh Heaven"*, the maximum -; between one heaven and the other, the rabbi calculated, there was the distance of 500 years of walking, so to get to the seventh heaven one had to travel a distance of 3500 years; an infinite path. Above the seventh heaven, there was the seat of God.

Under the earth there was a huge cavern, a large abyss that had a name which is easy to learn because we will repeat it several times during this meeting. It is important to see how much of some translations and some false ideas have come from this name. This abyss in Hebrew was called *"sheol"*. It's a simple word, but what is *sheol*? It was the largest cave in the earth, where all the good and bad people ended up after death leading a life of larvae-like, shadows which fed on dust. Therefore there was no belief that the good people were rewarded and the wicked were punished, but all the good and bad people, when dead, would end up there. Therefore this is what was believed in Jesus' time.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:10), this division of the cosmos is so described: *'so that all beings in the heavens'* (God's dwelling place), *'on earth'* (men's dwelling place), *'and in the*

underworld should bend the knee at the name of Jesus.'

Therefore in the seventh heaven there was God; the third heaven was a place that we will try to understand. Paul in one of his letters writes: *'I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—still in the body? I do not know; or out of the body? I do not know: God knows—was caught up right into the third heaven. And I know that this man—still in the body? or outside the body? I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard words said that cannot and may not be spoken by any human being'*. (2 Cor 12.2-4).

Paradise was placed in the third heaven, so Paul tells us of his mystical experience, and said he had experienced the heaven that he ranks as the third heaven.

So let's examine what this "sheol" is. We said that everyone, good or wicked, after death, regardless of their behaviour when alive, would end up in this place, where there are no rewards or punishments, but they all lived as shadows feeding themselves with dust, and having the appearance of larvae.

About 150 years before Jesus, the Bible, originally written in Hebrew, was translated into Greek. Some concepts are difficult to translate if you are looking for equivalent ones in the Greek language: the word "sheol," which here indicates this underground cavern, was translated as "Hades". What's the Hades? In Greek mythology when, after the struggle against the Titans, the world was shared between the three sons of the god Chronos, one was assigned the heavens, one the sea and the last one the realm of the dead. The heavens went to Zeus, which corresponds to the Latin and Roman Jupiter, the sea to Poseidon (or Neptune for Romans), and the kingdom of the dead was given to Hades, which corresponds to the Latin god Pluto. Hades is the Greek God of the underworld.

In the Gospels Hades appears only four times; it is important to understand that it means "the residence of the dead"; no one is authorized to translate it as "hell". In a short while we'll talk about hell.

As I said, Hades appears four times in the Gospels. The first two in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke: *"And as for you, Capernaum, did you want to be raised as high as heaven? You shall be flung down to Hades"*(Mt 11:23, Lk 10:15). Capernaum is the city that rejected the message of Jesus, that was so full of itself that Jesus says to it: 'Who do you think you are? Look, you are sinking into the realm of the dead because Hades is the realm of the dead.

It appears again in the promise that Jesus made to his community when he says: *"The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it"*. (Mt 16:18). The Christian community, the authentic one, the one that has welcomed Jesus' message and translates it into practice, has a strength of life that the forces of death can do nothing against it, then "the gates Hades" means the gates of the dwelling of the dead; the realm of death will have no power against the authentic Christian community.

And finally, in the Gospel of Luke, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus: *"In his torment in Hades he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off with Lazarus in his embrace"*. (Lk 16:23). Hades appears only four times in the Gospels and refers to the realm of the dead.

Now here is a tragic problem: it shows how important translation is! As many of you know, I am part of a Bible Research Centre that we established six years ago. We are mainly engaged in the translation and the dissemination of the biblical text at grass roots level. Translation is a very

delicate process, because if you translate a word incorrectly, the whole sentence can acquire a negative meaning, and if we set our existence on a sentence of the Gospel which has been badly translated, all our lives may suffer some damage.

Just think of the invitation of Jesus: "change life, convert". In the past this was translated into "do penance". This unleashed people's sadistic and masochistic tendencies as people read "the more penance one does the happier one is. Jesus never dreamed of doing penance. Just think when a copyist, to Jesus' observation: *'This is the kind [of demons] that can be driven out only by prayer'* (Mk 9:29), went on and added "and fasting". Importance of fasting in the Christian spirituality: Jesus has never dreamed of saying to his disciples to fast. Only the Madonna of Medjugorje still believes in it because, appearing here and there, did not have time to see the new translation of Gospel; so we now hope that she finds the time and then calls on the other Madonnas that appear not to fast! Jesus has never dreamed of saying to people to fast: Jesus is in favour of life, not death. These are only a few examples to show you how an inaccurate or incorrect translation of the Gospel can lead to irreparable damage to people spirituality.

At Centro di Studi Biblici, we are dedicated to accurate translation, and this takes years. In five years of work we only reached chapter 22 of the Gospel of Matthew. We calculate that to translate it all will take between eight and ten years, because every word needs to be looked at.

This need is shown by the tragedy of a translation that has ruined the lives of Christians for centuries. We've said that the word in Hebrew is Sheol and in Greek is Hades. When the Bible was translated from Greek into Latin, a corresponding word was found: inferi. In the Roman world the underground abyss was called "Inferi". The gods of the realm of death were also called "Inferi", which literally means the gods that inhabited the lower part of the world.

The word "Inferi", mustn't to be confused with "Hell". Yet slowly appeared the terrible connection between "Inferi" and the tragic idea of hell. This has ruined the lives of so many people who have not tasted earthly pleasures, for fear of ending up lost for eternity in hell.

The word "Hell" is not in the Gospels. Jesus has never dreamed of saying that there was a punishment after death for the people who behaved badly, but unfortunately this idea was loved by sadistic preachers, sadistic priests and swelled to dramatic dimensions. A couple of lines from a famous sermon by Saint Leonardo of Port Maurice will suffice when with gusto he describes the souls of the damned: 'Look at them as everyone is engulfed in fire, abysses of fire to the left, abysses of fire to the right, above abysses of fire, abysses of fire below, fire in their eyes, fire in their ears, fire in their veins, fire in their bowels, everywhere fire'. This was an arsonist, not a saint; he was a sadistic person who projected his sadism to imagine the pains of the damned ones and he should have been hospitalised in a mental institution.

The term "hell" is not entitled to citizenship in Christian spirituality, because it is completely unknown in the Gospels. I repeat, Sheol, and Hades, and Inferi appear. But they must not be confused with 'Hell'. Do you remember when in one of the Creed version it was said: "Jesus died, was buried, and descended to the dead"? What was the meaning of this formula? It was an exact form inspired by passages in the New Testament and it means that life is capable to overcoming death. Jesus went to communicate life also to all those who had died before him. This of course doesn't mean that these poor souls had to wait for ages to continue to live. This is a theological way of saying that Jesus has a life of such energy – this is the theme of this meeting – that it exceeded the power of death. Jesus has communicated this energy to all. Therefore Jesus did not go to hell, but he went to the underworld.

In the Bible and in the New Testament, there are other words that describe the underworld: 'Tartarus' where the sky was upside down and it was the chasm of the abyss, and then there was the abyss. A word of particular interest is "Gehenna". I say this because of some unfortunate translations in the past- (now there should be no problem about it) - but in the past a few translators confused 'Gehenna' with the word "Hell". This shows how important translation is, particularly in the Gospel of Matthew—Matthew is the evangelist that most often speaks of Gehenna, for example: *“But I say this to you, anyone who is angry with a brother will answer for it before the court; anyone who calls a brother “Fool” will answer for it before the Sanhedrin; and anyone who calls him “Traitor” will answer for it in the Gehenna fire.”*(Mt 5:22). Jesus means 'If you do not change your behaviour you ended up in the fire of the Gehenna'.

What is this Gehenna? It is a ravine to the south of Jerusalem still visible today. In biblical times it was the site of crematoria in honour of the god Moloch. It was a common, a normal practice, that, when a person had to start a challenging task, an activity out of the ordinary, or found himself at a turning point in his life, chose one of his sons—the most appreciated by the god were the eldest – went to this ravine and threw him into one of these furnaces as a sacrifice to the God Moloch. The prophet Jeremiah for example says: *“they have built high places for Baal to burn their sons as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing I never ordered, never mentioned, that had never entered my thoughts. So now the days are coming, Yahweh declares, when people will no longer call this place Topheth, or Valley of Ben-Hinnom, but Valley of Slaughter.”* (Jer 19:5-6). Tophet means crematorium; 'Ge' means 'valley'; 'Hinnom' is the name of a person, and then Gehinnon from which Gehenna comes. Therefore it was a normal practice for them to take these children and throw them into the crematorium.

In the second Book of Kings we read that King Josiah tried to end this cult: *“He rendered unsanctified Tophet in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, so that no one could pass his son or daughter through the fire of sacrifice to Moloch”* (2Kings 23.10). Therefore it was a fairly common practice to take a child and burn him in honour the god Moloch. In vain did the prophet Jeremiah and king Josiah oppose this cult. Certain traditions, certain superstitions are so ingrained in people that it is difficult to eradicate them.

A new strategy was successfully used before Jesus' birth when Gehenna was transformed into the incinerator or dump of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a populous city and during the annual pilgrimages, its number of inhabitants doubled and sometimes tripled. Their waste was thrown into this ravine, and burned. Gehenna was the place where fire burned continuously, and it was avoided by the Jews as an unclean place. Gradually the worship of Moloch also ceased.

When Jesus calls someone “fool” – in those days to call a person “fool” had a different meaning than today: a fool was one who was excluded from the camp, and to be excluded from the camp in those days meant to be going towards death – he meant: “if you exclude anyone from your life, if you exclude someone from the sphere of your life, look, your end will be the Gehenna of fire”. This is not a punishment after death, but the end of your existence.

When an animal dies its carcass is thrown into the Gehenna; the same will happen to you at your death, because all those who exclude anyone from their lives, will be excluded from the life of God; therefore Jesus uses images of Gehenna as a warning to those who do not change and do not accept his message, a message that is completely positive.

In the Talmud - I will often refer to this book, the holy book of the Jews which has the value of the

Sacred Scripture – in the Talmud the Gehenna is also represented as a punishment for the wicked, and the text that follows is important to understand how in Judaism there wasn't the idea of a punishment for the wicked after death for all eternity.

"The Holy One, blessed be He, condemns the wicked to the Gehenna for 12 months. Initially they are afflicted with itching, then with fire and finally the snow. After 12 months, their bodies are destroyed, their souls are burned and scattered by the wind under the soles of the feet of the righteous". (Sanh. 29b; Tos. Sanh. 13:4-5).

PART ONE (Saturday morning)

Last night we saw that according to the Bible death was the end of everything: good and bad, once dead, fell into the underground cave that was thought to be beneath the earth. So, to remind you, this cave in Hebrew is called "Sheol"; it was translated into Greek as "Hades", a deity of the Greek mythological world; and finally translated into Latin as "Inferi". We must not confuse these word with "Hell". This word does not exist in the Gospels.

As we shall see, in Judaism, as in all religions, there is a concept of merit. The concept of merit involves gaining the love of God. Those who behave will be rewarded with God's love, those who misbehave will meet their punishment: this is part and parcel of religion.

Well, if a person behaves well what could be the prize he/she receives if everything ends with death? So it was believed that good and evil were recompensed on this earth; those who behaved well had a long life, a prolific wife, and a lot of wealth; those who misbehaved were punished with a short life, a barren wife and poverty. This, however, was easy in theory, but in practice you could see that the opposite often happened. You could often see that the wicked lived long, had many children and were rich, while the pious had perhaps a barren wife and were poor.

So between the theological claim that God dispensed good and evil on this earth and reality there was a chasm. Moreover it was also believed, as explained in the book of Deuteronomy, that God would not simply punish the guilt of people, but it was a vengeful God who said: "*For I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God and I punish the parents' fault in the children, the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren*" (Dt 5:9), and this served a little to justify the inevitable adversities that appeared in everyone's existence. Even if I try to behave according to the rules of religion, and therefore I am a pious person, a person who prays, I have to pay for something that maybe my father committed, or my grandfather has committed or my great-grandfather, because God punishes people up to the third and fourth generation.

The prophet Ezekiel tried to challenge this view in the 6th century BC by saying that everyone is responsible for his own faults, and therefore God does not punish the children or grandchildren for the sins of the fathers. However this wasn't an everyday experience because it could be seen that some people suffered all sort of troubles despite excellent behaviour.

So, we're in the 5th century and closer to Jesus' birth; in this century there was an author who wrote what may be called a play, a gorgeous play, the book Job that we all know. The book of Job was written to challenge this very simple theology that the good were rewarded and the wicked were punished. Job is presented as a pious and good man upon whom many misfortunes of this world befall. This book shows a disconnection between priestly theology and everyday human experience.

In the 2nd century B.C., much closer to Jesus' birth, king Antiochus Epiphanes sought to force the

Greek culture and pagan religion upon the people of Israel. His changes were resisted and the ensuing persecution created some martyrs. It was for these martyrs that little by little the idea of a resurrection after death was born. At the beginning this was only for the martyrs and the righteous.

In the book of Daniel we read: *"Of those who are sleeping in the Land of Dust, many will awaken, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace"* (Dan. 12:2). It is important to note the fact that, with this persecution, the idea developed that there will be a resurrection of the martyrs and of the righteous; the wicked instead will not resurrect but remain in everlasting shame.

In addition to the Hebrew Bible there are texts that the Jews did not accept as inspired, but the Catholic Church does, where resurrection features. In the 2nd Book of Maccabees we find again, precisely because of these persecutions, the idea of a new and eternal life. One of the seven martyred brothers said to the king that: *"Ours is the better choice, to meet death at men's hands, yet relying on God's promise that we shall be raised up by him; whereas for you there can be no resurrection to new life"* (2 Maccabees 7:14).

The Sadducees, members of the religious authority at the time of Jesus, rejected resurrection as the idea was not contained in first five books of the Bible, called the "Torah", or the Law. To them it was a heretical doctrine. Remember, and it is important in order to understand the thinking of Jesus, that the resurrection concerns only the righteous; for the wicked there is death forever. The doctrine of the resurrection, rejected by the Sadducees, was supported by the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the pious laity who fulfilled all dictates of the law and they were working on this important doctrine for religion, like any other religion: the doctrine of merit, that is man can earn the love of God.

The good news for Christians is that Jesus frees us from this doctrine: the love of God is not earned by the efforts of man, but is to be accepted as a free gift from God. That is why last night we said a little jokingly that we have eliminated hell, heaven and the soul.

Now we will eliminate another erroneous idea that due to the ignorance and credulity of many Christians, has been believed: the theory of "reincarnation". This is not part of Christian doctrine or faith in Jesus. The idea that when I die, I become reincarnated a second time and re-live again; and if then at the end of this second existence I have not deserved to enter in the love of God, I reincarnate again and again, is an error.

This doctrine belongs to religion; but Jesus has set us free from religion, a religion that is based on merit, on man who has to deserve the love of God. With Jesus the love of God is no longer to be deserved, but to be accepted, eternal life is not a fruit of the merits of man, but a free gift from God.

That's why the concept of reincarnation is absolutely incompatible with the message of Jesus and we absolutely cannot put the two things together: they pollute one another. Therefore the idea of reincarnation has no right of citizenship in Christian spirituality; we do not have to gain eternal life through our efforts, but it is a free gift to us from God.

Then Jesus, we finally arrive to Jesus, takes the idea of resurrection from the Pharisee; as we've seen, this is the idea of resurrection supported by the Pharisee but challenged by the religious authority. Jesus talks about resurrection only when he talks to the Jews. It is interesting to see how Jesus in the Gospels always uses two ways of speaking, and we have to learn from his technique and his way of teaching; when Jesus speaks to the Jews, he speaks in religious categories that they could understand, even if he would change their meanings; when Jesus speaks to the Gentiles, today we would call them the non-believers, he never uses religious categories, but concepts borrowed

from everyday life.

Therefore with the Jews Jesus speaks of resurrection, but—as we shall see – he changes its meaning; with the pagans or non-believers of the time, he talks of a life that is capable of overcoming death. Jesus says "*Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life*" (Jn 12:25). The novelty that Jesus brings is that, while the Jewish religion or in any other religion, offers eternal life as a prize to be won for with good behaviour and to be received in future, for Jesus eternal life does not lie in the future, but is for now, in the present.

Jesus says several times: "*so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him*" (Jn 3:15; 3:16; 3:36; 5.24, 6.40, 6.47). He doesn't say: "believe and you will have eternal life": this is indeed the great novelty that Jesus brought us.

Let's briefly examine some of these important texts to understand how it is possible right now to have a life of a quality that is eternal; you know, this is so important that the early Christians did not believe that they would be resurrected, but believed that they already had been resurrected.

Have you noticed that the title of this conference is a little strange?

"The living do not die, the dead do not rise"

This is an expression taken from the Gospel of Philip, an apocryphal text where it says: "*If you are not resurrected first while you are still alive, by dying you will not be resurrected any more*". This means that unless eternal life begins here in this life it cannot become a reality after death. Death does not usher in eternal life, but while on this earth we can have a life of a quality that is eternal.

Hence St. Paul does not speak of slaves as those who will be resurrected, but as those who are already resurrected. For example, in the letter to the Ephesians Paul says "*and raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven, in Christ Jesus*" (Ep 2:6). Note that he says "*raised us up*"; he does not say "will raise us up". Paul is convinced that we are already living the state of the resurrected. But how can we be resurrected if we are not dead? The resurrection does not happen after death: either we rise when we are still in this life or we will not rise at all.

Paul also says, "*You have been buried with him by your baptism; by which, too, you have been raised up with him through your belief in the power of God who raised him from the dead*" (Col 2:12), and "*Since you have been raised up to be with Christ ...*"(Col 3:1). Therefore eternal life is not a reward in the afterlife, but a state in the present. Even now, in this existence, we can have a life of such quality – this is the divine quality - which is indestructible and capable of overcoming death. The term "eternal" refers not so much to the length but to the quality of life This is a life that, since it is coming from God, is of such quality that not even death will be able to destroy it.

There are also passages in John's Gospel that show how in the present we can have a life of such quality that it will not allow us the experience of death. Jesus says "*Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life.*"(Jn 6:54). Take note, I will repeat it until my death: NOT "will have eternal life", BUT "has eternal life". What does it mean: 'Eating Jesus' flesh'? Jesus becomes bread, which means being willing to be eaten by others, that is we eat the bread that is Jesus because we are willing to become bread for others.

Well, Jesus assures us that anyone who makes oneself bread for others, that is, those who put their lives at the service of others, to the good of others, have already attained a life of such a quality that it is indestructible. But Jesus did not stop at the mere fact of drinking his blood - blood means death. To live for others according to Jesus will not bring applause from the society we live in, but it will

inevitably bring persecution because it will always put us on the losing side, the side of the marginalized, the side of those that are clobbered and not those who clobber. Therefore meeting persecution is inevitable – that is why blood is mentioned. Then Jesus assures us that whoever makes one's life a gift to others, always on the side of the least in society, has already now, on this earth, a life of such quality that death can not touch. He continues: "*For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink*" (Jn 6:55). This is what sustains us in discharging his commission to stand by the rejected in society.

It is beautiful but also sad that the only thing that is important in life is the good that one does to others, everything else is wasted effort: think how many people are lost in futilities. The only thing that counts is the good that one does to others.

And Jesus explains this fact of eternal life by saying "*Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person*"(Jn 6:56). Earlier on we have eliminated paradise, but here is what replaces it: the one who lives by making oneself bread for others, already dwells in Jesus, that is he has already entered in the sphere of God and Jesus has entered in him. Whoever lives for others is already moving in the divine sphere. Jesus continues, "*As the living Father sent me and I draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will also draw life from me. This is the bread which has come down from heaven; it is not like the bread our ancestors ate: they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live for ever*" (Jn 6.57-58). Jesus assures us that those who live for the good of others has a life of such a quality that it is capable of overcoming death.

We will try to better understand what these words mean. Jesus continues Chapter 8 saying "*In all truth I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death*" (Jn 8:51): So here we have to change the concept of death, because we see that, although we believe, we encounter death. Then what does Jesus mean by death? He probably is not referring to biological death, the death of cells, but to something else and we will try to understand it.

So far we have seen that the permanence of life through death is what is called resurrection, and according to Jesus - that's why earlier on we talked about the soul - the soul is not something which survives the person, but it is the whole person that continues his/her existence. Jesus does not say "whoever believes in me his soul will live", because those who believe are already living; it is the individual in its fullness, in his person that continues his/her existence in God.

Then slowly we are approaching the concept of death, to understand what death means; according to Jesus death is a transformation that begins already during this life. The beautiful Preface of the Mass for the Dead that is taken from the ancient world, has an expression that is unsurpassed; it says: "For unto Thy faithful, O Lord, life is changed, not taken away". The transformed life is enriched by the inheritance of good that it brings with it. In the book of Revelation there is an important statement which helps us to better understand the meaning of certain prayers that we recite for the dead.

In the book of Revelation we read: "*Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord. Yes, says the Spirit, they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them*" (Rev 14:13). You see what a contrast: blessed - that is, the fullness of happiness - are those who have died in the Lord. You know that one of the prayers that are said for the dead is "Eternal Rest", if this prayer is not well understood it looks like a life sentence: you imagine, resting for all eternity? For goodness sake, it's an amazing thing, but then what is its meaning? The author states that death has no last word on the believer's life, death is neither a defeat or an annihilation, nor an entry to a waiting state, but the transition towards a state of fullness.

The rest the author talks about doesn't indicate cessation of activities, but refers to the divine state. You know that according to the book of Genesis, God worked for six days to create the world, and on the seventh day he rested. Then the rest of the dead people does not mean cessation of all activities, but it means the fullness of the divine condition: cooperating with God in the creation of the world.

So it is not perpetual inactivity. When I was little we were told that the eternal life was contemplating God the Father for eternity: imagine the fun! After two or three centuries one might as well get tired of this eternal contemplation! It is an activity, it is the whole person that reaches the fullness of the divine state through death, and God called him/her to work with him to continue the creation of the universe. Therefore our dead are not only alive, but have become life givers. For Jesus the creation isn't finished: Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "*My Father is still working, and I also am working*" (Jn 5:17), and our loved ones who have died are in the fullness of their divine state, and continue to cooperate with God to the creation of the world.

But only those who create and communicate life enter into this dimension of 'rest'. You heard that the author says "*their deeds follow them*": all the good that we have been able to do in this life is the inheritance that then allows us to continue to operate afterwards. But there is also, and now we will try to understand the meaning, the final death.

The author of the Book of Revelation says that there is also another reality: "*There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name*"(Rev 14:11-12). The beast in Revelation represents power, that is success, enrichment, and the fulfilment of the person through power, success and wealth; the richer you are, the more you are powerful the more you have success. This is called the beast in the book of Revelation (don't tell Berlusconi, otherwise he thinks that John was a Communist too ...).

The men of this system are all alike. There is the worshipping of the head, the leader, the man of success, and all their efforts are towards being cloned in his image and likeness; this leads to idolatry, to become like the head, to be like him, rich, and powerful. The author says: they "*receive the mark of its name*", they have no rest day nor night. This is the picture of many people: those who worship the beast, those who do not put themselves in line with Jesus, do not rest day and night, so for them death is the final end of everything.

So we said that life is transformed after death, but its transformation begins already during the person's lifetime.

I think that this is part of everyone's life experience: a person is born, begins to grow, and up to a certain age - that we could say up to 20-30 years - grows with a balanced growth both the person's biological part, the body, the "flesh", and the spiritual, moral part. So, shall we say, we start from the number zero and grow in a balanced way: both physically and intellectually, and also morally, spiritually. Then unfortunately, sorry but it is a law of nature, after the biological reaches its peak, a slow but inexorable decline starts that will lead to total decay; sorry but unfortunately this is the case, we only need to look at the photographs of twenty years ago, we see that we were different biologically and physically.

So there is a starting point, you reach a fullness and then inevitably, inexorably, there is a slow decline to total decay of the biological part, and then in spite of all the efforts that people can muster, in spite of all your attempts to slow down this decaying, this process is unstoppable.

While the biological part of the body begins its decline, the spiritual part of the individual - there is a separation – continues its growth. There comes a point that this separation is unsustainable. This is very well described by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians: *"So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day"* (2 Cor 4:16).

To the decay of our biological part corresponds the growing of our maturity; to the death of cells in the body, corresponds an indestructible life. Then death will no longer be destruction, annihilation of the person, but only of the biological part; the individual, the person with all his wealth of doing good, continues to grow.

I believe that many of us, in certain life situations, experience an unknown energy that they did not know they possessed. To speak of death, since we are talking about a reality of which we have no experience, we can not use a conceptual language; not even Jesus did that: how can we describe what it is not part of our experience? Even Jesus needed images; there are two main images that Jesus used to talk about this transformation. In John Gospel it is that of a grain of wheat. We all know the expression *"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"* (Jn 12:24).

Through the image of the grain that, by rotting, produces abundant fruit, Jesus declares that death is nothing but the condition that allows the freeing of all the vital energy that man has inside. Inside the grain of wheat there is a wealth of riches that just by looking at the grain one can not perceive. Another example, perhaps easier to appreciate, looking at our fields, is the sunflower. Take a seed of sunflower: it is a dull, greyish seed, not particularly flashy. Look at the difference when it becomes a flower; and yet the beauty of the sunflower was all contained in the seed.

Jesus assures us that in each of us there is a vital energy, a fullness of life, an extraordinary beauty that cannot be manifested while we are on this earth. Death not only doesn't destroy the individual, but it allows the release of all this energy, and power to expand and grow the person to a beauty that has no limits. So after death life manifests itself in a new form.

Then what I said previously makes sense. Mourning the death of a loved one is an event that unfortunately sooner or later will happen during our lives; but be careful: death isn't the destruction of a loved one, but an event that allows life to manifest a beauty which we might perhaps have been able to catch a glimpse of, but we weren't able to experience in its fullness. Death allows the individual to explode in a burst of life that has no end.

We've probably already experienced some of this energy that we have inside ourselves. Have you ever been in an emergency situation? Maybe a sick person in the family needed assistance, etc., and you realized that by helping this person you had found energies, strength, stamina that you never suspected you had? What was that? The loving experience, the time dedicated to service that freed the energy that a person has inside.

We became aware that we had energy, strength, stamina that were unknown to us; and once in place they do not disappear, but are part of our endowment. In death, all these unknown energies are released.

Another image that Jesus uses to describe death is the image of sleep. You know that the term we use in the English language, "Cemetery", is a term borrowed from the Greek koimeterion and it

means "dormitory". Due to Jesus' teachings the place of the dead is called 'dormitory'. What is sleep? For Jesus death is equivalent to sleep.

Sleep is not part of death, but of life. Sleeping is that action that allows the individual to relax, recuperate from the fatigues of the day, and then resume with greater vigour his/her existence and life This is sleep. For Jesus death doesn't stop a person's life, but it constitutes that necessary pause in our existence that allows life to resume with greater intensity.

Here then our death, and especially that of our loved ones, is neither a loss nor an act of destruction. Yes, we saw the decay of the biological part, but we are not this biological part even if it is useful to us: doctors will confirm that each day millions of our cells die, and do we notice it? We realize years later because when we see photos of 20-30 years before, we see that we were not what we are now, and we do not realise that before our eyes today millions of cells die that we cannot renew any more. You see, the moment of death is the cessation of all our biological cells, but not of ourselves as individual persons.

Jesus assures us, and we will see it later on with the resurrection of Lazarus, that he who lives for others will not experience death, will not notice the arrival of death because the life that he has in himself is of such power that even if the biological part of him decays, the person does not experience death. As none of us today realizes that 20-30 millions of our cells die, so it will be the moment of death. It will be the end of all biological part of the individual, but, at the same time, a positive moment that allows the individual to release all the energy inside him.

But there is a downside. Earlier on we've eliminated the soul, we understood what is the equivalent of the soul; we've eliminated Paradise, because it wasn't part of Jesus' language and we saw later what is the equivalent of Paradise. What is the equivalent of Hell?

If death, the biological end of a human of life, finds an empty body, empty for the poor choices that a person has made during its existence, then it is the final death for that person. In Jesus' message, there is no punishment after death for that person, Jesus' message does not contain threats to bad people. Jesus' message is absolutely positive: he who believes has a life that can overcome death, but he who lives only for the himself, for his own advantage, for his own wealth, he who lives not communicating life to others, but subtracting from other people's lives, he who does not live making himself bread for others, but instead takes bread away from others, this is a person who gradually will choke and will turn off that vital energy inside him. So when the biological death comes, it is the total death of such an individual for ever.

This in the New Testament is called "second death." In the book of Revelation, and also in the Gospels, there is a reference to two types of death, one of which is the "second death", but how many times do we die? Why do we speak of "second death"? Because, according to Jesus, there are two kinds of death: there is the biological death of the "flesh" so to speak, but this doesn't undermine the person who continues to live; however if there is nothing else a part from "flesh" then there is the true death of the person, the ultimate death.

There is a hint of this in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 10, where Jesus says: *"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill life"* (Mt 10:28). Jesus is speaking to his disciples and warned them: beware that if you live with me and with me help others you will meet persecution, a persecution that could prove fatal. *"If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too"* (Jn 15:20), because he who does good to others goes against the interests of the system, a counter system of power.

They will be able to take our “flesh” away from us, but will not be able to scratch our life. Indeed, the death of the "flesh" will be the moment of liberation. Jesus says, "*Do not be afraid*"- and this is the first time that Jesus says to his disciples to be afraid – "*of those who kill the body but cannot kill life; fear him rather who can destroy both body and life in the Gehenna*"(Mt 10:28 b).

We saw earlier the valley of Jerusalem, which was Jerusalem's rubbish dump, Gehenna; the term which I have translated as "life" in Greek is "psyche", which shouldn't be translated with "soul", but indicates the vital energy of the individual, the true life that continues even after death.

Jesus is saying: beware, for by opposing the values of an unjust society may lead to, and often does, persecution and possibly even the loss of physical life. Adherence to the values of a system based on power, wealth and success, which in the Bible is represented by the word 'mammon', is the cause of ultimate death.

There are two rival deities. On the one hand there is the Father of Jesus, God who gives life by becoming a servant of people. He is the God that is at the service of men, therefore God is service and with his love communicates life. His rival has always been called "mammon" the God of power, the God who isn't in the service of men but dominates them. The first communicates indestructible life. The latter destroys life. Keeping to the values of this system leads to the total destruction of our existence, that, like any garbage, is thrown into Jerusalem's rubbish dump, the Gehenna.

This is the meaning of "second death". This isn't a threat from Jesus as we cannot judge that any person's life has ended in "second death"; This is not our job. The message of Jesus is fully positive: he who embraces my message has a life of a quality that is indestructible and eternal, he who consistently refuses every stimulus of life, every choice in favour of others, will meet total annihilation.

We've said that in the book of Revelation this is called "second death". There are four passages in it which mention "second death": "*For those who prove victorious will come to no harm from the second death*"(Rev 2:11); "*The second death has no power over them*" (Rev 20:6); "*This burning lake is the second death*" (Rev 20.14, 21.8)

In the new creation, to which we are all called to contribute as from now, a contribution that will not end with death, but that will be enhanced by the new life that Jesus recreates in us, that the Lord will rebuild in us, in this new creation there is no room for death.

Death is finally destroyed. In the book of Revelation reads: "*The sea gave up all the dead who were in it; Death and Hades*"- that is the abode of the dead -" (Rev 20.13-14). To affirm that the “second death” has been thrown into itself may seem nonsense, but to the contrary it is very telling because it indicates that the final death for the believer disappears from the human horizon.

Who meets the second death? The Book of Revelation says: "*But the legacy for cowards, for those who break their word, or worship obscenities, for murderers and the sexually immoral, and for sorcerers, worshippers of false gods or any other sort of liars, is the second death in the burning lake of sulphur*" (Rev. 21.8).

The list of eight categories of people includes all those who are contrary to life. Watch out! They are not the flaws that a moralist author condemns as immoral, but it is the description of a system based on power, ie the system of the beast, where idolatry stands as the norm and only way of life.

Therefore he who pursues power, success and wealth has his existence completely destroyed and annihilated by death; but all those who use their lives for the good of others on this earth has a life of such a quality that death can't touch.

PART TWO

The concept of God's judgement is wrong. It is the result of a Medieval theology and it should have no place in Christian spirituality or language. There is no judgement. Earlier we said that many people have lived in anguish and fear and throughout their existence. They did not perceive the beauty of what has been called "good news", which is what "Gospel" means.

Jesus says, "I leave you my joy, because your joy may be overflowing and you can pass it onto others". Fear of judgement? The Church says that if many are atheist, it is because of the representations that have been made of God. You remember the old catechisms, which said that all our sins are recorded by God, that in the day of judgement - what a shame! -, each one will have written in his forehead all that he did, because there was that triangle with that eye of God who followed you everywhere, even to the toilet to see if we touched yourself. It was a terrible picture of the judgement of God: God does not miss anything.

One knows what one has done. Who among us has not made any mistake, infidelity, betrayals, stupid things, sins, if we want to use the religious language, in our lives? Well, John's Gospel could not be clearer. God did not send his son to judge the world, but to save the world; there is absolutely no judgement from God. Jesus does not judge, not even the Father judges. There is no judgement for our conduct, there is a proposal for a full life, with consequences for the ones who accept it and consequences for those who reject it.

Where was this image of judgement born then? It was born in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25 (Mt 25.31 -46), where Jesus refers to a Jewish tradition. You know that the Jews had believed that, because they were children of Abraham, they were not going to meet any judgement, but would obtain salvation directly. They used to think that on the last day all the peoples of the earth would turn up before God. God seated with the book of the law in his hand then asks each one: "Have you observed the Law?" "Yes". "Come with me". Or "No", then "Go away".

When Jesus spoke to the Jews about the same issue a problem emerges and we'll discuss it better later on: "But those guys who have never heard of God, those who do not believe in God, what is their fate?" Then Jesus speaks of this judgement, where people are not judged if they have believed or not, if they have prayed or not, but by the attitude shown towards the others. This is the standard they will be judged against.

It isn't: "Did you believe in God?", rather: "when you met someone who was hungry did you feed him? "There won't be the question,"Did you pray God ", but: "Have you visited the prisoners?" Thus salvation is also for those who, although not believing in God, adhere to the truth and lend themselves to the needs of men. So there is no judgement. The judgement, if we want to use this terminology, we do it to ourselves, it's a look backwards to our existence. The parable of the wedding feast: "*For many are invited but not all are chosen*" (Mt 22:14)

You know, I mentioned earlier, that once it was considered to be a requirement to be Catholic in order to gain salvation, that there was no possibility of salvation outside the Catholic Church But Jesus never dreams to impose his teaching. Jesus makes a proposal and a call. Those who respond

positively are all right; but it doesn't mean that those who don't are damned. It means that Jesus offers the fullness of life here on this earth to all and there are the few who feel that they can accept this message. Jesus did not come to talk about the afterlife but to change this life. When Jesus says that the rich will not enter the kingdom of heaven, he doesn't say that they will not go to heaven: he says that on this earth they will not have the fullness of life that he has come to offer.

The prayer for the dead, one of the best-designed traps by priests - no one can engineer traps better than priests – is the Gregorian Masses. You can give money in exchange for Mass being celebrated for thirty consecutive days exclusively for your deceased loved one. Your loved one then gains a special place near God: this is witchcraft, this is theft, this is paganism.

What does it mean to pray for the dead? Praying for the dead doesn't mean praying or having a Mass celebrated to give someone a little helping push up the hit parade of God's approval. Absolutely not, absolutely not!

What does it mean that tomorrow we will celebrate the Eucharist and put it in this context of celebration and thanksgiving for the lives of our loved ones, a celebration in which all of our loved ones are present? Pray for a deceased does not mean helping them along on their way to salvation, to get them out of purgatory a bit earlier (Remember? Once there was also purgatory) It means thanking the Lord who has given to our loved ones a life that was capable of overcoming death.

We'll see tomorrow in the Eucharist: God does not take from this life but takes from his own life. Then in the Eucharist, when we pray for our loved ones, it's not not to promote their encounter with God - they are already in the grace of God – but to thank the Lord for having granted them a life capable of overcoming death, and this means that our loved ones are not remembered in a dark tomb, and not even fluttering across the skies, but are living and life-giving within our Christian community.

Part Three

We said that, according to Paul, "*and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is without substance, and so is your faith*" (1 Cor 15:14). It is important to believe that Jesus has risen. What does it mean that Jesus is risen? Even here, unfortunately, our ideas a bit confused or even wrong. We said earlier that no Gospel describes the resurrection of Jesus, so the fact of the resurrection is not described in any Gospel.

The only description of Jesus' resurrection is one that the Church did not consider authentic, and unfortunately one that has rather excited the imagination of writers and artists. We all know the image of the a triumphant Jesus rising from the grave with the banner of victory. This does not belong to the Gospels, but it is an apocryphal text called the Gospel of Peter written around 150AD.

So no Gospel describes Jesus' resurrection. All portray it in different forms, but the meaning they wish to pass on is the same: to offer us the opportunity to experience him resurrected. It isn't possible to believe that Jesus is risen just because we are taught this by the Church, nor because it is written in the Gospels. So long as you do not experience in your own lives the reality of the living and life-giving Christ it is not possible to believe in a risen Jesus.

That is why while none of the Gospels tells us how Jesus rose, all, in different ways, give us an indication of how to experience him resurrected. The resurrection of Jesus is not at the history level, but the faith level. It is not as a news story, but it is as a 'fact' of theology.

What does this mean? If at the time of the resurrection of Jesus there had been television cameras with photographers, they would not have photographed or shot anything at all, because the resurrection of Jesus is not a historical episode, but an episode about faith. It would not be possible to see it with our eyes, with our physical sight, but you have to see it with the inner sight.

This can be disconcerting, but it is what all four evangelists present to us. If you are familiar with the Gospels, try going and read the stories of Resurrection: each evangelist presents it in a different way and it is not possible to reconcile a Gospel with another.

What seems like the most plausible account is given in John's Gospel. In this Gospel, Jesus was murdered in Jerusalem, died in Jerusalem and rose in Jerusalem. The disciples locked themselves in the upper room in Jerusalem, for fear of meeting the same end as Jesus. Jesus just resurrected then appeared to his disciples.

This is the account that we believe, even historically, to be the most plausible. The first thing the resurrected Jesus does is to appear to his disciples. In the Gospel of Matthew, in contrast to John, the narrative is completely different. Jesus, who died in Jerusalem, rose in Jerusalem, does not appear to his disciples in Jerusalem. He sends word: "Do you want to see me? Go into Galilee!" (see Mt 28:10). So, you see, the two accounts cannot be reconciled.

Either Jesus appeared on the day of his resurrection to his disciples in Jerusalem or, as Matthew says, he has forced them to go to Galilee. From Jerusalem to Galilee, it is normally four days of walking. Why this bizarre behaviour? Isn't it more plausible what John wrote that the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples immediately? Why sends them to Galilee and delay the important experience of the resurrection?

All the evangelists indicate the same thing: the message is the same, the forms with which they present it are different. The evangelists want to say this profound truth: you can experience the risen Jesus only by putting into practice his message and living as he lived.

In Luke's Gospel the Resurrection account is presented in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Here as well it is not possible to reconcile this account with John's or Matthew's. All evangelists confirm the same thing in that no one tells us how Jesus rose but everyone tells us how you can experience him resurrected. And how can we experience him resurrected? By living as he lived.

In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "*As the Father sent me, so am I sending you*" (Jn 20:21), i.e. practice my message and you will have a quality of life so strong as to be indestructible, - that is, a divine life - and so you will experience that I am alive.

In Luke's Gospel, when did the disciples realize that the stranger was Jesus? When Jesus broke the bread; it is Jesus who makes himself bread for others. At that time in their lives they experience the presence of the living and life-giving Jesus.

From Matthew's Gospel 28:1-20

The empty tomb. Angel's message

1 After the Sabbath, and towards dawn on the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary went to visit the sepulchre.

2 And suddenly there was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled away the stone and sat on it.

3 His face was like lightning, his robe white as snow.

4 The guards were so shaken by fear of him that they were like dead men.

5 But the angel spoke; and he said to the women, 'There is no need for you to be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.

6 He is not here, for he has risen, as he said he would. Come and see the place where he lay,

7 then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has risen from the dead and now he is going ahead of you to Galilee; that is where you will see him." Look! I have told you.'

8 Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples.

9 And suddenly, coming to meet them, was Jesus. 'Greetings,' he said. And the women came up to him and, clasping his feet, they did him homage.

10 Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; there they will see me.'

11 Now while they were on their way, some of the guards went off into the city to tell the chief priests all that had happened.

12 These held a meeting with the elders and, after some discussion, handed a considerable sum of money to the soldiers

13 with these instructions, "This is what you must say, "His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep."

14 And should the governor come to hear of this, we undertake to put things right with him ourselves and to see that you do not get into trouble.'

15 So they took the money and carried out their instructions, and to this day that is the story among the Jews.

16 Meanwhile the eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them.

17 When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated.

18 Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19 Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

20 and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.'

Let us now, briefly, examine chapter 28 of Matthew's Gospel which is the strangest one. Jesus says: "Do you want to see? Go to Galilee." Chapter 28 says that "*After the Sabbath, and towards dawn on the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary went to visit the sepulchre*". One woman is missing, why? At the time of Jesus crucifixion, there were Mary Magdalene, another Mary and the mother of the Zebedee sons: why now the mother of the Zebedee children has disappeared?

Women in the Gospels are all positive figures except two who are linked with power: the woman who holds power, Herodias, and the woman who aspires to power, the mother of Zebedee sons in the famous episode: "*Promise that these two sons of mine may sit one at your right hand and the*

other at your left in your kingdom". (Mt 20:21). She is an ambitious woman who seeks power for her children and, indirectly, also for herself. The death of Jesus means the end of her dreams. Hence those who seek power will not experience the resurrection of Jesus. That's why this woman is absent.

And the evangelist writes: "*And suddenly there was a violent earthquake*". It isn't a real earthquake, this is a literary form to indicate a divine manifestation. "*For an angel of the Lord*". When we find the expression "Angel of the Lord" it is never meant an angel sent by God, but God himself. The Jews were keen to keep the relationship between God and men a distant one. When God came into contact with men they never spoke of the Lord or God, but always used the term "angel of the Lord." So when we find the expression "The angel of the Lord" in the Old or in the New Testament, it always means that God himself comes in contact with men.

And it is interesting that in Matthew's Gospel we find this "angel of the Lord" three times: the first to announce the birth of Jesus to Joseph (Mt 1:20, 24), the second to protect him from Herod's murderous plots (Mt 2.13, 19) and the third to confirm that life, when it comes from God it is stronger than death (Mt 28.2). This "*Angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled away the stone and sat on it*". There is an expression that we commonly use and refers to the use in ancient burials: the expression we use is: "Put a lid on it". What does it mean to put a lid on it? It recalls ancient funerary custom where the dead person was put in the tomb, and a lid was put on it.

Put a lid on it means it's all over. Well, God, who burst in during this event, rolls back the stone lid and sat on it: full communication between the realm of the dead, indicated by the tomb, and that of living is re-established. Before this there was separation.

Here the evangelist describes the guards' fear and the reproach that the angel of the Lord, God himself, expresses to the women: "*I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified*". To say crucified meant cursed by God, because the crucifixion was the death reserved for those who were cursed by God. "*He is not here, for he has risen, as he said he would. Come and see the place where he lay*".

Here the Evangelist says that Jesus had risen: the resurrection is a new creation that God does in a person. The resurrection is not the resuscitation of a corpse, but it is a new creation. As Paul says, "*What is sown is a natural body,- the body of flesh - and what is raised is a spiritual body*" (1 Cor 15:44). Then resurrection is not the resuscitation of a person but a new creation operated by God.

That is why it is important to realise that once Jesus is risen he appears in a different form, in a different aspect, that is not possible to perceive unless we are tuned in on the same wavelength of the love of God. The question: where are our loved ones? They are not in a particular place. To experience their presence, to see them, it is necessary to synchronize our life to the wavelength of the love of God; then we can experience that these people, who are not revived, are present in a new form.

The Lord says: "*then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead and now he is going ahead of you to Galilee; that is where you will see him'*". The announcement in the Gospel is important: Jesus was raised from the dead, God has recreated a new life in him and therefore he is no longer in the realm of the dead, he's going ahead of you into Galilee - we will see why - and invites them: "*where you will see him.*"

In the Greek language the verb "to see" is written in two ways, 'oraō' and 'blepō'. In English we

often use the same verb for two realities: physical sight (I can see you are here), and interior sight that is understanding, perceiving. Here the evangelist uses 'orao', ie perceive.

The evangelist does not guarantee that the eleven disciples will have visions: visions do not exist. If there is someone here who has visions tell him to get his blood pressure measured or to go to hospital. This is something we all can experience, it is not a privilege for a few people, the visionaries, but an opportunity for all believers. This verb "to see", is important in Matthew's Gospel as used in the Beatitude: "*Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God .*" (Mt 5:8).

What is the evangelist saying? "Pure in heart": the heart in the Jewish world, didn't mean the seat of affections, but of consciousness. Jesus says: "People who are clear, transparent, crystal clear"- and one is clear, limpid, transparent when he gives up the ambition to stand out and worries only about looking after others - "these people are so transparent and clear that they will see God". Not in the afterlife - in the afterlife we all will see him - but here, in their earthly existence, they will make a consistent and deep experience of God's presence.

While others do not see because they are preoccupied by too many things, limpid and transparent people will notice a continuous, constant and life-giving presence of God. The God who is at the service of his own people and a God who transforms everything into good. In order to make this experience, people need to be transparent and clear: the one who is transparent with other is also transparent with God, hence they are able to perceive God in their existence. That is why there isn't any kind of nostalgia for a far away paradise.

Thus he asks them to go to Galilee to experience the presence of the Lord; "*Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples*". I always like to emphasize that in the Gospels men and women are not placed at the same level; women are always quicker than men. There is no equality between men and women in the Gospels. Unfortunately men in the Gospels often look like fools because they appear dumb, slow and almost always negative.

And this was awesome in the culture of that time, because in the culture of that period there was a hierarchy where there was God at the top, around God there were the angels at his service and then gradually down, there were men and in the last place, so very far from God, there were women. Women, due to menstruations, were considered in a state of perpetual impurity and so the most distant from God.

In the Gospels this is turned upside down. In the Gospels, the role of the angels is carried out by women. 'Angel' means "announce" (the same root as in the term "nuncio" – papal ambassador). Women in the Gospels are not given the same tasks as men, but those assigned to angels: to announce life. '*And suddenly, coming to meet them, was Jesus*'. When you convey a message of life it is impossible not to meet Jesus.

These women accept this message of life. They announce a message that there is a life that is stronger than death and meet Jesus. This is a constant experience in the lives of all those who proclaim a message of life. Those who bequeath their lives, bequeath their own lives reinforced by that of God; when you do good to others, when you communicate your goodness to others, your goodness is increased hundredfold by the force that the Lord gives us.

Then he meets them, saying, "*Greetings*" (but in Greek it is "Be rejoicing"). The first word that the evangelist puts into the mouth of the risen Jesus is "rejoice"; this expression is found, the only other

time in this Gospel, at the end of the Beatitudes. At the end of the Beatitudes, Jesus says: *“Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how they persecuted the prophets before you”* (Mt 5:11-12): Jesus in saying "Rejoice", makes us understand what this joy is. Loyalty to the Beatitudes, even in persecution, brings as a consequence a life that is capable of overcoming death, an indestructible life that now, for the first time, is visible in Jesus.

And Jesus said to them: *“Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; there they will see me”*. Note the emphasis: wasn't it simpler in Jerusalem? They were there! Jesus is categorical: that they should go into Galilee, and there they will see him.

“The disciples set out for Galilee” - and here's the news, and here is the opportunity for all of us – *“to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them”*; but Jesus did not arranged to meet them on a mountain! The angel of the Lord said, "Go to Galilee and there you will see him" and again "Go into Galilee, there they will see me".

But the Galilee is a vast region where there are many mountains. Why is the Evangelist saying: "the eleven disciples went to Galilee on the mountain that Jesus had set for them?" What is this mountain, and why do they go there? The term "Mount" in Matthew's Gospel is found to indicate the mountain where Jesus proclaims his message, the one which is known as the "Mount of the Beatitudes" (Matthew 5:1).

Here then is the key to the episode of Jesus' resurrection: it is not just a privilege granted two thousand years ago to a few dozen or a few hundred people, but a possibility for believers of all times: to experience a risen Jesus we have to go to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus announced his message, a message that has been formulated and summarized in the Beatitudes. So this is an experience available for all people.

Do we want to experience that Jesus is alive? Do we want to meet him in our inner self? This does not mean having visions or hallucinations, but a deep conviction, a profound experience. The Evangelist tells us how to: put into practice the message that Jesus announced in the Sermon on the Mount. This is formulated in the Beatitudes and can be summarized as follows: "Blessed are those who take care of others because this allows God to take care of them; and he who in his life takes responsibility for the happiness of others allows God to take care of his own happiness". It's a wonderful deal, as we've seen before, the more we give to others the more God increases our capacity to give. The line of development and growth of a person is that of giving generously; for Jesus the value of a person is in his generosity, because we all can be generous, except the rich.

The rich are rich because they aren't generous - if they were generous they wouldn't be rich - but we all can be generous. Being generous does not depend on health, does not depend on culture, does not depend on prosperity: we all can be generous. For Jesus, the line of development that makes a person grow in a never-ending growth is the generous gift of himself, one gives himself to others and allows God to communicate more life: this constant, profound experience of life from God is the experience of resurrection. At some point in life one feels power throbbing within, with a quality of life that makes one understand how this life has nothing to do with the decay of the body: this is the life that goes on forever.

So *"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them"*.

But there is one small hitch. The evangelist writes "*when they saw him*". They see the risen Jesus, and, as always, seeing concerns the inner sight not physical sight - "*they worshipped him*", in Greek 'proskuneo' means to recognize the divine status; "*but some doubted*". What did they doubt? Not that this was Jesus; they see him and they worship him; not that he had risen, they had just experienced that. Why is the evangelist saying that they had doubts? This verb "doubt", in Greek distazo, appears only one other time in Matthew's Gospel. It is when Peter wanted to walk on water – which means having a divine status -. Jesus invites Peter to do so, and Peter began to sink; so Jesus says: "*You have so little faith, he said, 'why did you doubt?'*" (Mt 14:31).

Doubting means not having the divine condition, but, like Peter, thinking that this can be achieved with God's intervention. No! The divine condition is obtained only by putting our own lives at the service of others, inevitably passing through cross and persecution. His disciples, who have seen how Jesus' life ended through the torture of the cross, doubt that they are capable of going through the torture of the cross to obtain the divine condition.

The last words of Jesus are important: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*", that is immersing people in the reality of God and above all, - the following words seem to have been deleted from Gospels -: "*And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.*" 'To the end of time' is a Hebrew expression that means 'forever'. The risen Jesus did not take leave from his own, but invites them to go to the world, not to propagate a doctrine, but to practice a message of love.

This invitation is not addressed to priests, but to the whole community of disciples. Jesus is not talking about administering the Sacrament of Baptism. The verb baptize, in Greek baptizo, means "to immerse". Jesus invites the community of believers: "Go and every person you encounter immerse him/her in the reality of the Father" - it is the Father who communicates life – "in the reality of the Son" - the Son is the one in whom this life is fully realized - "and in the reality of the Spirit" - the strength and love that allows this life to be fulfilled. This is the only task that the Christian community has.

The tragedy for us Christians is that we have inherited doctrines, they have been bequeathed to us in catechisms, but they did not allow us to have the experience to be immersed in this world of love: we were brought up mostly to the fear God and we do not have the experience of being totally immersed in this love, regardless of our condition and our conduct. Jesus here does not say "go and immerse the deserving ones in the love of God". Jesus says "go among the Gentiles", that is among the unbelievers, those who according to Jewish culture would not be resurrected -: go to every person regardless of their religious beliefs, their moral conduct, whatever faith they belong to.

The task of the Christian community is to immerse everyone in love of God, a love that forgives and erases, a love that does not love in order to be loved, but loves only for love, this is the love that communicates life. Maybe this has been our tragedy: we have been given doctrines, teachings, but they did not enable us experience fully the love of God who says: "*I am with you always; yes, to the end of time*".

Jesus did not retire, Jesus is not jobless. He is the centre of the Christian community forever. Jesus does not need a successor. Moses did! Moses died on Mount Nebo, and before he died he needed to appoint his deputy Joshua as his successor. Jesus did not need a successor! Jesus is alive, and he is this life-giving figure at the centre of the Christian community, a community that if it puts into practice his teaching feels him alive, visible and invigorating in any instant of their existence.

PART FOUR

From John Gospel 11,1-44

1 There was a man named Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha, and he was ill.

2 It was the same Mary, the sister of the sick man Lazarus, who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair.

3 The sisters sent this message to Jesus, 'Lord, the man you love is ill.'

4 On receiving the message, Jesus said, 'This sickness will not end in death, but it is for God's glory so that through it the Son of God may be glorified.'

5 Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,

6 yet when he heard that he was ill he stayed where he was for two more days

7 before saying to the disciples, 'Let us go back to Judea.'

8 The disciples said, 'Rabbi, it is not long since the Jews were trying to stone you; are you going back there again?'

9 Jesus replied: Are there not twelve hours in the day? No one who walks in the daytime stumbles, having the light of this world to see by;

10 anyone who walks around at night stumbles, having no light as a guide.

11 He said that and then added, 'Our friend Lazarus is at rest; I am going to wake him.'

12 The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he is at rest he will be saved.'

13 Jesus was speaking of the death of Lazarus, but they thought that by 'rest' he meant 'sleep';

14 so Jesus put it plainly, 'Lazarus is dead;

15 and for your sake I am glad I was not there because now you will believe. But let us go to him.'

16 Then Thomas -- known as the Twin -- said to the other disciples, 'Let us also go to die with him.'

17 On arriving, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already.

18 Bethany is only about two miles from Jerusalem,

19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother.

20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming she went to meet him. Mary remained sitting in the house.

21 Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,

22 but even now I know that God will grant whatever you ask of him.'

23 Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'

24 Martha said, 'I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.'

25 Jesus said: I am the resurrection. Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live,

26 and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

27 'Yes, Lord,' she said, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world.'

- 28 *When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in a low voice, 'The Master is here and wants to see you.'*
- 29 *Hearing this, Mary got up quickly and went to him.*
- 30 *Jesus had not yet come into the village; he was still at the place where Martha had met him.*
- 31 *When the Jews who were in the house comforting Mary saw her get up so quickly and go out, they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to weep there.*
- 32 *Mary went to Jesus, and as soon as she saw him she threw herself at his feet, saying, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'*
- 33 *At the sight of her tears, and those of the Jews who had come with her, Jesus was greatly distressed, and with a profound sigh he said,*
- 34 *'Where have you put him?' They said, 'Lord, come and see.'*
- 35 *Jesus wept;*
- 36 *and the Jews said, 'See how much he loved him!'*
- 37 *But there were some who remarked, 'He opened the eyes of the blind man. Could he not have prevented this man's death?'*
- 38 *Sighing again, Jesus reached the tomb: it was a cave with a stone to close the opening.*
- 39 *Jesus said, 'Take the stone away.' Martha, the dead man's sister, said to him, 'Lord, by now he will smell; this is the fourth day since he died.'*
- 40 *Jesus replied, 'Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?'*
- 41 *So they took the stone away. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said: Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer.*
- 42 *I myself knew that you hear me always, but I speak for the sake of all these who are standing around me, so that they may believe it was you who sent me.*
- 43 *When he had said this, he cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'*
- 44 *The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with strips of material, and a cloth over his face. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, let him go free.'*

The topic for today is a topic which is not of easy and immediate understanding, not because it is a difficult text, but because unfortunately in our imagination we have so many images that relate to the Gospel that when we read the Gospel we are conditioned by what we believe we know: we have seen paintings, we have seen some representations, some films that heavily influence our reading of the Gospel.

One of the risks when we read the Gospels is to read a certain expression but then modify it and interpret it according to what we think we know. We have seen this many times in the past in many cases, for example in Luke's Gospel, Elizabeth is visited by Mary. If you ask people how they were related, all respond: "They were cousins" and who said this? They could also be aunt and niece, but since a whole tradition says that they are cousins ...: The text says: "*Your relative Elizabeth*" (Luke 1:36). Or other times we have seen that, while reading Jesus' Passion, there are people who swear that Jesus carrying the cross fell three times, but who said it? Not the Gospels for sure, Jesus never falls in the Gospel accounts.

When we read the Gospel there is the risk of a 'pre-understanding', and for the delicate episode we

are going to examine this evening this risk is stronger than ever because we will talk about the so-called "resurrections" carried out by Jesus in the Gospels.

There are three "resurrections" carried out by Jesus: in the house of the deceased (the daughter of the head of the synagogue), during the funeral of the son of the widow of Naim, an episode that only Luke gives us, and finally in the cemetery (the resurrection of Lazarus, the most difficult one because Lazarus had already been dead for four days) and it is this last one that we will consider. The girl had just died, the boy was still warm, one can say, carried during the funeral; Lazarus instead was really dead. He had been in the tomb for four days already.

Additionally in the Gospels there is a most embarrassing resurrection: when preachers comment this episode they treat it lightly. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus death is described with these words: "*And suddenly, the veil of the Sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth quaked, the rocks were split, the tombs opened and the bodies of many holy people rose from the dead* (Mt 27,51-52). So when Jesus dies, the graves open up and many dead people resuscitate, but the strange thing is that the evangelist writes: "*and these, after his resurrection, came out of the tombs, entered the holy city and appeared to a number of people*".(Mt 27,53). When Jesus dies the graves open up and the dead are resurrected, but do not get out because it is not Easter day; they wait and go out on Easter Sunday.

You see that there is an inconsistency here, what do they do in between? Do they get some fresh air? They are already resurrected. Do let them go into the holy city, and let people to see them! Instead it says, "*coming out of the tombs after his resurrection*": There isn't a comment to this passage that indicates that this is an historical event. When Jesus died no tomb opened because this is a theological image that indicates that Jesus with his death has conquered death and with his resurrection he passed on his own life, a life of such quality that it was capable of overcoming death. This also applies to those who had died before him.

In the Gospels Jesus often guarantees that whoever believes in him will be able to raise the dead. Yet in two thousand years of Christianity there is not a single dead person that has come back to life. There have been some extraordinary saints who have produced some prodigious deeds, but to date, there has yet to be a dead man that has come back to life. Yet Jesus says, "if you had as much faith as a grain of mustard seed, who is after me will work greater works than those I have accomplished"(see Mt 17.20, Jn 14:12). Yet in two thousand years of Christianity not a single person has been raised from the dead, the dead remain dead.

Hence the question mark: could it be that when Jesus says that those who believe in him will raise the dead he intends resurrection as something different from the revival of a corpse? To better understand something that maybe has not yet been clarified about death and life that comes after death, let us examine this episode in closer details.

As always, the interpretations that I present to you this evening are interpretations in the light of biblical and exegetical studies, but they are only proposals: those who feel that these proposals correspond to their feelings and expectations please accept them, those instead who are disturbed by them, please continue to hold your views. I say this because my reading of this episode of Lazarus will cause some confusion and perhaps lead some people to refuse it.

If we interpret the Gospels literally, the 'resurrections' that Jesus carried out may not be called 'resurrections' but 'resuscitations'; 'resurrection' means the final transition from a mortal to an immortal state.

The people that Jesus raised have not been transferred to an immortal world, they have been revived; as reanimated corpses then they will die again afterwards. You wonder at this point what is the reason that Jesus did this. They were already dead, they had already gone through the experience of death, Jesus revived them and they know that they will still have to relive the same experience again.

If we interpret the Gospel in a literal manner these are revivals of corpses and not resurrections. In this case the evangelist intends to chronicle some events: events that belong to history, and not deeper truths that are expressed through a narrative that makes them more understandable. It is this line of interpretation we choose in order to examine the Lazarus event.

The details are quite complex so let us select most salient aspects. Lazarus was part of Jesus community and there was a relationship of friendship and love between Lazarus and Jesus and Lazarus' family. This relationship also included his two sisters Martha and Mary.

Lazarus became ill and the sisters sent word to Jesus, "*Lord, the man you love is ill*". Jesus does not move. It is the first inconsistency, strange: they let him know: "Look, the man you love" - the one you love means the relationship that Jesus has with each disciple - "*is ill*" and Jesus not only doesn't move, but remains on purpose for another few days in the place where he was.

Only when Lazarus was dead does Jesus decide to set out. Verse 17: "*Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already*". Why this piece of information? According to the Jewish custom, the funeral and hence the burial took place – as today - on the day of death. Due to climatic conditions it is not possible to wait one or two days.

The body is buried on the same day of the death. It was commonly believed that the spirit remained with the corpse for three days in the tomb, as long as the spirit was still able to identify itself in the face of the corpse. Then from the fourth day, by which time the decomposition process was at such an advanced stage that the spirit was unable to identify itself with the face of the dead man, the spirit abandoned the corpse, abandoned the tomb and went down in Sheol or Hades or the nether region, that is in that underground cavern where everyone ended up.

When the evangelist points out that Lazarus had already been in tomb for four days, he confirms that Lazarus is already dead and that the irreversible process of decomposition of the corpse had already begun.

Thus "*when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and meet him ... and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died'*". She had sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was ill and Jesus not only did not rush but remained in the place where he was. Jesus upon arriving at Bethany is met with strong rebuke from Martha.

Martha clearly believed that Jesus could extend people's lives, but she did not understand that Jesus could overcome death; "*but even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you*". It is important to pay attention to the use of verbs in this episode.

Martha's understanding comes from her religious tradition, a tradition Jesus wants to free his people from. Martha did not understand who Jesus was. She says to him: "*whatever you ask from God*". In the Greek language, there are two words for 'to ask': one from inferior to superior and the word is 'to ask'. The other is between peers and can be translated with 'to request'. The inferior 'asks' his

superior; peers instead 'request'.

Marta does not use the verb "to request" because she did not understand that Jesus is God and that God is like Jesus. For Martha Jesus was only a messenger of God, a prophet of God; no divine condition in him. Jesus replied: "*Your brother will rise again.*" And here he gets the second unkind reply from Marta: "*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day*". There was a belief in the Jewish world that after death the spirit would enter this underground cavern and then, under the influence of the Pharisees and the idea of resurrection, it was believed and hoped that on the last day, the last day of history, no one knew when, there would be a resurrection for the righteous.

Martha's sharp answer to Jesus is understandable. If, when you suffer the loss of a loved one, you are told: "Be comforted, he/she will rise again" you not only do not feel consoled, but you are thrown into an even deeper despair. You miss your loved one now. If you are told he/she will rise again when you are dead as well, you won't feel overcome by consolation – you will see him/her risen after you have been dead and risen as well. What kind of consolation is knowing that our loved ones will rise on the last day at end of time? We are missing our loved one now. On the last day we will rise all together. So Martha, believing that Jesus responded according to the traditional teachings, answers unkindly for the second time: "*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*"

And here is verse 25. It is very important to register this verse because it shows the radical change in the concept of death and eternal life that Jesus offers to his community. When Jesus says to her: "*I am*" he states that he is God. When Moses asked God in the episode of the burning bush "Tell me your name," God did not give his name - because God has no name – and did not give an identity, but his activity: this is what made him recognizable as God. So he replied: "*I am who I am*". So in the Jewish tradition, "I am" was the name of God.

Then Jesus firstly says to Martha - who believes he is a simple messenger of God, a prophet of God - "I am", that is in me is the fullness of the divine condition, "*the resurrection*". Jesus shows he is the resurrection because he is the life. And then this expression: "*Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live,*". Jesus said that Lazarus, who believed in him, even if now dead and a corpse, he continues to live.

So, to the community that cries out because one of their members is dead, Jesus says that those who have given adhesion to him - to believe means to give adhesion to Jesus - even if they die, they will continue to live. This is the first essential aspect.

The other aspect is: "*whoever lives and believes in me will never die*". To the community who mourns a dead person Jesus says: if this person, who adhered to my thinking, who made his life a gift of love to others, even if you now see his/her biological life at an end, his/her existence continues. You who are alive, who live and believe in me, you will never die.

Jesus assures us that we will not experience death; it will happen as he said, that all the billions of cells that make up our body will complete their cycle, but these cells are not our self, our being. This body of flesh will end, but we will not experience death. This is the novelty brought by Jesus and the idea that we try to unpack in our meetings: Jesus does not raise the dead, but he communicates a life that can overcome the threshold of death. This is why Paul writes: "*we who are already resurrected*" (Eph. 2:6).

Jesus tells us that eternal life is not a reward in the future, but a condition in this life. He assures us that whoever lives and believes in him already has a life of such a quality that does not allow one to experience death. Jesus asks Martha, "*Do you believe this?*". In this new context, and here is the sign that Martha has grown in faith, she replies: "*Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world*". So far Martha had been thinking in terms of her religion but now she makes the transition from religion to faith; and this is the transition that Jesus asks each of us to make, to move from religion that still affects us to faith.

Many of our ideas about God and life belong to the world of religion Jesus came to free us from, but Martha moves to the world of faith. At first she thought that Jesus was a prophet, a messenger from God, but now she sees him as the Messiah, the Son of God. It is Martha's growth in faith. Finally she no longer 'knows', but she 'believes' that Jesus is the manifestation of God.

That's why – please note: in the passage, for those who know it, there is an inconsistency - "*When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in a low voice, 'The Master is here and wants to see you.'*" Why 'In a low voice'? Because here the evangelist wants us to understand the experience of the Christian community. The early Christian community did not understand exactly who Jesus was. For as long as the early Christian community felt that Jesus was a messenger from God, a prophet, they enjoyed some sympathy among the people; but as soon as the Christian community, through their experiences, has come to understand that Jesus was the manifestation of God, the persecutions begun.

I skipped a verse in which it was said that the Jewish authorities, went to offer their condolences to Lazarus family, but as soon as the community grows and understands that Jesus is God, we start seeing clandestine behaviours. So she goes to her sister Mary saying 'in a low voice': "*The Teacher is here and is calling for you*".

The evangelist says that Jesus had not yet come into the village and this is important because the village in the Gospels is always the place of tradition. Significantly Jesus does not enter the village. This shows that you have to leave the village in order to meet the Lord.

Skipping a few sentences: here is Mary who goes to meet Jesus, the same rebuke of Martha, ... "*At the sight of her tears, and those of the Jews who had come with her ...*" And here's a verb, Greek 'embrimaomai', that means "suppress by force a deep feeling". We could translate this as he was "fuming" or "furious".

Jesus loses his cool, he sees that his community had not understood the newness that he came to bring. In the way the Jews are weeping, so his community is weeping. They did not understand that death does not stop their existence and therefore Jesus represses his feelings. And here is the series of very important actions that the evangelist reveals, which is not about an historic incident that happened two thousand years ago, but about the experience of individuals in all ages with respect to what happens at the time of death.

When Jesus said, "*Where have you put him?*", or: "What have you done with Lazarus?" They said: "*Lord, come and see*". An interesting answer which mirrors another event, when Philip invited Nathaniel to go to meet Jesus, he said: "*Come and see*" (John 1:46). "Come and see" meant the direction for life, but here repeated at the death of Lazarus. They said to him: "*Lord, come and see*".

(May I suggest how to read this passage, because it isn't easy to understand: if you want to interpret it literally as an historical event, feel free to do so, but I suggest a different reading, a deeper

interpretation which the evangelist himself helps us to grasp).

And here there is something strange: “*Jesus wept*”. Why did Jesus weep? If Jesus knows, as he did, that within a few minutes he would resurrect Lazarus, you do not understand the reason of his tears. Why is he weeping? You know that soon you would resurrect him, why waste time with crying instead of getting on with his resurrection? You see that this is an inconsistency. Here we need to look at the original Greek text what is the verb for 'weep'. Apologies for the constant references to the original Greek text, but they are necessary to understand the richness of the Gospel and important for us so that we have the right attitude towards the death of our loved ones.

In the Greek language the word 'weep' is written in two ways: “*klaio*” which means despair at what is irrevocably finished; Martha, Mary and the Jews weep desperately because for them death is the end of everything. It is true that we believe he will be resurrected on the last day, but it is no consolation for anyone to know that our loved ones will be resurrected in the last day: we miss them right now.

So the tears of Martha, Mary and the Jews are those of despair. Jesus however does not cry tears of despair. The evangelist uses the verb “*dakruo*” for Jesus, which means "shed tears." It is a cry of pain and the evangelist shows that this is the fair and balanced attitude of a believer in the face of death. You know that for certain enthusiastic or charismatic groups, death is seen with joy. Death, even for a believer, even if we know that this person will continue to live, is always a tragedy, and the age of the person does not matter: death is always a tragedy, and the passage of time does not decrease the pain of this tragedy. Death always needs to be taken seriously.

The right attitude towards death according to John's Gospel is one of pain because we miss the loved one, but not of despair. Martha, Mary and the Jews mourn with despair feeling that all is lost, even if there is this distant hope of the resurrection. Jesus tears are different! Jesus sheds tears for the pain of the death of his beloved friend.

The Evangelist shows us that the right attitude towards the death is that we should not be thrown into despair as if we believed that everything is finished. Our sorrow is because we miss the person who we hugged and kissed while he/she lived.

Jesus, still fuming, "*Sighing again, Jesus reached the tomb: it was a cave with a stone to close the opening*". We've seen earlier on the meaning of the stone at the entrance of the tomb: it meant that the relationship with this individual was finally closed, "let's bygones be bygones."

Do not consider the instructions that Jesus issues now as merely an account of an historical event that happened two thousands years ago, but as invitations to all those people who suffered, even very recently, the death of a loved one.

The first instruction is "*Take the stone away*". When the women go in search of Jesus in the tomb, there are angels in Luke's Gospel that are surprised, and said: "*Why look among the dead for someone who is alive?*" (Luke 24.5). What is the meaning of visiting the cemeteries? Apart from the proper decorum of the tomb, in the cemetery there is nothing of the dead person. Why look among the dead for someone who is alive? The cult of the tomb means that this experience that the person is alive hasn't caught up with us yet. Therefore the first thing Jesus says is, "*Take the stone away*". Whatever prevents communication between the dead person and the kingdom of the living needs to be removed.

Martha said to him: *“Lord, by now he will smell; this is the fourth day since he died”*. Martha's faith is now beginning to falter in the face of reality. Here is another important line that makes us understand the true meaning of this passage: *Jesus replied, 'Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?'*

I hope that, despite the fatigue of the long day, we will be able to understand this line. In the conversation that Jesus had with Martha, he did not mention the glory of God, but of an indestructible life; Jesus says to Martha: *" Have I not told you ..."*, referring to something that Jesus said before, but Jesus did not say to her, 'you will see the glory of God'; he said that he is the life capable of overcoming death. Why does the Evangelist connect the two words "glory" and "life"? The evangelist indicates that in the indestructible life, a life capable of overcoming death, we see the glory of God and the Father's workings become visible.

But Martha cannot see all of this while she does not believe; if she believed, she would be able to see. The resurrection of Lazarus is conditional upon Martha's faith: if Martha believes she will be able to see. The Greek verb 'to see', *oraō*, does not mean physical sight, but means a profound inner experience. Like for the resurrection of Jesus so for the resurrection of Lazarus, if there were some cameras in front of the tomb they would have recorded absolutely nothing: it does not take the physical sight, it does not take a lens to record what is going to happen, we need a deep faith to do this.

Jesus says: *"if you believe you will see the glory of God"*. Here Jesus turns over what is the characteristic of the religious tradition. With traditional religion you first need to see and then believe. We always ask – they've also asked Jesus - 'What sign are you giving that we see and then believe?'. You know, with apparitions, normally it is always the Virgin Mary that appears most, she invariably announces: "I will give you a sign because you see and believe". Well, this is just evil because this is not in Jesus plans: the ones who promise to show a sign for you to believe, in the Gospels, are always false prophets and false messiahs, not Jesus. Jesus by contrast says: Believe! and you shall be a sign that others can see.

“Jesus replied, 'Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?’”. Lazarus' resurrection can only be seen by those who have believed Those with faith have seen Lazarus rise again, but those who do not have faith will not see anything.

“So they took the stone away . Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said: Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. ’”. Thank you", Greek *eucaristeo*, is the word from which the term 'Eucharist' comes. Jesus does not ask the Father as an inferior, but he thanks him. This verb, from which we derive the word "Eucharist" appears in John's Gospel three times, twice in the episode of the sharing of the loaves, and the third time in this episode concerning Lazarus. These two episodes are in very close relationship with the Eucharistic celebration; the generous gift of what one has and what one is, which is expressed in the sharing of the loaves, bequeath a life capable of overcoming death.

We saw it earlier on, when Jesus said: *" Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever ... Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life ”*”(Jn 6:51, 54): then the Eucharist is that special moment when by eating the bread of Jesus we make ourselves bread to others and in us an indestructible life, the divine life, begins to beat.

When he had said this, he cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'. Jesus had already said: “In all truth I tell you, the hour is coming -- indeed it is already here -- when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live (Jn 5:25). The dead man came out, his feet and

hands bound with strips of material, and a cloth over his face. The Jewish way of burying people called for the body to be washed with water and vinegar, then a shroud was placed over his face to hide the effects of decay and a sheet wrapped around him like the Egyptian mummies.

There is a strange detail that does not correspond to the customs of the Jewish funeral: here the dead man came out with his feet and hands tied in bandages. Why does the evangelist tell us that the dead man's feet and hands are tied? This is a hint to the Jewish way of referring to death as described in the Psalms where it says: *"The bonds of death were all round me, the snares of Sheol held me fast"* (Ps 116.3): therefore it is the prisoner of death that comes out. Jesus said to them: *"Unbind him, and let him go free"*. We have seen that these are indications for the members of the community and for people who mourn the loved one who has died.

Firstly the removal of the stone to allow communication between the world of the dead and that of the living, then unbinding him, because it is you who have tied him with the false conception of death as the end of everything. The false idea of death as the destruction of a person means having tied that person to the realm of death, means to mourn him as dead: *'unbind him!'*

And here's the last indication which seems to me very clear: this is my interpretation and I offer it to you and I think it is the key to understand the whole piece. Unexpectedly, Jesus says: *"and let him go free"*. This is absurd! Visually, if we try to imagine the scene of the resurrection of Lazarus coming out of the tomb, we understand Jesus' invitation, *'Unbind him!'*: he was tied, but then let's go and meet him, let's celebrate, let him come to us. But why Jesus says instead: *'Let him go free?'* Where has Lazarus to go? Why doesn't he say to let him come to us? This would have been clearer.

The verb "to go", Greek *epago*, has always been used by John to indicate the path of Jesus to the Father, passing through death: *"Where I am going, you cannot come"* (Jn 8:21). Jesus does not return Lazarus to his own, but leaves him free to go: it's not that Lazarus should still go to the Father, he is already there. It is Martha, Mary and the Christian community that should let him go without hold him as a dead person; for as long as we mourn our loved ones as dead we keep them tied. By unbinding the dead, the community frees itself from the fear of death and frees the individual.

Where does he have to go? He must continue his life in the sphere of God's love in a crescendo of joy, love and peace in the fullness of the Father. Lazarus is already with the Father of course as our loved ones are already with the Father; it is the dead person that needs to be unbound. Let me be clear, this episode is complex and our dead are not influenced by what we believe, it is not that if we believe that our dead are "bound" by death, they are bound. They are already in the fullness of God's love: it is we who have to change our mentality, to give up the cult of the dead and enter into communion with the living.

For as long as we mourn our dead, it is we who are bound: the dead person is not bound, Lazarus was not bound. By unbinding Lazarus, the community loosens itself from the false idea of death, and finally the invitation of Jesus: *"Let him go free."* As long as the dead person is held with our despair, grief and crying, we in our mind prevent this deceased to continue his journey.

Let's end here the presentation here so we can reflect on it as this episode isn't easy to understand. As I said before, if someone wants to stick with the idea that Jesus really has revived Lazarus' corpse, great! This is a well respected theory; but for us, whether Jesus has resurrected Lazarus does not tell us much. If Jesus could raise the dead, he has resurrected only a few - three in all his life: I'm not saying in the house of the daughter of Jairus, I'm not saying at the funeral of the son of

the widow of Nain, but here there was a cemetery, at least those of the first line, since he was in the mood, he could have resurrected them all. Only three, a little too little...

These resurrections must show not the resuscitation of a corpse, that after a short time has to die again, but a change of thinking about death. Not that by changing our mentality the death of our loved ones will feel any better; they are already feeling better; it is we who are feeling bad; as long as we mourn our dead, we can not experience them as living. Let us accept the invitation of the angels to the women: "*Why look among the dead for someone who is alive?*" (Lk 24:5). Therefore we have to change our attitude towards death completely. As long as we continue with the obsession of the grave, the cemetery, we can not understand that the person is not there: our dead loved ones are neither in the darkness of the grave nor fluttering about in the skies, but continue their existence in the sphere of the Father, that is, in the sphere of life and love, the same one in which, perhaps, we too are to be part of.

Tomorrow morning, Sunday, we will conclude with what is a most important aspect; Jesus is not so much interested so much in the afterlife, but in this life. We must not enquire about life after death, but whether this is life. We will conclude tomorrow with the story of the rich man who asked Jesus what he must do to deserve eternal life. We will see Jesus' teachings on this matter.

And for those who want to conclude with the celebration of the Eucharist, in which we will not be alone, but we will be with all our loved ones who continue their existence. This episode does not end here: it continues with: "*Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom he had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there; Martha waited on them and Lazarus was among those at table*" (Jn 12:1-2). The Christian community replaces the funeral banquet with the celebration of the Eucharist: the presence of Jesus and of Lazarus shows that to pray for the dead is a privileged moment in which we thank God for the life that we have and the life that God has given to those who came before us.

If the episode appears too difficult to understand, it is because it is difficult. Keep this fact in mind: from the time I examined this episode and I understood it at an intellectual level to the time I've understood it at an inner true level, I took five years; since I was able to understand this episode in this formula - because the text is very clear, the gospel is a kind of mathematics - since I understood it at an intellectual level it took me five years to move to a more intimate level of faith; therefore I do not have the presumption that in an evening everything is solved. The only thing I'm asking you is this: do not reject it, keep it as an indication that at the appropriate time - I hope less than five years - this will make sense.

Part Five

Matthew 19,16-30 The rich young man

¹⁶ And now a man came to him and asked, 'Master, what good deed must I do to possess eternal life?'

¹⁷ Jesus said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one alone who is good. But if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.'

¹⁸ He said, 'Which ones?' Jesus replied, 'These: You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false witness.'

¹⁹ Honour your father and your mother. You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

20 The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these. What more do I need to do?'

21 Jesus said, 'If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

22 But when the young man heard these words he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.

23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'In truth I tell you, it is hard for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven.'

24 Yes, I tell you again, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven.'

25 When the disciples heard this they were astonished. 'Who can be saved, then?' They said.

26 Jesus gazed at them. 'By human resources', he told them, 'this is impossible; for God everything is possible.'

27 Then Peter answered and said, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What are we to have, then?'

28 Jesus said to them, 'In truth I tell you, when everything is made new again and the Son of man is seated on his throne of glory, you yourselves will sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel.'

29 And everyone who has left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children or land for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times as much, and also inherit eternal life.

30 'Many who are first will be last, and the last, first.'

Then let us conclude our meetings on the theme of a life capable of overcoming death with a piece that is easy to understand; there will not be the difficulties and complexity that we encounter in the episode of Lazarus last night.

It's an episode where we will see what the Lord really has at heart. Jesus was never interested in the afterlife: Jesus invites us to ask not whether we will have a life after death, but if you can call life the one we lead here. The answer lies in here: if the life we lead, if this existence is really life, then it is also able to overcome death. There is the risk unfortunately, and it is a possibility, that the life we currently lead is not life, but that we are only zombies.

Maybe you remember the evangelists' technique for explaining how all people that belong to the sphere of power are simply zombies, because although still physically alive, in fact they are already dead. Some of you may remember that when we examined the composition of the execution of John the Baptist where the evangelist writes: "*Herod on his ...*" and instead of using the Greek term which means "birthday", Greek *genethlia*, that makes life, increases life, uses the Greek term "*genesia*" meaning "funeral anniversary" (see Mk 6:21).

Why does the evangelist use this word? Because Herod represents power, and power is death, and on his birthday, rather than celebrate life he does nothing more than sinking into an atmosphere of death. That is why in this passage of the execution of John the Baptist there is a court of zombies; Herod is a dead man celebrating his birthday. His guests belong to the sphere of power and therefore are all dead. The only dish, the only tray that appears contains the head of a dead man; they are dead people who feed on the dead.

According to the evangelists, it isn't important to ask if there is an afterlife, but to investigate whether the life we lead here can be called life. This morning's passage from Matthew chapter 19

verse 16: *“And now a man came to him”*. This character isn't introduced, but left undefined – a man – however it is important to see how the evangelist outlines and characterises this figure.

“A man came to him and asked, 'Master'”: already this indication is significant, because Jesus is called "Master" by his enemies, the scribes, the Pharisees and Judas or by those who did not recognize him. Then in a certain sense this is a person who does not know Jesus, but in reality is presented as being slightly hostile to him, and we will see why; however he addresses Jesus as Master, and here is his concern: *“What good deed must I do to possess eternal life?”*

This is important because it is the first time in this Gospel that Jesus speaks of eternal life, and does so only in reply to a question; in Matthew, Mark and Luke Gospels Jesus never speaks of eternal life, because he is not interested in the afterlife as he came to change this world here. And now there are two categories of people who are concerned about the afterlife: the rich and the very religious. Wealthy people having ensured their well-being in this world by money now want to make sure that they are okay in the afterlife as well; religious people base their well being on their pious and religious practices, and so want to be sure that these will secure them a place in the afterlife.

However Jesus never speaks about eternal life on his own accord, so Jesus here in this Gospel speaks about it only in reply to a question. When the man asks: *“What good deed must I do to possess eternal life?”* he reflects the religious view that eternal life is to be earned by good behaviour. Jesus said to him in a rather abrupt way: *“Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one alone who is good. But if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.”* Jesus suggests a radical change of perspective: not to worry about what good to do, but get to know the One who is good. It is the transition from religion to faith.

In religion people are concerned with what is needed to be acceptable to God; with faith knowledge of God takes away this concern, because the love of God is not deserved with efforts but is accepted as a free gift. As long as believers are not convinced about this, they are still in the sphere of religion; as long as people think that they have to deserve God's love or - worse – they have to buy it with sacrifices, offerings or penance, they are still in the sphere of religion and they haven't understood the nature of God.

So in answer to this man's question, *“What good deed must I do?”* Jesus invites him to change course and look at the "Good" one. "One" is a Hebrew term that indicates the oneness of God; for Jesus eternal life is not a prize you get for your efforts, but a gift which comes from the one who is Good. So eternal life, love and forgiveness of God, should not be deserved for one's own efforts, but must be accepted as a free gift from God.

Consequently this also changes our relationship with others, because if God's love is no longer to be deserved but to be accepted, then also the love we demonstrate towards others is not motivated by the fact that they deserve it, but as a free gift to anyone.

To the question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' answer invites the individual to reflect on whether this life that leads here is really life. Therefore he responds simply: if you want to enter into life - he does not mention eternal - keep the commandments.

We need a little clarification, because when we read the Gospels we tend to forget whom Jesus is talking to. When Jesus gives his answers or teachings to people who belong to the people of Israel, then these are lessons and teachings for the Jewish people but not for the community of Jesus. The Commandments of Moses are not for the Christian community. The Christian community does not follow the commandments of Moses, but those with which Jesus has replaced them, which are

the Beatitudes.

It is a tragedy to see that many people know more or less Moses' Commandments, but do not even know what or how many the Beatitudes are. So when Jesus says, "keep the commandments" this is for the Jew, not for his followers; never Jesus will say to those in his circle "keep the commandments." The commandments are for the Jews.

Within the Christian community there is only one commandment that is to love on another as He has loved us, but not those of Moses. Therefore Jesus says to him to keep the commandments, and it may seem strange that the young man's reply is: "*Which ones?*" We know that the commandments are ten, but this was not all that clear at the time of Jesus, because together with the Decalogue the rabbis had added many other requirements that they believed had the importance as the Ten Commandments. Therefore he wanted to know which ones.

Jesus' answer is shocking to the ears of a Jew, and perhaps scandalous even today for the ears of the pious, religious, the high-minded people, but of a universal openness and an answer to many questions that I didn't want to answer in detail in the course of these meetings, the many questions that I felt in the air: what happens to those who do not know the Lord or those attempting to approach the Lord through other routes or other philosophies, or other religions? Jesus' answer is disconcerting: "*You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false witness. Honour your father and your mother. You shall love your neighbour as yourself*". Jesus responds by listing five commandments and then he even adds what is not a commandment but a precept: '*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*'. Where's the scandal and bewilderment that Jesus causes?

You know that Moses' Commandments were visually represented in two tablets: the first contains the most important ones, which were the three commandments regarding our relationship with God; the first three commandments concern obligations towards God. The second tablets, also important but not of the same value, gives the duties of man towards his fellow human beings. Well, to achieve the fullness of life here on earth - which then leads to life eternal - Jesus does not care for the attitude or behaviour towards the divinity: this is sensational. Jesus removes from his answer the tablet concerning God: whether you believe in God or not, pray or not it is irrelevant to achieving eternal life.

Here then, as I said, we have an answer of great universal openness; a lot of people have never heard of God or Jesus; a lot, although they've heard of him, have rejected him for legitimate defence, because of the manner this God was presented to them. It was an insult to their intelligence and common sense. Many others rejected him because they already have other deities.

For Jesus it isn't important what one believes in; what is important is how you behave towards others, and - as we shall see - these are attitudes concerning life; however what is most striking is that Jesus removes the necessity of keeping the commandments which his hearers would have considered the most important commandments of all!

The Jews asked themselves which was the greatest commandment, and the answer was the commandment that God himself observes: that is the one concerning the Sabbath rest. This was the most important commandment. Full compliance with this was equivalent to the respect of the whole law; disrespect of the Sabbath - punishable by death under Israeli law - was tantamount to violation of all the whole law. Well, Jesus ignores this commandment and therefore ignores the distinctive characteristic of the Jewish people.

To have the fullness of life here on earth, and consequently a life capable of overcoming death, our behaviour towards God is of no consequence. Here is the extraordinary universalism of Jesus' message. It doesn't matter what religion you belong to, it doesn't even matter whether you have a religion or not. What matters is your attitude towards your fellow creature, especially with regard to the five aspects mentioned previously, that is towards life.

Some of these commandments do not need comments: "*You shalt not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal*". But the last two do, because of the way many were taught the catechism. This may have given us a distorted meaning: "*You shall not give false witness*" does not mean not "do not tell the lies"; the false witness was the one who produced a false testimony or an accusation that allowed the death penalty to be carried out against an individual. So the false testimony is not a lie - sometimes it can happen in life of having to tell a lie - but it is the false testimony that leads to death for an individual in court; it is a false accusation in court that leads to a death sentence.

The last of the commandments that Jesus mentions, "*Honour your father and your mother*" is not the due respect to parents, but is their financial support. At that time there were no pensions and the maintenance of elderly parents was the full responsibility of children; keeping parents in a state of poverty and destitution was the ultimate dishonour. What does the honour of the father consist in? It is written in the Talmud, "in feeding and clothing him." So "*Honour your father and your mother*" means "to ensure a peaceful old age", not only from an emotional point of view, but also financially; that is, take care of these people who by now depend solely on you. So it does not just mean the respect that is due to them as parents but also, their economic upkeep.

To this Jesus adds the precept, and it is important because as we shall see, it will expose this individual for what he is - "*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*", which - remember - it is for the Jews. I say this because many times, when many Christians in the community ask themselves what is Jesus' teaching about love, they produce the precept in the book of Leviticus: "*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*" (Lev 19:18). No, this is for the Jews – and it represents the maximum level of spirituality reached by the Jews - love goes towards the neighbour, that is the one that belongs to my circle, my clan, or at most to my country. Jesus goes beyond this: love has no limits, love is universal.

At the beginning of the interaction this character is presented in a vague way as 'A man': now the Evangelist calls him "Young man". It is important to the understanding of this passage. 'Young man' indicates a person on the way to full maturity, but who still has not reached it, therefore a human stage of an individual who has not reached maturity yet, but is on the way to becoming a man.

The young man answered: "*I have kept all these*". In the Greek text: "All these" is expressed in an emphatic form - it seems that one fills one's mouth with these words, in Greek: *panta tauta ephulaxamen*, - then strangely enough he adds: "*What more do I need to do?*". Therefore on the one hand expresses the maximum self satisfaction, but on the other hand a lot of presumption. In fact, he declares not only to have observed the five commandments Jesus listed, but also to have loved his neighbour as well as himself; however we will shortly see that this was a lie. In his response we spot also some disappointment: instead of being pleased, he confesses to be deficient in something when he says: "*What more do I need to do?*"

This is an accusation that the evangelist makes to those who put their happiness in the accumulation of property and in religious practices; neither wealth nor religious practices ensure the fulfilment of

the individual: they do not guarantee full happiness of the individual. So the punctilious observance of the commandments does not lead to full maturity for this individual, but kept him 'a young man'.

Here's the important answer that Jesus gives to all those who already here want to have a full life that will be indestructible and capable of overcoming death. Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect"; the individual is a young man who has not yet reached the stage of maturity, because, as long as people live their relationship with God based on the observance of the commandments, they will never become mature and will always be in a childlike state. A commandment always means there is an authority over you, that you must be careful to please by the exact observance of the commandment. Obedience has never made people mature but kept them childish, which is why the word 'obey' doesn't appear in Jesus' language.

Then Jesus said to him: if you want to become adult, "*go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me*". The young man was concerned about his happiness in the afterlife. Jesus instead invites him to choose and lower his sight towards this earth, to discover how many unhappy, poor people await his action for a better life here. To people concerned with the afterlife, Jesus says: look at all people who are here on this earth and do not lead a life worthy of being called life. To the one who asked him what he should do to get the fullness of life in the afterlife, Jesus replied by inviting him to a fullness of life here in the present, by taking care of others.

Jesus is inviting people to become mature, free, and able to follow him with their own two feet and think for themselves. The term "mature" or "perfect" appears only here and in the Sermon on the mount where Jesus says: "*You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect*". (Matthew 5:48). Jesus never calls us to obey God, but always to be like him.

Remember - and we have seen it many times - that while in religion the believer is one who obeys God by keeping His laws, in faith the believer is the one who resemble the Father by practising a love similar to his. This is why Jesus never says to obey God, but to be like God. Be as perfect as God means to be able to practice love of the same quality. The answer to all situations in life is love. Therefore the Father's perfection consists in unconditional love. In order to reach this fullness of unconditional love man needs to get rid of all his possessions: these are an obstruction to full maturity.

Jesus continues: "*and you will have treasure in heaven.*" "In Heaven" is a Jewish expression which means "God": the one who takes care of the happiness of others has the certainty that God takes care of his happiness. If I look after the economic well-being of others, I am sure that God takes care of my wellbeing, the treasure, the capital that guarantees my security. For Jesus the guarantee of those who give to others is that God gives back much more to them. The invitation that Jesus makes to the young man is to accept the first beatitude, the beatitude of poverty, which does not mean that we go and add to the number of poor of this world, but we lower a bit our standard of living to allow those who have it too low to raise theirs a little.

And here's the twist: "*But when the young man heard these words he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth*". Jesus proclaimed happy, blessed those who choose to be poor, that is those who freely decide to share what they have and what they are with those who do not have and those who are not; but this guy, when offered to choose between the fullness of happiness here on this earth and sadness, chose to be sad because he had great wealth. Thus, the accumulation of wealth is not a guarantee of happiness, but a guarantee of sadness and unhappiness.

Whoever aims to accumulate wealth for its own sake will end up in an exaggerated life style and full sadness and unhappiness. It is strange, because what was meant to ensure happiness, i.e. wealth, is instead source of sadness.

Here the evangelist exposes the young man's flaw because he had said he had always loved his neighbour as himself, but when Jesus invited him to prove it, by sharing his possessions, he shows that he is incapable of this. The poor do not fall within the category of the neighbour to be loved; Jesus invited him to grow up and he chooses to remain childlike.

The Gospels' teaching is very clear and very uncompromising: the one whose purpose in life is the accumulation of wealth or the pious practices of religion, remains forever an immature person and has nothing to do with Jesus. The young man is not the master of his possessions, but he is owned by them. Wealth that would guarantee him freedom, actually made him a servant and a slave. He is still an individual possessed by the god Mammon, the false god that instead of ensuring the happiness that he promises, ends in destroying those who worship it.

This episode shows a tragedy: Jesus is able to cleanse the leper of an incurable illness, he managed to free a man possessed, to cure blind and dumb ones, but can do nothing against wealth. Wealth is worse than leprosy and worse than being possessed. This teaching from the Gospel is really stern.

If you remember last year, when explaining the parables, we saw how Jesus said that the concerns of this world find their solution in wealth, but wealth brings new ambitions that prompts new economic concerns. Here the soil might be good – he is one that has always kept the commandments - but the ground is infested by bad weeds of desires and ambitions. Therefore the person has not grown up. Wealth is a demon that takes possession of individuals by making them permanently impure and most reluctant to accept the message of Jesus: for the rich there is no possibility of life.

Jesus sternly warned his disciples: “*In truth I tell you*” - when Jesus speaks like this in Hebrew it means he is making an important statement - “*it is hard for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven*”. Jesus refutes the religious tradition which saw wealth and religious devotion as a divine blessing.

Jesus' solemn declaration does not refer to the difficulty of the rich to enter the afterlife; the salvation of the soul is not at stake: anyone who behave honestly, uprightly and keep the commandments, gains eternal life. But Jesus excludes the rich from fullness of life here.

So possessing wealth prevents the fullness of life here on earth. Jesus says: “*It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven*”. There is no chance for the rich to enter the kingdom of God; perhaps Berlusconi will say that this text has been written by a communist, but the evangelist Matthew cannot be accused of communism. Wealth, for Jesus, is a devil that makes people worse than a leper and worse than one possessed by a demon. There is no place for the rich in the Christian community unless they are prepared to share their good fortune with those who are less well off.

In the Christian community there are places for gentlemen, but not for the rich. What is the difference between a rich man and gentleman? The rich man is one who possess, the gentleman is one who gives. We all can be Gentlemen, we all can give. It does not depend on culture or health: we all can give something. Then Jesus invites us all to be gentlemen like him, but there is no place for the rich. The rich might be religious, might also make offerings to the orphans and feel good

with a clear conscience, but to them the fullness of life in the present is denied, because the fullness of life in the present can only be achieved by sharing what one has and what one is with others.

Of course this message was uncomfortable yesterday and it is uncomfortable today: *“When the disciples heard this they were astonished. ‘Who can be saved, then?’ they said”*. The eternal salvation is not at stake: Jesus has guaranteed that - observe the commandments and you will get it ! But it is the survival of Jesus' group that they are worried about: they gave up everything to follow him. Finally a very rich person asked to join the group, now we finally eat ..., but Jesus says: "come in but leave your wealth at the door and give it to the poor". Then the Christian community was wondering, if the rich do not have access to our community how do we survive? How do we hack it?

“Jesus gazed, this is an important verb, at them. ‘By human resources’, he told them, ‘this is impossible; for God everything is possible’”. This verb "gazed", Greek emblepo, appears only twice in Matthew's Gospel. When I draw your attention to verbs, it is because it is a literary Hebrew technique: use the same word in two different texts to link them. So this verb appears only twice in Matthew's Gospel: once in the Sermon on the Mount and here. Inviting his disciples to have great confidence in the father, Jesus said: *“Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are?”*

Now the same verb appears in Jesus warning to his disciples to trust in God; the disciples think as human beings, and as human beings we can not guarantee the survival of life, because according to the mentality of men each keeps for himself.

If everyone keeps for himself you cannot go forward but thinking as God is the generous sharing of what you have and what you are. When there is sharing then abundance is created and abundance then creates the ability to give.

Then Peter who we know is a stubborn disciple and the evangelists, when he is presented as contrary to Jesus, call him only with his nickname, the "stubborn" -, well, Peter replied: *“Look, we have left everything and followed you. What are we to have, then?”*

There is a tone of defiance in Peter's reply: he says, *“we have left everything”*. But it is not enough to leave everything, you have to find everything. It is not enough to leave everything to follow Jesus if then you are not one with Jesus; he accompanies Jesus but does not follow him, because he did not absorb Jesus' ideals. *“What are we to have, then?”* And here is the final answer of Jesus: *“ In truth – and here is a solemn declaration again - I tell you, when everything is made new again...”* Whoever receives the message of Jesus, whoever accepts, while eating Jesus' bread, to become bread for others, this person is already a participant in the new creation.

The resurrection is a new creation by God, but this creation does not begin at the moment of death rather it starts while we are alive. Whoever receives Jesus and his message and, like him, puts his life at the service of others, belongs already to the new creation, and the new creation does not end with death but it is able to overcome it.

That's why there isn't a sequence of life, death, and then resurrection, but already while we are alive, he says: "You who have followed me, in the new creation": those who accept Jesus are already re-created. That is why Paul can say, *“We that are already resurrected”* (Eph. 2:6). So we do not believe that the dead will be resurrected, but we believe that the living will not experience death because we

participate in the new creation.

“When everything is made new again and the Son of man is seated on his throne of glory, you yourselves will sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel”. This assertion must be understood in the context of Jewish culture: as children of Abraham, the Jews believed they would not meet with any judgement, as this was reserved only for the Gentiles. Jesus rebukes Israel for rejecting him and puts them on the same level as the Gentiles while giving his followers seats on the throne of glory and so assuring them of a divine condition.

Those who accept Jesus and put his message into practice, have already achieved a divine condition; God's plan for humanity, and this is his will, is that every man should achieve divine condition. Jesus concludes: *“And everyone who has left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children or land for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times as much, and also inherit eternal life”*. Eternal life is not the result of human effort, but it is an inheritance; an inheritance is a completely free gift; life eternal is a free gift that God gives to his followers and not an achievement for man's effort.

What does it mean: *“everyone who has left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children ...”* It means that if against this desire for fullness of life, this desire of the new creation you do find some obstacle opposing it as important as brothers and sisters, father, mother, even children, or fields, i.e. everything that ensure your well being, you need to let it go! There is no obstacle that could hinder the fullness of man.

Whoever is capable, when facing an impediment, even an important one, of letting it go and go beyond it does not suffer a loss but realises a gain a hundred times greater: "hundredfold" is a biblical Old Testament expression that means the blessing of God (see 2 Sam 24.3; 1Cr 21:3). Therefore first you let go the impediment, but not for asceticism - the Lord does not ask us to leave anything to follow him - but if in order to follow him, meaning to realise the fullness of our existence, we encounter an obstacle, this must be overcome. Having abandoned this obstacle will not be a loss, but the effect of divine blessing. I hope we understand only one thing: the afterlife is not important; we need to ask ourselves whether the life we lead here is really life.