

XVII BIBLICAL WEEK

Sin from Jesus to Moses

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N.B. : *This transcription has not been revised by the speakers*

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Introduction

fr Alberto Maggi

I feel emotional being here and resuming the Biblical Weeks especially after what has happened over the past few years. It was, indeed, during this time that I had the idea of investigating the theme of sin. Why was that? You know, while I was in hospital a Capuchin friar brought me the Holy Communion. I sent him away because, before administering it to me, he put me on trial. This annoyed me, so I told him: "If you need to upset me first, I don't want your Communion". Yet he was a holy Capuchin friar! Standing in front of me, he was saying such things as: "You are outside the Church ... you are a heretic ... you administer Communion to gay people, to divorcees ...".

Another time his assistant came, an exquisite person, likeable and diligent. However, before giving me the Holy Communion he made me recite the 'I Confess' (a prayer I had almost forgotten): "I have sinned through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault ...". The first day I made him happy and I said it. The following day, though, when we got to "... through my fault ..." I burst out: "What possible guilty deed could I have committed in a day while I have been attached to all these pipes entering my body? ... what could I be guilty of?" Yet I was aware of how this was part of the rite and how readily people accepted it without any objection.

Therefore, while I was there, having a lot of time on my hands, I began to reflect on the meaning of sin and how we live in a church that is obsessed with the idea of sin. This obsession is a key idea that is instilled in us from a very early age and one which we find difficult to get rid of. It is strange: a church that should be the bearer of Jesus' good news, where 'Grace', to use traditional term and theme, is stronger than sin, is in reality obsessed with sin. This would be incomprehensible, if it wasn't that sin and guilt are used as instruments of power over, and submission of, people. "I decide what is and what is not sin; I determine whether you're a sinner or not and I am the only one that can break you free from sin".

This obsession with sin begins from an early age when children we are taught one of the most beautiful and innocent prayers: the 'Hail Mary'. Think about the second part: 'pray for us sinners'. The idea of being "sinners" is inculcated in us since a young age. Think of that devastating event that is the first confession to which children are obliged to submit to at an age at which they cannot commit any sin. Those that are the normal stages of their growth are criminalised and transformed into sins of which they must ask for forgiveness. The first confession has devastating effects on children.

Children are forced to declare themselves guilty of three attitudes (they are normally three) which are part of their normal childhood development ... it would be deleterious if they weren't there! What are they? Here are the three different sins they have to declare themselves guilty of: I have disobeyed my parents, I have quarrelled with my brother/sister or with my classmates (if they do not have the brothers/sisters), and I told lies. But disobeying parents is normal! It is worrying if a child does not disobey his parents because it means that either he is terrified of his parents or he has no character. And be aware that this is important because these things, once they enter into their psyche, prevent them from growing.

I still remember years ago when I was in a parish in Rome, I was confessing in a confessional that still had a grate. I usually do not ask people any kind of questions. This time I heard a person who

accused himself of disobeying his parents. The voice, however, sounded like one belonging to a grown up person. So I asked him: “Forgive me, but how old are you?” “Forty two”, he replied. “It was about time! Why did you wait so long to disobey your parents?”, I said.

The other attitude: I have quarrelled with my class mates or with my brothers or sisters. This is normal! A child who does not argue with brothers, sisters or with his friends shows that he has no character or that he does not care about others.

The third one is the funniest. We have stuffed these kids with ideas such as Santa will bring you a present, baby Jesus will give you a gift, the tooth fairy has taken away your tooth and left you a coin, etc. ... However, having stuffed them with all those stories, we do not hesitate to accuse them: “Oh, he/she told a lie ...”! Then you see how we get obsessed with the idea of sin from an early age. We will clarify it later, but here, for the time being, I must emphasise that I do not intend to minimise the idea of 'sin', but to place it in its proper scope. This obsession with sin is typical of Catholicism.

You know that one of the problems of the Italian language is that we describe any negative event with the expression: “It is a sin” (meaning: it is a pity). It is a sin (pity) that it is so hot this week ... and we do not know how to translate it into other languages because they do not have an equivalent expression (“It is a pity” does not carry the same feeling). It seems that this obsession with sin emerges in an incredible and disproportionate manner at precisely the moment when the Christian community gathers to celebrate the Eucharist, which should be seen as the explosion of God's grace and love for his children, at least those who have accepted him.

Well, strange to say, in the celebration of the Eucharistic for at least 15 times, in an obsessive manner, appears the term 'sins' and the consequent demand for forgiveness. You, parents, think for a moment when you invite your sons, daughters or friends to lunch and when they arrive they kneel down and start asking for forgiveness for something or other. “All right, I have forgiven you”. Then, before sitting around the table they ask again: “Have you forgiven me”. “Yes, I've forgiven you”. And then before starting eating: “I cannot eat if you do not forgive me”. During the celebration of the Eucharist we do exactly this! Sometimes we do not think about it because these obsessions are so deeply rooted in our behaviour and thinking. What is even more tragic is that we do not even realise!

The Eucharist begins with the priest saying: “Brothers and sisters, let us acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries”. And that is all well and good and may already be enough, but immediately afterwards there is the famous 'I Confess': “... that I have greatly sinned, ... through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault ...”. This is an exaggeration! Bearing in mind that those people who participate in the celebration of the Eucharistic, are not some habitual criminals who do not even think of getting near the entrance of a church, what overwhelming sin could they have committed? Yes, we make mistakes and err, but overall it seems to me all too excessive: “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault”. And the priest continues: “May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sin ...”. And, all right, this might all be well and good when starting the celebration. But, again, during the celebration this is repeated multiple times: “Lord God ... you take away the sins of the world” is accompanied by the invocations: “have mercy on us” and “receive our prayer ...”.

Then, in the Creed, we proclaim: “I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins”. Afterwards, for the priest, the word “sin” occurs again when, after the presentation of the gifts during the offertory he washes his hands and says: “Lord, wash away my iniquities; cleanse me from my sin”.

Then the theme of sin appears in many prefaces. For the consecration, Matthew's words were chosen where he mention the blood shed for the remission and forgiveness of sins. After the Our Father the priest says: "... we may be always free from sin" and at the time of exchanging a sign of peace: "...look not look on our sins ...". And this is not the end: we continue with: "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us" which is repeated three times. And then when the Host is presented to the assembly: "Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world". Fifteen times. This is a psychological condition, an obsession!

I can understand that at the beginning you can ask for forgiveness even if evangelically it is not correct: the most pointless thing that a believer can do is asking God for forgiveness. God never forgives because he never feels offended. Therefore, in the Gospels, Jesus never invites sinners to ask God for forgiveness, because forgiveness has already been given, but he invites them to grant forgiveness to others. God's forgiveness becomes operative and effective when it is translated into forgiveness for others. So far, for the liturgy of the Eucharist. But the theme of sin is also constant in most of our prayers. In them, we rarely find man's sufferings and joys. During these meetings, therefore, we want to go to the root of all this to try and understand how the idea of sin started, and how Jesus changed it. Shortly, we will examine the definition given by the second Vatican Council.

The origin of sin

(Ho 4:8)

fr Alberto Maggi

How does the idea of sin arise? This idea was born from an attempt to explain the eternal problem of why there is evil in the world. However, as yet, no satisfactory answer has been found. This problem that has always been in human conscience and has always gripped people's minds. Why is there evil, disease, and suffering? In primitive religions the solution was quite simple and even reasonable. There was a god that was good and another god that, instead, was evil. This is a reasonable explanation and people understood it. Therefore, all the goodness, such as life and everything that promotes life, comes to us from a god who is benevolent; every evil, instead, such as disease and death, comes to us from an evil and malign god.

With Israel all this changed because Israel came to understand and accept, albeit very slowly, that there was only one God. Therefore, there was no longer a good god and an evil god, but only one God, to whom both benevolent and evil actions were attributed, according to the most ancient texts. A single God who presented two sides. Here is a very ancient text from the prophet Isaiah: *'I am Yahweh, and there is no other, I form the light and I create the darkness, I make well-being (the action of a good God), and I create disaster, I, Yahweh, do all these things'* (Is 45:7-8). Therefore, in Israel's ancient times, when people did not believe in two gods, but in only one, this single divinity had positive and negative aspects.

In the Book of Ben Sira we read: *'Good and bad, life and death, poverty and wealth, all come from the Lord'* (Si 11:14), precisely to prevent the belief in any other deity. In the book of prophet Amos the Lord himself says: *'Does misfortune come to a city if Yahweh has not caused it?'* (Am 3:6). Therefore, in Israel's ancient times, the idea of two gods is discarded; there is only one God who is, at the same time, good and bad. And this God, who is also bad, is the author of the most dramatic episodes that we find in the Scriptures. He is a God that, as he is held responsible also for evil, is often presented with features that seem to be more appropriate of the devil than of God.

For example, in the Book of Deuteronomy, Yahweh says: *'Just as Yahweh used to delight in making you happy and in making your numbers grow, so will he take delight in ruining you and destroying you'* (Dt 28:63). Not only he will destroy you, but he will rejoice in doing this. Moses, like a deity, is capable of instilling terror when he says, again in the Deuteronomy: *'I shall make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword will feed on flesh: the blood of the wounded and the prisoners, the dishevelled heads of the enemy!'* (Dt 32:42). As you can see, we find terrible and dramatic aspects about God in the Old Testament.

The episodes relating to the liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt vividly manifested evil and diabolic actions by the Lord. There, he is presented as a contradictory God. He first hardens the Pharaoh's heart so that he does not let his people go. Then he takes this as a pretext to punish him. Therefore it is God who prevents the Pharaoh from freeing the people of Israel and then he punishes him for not letting them go free.

We have spoken before of a good god and an evil god. However, for Israel, those deeds linked to evil beings are all attributed to the same God. He uses an evil spirit to make people go mad, to trigger wars, etc. He even uses a very strange character that in the Bible is called the 'exterminator'. Who is this exterminator? Israel was a nomadic people. The high mortality of lambs at birth in spring was attributed to a demon that was called the exterminator. For this reason people used to

offer a sacrificial lamb during the spring full moon. Well, God appoints this character in the role of exterminator of the Egyptian people who rebelled against him and did not let his people go free. We are all familiar with the story of the slaughter of the first born of Egypt. All this happened in antiquity.

Subsequently, with theological progress, people started to think that explaining the existence of evil with a God that was both good and evil was implausible. In a new attempt to explain evil, two new important concepts were put forward: Satan and sin. In an attempt to exonerate God for the evils of this world they blamed Satan together with man, guilty of sin.

We can understand this process by first reading from the second book of Samuel: *Again, Yahweh's anger was aroused against Israel, and he incited David against them. 'Go,' he said, 'take a census of Israel and Judah'* (2S 24:1). God did not want David to take a census of the people of Israel because that would have meant that David was the master of Israel. Instead, the master of Israel was the Lord himself. The Lord says to David: "Take a census". What could David do? He took a census. Had he not done so! This unleashed the wrath of God. It was an astonishing error. However this story is contradictory. God forbids censuses, then he, himself, says to David: "Take a census" and afterwards he punishes him for running this census. It was a shaky theology.

Let us now see the same story as related in the first book of Chronicles: *'Satan took his stand against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel'* (1Ch 21:1). This is a surprise: here we have something that we should not have. In the book of Samuel, it is the Lord who drives David to do something wrong. In the book of Chronicles instead it is Satan. Had it been the Lord it would be incomprehensible and contradictory, but since it is Satan it is easier to understand. Therefore, it was not the Lord, but Satan that incited David to do something against the Lord's will, to take a census, an action that would entail punishment. From this we understand that the figure of the devil, Satan, was brought about to justify the evil that is in the world.

Therefore, Satan has become, in a way, a sort (and we'll see just how significant it is) of scapegoat. Why is there evil? Because there is Satan. Be aware, this idea has permeated our culture. How many times we have said: "The devil has something to do with it", "It was the devil" or "Damn the devil". The poor devil has become the end point of all the buck-passing of humanity's misdeeds. This on the other hand has led to the idea of sin. Therefore, to discharge God as the origin of all evil - everything goes back to the origins of evil - we created two images: that of Satan as an instrument through which God permits evil, and the idea of sin.

Why is there suffering? It is punishment from God for man's sin. We find in ancient texts such as the Book of Deuteronomy that the Lord says: *'You must not bow down to these gods or serve them. For I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God* (this is at the root of why there is sufferings) *and I punish the parents' fault in the children, the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren, among those who hate me'* (Dt 5:9). This is a reasonable explanation.

Why do I suffer? Because I have sinned. But I did not commit any sin! Then it was your father ... My dad was a holy man! ... It must have been your grandfather then... Grandfather was a good person ... What about your great-great grandfather ... This mean, then, that you want to be right at all costs, how is it possible? This was, therefore, a reasonable enough explanation: the suffering in the world is the consequence of the punishment that God inflicts on sinful people.

Therefore there is this transposition: to exonerate God we began to blame man. But this theology, of course, is shaky. Then the prophet Ezekiel goes beyond this rather simplistic theology and says: *'The one who has sinned is the one who must die; a son is not to bear his father's guilt, nor a father*

his son's guilt. The upright will be credited with his uprightness, and the wicked with his wickedness' (Ezk 18:20). According to Ezekiel, everyone is responsible for his own sins. Therefore, a son shall not bear the iniquity of his father and a father shall not bear the iniquity of his son. Each person is responsible for his own sins. We are responsible for the sufferings each one of us experiences.

Although a step forward, even this theology will not stand up to scrutiny because we can see in real life that some criminals thrive while some good people are afflicted by calamity after calamity. Then an anonymous author wrote a theatrical work, it was a work that needed to be performed on stage: it is known as the Book of Job. It challenges all the previous theories. Here we have the best person that lived on the face of the earth, yet, he is hit by all sorts of misfortunes. However, he said: *'If we take happiness from God's hand, must we not take sorrow too?'* (Jb 2:10) and again: *'Yahweh gave, Yahweh has taken back. Blessed be the name of Yahweh!'* (Jb:1:21). Therefore the Book of Job contest conventional theology: it is not true that all the suffering in the world is the result of man's sin because here is a man, at least one man about whom God himself boasted: *'There is no one like him on the earth: a sound and honest man who fears God and shuns evil'* (Jb 2:3). And yet, he had to face all the misfortunes of this world.

We can see, therefore, that all these attempts lead us nowhere! The good God and the bad God, the God who is good and bad at the same time, the inventions of Satan and sin take us time and again to the same question: why does evil exist? This unanswered question undermines God's image. Why?

We believe in a God who is omnipotent. If so, we have to conclude that God is not good. If he really can do anything, he is not a good God, given all of the suffering in the world. On the other hand if we believe that God is good, then he is not omnipotent. We are in a dilemma from which it is difficult to escape. If God is omnipotent then he is not good. Why does suffering exist? Why all the suffering born by innocent children? If, on the other hand, God is good, then he is not an omnipotent and almighty God. And people do not want to know of a God who is not omnipotent and almighty. Therefore we can see how important the issue of suffering is. How was this issue tackled at the time of Jesus?

At the time of Jesus, every disease incurred by man was a punishment from God. In the Talmud, the sacred book of the Jews, we find the following sentiments: those who see a handicapped person, a leper or a lame man should say: "Blessed is the righteous judge". Therefore physical defects and diseases are punishments from God. But why are there children who suffer diseases and disabilities from birth? There is an explanation for this, too, in the Talmud: when in a generation there are some righteous people then these are punished for the sins of this generation. If there are no righteous people then children suffer for the evil of that age. This means that if God does not find any righteous man to punish for people's sins then he inflicts punishments on children. Therefore children suffer for the evil of their generation. Of course, a God of this kind is a God who frightens, a God that cannot be loved, a God who worries people, a God who puts fear on people.

In summary, we said that sin is an action that triggers a punishment from God. However this explanation was shaky because people could see that there were people who were good and just, who observed all the commandments, who behaved well, but, nonetheless, suffered diseases, accidents and misfortune. Why was this possible? You create a religious system attributed to God whereby a man, whether good or bad, willing or negligent, is always in sin and in need of asking God for forgiveness. Who has never heard at least once the statement from the Book of Proverbs: *'The upright falls seven times'* (Pr 24:16)? How could we have arrived at such a statement?

It was religion who invented sin and applied it to even normal aspects of our daily human lives. If it was not for a religious Law that is attributed to God, man would never have known and would never even have imagined that certain behaviours are sinful. To realise this, it is enough to read the rules about clean and unclean contained in Chapters eleven to sixteen of the book of Leviticus. This is the book that, as we will see, Jesus will demolish. If you didn't have this Law that was attributed to God, could you tell me for which mysterious reason our Creator prohibits eating hares (incidentally hares were classified as ruminant animals even if they were not), as stated in the book of Leviticus, but allows us to eat grasshoppers?

There is no rational explanation for this! If you eat hare you are unclean (our idea of sin), if you eat grasshoppers you are in the clear with God. Another example: why does the Bible allow you to eat crickets but not pork? There are no rational explanations. As you can see, sin is born as an imposition of the religious institution that attributes these rules to God's will, a will that we cannot question or even discuss. Why is that? It is so because it is so. Now, quite rightly, you smiled when you heard about these food prohibitions imposed by religion, but those of my age, or thereabout, remember certain prohibitions in the non distant past. Before the Second Vatican Council many will remember that eating meat on a Friday was not a small sin, was a mortal sin! Housewives were very careful, almost obsessed, that a small piece of meat or fat could end up in their family's meal. That would have been a mortal sin! Do you know what a mortal sin is?

It is a kind of sin that, if you die with it, will send you straight to hell for all eternity. Eating a little bit of meat on a Friday is one of those sins! Today we laugh about it. Having this kind of rules seems so absurd to us now. However, we believed and observed those rules in the past. We worried that eating a slice of ham on a Friday was so great a crime that offended the Lord so much that he would send us to hell. Then there were wealthy people who ate lobster on Fridays and they were in the clear! Today we laugh, but in the past we have believed and observed these rules! Then let us have a proper look this week: by any chance, is it not the case that we observe certain rules, without even thinking of challenging them, rules that, as we shall see, not only do not come from God, but God himself does not even like?

Just think, I am of the generation when everything regarding not only sex, but also the genitals was considered sinful. One of the questions that confessors asked adolescent children was always: did you touch yourself? This, probably, was because these priests thought of a generation of castrated or armless people ... did you touch yourself? How was this possible? God's commandment "Do not commit adultery" was transformed into "Do not commit impure acts".

What constituted an "impure" act? Anything concerning not just the sexual, but also the genital sphere. Therefore, we have stories by elderly priests who, while in seminaries, ended up in hospital with infections to the genitals because they avoided washing them for fear of committing sins ... etc. We laugh, but the issue is a serious one. At the beginning I said that this is not an attempt to minimize the meaning of sin, but to bring it back to its correct context, otherwise, when everything is sin, nothing is sin any more. When we are immersed in a culture where everything is sin, then nothing is sin.

In the Gospels, as we will see, sin is not the transgression of a religious Law, but it is the evil that we concretely inflict on others. The second Vatican Council, in the document "Gaudium et Spes", gave a marvellous definition of sin. It says that sin diminishes man while blocking his path to fulfilment. Therefore sin is not so much an offence towards God. Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord says: *'Is it really me they spite, is it not in fact themselves, to their own confusion?'* (Jr 7:19). Jesus redefines the idea of sin from an offence to God to an offence to man. The religious institution

through the creation of the rules about pure and the impure causes all of man's existence to be under the sign of sin.

The birth of a child, according to the book of Leviticus (Lv12:2-5), made the mother unclean, albeit with a difference: 7 days of impurity if the newborn was a boy, 14 if it was a girl. This was followed by 33 days of purification for a boy and 66 for a girl. You smile again, but you are wrong! Before the Second Vatican Council, after a woman had given birth, the parish priest would hold the mother on the threshold of the church and give her a special blessing. Think about the crimes of religion! I think that, if we can talk about miracles, that is the birth of a child. A newborn baby is really a miracle of creation. Yet religion managed to soil even the miracle of Creation. The birth of a child makes the mother feel guilty. I repeat, before the Second Vatican Council, a woman who had given birth had to get a special blessing before entering a church, as if giving birth had in some way stained or infected her. This is why she could not enter a church. The Council happened only about 50-60 years ago, not so long ago. But these things are deeply seated into people consciousness. Therefore, from birth we have to deal with impurities.

Another problematic aspect of life was sexuality: in Old Testament times, it was thought that the legitimate relationship between husband and wife made both of them unclean and in need of purification. This was transferred into our Christian spirituality. Husband and wife, although legitimately married and sacramentally united in a conjugal relationship, did not access holy communion unless they had gone to confession first. Therefore, expressing your love, your sexuality to your lawful spouse was seen with a feeling of guilt. These feelings are deeply rooted in people. We collaborate with many psychologists and psychiatrists who send us their patients, as fortunately society has changed. In the past, people, especially women, were devastated by certain ideas, and became frigid because the idea of joining with their husbands was acting as a block on their psyche. They felt that in some way they were committing something that was offensive to the Lord and turned them into sinners. Just imagine what kind of relationships that could lead to! Well, the true Lord, of course, could not tolerate all this and, as we will see, denounces it firmly.

Summarising what we have seen so far, this unhappy situation derives from the unresolved problem of why there is suffering and evil in the world. There is no explanation. Primitive peoples had explained it by creating the image of a good god and a bad god. Israel refused multiple deities and, at first, subscribed to the idea of a single God who had good and wicked aspects. Eventually the bad aspects were transferred to two concepts: Satan and sin.

However, even this theology was suspect because people who were upright and good sometimes were also hit by diseases, which were considered punishments from God. As we shall see when we will examine the episode of the man born blind, Jesus' disciples did not have any doubt that the man born blind was punished for a sin: they only wanted to know whether it was he or his parents who had sinned. Therefore, at the time of Jesus, there was no doubt that suffering was a consequence of sin.

The religious institution of the time solved this problem by creating a body of Laws so complex, so difficult to observe that all people appeared to be sinners. We have quoted the words of the Book of Proverbs: 'A righteous man falls 7 times'. Therefore all people are sinners and in need to ask God for forgiveness. Of course God, the true God, could not accept this exploitation of man in his name.

Earlier on, Ricardo mentioned the excellent book by José M. Castillo: "Victims of sin", which I thoroughly recommend. The first victim of sin is God, a God who creates Laws that are impossible to observe, a God who punishes, a God that is difficult to love, a God one can only fear. God,

therefore, makes his feelings known through his prophets. One of his strongest complaints is found in the book of the prophet Hosea when the Lord shows his anger towards the priestly cast: *'My people perish for want of knowledge. Since you yourself have rejected knowledge, so I shall reject you from my priesthood; since you have forgotten the teaching of your God, I in my turn shall forget your children'* (Ho 4:6). A bit further down, his denunciation explains the reasons why the idea of sin started and was maintained: *'They feed on the sin of my people, they are greedy for their iniquity'* (Ho 4:8). This is an atrocious denunciation!

To understand this, we must refer to the idea of forgiveness at the time. Forgiveness of sins was not obtained through prayer, but only through offerings of animals that were subsequently slaughtered. Their blood, sprinkled on the people offering the animals, wiped away their sins and returned them to a state of purity. The priests, on the other hand, kept hides and part of the meat for themselves. God's complaint [*'They feed on the sin of my people, they are greedy for their iniquity'*] means: people sin and, to be forgiven, they must offer animals in sacrifice. The priests are the ones who feed on these sacrifices, and therefore on people's sin. God's complaint was tremendous: these priests, in their hearts, hoped that people sinned more and more because the more they sinned the fatter they got. This was why they created a Law that was impossible to observe and attributed it to God.

When there was a clash between Peter and the conservative wing of the primitive church, Peter said clearly: why impose on the pagans a Law that neither we, nor our fathers were able to observe, an impossible Law? (cf Ac 15:7-12). But here is God's complaint: they are greedy of my people's iniquity. Therefore the real concern on the part of the priestly caste is not sin, but that people stopped sinning or sinned less because, while people sinned, the temple's revenue stream was assured. If people sinned less, revenues would fall; if people, by bad luck, stopped sinning the temple would go bankrupt because the system would no longer be able to support the army of priests that it had hired; even worse, (here we already anticipate the sensational coming of Jesus) if unfortunately someone starts saying that sins are forgiven in another manner, without any need of offering sacrifices, then the whole system would collapse. This was what scared priests most.

The greed of the priestly cast had caused a truly diabolical form of trade. Sacrifices were offered only by priests in the temple. A pilgrim, therefore, had to go to Jerusalem. He, however, could not bring his own animals to offer in sacrifice, because sacrificial animals had to have certain properties. If they lacked these properties, they were not accepted. He could not risk to stand up in the temple with a lamb that, perhaps, the priest would reject. Therefore, how could he be sure that his offering would be accepted? It was quite simple: on the slopes of the mount of Olives there was a breeding farm that sold animals to be offered in the temple. If one had been a little curious and had wondered who it belonged to, he would have found that – surprise, surprise – it belonged to the family of the high priest!

When a pilgrim went to Jerusalem, it was not for a day trip; one stayed for a minimum of three days, but normally a whole week. If he wanted to eat a little bit of meat he would have to go to a butcher, and would probably have bought a piece of meat that came from the lamb that he had offered. Therefore he would have gone to the mount of Olives, bought a lamb, taken it to the temple where it was slain. The priests ate some of the meat and shared the hides between themselves. Incidentally, the chronicles of the time report of deadly fights between the priests for the possession of these hides because they were very valuable. The left over meat – during festivities, thousands of animals were slain - was sold in the butcher shops of Jerusalem, all of which were contracted out to the sons of the high priest. Therefore, it is against this exploitation that the action

of Jesus, when he entered the temple, must be seen. It was not to drive out only the merchants Normally, we say: the expulsion of the merchants from the temple. This is incorrect because the text tells us that Jesus drives out not only those who sell, but also those who buy. Furthermore, Jesus did not intend to cleanse the temple, but to eliminate it completely because for Jesus the concept of forgiveness, as we will see, was totally different.

Therefore, it was the priests who, for their own interest, created an impossible doctrine, with the support of the Scribes. God himself will intervene against this manipulation of his own will. Through the prophet Jeremiah, he says: *'How can you say, "We are wise, since we have Yahweh's Law?" Look how it has been falsified by the lying pen of the Scribes!'* (Jr 8:8).

The Scribes, as we know, were the official theologians; they represented the infallible teaching of the time. But the Law they proclaimed did not correspond to the will of God. The Lord exposed it as a lie concocted by their lying pens.

We have now reached an impasse. We have seen that these shaky theories of sin were invented in order to explain why suffering exists. The existence of suffering is still an unresolved problem. Jesus did not directly deal with the problem of suffering, he did not provide a theoretical explanation for it, but he dealt with the consequences of suffering. Jesus showed he cared about the sick. Jesus' actions were twofold. We have seen that to justify suffering they had brought about Satan and sin. Sin was understood as an offence to God, which incurred punishment. Jesus eliminates the figure of Satan. What does "eliminate" mean?

Satan, in Jesus' time, did not have the same connotation of the devil that Christians gave him. Israel for more than three centuries was under the Persian domination and acquired some of their culture, customs and ways of living. In the court of the king of Persia there was an important character, a sort of inspector general, whose job it was to supervise the governors in all the provinces. He was called the "Eye of the King". He travelled around the provinces observing the actions of governors and people. He then reported back to the king. Normally, he would report to instigate punishments for the bad behaviour of certain governors. In the Jewish culture this figure was transposed into the divine court. If we read the beautiful Book of Job, we see that Satan has nothing to do with the image of the devil created by Christians.

From the beginning, Job is portrayed as an upright and very good man. And then: *'One day when the sons of God came to attend on Yahweh, among them came Satan'* (Jb 1:6). The author imagines that, according to the customs of the Persian court, the king received his top military aids once a week, and Satan was among them. Therefore Satan is not yet an enemy of God or a rival to God. Satan is part of the divine court and has a very important role. *'So Yahweh said to Satan, "Where have you been?"'* (Jb1:7a) You can see from this that between the Lord and Satan there is no enmity. The Lord should have kicked Satan away, according to our mentality. Instead, he treats him normally. Even if he does not offer him a cup of coffee, as he might have done according to the Persian custom, there is an amiable conversation between the two of them. *"Prowling about on earth", he answered, "roaming around there"* (Jb 1:7b). This was the job of the Lord's officials. *'So Yahweh asked him, "Did you pay any attention to my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth: a sound and honest man who fears God and shuns evil"'* (Jb 1:8). There is, therefore, this conversation between God and Satan, one of his official. The Lord is boastful: "Have you seen Job? There is no one like him on earth". Satan, who looks after the interests of his master i.e. the Lord, says: "Of course, he is good and pious, but everything is going well for him. When one has a full belly, it is easy for him to thank the Lord, but try and send him some misfortune!" Then the Lord allows Satan to send all sort of misfortunes to him. At the following week's meeting the Lord is

happy with Job and says: “You've seen what happened to him, but he continues to be faithful to me”. And Satan, who always works in the interests of his master, says: “Yes, but you have hurt him on his children, his cattle and house; try to hurt him on his flesh”. And the Lord allows that, and so on. Therefore who is Satan?

Satan, according to the Book of Job, and this was still the belief at the time of Jesus, was one of God's officials at the divine court in heaven. He went back and forth to earth checking men's behaviour, reporting back to God and seeking permission to punish them. Therefore Satan was not in what afterwards Christians invented and called hell. He was in heaven, from time to time he descended to earth to carry out his job of spying on people and then went back up to heaven to report to God. He was the accuser.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus sent the seventy two disciples to proclaim the good news. As it had been a successful expedition, Jesus could state: *'I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven'* (Lk 10:18). This is a statement of incredible importance. As we have seen, Satan's abode was in heaven. He came down to earth to spy on men and then report back to God. Satan fell like lightning from heaven and he no longer had access to the divine court because of the announcement of the good news by the seventy two disciples. Jesus had presented a new image of God. It had become futile for Satan to go to God and ask permission to punish people.

The God of Jesus, especially in Luke's Gospel, is a God whose love is aimed at all people without taking into account their merits and faults, but only considering their needs. A God, therefore, who neither rewards the good people, nor punishes the wicked. It had become a futile exercise for Satan to go to God and say: “Look, what this one has committed ... I want him punished”. The true God, the one presented by Jesus, does not punish anybody. Therefore, poor Satan found himself on the dole because his role as accuser had been scrapped. In fact in the Book of Revelation we read: *'The accuser, who accused our brothers day and night before our God, has been brought down'* (Rv 12:10).

In this way, the community celebrates the fall of Satan who no longer has access to heaven to accuse and punish men, but has been thrown down to earth. Jesus, therefore, does not solve the problem of suffering, but he eliminates the figure of Satan, he makes him harmless as he no longer can accuse men. He also changes the concept of sin. Sin is no longer an offence to God but an offence to man. That is why Jesus did not put forward a theoretical explanation of why there is suffering but he took care of the sick and the diseased. He did not attempt to present theological theories about the existence of suffering, but all his activity was towards caring about suffering people. Why did Jesus change the concept of sin from an offence to God to an offence to man? To understand this we need to consider another aspect of the novelty brought by Jesus.

In Jewish culture, and likewise in every religion, reaching God was considered the ultimate attainment of man's existence. Therefore, the believer – all people were believers in those days – aimed all his efforts to reach this God and obtain forgiveness, blessings and favours from him. Prayers and the love for others were also oriented toward God. Everything one did was for God. As a consequence if everything was oriented toward God, sin had to be an offence to God.

Something outrageous happened with Jesus, something unthinkable, something that perhaps in the history of humanity one day people will understand - after 2000 years we have not yet fully comprehended this. With Jesus, God becomes man. This is incomprehensible. It was incomprehensible at the time of Jesus, and it is incomprehensible even today. But this, as we will see, will change the meaning of sin. With Jesus, God becomes man. Why is this incomprehensible,

and, not only incomprehensible, but also unacceptable? Because Jesus did not present himself as an exceptional man with special skills, who had reached the divine status. This would have been understandable and acceptable at the time of Jesus. All those who held power had the divine status.

People used the expression: "They reside in heaven". This was not just because they were above other people, but because they were those who were closer to God. We know this from history. The Pharaoh was a god. The Emperor was either a god or a son of God. All those who held power stood up there in the sphere of the divine. Therefore Jesus could have presented himself - and it would have been understood and accepted - as a man who, for his extraordinary gifts, had reached the divine condition. Instead Jesus chose a method that was difficult to accept at his time, and indeed still is for our mentality, utterly incomprehensible. Jesus presented himself not as a man who has reached the divine status, but as the God who has chosen to be fully man with everything that goes with the nature of human kind: limitations and death. And this was, and still is, unacceptable!

We can accept a Jesus who had reached the divine status, but not a God who lowered himself to the human condition! Yet if we do not accept this we will not understand Jesus message and the change he brought, which is at the subject of this week's meeting: sin. This is because, if God became man in Jesus, what defines man's salvation and success will no longer be his behaviour towards God, as defined by religion, but his behaviour towards men. This is the novelty brought by Jesus.

What is sin then? Sin is no longer an offence towards God, but an insult to man because God fused himself to man; God and man become one thing. Therefore, Jesus has radically changed humanity's pathway. We saw that, before Jesus, everything was oriented toward God, everything that you did, you did it for God: God was the ultimate goal of your actions. For example, I pray God, I love you for the love of God etc. With Jesus, God is no longer at the top: God is here at the origin. A God that merges with man: like a stone thrown into a pond, it begins to take shape in waves that want to reach the shores.

God is no longer at the finishing line of man's journey, but he is at the beginning. It is he who takes the initiative in merging with man and pushing man toward other men. This is the novelty brought by Jesus. Therefore man no longer lives for God, but lives of God and this is a great difference. It is one matter if man, with his efforts, tries and lives for God in which case he will never succeed and will always feel guilty and a failure. It is another matter if man lives of God. In this case the action of the believer will be to love with God and like God. This is the novelty brought to us by Jesus which changes, as we have said, the concept of sin.

From the moment when John the Baptist appeared in the Gospels, he proclaimed something that at the time was truly sensational. We have said that sins were forgiven in the temple. It was unimaginable, unacceptable and incomprehensible that there could be forgiveness of sins outside of the sacred enclosure of the temple. The Evangelists instead write that John the Baptist practised his baptism for the remission of sins not in the temple, but in the desert. The Lord's action does not take place in a sacred enclosure any longer, but outside. The sacred places, as we will see in the Gospels, are the most resistant places to the divine action. This is why, when God has to intervene, he always chooses people and places outside of the religious institution.

Therefore John the Baptist is in the desert proclaiming a baptism (the word has become so commonplace that it has lost its original meaning which in Greek simply means immersion) as a sign of conversion. Here the Evangelists make a choice. In the Greek language, conversion is written in two ways: one means a return to God, the other a change of mentality which affects man's behaviour.

The first is the religious conversion. For example: I did not believe, now I believe; I did not pray, now I pray; I did not frequent the temple, now I frequent it. The second indicates a change of mentality that can affect man's behaviour. Behaviour toward whom? Not toward God because otherwise it would have been the first type of conversion, but toward man. The Evangelists chose the second one: the term conversion they chose does not mean return to God, but a change of behaviour towards man.

As I have said, John the Baptist proclaimed an immersion. Why an immersion? It was a well known rite. Immersion signified dying to what one was and emerging as a new entity. For example, when a slave was granted freedom, he was taken to a stream and immersed fully in water signifying the slave had died. He would then re-emerge as a free person. It was, therefore, a rite of death and re-birth, a sign of change for the forgiveness of sins. This was a radical change! Were not sins forgiven in the temple? No! Sin cannot be forgiven through a rite, through a liturgical action, but only through a change in behaviour.

With this, John does nothing but place himself in the wake of the prophets we have already mentioned. The Lord says through the prophet Isaiah: *'Wash, make yourselves clean. Take your wrong-doing out of my sight. Cease doing evil. Learn to do good, search for justice, discipline the violent, be just to the orphan, plead for the widow. Come, let us talk this over, says Yahweh. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool'* (Is 1:16-18). Please, notice: God does not say: "Do penance, offer sacrifices, go to the temple ...". It is a change of behaviour that obtains forgiveness. You can understand why this was worrying. The Evangelists said that a large crowd came not only from all the regions, but even from Jerusalem. It could not be from Jerusalem! Jerusalem has the temple within its walls. Well, the people of Jerusalem went into the desert to participate in this rite that signified a change in one's own life in order to obtain forgiveness of sins.

It then becomes clear why there was so much alarm among the clergy: this constituted an incredible hemorrhage. As we have seen, the announcement of John the Baptist was this: a baptism of conversion for the forgiveness of sins. And crowds of people rushed to him. Jesus arrived and he suggested another change. Both Jesus and John the Baptist talked about the need for conversion, a conversion that meant a change. This is important. When God manifests himself he does not call for the observance of what there is already, for maintaining the tradition of old, but he always calls for something new.

When God manifests himself he calls for a change. Therefore, there is no going back to the past, but we must be open to the new. Jesus preaches the good news of God by saying: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; convert" (cf. Mk 1:15, Mt 3:2). Therefore, Jesus' invitation is also for a change, but no longer for the forgiveness of sins. Although Jesus takes part in John the Baptist's announcement, his concern is no longer the forgiveness of sins because repentance and forgiveness of sins were something concerning God: God was offended by these sins. With Jesus, God does not get offended. God is love and, therefore, he promptly forgives. Jesus' concern is not God, but man. This is the great novelty brought by Jesus: the kingdom of God (we will soon see what it is). "Convert, change and believe in the good news". What is the good news? The love of God for humanity.

Here is a radical change in the attitude of the believer. With John the Baptist sin was an offence toward God that needed to be forgiven through a change of behaviour. With Jesus a change of behaviour no longer restores the honour of God who was offended by sin, but the honour of man offended by evil. Jesus does all this because he came to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

It is important that we understand this expression. What does 'Kingdom of God' mean? God had not wanted the institution of the monarchy for his people because monarchy entails a person who puts himself above others and God, from the beginning, said: 'No, no one among you will be king. Let just me be above you all'. But the people of Israel insisted on having a monarchy like the other peoples. Through his prophets, God warned them: 'Be careful because if you have a king he will take your sons to turn them into soldiers and your daughters to turn them into his servants, he will take your fields and you will have to pay taxes' (cf 1S:8). But people persisted with their request so that God desisted and granted them a king, because God respects man's freedom even when it goes against his will. It resulted, however, in a disaster.

Therefore, in the end, the people of Israel chose a king for themselves. The first one was Saul, for whom political power was not enough; he also wanted the priestly power ... but the high priest of a priestly city was God. According to the mentality of the time, that we have seen earlier on, God sent him an evil spirit (today we would say he suffered a bout of depression). Saul ended up killing himself because he was about to be captured in battle. His legitimate son should have become king, but a fearsome ringleader of the area, famous for his ferocity, seized the kingdom: this man was David. David, therefore, is an illegitimate king because the kingdom should have gone to Saul's son.

David was a bloodthirsty man. He caused rivers of blood to be shed, so much so that when, for political reasons, he wanted to build a temple to the Lord, the Lord said to him: "*You have shed much blood and fought great wars; it is not for you to build a house for my name, since you have shed much blood in my sight on earth*" (1Ch 22:8). God will curse David. David will end up being an adulterer and a murderer. At David's death the kingdom went to the son he had with Bathsheba, his lover. Bathsheba, through intrigue, managed to make Solomon king. The kingdom, instead, should have gone to David's legitimate son, Adonijah, later killed by Solomon. Solomon was a despot and a megalomaniac, who, in order to satisfy his idea of greatness, put his own people to forced labour and ended his life in the worst possible way for a Jew.

Solomon died idolatrous, worshipping foreign gods. Of course, his wives were blamed for this. You know that in the Bible the cause of sins is always attributed to women. At Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam became king. He was as vain as his father, but not as intelligent. When the tribal heads, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, went to him asking for a more benign method of governing than his father's who, they felt, had sucked blood from their veins, he foolishly replied: "*My little finger is thicker than my father's loins! Although my father laid a heavy yoke on you, I shall make it heavier still! My father controlled you with the whip, but I shall apply a spiked lash!*" (2Ch 10:10-11). Ah yes ... then there was a schism. Rehoboam was left with only two tribes; the other ten tribes seceded and started the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Thereafter, between these two kingdoms, the Kingdom of the House of David and the Northern Kingdom of Israel, there were a series of fratricidal wars. Israel became weaker and, as it often happens, its enemies had an inviting opportunity presented to them on a platter. The monarchy had been a total failure. This had created in people's mind the expectation of an ideal kingdom, in which God would have been king and would look after the poor and the weak. Therefore, the kingdom of God is not so much a geographical area, but it just means having God as King.

Therefore, what Jesus does is simply to proclaim the realization of the kingdom of God. What do we understand for kingdom of God and why does it require a change? The kingdom of God is an alternative society. Our society is governed by the values expressed with three verbs that we consider cursed: to possess, to climb and to dominate. That is, to have and accumulate wealth for oneself, to rise above others and crush them, and, especially, to dominate others. All these attitudes

arouse hatred, rivalries and injustices in men. Jesus instead suggests the kingdom of God as an alternative society where, instead of possessing, we experience the joy of sharing (so that what we have is shared with others); instead of always longing to climb on top of others we lower ourselves (so that we are prepared to approach and listen to every one), and, lastly, instead of this yearning to dominate and control, there is the freedom to choose to serve. Only a person who is free can serve.

This is the kingdom of God: a society based on sharing with, respect for and service to others. Here God is king because he takes care of people. Therefore, any negative effect that we could find in this choice of sharing and serving is amply rewarded by the fact that God takes care of his people. This is the novelty brought by Jesus. Therefore, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near. Why doesn't he say that it is already here? Because he has just announced it and he is awaiting for some people to accept it. Convert and believe in the good news. Jesus modifies John the Baptist's idea: John was still thinking that sin was an offence towards God, Jesus instead cares about the sick, the suffering, the least in society. This is the sin that we will examine tomorrow.

What offends God

fr Alberto Maggi

We start today with a brief summary of what we said yesterday in order to refresh our memory for those who were here yesterday and to bring up to speed those who are joining us today. The issue of sin rises from the still unresolved question of why there is suffering in the world. People, forever, have been confronted with the problem of why there is so much suffering especially among innocent people and young children. In older religions people thought that there were two gods: a good god and an evil god.

At the beginning in Israel with its monotheistic religion, both good and evil were attributed to God. Later on, with a theology that was becoming more refined and deeper, two figures have been introduced in order to exonerate God as the cause of evil: Satan and sin. Sin was considered an offence towards God and he punished sinners with sufferings. However, we have seen that this doctrine was fragile and shaky. Finally we started to have a look at what Jesus suggested.

In order to understand the profound change brought by Jesus, we need to understand something that even today, after 2000 years, we struggle to come to terms with: God has become man. Jesus has moved the orientation of humanity. Before him, man was oriented towards God who constituted the final aim of all his existence; with Jesus, God is at the starting line, but humanity is no longer looking up to God, but lives of God and, with God, heads towards man.

Therefore, the novelty brought by Jesus is very important: God becomes man. As a consequence, one of the first surprising changes is that the constant, imperative admonishment that appeared in the Old Testament - "*Be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy*" (cf Lv 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:26, Dt 14:2) - is never used by Jesus. Being holy was man's religious route towards God. What did 'holiness' mean? Respect for the rules, observance of the commandments in order to start the climb towards God. Jesus, who is God, never invokes this admonishment. Jesus never calls for people to be holy, and therefore to respect rules and commandments, but the God who became man continuously invites people to be as merciful as the Father is merciful. This is a big difference.

Holiness represented the religious path that led to God, mercy is the divine path that leads to man. In this, Jesus follows the line of the prophets. We have seen how God, through his prophets was trying to teach people his plan for humanity. Just think how often Hosea says: 'Learn what it means: "For faithful love is what pleases me, not sacrifice"' (cf Ho 6:6). This is what Jesus will adopt. Mercy is synonym with compassion and is directed towards men; sacrifices are a feature of holiness and they are offered to God. Jesus, therefore, does not repeat the exhortation "Be holy because I am Holy", but instead he says: "Be compassionate in the same way the Father is compassionate".

Holiness, therefore, is man's religious path towards God, compassion instead is the divine path towards man. This is an important difference which makes us understand why, in the Gospels, the religious and pious people were Jesus' fiercest foes. It is simple: according to the prevailing mentality of the time, man stands on earth. Adhering to "be holy as I am holy" takes him, through a series of rules, steps and commandments, towards God. Then, men who observe these rules and commandments, slowly climb up these steps that lead to holiness. However, inevitably, the higher one climbs towards God, the further away he goes from other people. One becomes detached or

separated: this is exactly the meaning of the word Pharisee. Who are the Pharisees? They are the ones who, having accepted God's admonishment "Be holy as I am holy", thought they could attain holiness by the scrupulous observance of all the rules and precepts contained in the Law. However, as a consequence, these Pharisees, while lifting themselves up towards God, distanced themselves from the rest of the world.

This is why the Pharisees fail to understand Jesus and they are not able to recognize him: Jesus and the Pharisees go in opposite directions: while man, the Pharisee, climbs up to meet God, with Jesus, God climbs down to meet man. The more religious people climb towards God, the more they move away from a God who became man. There is absolute incompatibility between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus' line based on divine compassion towards man is very important. From this we can understand why Jesus' attitude toward Moses' commandments was at best detached and indifferent.

In the Gospels there are sensational episodes. We all know the episode of the person who asks Jesus what is the most important commandment? They all knew the answer: of the 10 commandments the most important one was the one that even God observed. And what was the commandment that even God observed? Resting on a Sabbath. Compliance with this single commandment was considered compliance with the whole of the Law, the transgression of this commandment was considered a breach of the whole Law and could be punished with the death penalty. Jesus disconcerted the people around him with his answer! Jesus does not mention any of the ten commandments, but quotes part of Israel's creed from the Book of Deuteronomy and a simple precept from the book of Leviticus: absolute love to God (cf Dt 6:5) and love for your neighbour (cf Lv 19:18).

Therefore, Jesus keeps a distance from the commandments. Having seen his attitude, they ask him: which are the commandments to comply with? In those days the commandments were shown physically and spiritually by two tablets, the famous tablets of the Law. There were two tablets, but they were not of the same value. In the first table there were the first, second and third commandment which were the most important commandments and they concerned the divinity. These commandments were the exclusive privilege of Israel: it was only Israel that had these commandments. The second tablet instead contained the fourth to the tenth commandments: they concerned man and were common to all cultures: do not steal, do not kill, do not commit adultery, etc. These were common to all cultures and there was no need for a revelation from God.

What distinguished and characterised Israel was the first tablet, and especially the observance of the commandment regarding the Sabbath. Yet when Jesus is asked which are the commandments that need to be observed, he never mentions those from the first tablet, concerning man's attitudes toward God, but always those from the second tablet, containing the commandments regarding our behaviour toward man. Why is that? Because, once again, and we shall insist on this until the concept enters deeply into us, with Jesus, God was made man. Therefore, the determinant factor will not be whether one believed in God, but whether he loved man.

The God of Jesus will not ask whether we believed in him, but whether we love man as he does. That is why in the well known parable that we find in Matthew's Gospel, that one called 'The Last Judgement', God famously will not ask those who have never heard of him whether they believed, whether they prayed or whether they went to the temple, but he will ask them if they have responded with solidarity to the needy. The Lord did not ask if they have made any offerings to the temple, but if they have given bread to the hungry. The Lord did not ask how many times they prayed, but if they have helped those in need. Therefore in Jesus' list of commandments there is nothing concerning God, the cult, or religion, but everything is about our attitude towards man.

Jesus' teaching is completely different. That is why all the religious forces were mobilised against him. Jesus had caused an earthquake.

For Jesus, the most important aspect is not the deity, but, given that this deity merged with man, the human being is the most important one. Because of this, Jesus' message, curiously, is not a religious message. When Jesus sends out the disciples he does not say: "Go and convert sinners", (sin does not seem to be one of Jesus' concerns), but Jesus tells them: "Go and heal the sick" (cf Mt 10:8). We have said that the idea of sin was born as an attempt to explain suffering, and yet Jesus does not give a theoretical answer to this problem. He attends to and helps people who suffer: Jesus does not explain why there is suffering, but shows concern for people who suffer. Many times in the Gospels, see Matthew's, Jesus tells his disciples that they will lay hands on the sick, and heal them. Again Jesus will say in Matthew's Gospel that he will give his disciples the power to heal every disease and sickness. Jesus repeatedly calls on his disciples to heal the sick.

Most importantly the Evangelist Luke said: '*... and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and heal*' (Lk 9:2). We would have expected '*... the kingdom of God and the conversion of sinners ...*'. Not so. In the Gospels, Jesus heals the sick many more times that forgives sins. The forgiveness of sins in the Gospels occurs no more than two or three times. Instead, he continuously attends to the sick, because Jesus' main concern is alleviating the suffering of human beings. This is the program of the kingdom of God. For Jesus, healing the sick is more important than forgiving their sins.

This has been understood by the primitive church. Think about what Peter said when he met a crippled man, words that pope Francis has recently repeated during his visit to Brazil. What did Peter say? '*I have neither silver nor gold, but I will give you what I have: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, walk!*' (Ac 3:6). So the activity of the primitive community was looking after the diseased and healing the sick. It is important that the pope has reused this expression as reported in the Acts of the Apostles. Peter says: "I have neither gold, nor silver, but what I have I give it to you: stand up and walk". When the Church possesses gold and silver it is not only incapable of bringing back to his feet someone who has fallen, but causes those who are able to walk to stumble.

As a brief aside ... In so many meetings and homilies over the years, I never happened to quote the pope, never ... never ... but since we have pope Francis I keep quoting him continuously. This is because we finally have a man as pope who embodies the values of the Gospel and he is a man so imbued with the Scriptures that his every expression, even those that may seem casual, are in fact references to the texts of the Scriptures. People have been surprised when the pope, responding to journalists in an aeroplane, said: "And who am I to judge gay people?" Well, this was not a new papal expression: Peter used the same expression when he clashed with the conservative wing of the primitive church that did not want to open its doors to the pagans: "But who am I to prevent this?" Here, finally, in the church, we breathe completely new air.

Jesus, therefore, changes the direction of movement: no longer man moves towards God, but man together with God heads towards humanity. This is the great change that he brought to us. As a consequence, he changed the concept of sin. Sin is no longer intended as an offence to God that then God punishes through sufferings, but sin is an offence to man that God considers made by man on himself. We will examine one of the most important and shocking pages that we find in the oldest Gospel, that is Mark's Gospel; shocking because, at the end of this episode, Jesus got up to something so appalling that he had to escape and take refuge abroad. That is what we will see in Mark's Chapter seven later this morning.

What makes man unclean

(Mk 7:1-23)

fr Alberto Maggi

¹The Pharisees and some of the Scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered round him. It is a characteristic of Mark's Gospel that every time, really every time, Jesus communicates life to people – to communicate life to people, as we have seen, means healing and, especially, setting people free – the enemies of life appear. Who are the enemies of life? They are exactly those people who thought of themselves as the ones who were closest to God. How was it possible that the Pharisees, who led a life that was considered holy by most people, were Jesus bitterest enemies? Well, the answer is easy: they aimed to climb up toward God and could not understand a God who had lowered himself to the level of man. And here they are, the enemies of life, Scribes and Pharisees, appear on the scene.

In the Greek text, the chapter starts with a conjunction – Καί - that means 'And'. This is because the Evangelist wants to connect this chapter with the previous one where he had written: *'And wherever he went, to village or town or farm, they laid down the sick in the open spaces, begging him to let them touch even the fringe of his cloak. And all those who touched him were saved'* (Mk 6:56). This is one of Jesus' characteristics which we should imitate. In his travelling around he was not proclaiming forgiveness of sins, but he was healing the sick. He cared about people's sufferings and illnesses.

However, there is always someone who does not tolerate this. Scribes and Pharisee carry out a joint action. The Greek verb translated with 'gathered' is **συνάγουται**; we sometimes quote Greek words to show more closely what the Evangelist means. Here the Greek word has the same root of 'synagogue' which simply means 'gathering'. Mark uses this word to indicate the ideology of the people gathering around Jesus. This ideology was taught in synagogues. The article 'the' in front of Pharisees means that not just a few Pharisees approached Jesus, but all of them. This was impossible! The Evangelist, however, uses this exaggeration as a literary device to make people understand that the mentality of the Pharisees was well embedded in all people. It was, in fact, the Pharisees, those scrupulous followers of the Law, who dominated the synagogue and dictated what was taught there. In order to make themselves feel stronger, these Pharisees engage some Scribes from Jerusalem.

A few words about the Scribes even if, by now, we know who they are. However, there are always people who confuse them with clerks. The Scribes were the theologians of the official teaching of Israel; they were very important people because their word had the same value as that of the sacred Scriptures: they were the official teachers. When there was a conflict between the teaching of the Scribes and the word of God, you had to follow the Scribes because they were the true interpreters of this word of God. Therefore, they are not simple copyists or clerks, but important theologians. In this occasion the Pharisees joined forces not with local Scribes, but with some Scribes from Jerusalem, capital of Israel and Holy City.

What did Jesus do to bother these Scribes? This is the second time that they are inconvenienced by Jesus. We will see the first time tomorrow. Here is his crime: **²They noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them.** A more literal translation would be: *'When they saw some of his disciples eat bread loaves ...'* The Evangelist emphasised that his disciples were eating bread loaves because he wanted to refer to the previous episode when Jesus took the five loaves, broke them and gave them to his disciples to share out to the people.

Therefore, Mark wants to make a reference to this important episode which all the Evangelists use as a prelude to the Eucharist.

In that episode, Jesus took the loaves, he broke them and he gave them to his disciples to share out. The disciples are not the owners of this bread, they are servants whose only duty is to distribute it. It is not for them to decide who is worthy to receive it and who is not. Apologies for referring once again to the Pope ... it has never happened to me in the past thirty seven years, since I became a priest, but now I do it frequently ... This pope has said many fantastic things! Just think about when he said that Jesus Christ had set up seven Sacraments and us priests have set up the eighth: the one of the customs inspection to decide who can and who cannot be admitted to the sacraments. Jesus instructs the disciples to distribute the loaves. It is not for them to decide who is worthy to eat this bread and who is not. Those who do that usurp a power they do not have: it is a sin of idolatry. Jesus, in the sharing of bread, does not ask people to purify themselves first to participate to the banquet. This is outrageous!

As we have seen, they come down from Jerusalem to confront Jesus because he does not ask his disciples to wash their hands before eating. This was not a matter of hygiene, but an important religious rite: people had to purify their hands first. Why is that? Because one had to be pure before eating. Here the Evangelist foreshadows the Eucharist because Jesus' gestures are the same as those of the last supper.

What the Evangelist wrote is extraordinary and, if understood, it would change our lives and the Church's thinking in a lot of issues. While religion teaches us that man must be pure to be worthy to receive the Lord, Jesus teaches the contrary: welcome the Lord into your life, and he will make you pure. It's not true that man must be worthy to get close to the Lord, but getting closer to the Lord will make man worthy. Therefore, Jesus is not asking people to wash and purify themselves before eating this bread, but he shows that it is by eating this bread that they will become pure. This should have an extraordinary impact.

After this digression, let us resume examining Matthew's Chapter seven. The accusation that the Scribes and Pharisees levelled at Jesus was that some of his disciples ate bread with impure hands. Why are they so worried about this? Because the act of serving carried out in the distribution of the bread makes people free. Yesterday, while talking about the alternative of the Kingdom of God brought by Jesus, we mentioned the three cursed verbs: to possess, to climb and to dominate. Jesus has replaced them with their alternatives: to share, to climb down and to serve. We have matched service with freedom. Only a free person can serve others and serving makes people free. Therefore, the act of serving the bread makes his disciples free. However, the religious institution's alarm bells start ringing anywhere there is a hint of freedom. The religious institution sets the foundations of its power and prestige on absolute dominance over people.

The religious institution is terrified by the freedom of its followers and, therefore, it must always keep its followers in an infantile state. What does an infantile state imply? People who adhere to the religious institution must never be free to think with their own head and to walk with their own legs, but they must always ask permission, authorization and the opinion of the institution. There will always be an authority above you who will tell you what to do and what not to do, what is sinful and what is not, you can do this but not that. In this way, you are always under its control. If, and this is the effect of Jesus' message, a person begins to feel free and begins to reason with his own head and to walk with his own feet then it is the end for the institution. It is the end because it is no longer in control. This is the Evangelist's complaint, because even in the Church's early days there was this tendency to control.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, writes: *'Some false brothers have secretly insinuated themselves to spy on the freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, intending to reduce us to slavery ...'* (Ga 2:4). Jesus' message frees people, but there are people who are enslaved and are happy to be so. They do not tolerate the freedom of others and, covertly, try to limit it. Therefore religion keeps people at an immature level, Jesus instead gives full autonomy to people.

As we have seen, the problem was that the disciples handled the loaves of bread without practising the rite of washing their hands first. Here the Evangelist ridicules the supporting structures of religion with deep irony. These structures were, supposedly, traced to God himself; in reality they were man's inventions.

³***For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, keep the tradition of the elders and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow.*** According to the tradition of the elders, hands extended to the elbows! One of the Jewish characteristics was that they considered unclean anything external to man and, therefore, particular rituals were required to purify people and food. A principle conveyed in the Talmud declared: "It is prohibited to humans to enjoy this world without blessing". Some of these ideas, about which we now laugh, have been infiltrated into our Christian spirituality. "It is prohibited to humans to enjoy this world without blessing" because in order to eat, in order to be able to enjoy, we require, almost always, a divine permission and a blessing from God.

In the Book of Exodus, when describing the alliance with man, God says: *'For me you shall be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation'* (Ex 19:6). The Pharisees interpreted this text literally and observed the strict prescriptions of ritual purity that were intended for priests during their limited period of service in the temple everyday of their lives. Priests went to Jerusalem and ministered in the temple for a week. During this week, they had to be ritually pure and therefore they had to undergo certain purification rites. The Pharisees, who were lay people, had transposed the rules that priests observed during their week's service into their everyday lives. Among these rules there was the ritual of washing one's hands. In the Scriptures, there is no prescription to wash hands; this was a tradition that took roots from outside the Scriptures. However it became so deeply ingrained into people's mentality that it was considered divine will. It was not a simple issue of hygiene, it was an important religious ritual and people, who publicly disregarded it, could be sentenced to death.

We have many documents confirming this. Rabbi Aqiba, one of the great rabbis of Israel, had been imprisoned by the Romans. During his time spent in prison, he used the little water that was given to him to wash his hands rather than drink it. His disciples insisted that he should drink it. But he replied: "People who do not follow the rabbis' rules are sentenced to death. It is better for me to die rather than disobey my colleagues' commands". This rabbi, to show an example, did not use the little water that was given to him for drinking, but he used it to purify himself.

Let us now try to understand what the Talmud is. We know that God gave Moses a written Law on Mount Sinai. This Law was in Hebrew and was called the Torah. But it was understood that, alongside the written Law, Moses also received a body of oral instructions to which, over time, interpretations and comments were added. These were also attributed directly to God. Eventually this oral tradition was collected in the Talmud to which the same importance was attributed as to the sacred Scriptures.

Talmud was a Hebrew word that meant teaching. This is important in order to understand everything that will come next. Therefore we have two Laws: a written one that is preserved in the first five books of the Bible and an oral one that eventually was collected in the Talmud. However, both were considered of the same importance because God was the author of both. Well, a whole

tractate of the Talmud is devoted to the washing of hands. We will read some of it to understand the Pharisees' objections against Jesus.

It is not sufficient for a person to wash his hands hygienically before eating, it is necessary that the washing is done according to all the ritual requirements including the quality of the water (you may not use water that has already been used for other purposes), the type of vessel (the edge must be smooth and regular, without grooves). Additionally, the water must be poured by the person himself and is not the result of an automatic jet. For example, if I wash my hands with water coming from a tap or water contained in a vat then I am in breach of the rules and my washing is not valid. Water must be poured by the person himself. A jug with two handles had to be used for a valid ritual washing. The water must be poured on the right hand first. All rings and bracelets etc. had to be removed. The water had to flow from a person's hand toward the wrist and down to the elbow. Once the right hand was purified it was used to hold the other handle of the jug to pour water on the left hand. Before drying one's hands, one had to say this blessing: 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with Thy commandments and has commanded us concerning the washing of the hands'. After the blessing, hands had to be dried because otherwise the liquid can become a means of transmitting iniquity.

All this was done, says the Evangelist, to comply with the tradition of the elders, i.e. the Talmud that was considered God's word. The Scribes were the guardians and enforcers of this Law.

Mark continues in his ironic tone: ***4 And on returning from the market place they never eat without first sprinkling themselves. There are also many other observances which have been handed down to them to keep, concerning the washing of cups and pots and bronze dishes.*** Therefore Mark's complaint is that religion and religious practices are the enemy of all that is life, and this is why even the most normal objects are placed under suspicion of impurity. Food as well, which is what keeps us alive, is constantly looked upon with the suspicion of being impure. For John the Baptist, you will remember, what made pure the people of Israel was its severance with injustice through the practice of baptism. Here what is translated with washing we have the Greek word 'baptise' because to baptise means to immerse. Here the Evangelist is ironic. For John what made people pure was baptism as a symbolic severance with injustice; for the Pharisees holiness depends on rituals of purification of things and objects as if evil was outside man, not within.

All of this is an example of the hypocrisy of religion. Religion makes us believe that certain rules are important (rules that are observed even today in the Judaic world) and lead to situations that, with all due respect, cannot be described but as ridiculous. As an example, just look at the efforts made to prepare for the Passover. Some of you, at least those of my age, will remember that in the catholic world there was the custom of cleaning the house for Easter (spring cleaning). We did not understand why we had to turn the house upside down ... It was a tradition derived from the Jewish custom. During Passover, people were not allowed to store anything leavened in the house and therefore the house had to be thoroughly cleaned from top to bottom in case anything had been contaminated with yeast. It was mandatory to wash walls and floors with boiling water. Similarly, all the crockery, pots, pans and all kitchen utensils needed to be washed in boiling water. It was a big effort! So what do they do now? Simple. If you go to a synagogue during the time preceding the Easter period, you will find preprinted adverts for buying and selling household objects. I, a Jew, sell to you, a non Jew, all the plates and dishes of the house. Since they no longer belong to me, I am no longer obliged to clean them. Of course, after the Passover, I will buy them back.

After this digression, the Evangelist resumes: ***5 So the Pharisees and Scribes asked him, 'Why do***

your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?' Not following the tradition of the elders is equivalent for the Pharisees and the Scribes to ignoring the will of God himself. This is because, as we have seen, not only the written Law, but also the oral tradition came from God. And tradition had rules for all these things. Therefore, they accused Jesus of allowing closeness to God without requiring those particular conditions and ritual procedures that they taught.

And here is Jesus' answer: ⁶ ***He answered***, - to fully appreciate the Gospel, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of the first listeners or the first readers who did not know how it was going to end. In fact Jesus starts by complimenting these zealous guardians of the tradition and faith - ***'How rightly Isaiah prophesied about you ...*** so they expected a compliment for the example and the role models they offered to their people. A cold shower was to come, instead - ***hypocrites*** – this word comes from the Greek language that meant 'stage actors'. It did not have the moral overtones that it acquired subsequently. In those days, theatre performers did not act on stage showing their own faces, but they wore masks indicating the type of character they performed. Therefore, the bad, the good, the naive, the fool, the evil had different masks when they appeared on stage. People recognised the character immediately from the mask the actor wore. Therefore to better understand Jesus' denunciation we should translate hypocrites with 'stage actors'. These were the people who behaved according to a script; they recited words that were not coming from their hearts, but were written by others, and wore 'faces' and clothes that were not theirs. Jesus' answer, therefore, is an invective against the Scribes and Pharisees. ... ***in the passage of Scripture: This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me'***.

This page shows how Jesus, continuously, takes inspiration from the prophets. Here he repeats the invective of the prophet Isaiah: *'The Lord then said: Because this people approaches me only in words, honours me only with lip-service while their hearts are far from me, and reverence for me, as far as they are concerned, is nothing but human commandment, a lesson memorised'* (Is 29:13). In Jewish culture, the heart was not the seat of affections, as in our western world, but the seat of mind and consciousness. By contrasting the lips to the heart, Jesus accuses the Scribes and the Pharisees of only talking about being faithful to the divine Law, while, in fact, their real interests lay somewhere else. *'Their heart is far from me'*: where will this heart be 'away from me'? Jesus said it in Matthew's Gospels: *'For wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be too'* (Mt 6:21)

⁷ ***Their reverence of me is worthless; the lessons they teach are nothing but human commandments.*** Referring to Isaiah, Jesus complains that the cult that they render to God is useless and empty because they propose to honour God with attitudes that God never even thought of asking from man.

Let us conclude this first part by reading a very important and timely page written by a Pharisee who was unbeatable in the observance of these commandments. In fact he wrote: *'In Judaism, I outstripped most of my Jewish contemporaries in my limitless enthusiasm for the traditions of my ancestors'* (Ga 1:14), He was a Pharisee who, once he came to know Jesus, was shocked and defined all those commandments "excrement" (cf Ph 3:8). This is Saint Paul, Saul, a converted Pharisee who had observed all those commandments. Let us read what he wrote about them: *'Then never let anyone criticise you for what you eat or drink, or about observance of annual festivals, New Moons or Sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what was coming: the reality is the body of Christ. Do not be cheated of your prize by anyone who chooses to grovel to angels and worship them, pinning every hope on visions received, vainly puffed up by a human way of thinking; such a person has no connection to the Head, by which the whole body, given all that it needs and held*

together by its joints and sinews, grows with the growth given by God. If you have really died with Christ to the principles of this world, why do you still let rules dictate to you, as though you were still living in the world? -'Do not pick up this, do not eat that, do not touch the other,' and all about things which perish even while they are being used -- according to merely human commandments and doctrines! (Col 2:16-22). These doctrines do not come from God. We have been fooled. They made us believe that they were God's commandments, when in reality they were invented by a few people. And here is the final punch: In these rules you can indeed find what seems to be good sense -- the cultivation of the will, and a humility which takes no account of the body; but in fact they have no value against self-indulgence (Col 2:23).

According to Paul, all of these practices, these fasts, these prayers, these rites of the unleavened bread and apparitions have a semblance of religiosity, but in reality have no other value than satisfying one's own ego. Therefore we have to be suspicious of all these religious practices that seem to have a semblance of religion, but, in fact, have no purpose at all other than fuelling one's own ego, in which case they are also harmful.

We will examine the awesome reprimand that Jesus dealt to these Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus' teachings will become so controversial that in the end he will have to escape abroad because he put into doubt not only the oral Law, but, touching a raw nerve, also the written Law. This is also important for us today. Are we really sure that this is the word of God? This is a tremendous question because if we start saying: this is the word of God, this is not ... then the whole building will start to creak!

If the Evangelist Mark left us this page it is because he knew that it is of vital importance for the Christian community where there is always the temptation to bring back old customs, traditions and legalisms.

'Their reverence of me is worthless; the lessons they teach are nothing but human commandments'. By quoting Isaiah Jesus lands his first jab: their rites are worthless, their doctrines are merely human. Remember, they had said that his disciples were transgressing the tradition of the elders. This is a term that was spoken with great veneration: the elders! By quoting Isaiah, Jesus simply reduces them to mere mortals. Therefore he denies there is any value in their tradition. What the Scribes and Pharisees considered with great reverence, the tradition of the elders, is for Jesus, as it was for Isaiah, simply a tradition of men. I repeat, we must pay great attention to these pages because they are very topical today: we must not confer divine authority to what Jesus judged purely human.

Therefore, as we did yesterday with sin, let us ask ourselves: could it be the case that there might still be today something that is passed on as divine will when, in reality, it is something purely human? The falsification that the Evangelist and Jesus denounced is that, in order to impose something that is purely human (and consequently limited, relative and changeable), a divine authority is invoked. One thing is if I, Alberto, ask you to do something for me, in which case you may choose to do it or not. It is, however, a totally different situation if I say that what I am asking of you is sanctioned by God himself. In the latter case you might be inclined to think twice before disobeying me because that would mean disobeying God as well.

The Evangelist's complaint is that people belonging to the religious institution confer divine authority to what Jesus judges to be purely human. And he continues with another tremendous blow: ***⁸You put aside the commandment of God to observe human traditions.*** Note that again Jesus does not mention the elderly. The oral tradition that Scribes and Pharisees attributed to God

through Moses is nothing but a human invention. Jesus hollows out this tradition of any divine connotation: it is a human invention. For Jesus, the tradition of men is in contradiction with the commandment of God. God's commandment and tradition are incompatible. God is the one who makes all things new, tradition is what preserves the ancient: they are incompatible. Remember Jesus' call to conversion. When Jesus intervenes it is always to urge a change, never to preserve what already exists.

⁹ **And he said to them, 'How ingeniously you get round the commandment of God in order to preserve your own tradition!** Earlier Jesus spoke of human tradition, now he directly accuses them: *your own tradition*. Scribes and Pharisees abrogated the commandment of God to establish and impose their own tradition on people. To do this they have to manipulate God's will, usurp the role of God and put themselves above the Lord. These zealous guardians of God's will are, in fact, the first ones not put it into practice. They are the ones that, while posing as the perfect and devout keepers of their tradition, ignore God's commandment.

Jesus demonstrates all this with an example: ¹⁰ **For Moses said: Honour your father and your mother, and, Anyone who curses father or mother must be put to death.** Honour your father and your mother does not just have the obvious meaning of respecting them, but also of maintaining them economically. At that time there were no retirement pensions or welfare. It was the duty of the first born son to support his elderly parents. Therefore, supporting one's parents to a decent standard of living meant honouring them. To leave them destitute meant dishonouring them. We find this in the Talmud: What does it mean to honour you father? To nourish and clothe him.

Here Jesus is awesome. You will remember what God said earlier on through the prophet Isaiah: *'This people approaches me only in words, honours me only with lip-service while their hearts are far from me'*, and we wondered where this heart was and concluded that it was where their treasure was... Jesus denounces that their bragging about the compliance with the Law and all their devotions, were, in reality, hiding their insatiable greed. There are few people as greedy as some members of the clergy: priests know a thing or two about how to make money. It is unbelievable what their imagination comes up with to make more money!

However, here is Jesus' dig: ¹¹ **But you say, "If a man says to his father or mother: Anything I have that I might have used to help you is Korban (that is, dedicated to God)", ¹² then he is forbidden from that moment to do anything for his father or mother.** 'Korban' is an Aramaic word: it means 'sacred offer', it was used as a votive formula to donate to the temple some goods and so remove them from common use.

Jesus denounced the religious caste for using its power to trick people and exonerate them from their duty to support their parents. How did they do it in practice? They would approach someone and ask: How is dad? Dad is well ... who knows how long he will live ... And mum? ... Oh, the same ... certainly, it must be quite onerous to support them ... look, if you make a fairly substantial offering to the temple you are no longer required to support your parents. This is what Jesus denounced: through the practice of Korban, people offered to God what was their parents' entitlement by Law. What is more important: the honour due to God or the honour due to man? Since the honour due to God is more important, it is acceptable to dishonour man. In reality, this was a practice of extreme selfishness, greed and, often, revenge facilitated by the greed of the temple's priests who encouraged this practice to increase their revenues.

Jesus continues: ¹³ **In this way you make God's word ineffective for the sake of your tradition which you have handed down. And you do many other things like this.** Earlier on Jesus had

contrasted God's commandment with tradition, now Jesus contrasts God's word with the tradition they had handed over. And this was only one example, but Jesus made clear that it was only one of many. Scribes and Pharisees encouraged people to dishonour their parents in order to honour God. For Jesus honouring God cannot coexist with human sufferings. However, Jesus will fail with these people because Scribes and Pharisees, in spite of being so pious and zealous, were also too attached to money.

When Jesus said: you cannot serve God and Mammon, i.e. money, he heard people jeering from behind. Who were those people laughing at him? The Pharisees. How deluded Jesus was! How could he think that one cannot serve God and money: they had done it throughout all their lives. The Evangelist writes that the Pharisees who loved money derided him. (cf Lk 16:13-15). On the other hand, we do not need to go as far back as the Pharisees, we have a long tradition of this. Jesus is truly from another world: how could he think that it is impossible to serve God and money? We priests have managed to do it for ever. In Italy, we even have transformed the Holy Spirit into a bank: the bank of the Holy Spirit ... this is one of the worst blasphemies! God's unconditional love has become the name of a bank. We are also accustomed to the bank of St Anthony, St Paul, etc. Now we have all the saints in banks. We are so accustomed to this that we do not register it as a blasphemy any longer. This is as jarring as having the "Brothel of the Immaculate Conception". My God ... Two opposing things! Dear Jesus, it is not true that we cannot serve God and money. But, as always, it is the Church that has to change - *convert* - and proclaim the Gospel and not manipulate the Gospel to support the Church.

Jesus brought only this up as an example, as this was probably one that touched most people since most had parents. But he warned people that there were many other similar instances. However this subject was so hot that Jesus did something dramatic: ¹⁴ ***He called the people to him again and said, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand.*** These are exactly the same words with which Moses solemnly proclaimed his word to the people of Israel.

¹⁵ ***Nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean; it is the things that come out of someone that make that person unclean.*** To the multitudes that convened around him, Jesus announced his doctrine which is exactly the opposite of what Scribes and Pharisees taught and practised. Jesus declared that what may or may not break the relationship between man and God is not what enters, but what comes out of man and this is valid for all people throughout the ages. Therefore, Jesus denied the religious principle that discriminated between what was pure and impure. Please, note that Jesus' speech does not apply only to food because at that time Gentiles and sinners were considered impure. We, therefore, need to apply Jesus' thoughts not only to food, but to all aspects of man's life.

While Scribes and Pharisees had spoken about impure hands, but not about food, Jesus raises the stakes of the debate by criticising not only the oral Law but also the written Law. By declaring that there is nothing outside man that can contaminate or make him impure, Jesus sets himself against the written Law, i.e. the Scriptures, the word of God. In fact, in the book of Leviticus there are several chapters that list all the foods that make man unclean.

I repeat Jesus' words: '*Nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean*'. There is a big contradiction here! The Bible, God's word, says the opposite: there are foods that can contaminate man. The dilemma is a big one: either Jesus is right and the Bible, or at least those chapters of the Book of Leviticus, are wrong, or the Bible is right and it is Jesus who is wrong, in which case he is a madman and a heretic.

Let us remind ourselves that this discussion with the Scribes and Pharisees was about a rule contained in the oral tradition: wash your hands before eating. However, Jesus raised the stakes and touched the issue of unclean foods. This was not a rule found in oral Law; this was part of the written Law. It was sensational.

The Evangelist continues (we omit verse 16 which has been inserted later, probably by copyists):

¹⁷ When he had gone into the house, away from the crowd, his disciples questioned him about the parable. What parable? Jesus had not told any parable. His speech could not have been clearer and straighter. Sorry if I repeat it, but it is very important that we remember it: *'Nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean; it is the things that come out of someone that make that person unclean'*. Where is the parable? There is no parable. His disciples, unlike the crowd, did not understand. What Jesus had announced was so new and so explosive that they thought it was a parable, an enigma or something that had to be explained and not a teaching delivered in plain and clear language. Jesus had simply stated that it is not what enters man, but what comes out of him that makes him unclean. This went against the written Law. Since this was so shocking, his disciples thought he was telling them a sort of parable that needed to be explained.

Jesus lost his patience. **¹⁸ He said to them, 'Even you -- don't you understand? Can't you see that nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean?'** Jesus' disciples did not understand, not because what he said was unclear or difficult – Jesus could not have been clearer -, but because they could not accept the significance of what he had said. They, as we have seen, had reached the point where they did not wash their hands before eating, contrary to what the oral Law dictated, but could not dare to doubt the written Law which, undoubtedly, was more important.

And Jesus went on: **¹⁹ because it goes not into the heart** (remember that in Jewish culture the heart was the seat of the mind and not of affections) **but into the stomach and passes into the sewer?** Jesus could not have used more graphic terms: the sewer is where excrements end up. Communion with God does not depend on physical contact with the external world. Food of any kind does not defile man. Food does not go into man's heart, i.e. does not change man's way of thinking. Jesus said something so controversial and dangerous that it is found only in Mark's Gospel. The other Evangelists, shocked by the impact of Jesus' speech, will try to dilute it, somehow. Therefore, the situation is serious: if we open the book of Leviticus, we have several chapters listing clean and unclean animals, what was acceptable to eat and what was not. Watch out, this issue is very relevant even today.

Therefore, Jesus declared all foods clean. The book of Leviticus contains some chapters where the contrary is stated: there are some unclean foods. Then we are back to the same impasse as before. If Jesus is right, then the book of Leviticus is wrong. However, can anyone say that the word of God is wrong? If we begin to say: well, this chapter is wrong, the next one is not from God, then the whole edifice will start creaking. If we say that this chapter in Leviticus is wrong, then we could also say that a chapter of the Deuteronomy is also wrong in the sense that it does not have God as author. On the other hand, if we are sure that what is contained in the Bible comes from God, then Jesus is wrong and we follow an impostor, a deceiver, one that cheats people, which was exactly the accusation brought against Jesus.

²⁰ And he went on, 'It is what comes out of someone that makes that person unclean'. However, before we continue with Jesus' teaching, let us ask ourselves: we have the Bible as a heritage; it is made up of about seventy books (Bible means books) and we say that it is God's word and it

expresses God's will. Now Jesus declares that this is not always true, because at least these chapters of the book of Leviticus not only do not reflect the will of God, but are false. Therefore, when reading the Bible, how can we distinguish what is the word of God and what is not? What criteria can we use to determine what comes from God and what does not? It is important to find out because, if we say that everything comes from God, then everything has the same value. However, if we have a criterion for telling what comes from God and what does not, then we know. This criterion is given to us by the Evangelists themselves. Just think about Luke's Gospel, the episode known as the disciples on their way to Emmaus, where Jesus interpreted the Scriptures for them. Jesus does not limit himself to reading the Scripture, but Jesus interprets it.

Therefore we can say that the word of God is all that contributes to the well-being and freedom of man. Everything that limits man's freedom, everything that does not contribute to the freedom of man, all that sacrifices man's happiness is not God's word. It might be the word of Ezekiel, it might be the word of a Scribe, it might be the word of a rabbi, but it has nothing to do with the word of God. Should we, therefore, dismiss what has been considered word of God? No, it must be interpreted in ethics. When it is interpreted in ethics it acquires the right value.

This is important. Just think about an event that made the news around the world a few decades ago: the ending of apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid did not end because it was resolved as a political issue. It ended because people understood the theological issue that underpinned it. The justification for apartheid was based on the word of God, where God said to Noah's sons that Cam was to become the servant of his brothers. It is the word of God. Black people, who originated from Cam, would have to become servants to their brothers and sisters. This is the word of God. The word of God has not changed, but when it was interpreted and understood properly by South African theologians, apartheid lost its foundation and was dismantled.

It is very important to make the word of God relevant to our times: it needs to be interpreted. Would it be acceptable today to make people or categories of people suffer on the basis of a verse in the Old Testament? The criterion that we have is this: everything that contributes to the well-being of man is from God; everything that limits the well-being or happiness or takes away man's freedom is not from God. Certainly we have a liturgical problem. At the end of each reading, we proclaim it, with an unhappy expression, to be word of God. I wonder whether in the future it will be changed.

Sometimes there are texts of such violence, of such ferocity that a priest is embarrassed to end the reading with the usual 'This is word of God'. People would be terrified! I remember years ago when we had to read the episode of a commander who, before going into battle, made a promise to Yahweh: *'If you deliver the Ammonites into my grasp, the first thing to come out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from fighting the Ammonites shall belong to Yahweh, and I shall sacrifice it as a burnt offering'* (Jg 11:30-31). The first one to come out of his house happened to be his daughter, the only daughter he had. He slaughtered her as an offering to the Lord! Word of God ... my dear, I don't know ... if it was the word of the devil would it have been any worse?

There are other instances, for example in the Book of Deuteronomy, when God tells Moses to exterminate all people. Israel had invaded a region and killed all the men, but spared women and children. This upset God so much that he said to Moses: 'I will kill you if you do not exterminate women and children as well' (cf. Dt 1-3). Word of God!? This would be my suggestion: why don't we say 'This is the word of the Book of Deuteronomy', or 'This is the word of Ezekiel' or whoever, instead of implicating God when God has nothing to do with all this? This is just a suggestion for

the renewal of the Church.

After this digression, let us go back to Mark's Gospel. ^{20b}**Thus he pronounced all foods clean.** Therefore, this part of the Book of Leviticus does not correspond to the will of God, unless we consider Jesus to be an impostor. However, here is what we are interested in. We have said that, for Jesus, sin – i.e. what breaks our communion with God – does not consist in the transgression of a religious Law, but in anything that offends man. Jesus himself follows up this with a list of twelve (this is a symbolic number which represents the twelve tribes of Israel) behaviours that make man unclean. None of these relates to our relationship with God, religion or rites. They are all harmful behaviours that cause offence to other people. Therefore Jesus went on: *'It is what comes out of someone that makes that person unclean'*.

²¹ **For it is from within, from the heart** (the heart represents the mind, not affections), **that evil intentions emerge: fornication** (the original Greek text says 'prostitutions' which does not refer only to the activities of sex workers, but any kind of prostitutions by which one sells oneself for a gain), **theft, murder,**

²² **adultery, avarice** (i.e. accumulation of wealth), **malice, deceit, indecency, envy** (literally: evil eye. This expression meant a miserly person. Abstract ideas are not used in the Bible. A miser was described as one with an evil eye. In fact, when you meet a really miserly person and try to greet him, he will look at you with suspicion thinking you may be after something. If your greeting comes with a smile then he becomes panic stricken ... here is the evil eye, an eye that avoids all because he sees in each person someone after his possessions), **slander, pride, folly.** Folly does not mean a shortfall in grey cells. In the Gospels, a fool is a person that accumulates wealth for himself, a person who has everything, but in reality has nothing. You will remember the rich man who, having had an abundant harvest, does not think about sharing with others, with the poor. No, he demolished the old barns because they were too small and built bigger ones while singing: "Hooray!", and the Lord said: "Oh foolish, this very night you will die. Who will enjoy the wealth you've accumulated?" (cf. Lk 12:13-21). People in Naples have a beautiful proverb which says: "A pig is good only when dead, likewise a miser".

It is interesting to note that in the oral culture of the time, when there was a list, the two most important items in the list were put one at the beginning and one at the end of the list. Furthermore, there was always a link, a connection between them. What comes first in this list? Prostitutions. What is last? Foolishness. What is the connection between them? Self-interest. However, if we look closely, self-interest is the root of all the attitudes listed by the Evangelist: these are attitudes that make man unclean. And yet none of them are in relation with cult, religion or rites, but all relate to life as they are all linked to greed and self-interest: the prostitutions, thefts, murders, etc.

And here is Jesus' conclusion: ²³**All these evil things come from within and make a person unclean.** Therefore, in this list of twelve behaviours that prevent the communion with God, none regards the sphere of the religious, the cult or our attitude towards God, but instead they are all attitudes that affect our relationship with other people in a negative manner. They all cause suffering to our fellow human beings. Just to remind you of our main theme: Jesus does not talk about evil, but about suffering; he does not give the reasons why there is so much suffering, but tries to eliminate its causes.

For Jesus, therefore, the distinction between pure and impure does not come from God. Impurity stems from bad relationships with other people. What inhibits or prevents a good relationship with

God is the harm we cause to others. And in harming others we eventually harm ourselves. Well, what Jesus said was so explosive that he had to run away. In fact, the Evangelist writes: ²⁴ ***He left that place and set out for the territory of Tyre. There he went into a house and did not want anyone to know he was there; but he could not pass unrecognised.*** Tyre is in Lebanon; Jesus, therefore, had to go abroad because not only did he object to the oral tradition (which was in itself a serious transgression), but he touched the heart of the written Law (the Torah). In so doing, though, he gave us the correct way to interpret it.

The Sinners' Banquet

(Mk 2:13-17)

fr Ricardo Perez Marquez

This morning, Alberto spoke on the theme of what is pure and impure as seen in Chapter seven of Mark's Gospel. Now, we want to focus on another aspect in particular: eating and having dinner. We will do it in a way that appears shocking to those that are attached to the rules of what is pure or impure: the sinners' banquet. Mark introduces this theme at Chapter two, almost at the beginning of his Gospel, through the person of the publican Levi, Alphaeus's son. He was a tax collector and, as we will see, he will have dinner with Jesus.

However, before examining the text (Mk 2:13-17), I would like to explain the reasons for this obsession with the rules of purity. Where does this attachment to a series of rules, that are supposed to guarantee my ritual worthiness, come from? God cannot put up with anything impure and would detest me if I were unclean. Therefore, it is imperative that I keep myself in a state of purity. As a consequence I need to follow certain rules not only on a personal level, but also collectively. We know what were the function and the aim of these rules, but where did they come from? Where does this fixation or attachment to these rules come from? We know the reason was to maintain ritual worthiness: an unclean person was not fit to take part in religious rites, could not enter the Temple; he had to stay outside. Furthermore, at a collective level, the rules about purity safeguarded the people of Israel's cohesion and were an identity factor.

When the Israeli people found itself in situations of grave danger of being absorbed by much more powerful nations, it managed to maintain its cohesion and avoided blending in by maintaining its rules about purity. Remember the famous example of Eleazar (2M 6:18): he prefers death rather than eating a pork steak. This story is very important, because it explains how Israel kept its identity. It managed it by being steadfastly attached to these rules. Even if this story is a bit idealised and exaggerated, it shows that the people of Israel had understood that in an existential crisis, when threatened to be absorbed by other cultures, they could survive by keeping to these rules and, therefore, preserving their identity.

However, this obsession was also the cause of a progressive separation and segregation which at times led to situations of extreme danger as we have witnessed, for example, with the Shoah (Holocaust). Separation is the base of the rules about purity and impurity. In Greek, the word 'pure' also means 'suitable for worship', 'fit for the temple' because it is separate from anything that is not adequate for worshipping. The word 'holy' also implies separation.

When we refer to God as the 'Holy One', 'kadosh' in Hebrew, we mean 'the separate par excellence', separate from any form of evil. God is the fountain of life, Lord, the creator, in him there is no shadow of evil, hence he is totally separate from evil. Therefore, the idea of separation is what may explain this obsession with purity at the time of the New Testament.

This morning, Alberto explained the rituals of washing, ablutions, etc. These rules, as we have seen, served to preserve the identity of Israel as a people. Furthermore, these rules about purity functioned as a safety net for a person's daily life, his participation in a community and as a member of a people. There were, therefore, some rules that, taken as a whole package, formed a sort of safety net where the faithful of a Hebrew God felt at ease and worthy of taking part in their rituals

of worship.

Taking part to the rituals meant to be able to benefit from divine favours; being excluded meant to be deprived of these favours and as a consequence one could encounter all sort of adversities. This morning, Alberto spoke about ablutions: the rules about hand washing were important within the family group, a social group where relationships are like a net; people were not allowed to sit at the table if they had not cleansed their hands first.

There were many taboos in connection with food: there were some foods that could not be eaten as was established in the book of Leviticus. Therefore these foods could not be brought to the table. There were also rules about diseases. Sick people could not be approached and were kept at arm length. There were also taboos regarding sexuality. Anything to do with sexual relations was considered impure and, therefore, there were rules and rites to restore purity. Furthermore, the menstrual cycle in women was considered a state of impurity as well as anything to do with blood and giving birth.

In the book of Leviticus we read: *Yahweh spoke to Moses and said, 'Speak to the Israelites and say: "If a woman becomes pregnant and gives birth to a boy, she will be unclean for seven days as when in a state of pollution due to menstruation. On the eighth day the child's foreskin must be circumcised, and she will wait another thirty-three days for her blood to be purified. She will not touch anything consecrated nor go to the sanctuary until the time of her purification is over" (Lv 12:1-4). However, if she gives birth to a girl everything is doubled: 14 days in total isolation and 66 days to spend indoors ... etc. "When the period of her purification is over, for either boy or girl, she will bring the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting a lamb one year old for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or turtledove as a sacrifice for sin. The priest must offer this before Yahweh, perform the rite of expiation for her, and she will be purified from her discharge of blood" (Lv 12:6-7).*

This last rule reminds us of Luke's Gospel: Mary and Joseph went to the temple and offered two turtledoves for purification. Luke says 'for their purification', but in reality it was only the woman's purification that was considered. From the book of Leviticus we know that there were taboos regarding blood and women's conditions that were part of this matrix of rules. There were also rules regarding diseases, with leprosy being subjected to the strictest ones. A corpse in a house would have made the whole house impure. All these rules maintained the net tight and strong to safeguard the group's identity.

There were rules also outside the family context. These rules, though, were linked to the family rules and strengthened the overall safety net. For example people could not approach pagans and sinners, could not marry non Jewish people to maintain the homogeneity and the traditional culture of their forefathers. All this is very interesting and helps to understand how life was for the Jewish people, although this was not exclusive to them.

All ancient peoples had rules aimed at preserving a certain loyalty to their cults and Gods. We are interested in this because in the New Testament Jesus will begin to skip all of these rules in a very public and blatant manner and, in so doing, breaking this net that was maintaining cohesion within families or wider groups. What is of interest to us is to know that religion was able to enter within the home environment to impose that type of control. Worship had not only a public dimension in so far as for one, to be able to go into the temple, had to be in a state of purity; these rules had to be observed also inside the house.

Therefore religion had managed to control the home environment where these rules were to

be obeyed with the most scrupulous fidelity. You understand that when Jesus breaks with all these rules, which kept this type of system going, e.g. he does not participate to the rites, he does not observe the washing of the hands, he goes and eat with or approaches sinners, he has no qualms in being touched by a woman with a flow of blood or sick people or lepers, or he approaches pagans and goes into their houses, he undermines the whole system. And that is why, according to Mark's Gospel, his own family, thinking that Jesus had gone completely mad, wanted to capture him. He was braking with a system that was mandatory for all to accept. Nobody could argue or disagree with this way of living because, in exchange, the family would protect you in any situation in which you came to find yourself. And, therefore, there was an obligation on the part of the individual to observe these rules.

At this point it is also worth mentioning that there was an important institution in the ancient world which was called 'goel'. The 'goel' was the liberator or the redeemer: in the Bible and the rabbinical tradition it denotes a person who, as the nearest relative of another, is charged with the duty of restoring the rights of another and avenging the wrong that had been done to him. When a member of the family had a problem, for example, lost his land because of a debt, the family intervened and bought that land back for him. Or if a family had one of his own killed, it would intervene - an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth - to repair the damage that it had suffered. And then, in this manner, the honour of the family was restored while consolidating its identity as a group and enhancing its reputation.

Therefore, we could say that the theme of purity indicates the need to keep within a boundary. We have talked about a net, as a means of demarcation, to understand how different things fit together. Impure is what escape out of this boundary or net. This concept may be useful to explain and understand the way of interpreting relationships and life at that time.

Everything that is out of place is considered as something that may bear impurities and that is why boundaries must be well fixed, within the house as well as outside it. Thus, we must never go outside these boundaries otherwise we lose this state of purity which ensures our suitability to worship and our identity as part of the group. This idea of boundaries can also apply to physical places, places that one is allowed or not allowed to visit. As an example, pagans, lepers and people with certain handicaps could not enter the temple; women could go as far as the first courtyard, men were allowed into the second one, priest could go further into the temple and the High Priest was the only one allowed into the most sacred and secret room, the one reserved for the worship, etc. These boundaries applied not only to people but also to animals, food and objects.

I have quoted only a small section of the book of Leviticus in chapter 12, but there is a whole list of things you cannot do, those that are outside certain boundaries and which are seen as threats to the integrity of the person. This is why, for example, everything that comes out of the body as a liquid, like blood and other bodily secretions, are considered impure: they overstep their boundaries. Blood especially, being the symbol of life, when it escaped from its boundaries, made men and women impure. In the end, purity or impurity did not in itself indicate a moral quality, but the common suitability to participate to the rituals that defined a people as a worshipping community. Luke reminds us of all this in chapter 2 verse 20 when Mary and Joseph go to the temple and buy back their suitability to worship after the days of purification.

Going back to the idea of separated and separation, rabbis had a particular interpretation of the book of Genesis. They believed that, when God created the world, he created it by separating. God separated light from darkness, big lights from smaller lights, the waters that were above the earth from the water below. This method of creation by separation established order and a kind of

harmony. Similarly God created animals and other beings according to their species. We have read this text this morning in order to better understand these ideas about purity. Therefore the rabbis thought: if God has used separation to create order, we must also separate, and if he said that things had to be considered according to their species, everything that does not conform to its species is unclean. For example, the aquatic animals must conform to their species and have scales and fins. So, an animal that lives in the sea, under the water, but does not have scales and fins, such as shellfish, does not conform to its species and, therefore, is unclean and cannot be eaten. This is one example and you can still find today these taboos concerning foods, known in Hebrew as the Kosher standard. This standard is adhered to with the highest fidelity. Therefore, if you are in a Jerusalem restaurant, never ask for pasta with seafood sauce because you will be considered despicable and attract hatred ... seafood may include mussels, clams, shrimps that are considered abominable, i.e. impure.

Their reading of the book of Genesis leads slowly slowly (of course, this is a priestly reading of the Bible because we said that the rules of purity are pertinent to cult and worshipping and they are meant to guarantee the correct way of worshipping and, therefore, the rules must be followed with the highest fidelity) to this obsessive mentality that extends beyond the boundary of the temple and into the family environment. It is in the family that work must be done in order to ensure that the cult is performed in a correct way and participating people are suitable for this type of activity.

As we have seen, the interpretation of the book of Genesis given by the rabbis deformed the very event of Creation. This idea of separation meant that, at a certain point, life became very, very complicated, because it decreed that one had to be always aware of the boundaries of what was pure and impure. Furthermore, they linked this idea to what God said to Moses according to the book of Leviticus: *'Be holy to me, for I, Yahweh, am holy, and I shall set you apart from all these peoples, for you to be mine'* (Lv 20:26). Holy means separated, and, therefore, this provided further support to the idea of separation. As a consequence, separating oneself from sinners, pagans, dead people, women with the menstrual cycle, etc. was not seen as something evil, but, on the contrary, it was the way to ensure my suitability to participate to the acts of worship.

In his Gospel John relates the famous episode of the wedding at Cana where he tells us that there were six jars of about a hundred litres each for purifications. Although this was an exaggeration, it makes us understand what kind of relationship had been established with God: it was so precarious and always so insecure that there was a constant need for purifications to return to a state of purity. Hence you always had to take baths, ablutions and make offerings of sacrifices, even, as we have already said, in the case of women in childbirth. But of course, in these situations concerning biological processes, even if it was presented as a sacrifice for a sin, at the end of the day, sacrifices were not offered, really, to ask forgiveness for sins. In fact, they were not voluntary actions but physiological functions.

Of course, the fact that a woman gave birth did not mean she was a sinner. However, she was in a state of impurity which she had to overcome and come out from. Furthermore, they had presented holiness as separation which justified their attitude of excluding foreigners, sinners, sick people, pregnant women. Separation also explain why people were not allowed to eat certain food and why they considered legitimate sexual activities as taboos. The fact that religion prescribed all this relieved their consciences of any feelings of wrongdoing.

God wants me like this otherwise I cannot stand before him. It is the relationship with God that is at stake with the observance or otherwise of these rules. Here is something else that helps us to understand their mentality: the word Pharisee means 'separated'. The Pharisees are those that in the

Gospels are most fiercely opposed to Jesus, because they have taken this attitude to the extreme. As 'separated', they are the ones who keep the boundaries and, in so doing, they demonstrate their holiness. In truth, Jesus said that the Holy Spirit will separate us from evil. This, however, does not mean it will separate us from others and this is a big difference. They thought that the separation was not from evil in the abstract, but from the people who, in their opinion, were in a state of impurity, a state that could be brought about both involuntarily by disease, bodily secretions or childbirth, or voluntarily by not washing your hands or entering the house of a pagan or committing a crime, which would obviously made a person impure automatically.

In the Talmud, a collection of rabbinic teachings about the Bible that was put in writing starting from the third century AD, we find some indication on how the rules about purity were explained. For example here are some thoughts about hands washing: he who eats bread without having first washed his hands is as if he is covered in sin like a red ribbon (on Yom Kippur a scapegoat, with a red ribbon tied to its horns, was released into the wilderness. The red ribbon represented all the sins of the people of Israel); those who take lightly the prescription to wash their hands will be uprooted from the world (meaning he will be separated from the world). He who eats bread without having purified his hands is as if he had eaten unclean bread.

What could you say of a town devoid of baths! When we visit Israel, what strikes most in some buildings is the great abundance of ritual baths. We read in the Gospels about the strong clashes between Jesus and the Pharisees about the rules on cleanliness. This is understandable considering that at the time of the Gospels these towns were full of baths for ritual purification. This practice was obsessive. And what about women? A woman who saw a drop of blood greater than a mustard seed had to remain indoors for the seven days prescribed for purification. This was conducive to paying the maximum attention to when the menstrual cycle started. There were also things that may seem a joke today, but at the time they were given serious consideration. For example, when a menstruating woman passed between two men, if she was at the beginning of her cycle, she would cause the death of one; if she was at the end, she would provoke a fight between them. Therefore it was much better for everyone if women staid indoors during their menstrual cycle! These texts were written well after the Gospels but they reflect very well this obsessive mentality that determined people's daily lives at the time.

According to the texts we have seen so far, it is clear that it is the woman who bears the brunt of these rules about cleanliness and purity. In fact, there were some kind of rankings. Men could become impure in certain situations, but, for sure, women were always considered more unclean than men, followed by lepers and, lastly, corpses. In a sense women were always more outside the boundaries than men. We could summarise the rules that we find in the book of Leviticus concerning purity like this: with regards to animals, there are some we can eat and some we cannot eat; as for women we must consider them always in relation to their menstrual cycle and childbirth; diseases and handicaps were always considered a sign of impurity (especially leprosy that in those days included any skin disease such as dermatitis or psoriasis); and, finally, bodily secretions.

As we can see women were not treated with a lot of deference: there were animals, women, diseases and bodily secretions. What is the reason to make women suffer this humiliation and segregate them just for their condition? For ancient peoples anything connected with the transmission of life was mysterious, it was nearer the divine sphere as life came from God. This put women outside the normal boundary of the human condition. Women, unlike men, for the sheer fact that they could give birth, were part of the mystery of life. Men, for all their strength and power, were excluded from this.

This was cause for some concern and discomfort because women went beyond the boundaries assigned to human beings. Women were at risk because they, as human beings, could not enter the sphere of the divine. In order to safeguard their safety, they had to be kept segregated. It also shows how men were somewhat worried about women's power to procreate and their familiarity with blood. The fact that women, for their physiological make-up, were part of the mysterious processes of life, paradoxically, was the cause for their being excluded from worshipping activities. Therefore women had to come back to within their normal boundaries through the seven days or thirty-three days segregation, a series of ritual ablutions and the offering of animal sacrifices in atonement for their sins. Although this sin was involuntary, it nonetheless placed them in a situation that made them unfit for worship.

Perhaps this can explain why, even today, women have a subordinate role in the Catholic Church. Subconsciously, we still have this mentality: men see women as a danger for the fact that they have the power to access what men cannot. This of course is due to the fact that worshipping activities are traditionally managed by men. However, this is only one explanation that experts offer. Meanwhile we wonder how, when we got to the time of the New Testament, we arrived to this body of rules about purity, how to maintain purity and what made human beings impure.

However, all these theories do not give an altogether satisfying answer. In my view, we can accept that people read the story of creation as told in the book of Genesis as the outcome of various separations, a reading that was in function of exercising control through religion. The rules about purity are found in the book of Leviticus which was written by priests. On the other hand, it is clear that, according to the Gospels, Jesus did not feel bound by these rules, did not read the book of Genesis in the same way and did not view God's holiness in the same way as his contemporaries. Jesus did not accept that separation led to purity, but, instead, considered creation as a free gift to man from God who saw that all he created was good and was an expression of his unconditional love for man.

In the light of this free giving, it is obvious that Jesus breaks with all those rules because if God created out of unconditional love then men and women will always be welcome by him. There will be nothing that makes them unworthy of him and nothing that can keep them away from him. Jesus, therefore, takes back the Scriptures to their authentic context. We, also, should learn to read the Scriptures from the way Jesus ignored the rules of purity, and so presenting a God that does not separate, but a God who creates harmony through the fundamental value of the gratuitousness of his love, something that he gives freely. Jesus' way of seeing creation highlights the true beauty of the Genesis story.

This was a brief introduction to the pages of Mark's Gospel that we will be reading later. I hope I succeeded in explaining the complexities of all these rules about cleanliness and purity. Jesus' attitude was not so much disrespectful of these rules, but a way of showing the true relationship between man and God. He wanted to make sure that a person felt that he/she could always communicate with God. For this Jesus was met with incomprehension by his family who thought he was mad, with rage by his own people in Nazareth and hatred by the Scribes and Pharisees who accused him of blasphemy and of being possessed by Beelzebub. They plotted to eliminate him as soon as possible.

Therefore, Jesus did not break with the traditional rules on cleanliness out of spite, but because he wanted to show us a new way of relating with God. And, in doing so, he risked his life, as the Gospels clearly show us. Having said that, let us see the episode of Jesus' banquet with sinners. Among all the rules that underpinned cohesion among the Israeli people was eating only food

considered pure, eating in a state of purity and eating with people who shared the same condition of purity. People who shared a meal with somebody who was unclean would become unclean themselves. It was enough for an unclean person to touch the food for everyone else to become unclean. As an example, if a woman touched my plate during her menstrual cycle I would become contaminated with her impurity. Therefore, taking the daily meals were the fundamental occasions in which to emphasise these rules and guarantee their implementation. It is exactly for this reason that Mark shows us an episode featuring a dinner with people who were considered most unclean.

Let us start reading from Mark's Gospel, chapter 2, verse 13: ***13 He went out again to the shore of the lake; and all the people came to him, and he taught them.*** Mark introduces the episode of Jesus' banquet with sinners with the image of Jesus going towards the sea. The sea represented the boundary in respect of the pagans. Mark is already suggesting that Jesus came to pull down these boundaries (which is the most interesting thing) and, therefore, the rules about purity are of no use to Jesus because he does not recognise any boundary or anything that keeps people apart. The sea is an opening that allows people to see life and relationships with others in a new way. People followed Jesus because they appreciated this openness and this gives Jesus the opportunity to teach them.

14 As he was walking along he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him. On his way towards the lake of Galilee, Jesus met this man who was sitting in the toll booth. He was a publican, a person that collected taxes for Rome and King Herod. This meeting, that looks random, reminds us of the call of the first four disciples when Jesus met them along the same Galilee sea near Capernaum.

We know that Capernaum was a frontier town and because of this it had tax offices and toll booths. Whoever went through the town had to pay a toll on the merchandise he carried through the border in order to continue his journey. The tax collectors were there just to collect taxes. We know how this worked: both Rome and King Herod put out the collection of a certain amount of money to tender. Whoever agreed to pay that amount was awarded the contract. Collectors, the publicans, were then free to charge people as much as they wanted and any excess was theirs.

This meant that publicans were thieves by profession and allowed by Law to carry out extortions. For them there was no hope of salvation because in order to be redeemed they would have had to give back to every one the amount of money they had stolen, which was impossible to establish. Religion, therefore, excluded them from any possibility of redemption and because they were criminals they were impure. They were in a hopeless situation.

In Luke's Gospels, Zacchaeus another publican, says to Jesus: *'Look, sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount'* (Lk 19:8). Publicans, in order to be pardoned, according to the Talmud, had to return four times what they had stolen. They, however, paid scant attention to religious rules or anything to do with religion, and, therefore, were regarded just like pagans: people who lived outside Israel's rich environment of rites and worship.

Furthermore, to put the icing on the cake, they were seen as traitors and collaborators of the Roman empire, and, as such, they were hated by people because they collected money to give to the enemy, the invaders or to King Herod who was a tyrant. Publicans had no civil rights and could not testify in a court of Law. Furthermore, all members of their families were deemed equally impure. Therefore, it was enough for a member of a family to be a publican that the whole family was treated with contempt.

When, earlier this year, we went to Jerusalem and spoke to the sisters of the Caritas Baby Hospital,

they said that the situation was now a little less tense with regard to the relationship between Jews and Palestinians. Especially for those who were on the other side of the wall, it was relatively easy to get a permit to go to Jerusalem. However, if in the family there was even a distant relative who was known to the police authority the permit was withheld. This shows that the same mentality still survives today: it is enough to have a Lawbreaker in the family that the whole family is seen with suspicion and contempt.

Jesus, who in this Gospel has already given strong indications of breaking with these prejudices, does not let himself be conditioned by this mentality and approaches somebody who was considered a sinner par excellence, a publican, a thief and a traitor. Mark tells us his name was Levi the son of Alphaeus and, therefore, a Jew. Levi reminds us of the famous tribes of Jacob, and it is interesting to understand why Mark gave this name to this character, while Matthew calls him Matthias. Although the latter changed his name, the meaning is the same. Mark called him Levi to say that, although he was a Jew, he had been excluded from any possibility of salvation: there is no hope for this guy. The tribe of Levi had been excluded from the sharing of the Israeli territory because, according to the book of Genesis, it had committed a massacre at Shechem, and Jacob had cursed it. Later on, in the Book of Deuteronomy, they tried to put a remedy to this abuse and said that their exclusion was in fact a privilege, because God had chosen this tribe to be at his service. However it has to do with an exclusion and this is what interests Mark: Levi was a Jew who had been excluded.

In Matthew's Gospel this person is called Matthias which means "God's gift", something that is given for free. Jesus did not make any distinction between the people he called to follow him: he invited the publican in the same way he invited his first four disciples. However, while for the first disciples there was the brief comment that they had to leave their nets, Levi instead immediately stood up and followed Jesus. This look a bit strange: how could it have happen?

In order to understand this behaviour, we need to look at the next scene, which is that of the banquet. In general, we must not read the Gospels as a chronological sequence of events, but follow the meaning. Jesus does not show any prejudice in approaching people, and people are aware of his openness and tolerance and feel the desire to follow him. The rapidity with which Levi is said to have followed Jesus shows readiness and spontaneity of his action. If interpreted chronologically it would look like a little tale.

15 When Jesus was at dinner in his house, ... whose house is this? Most people would think that it is Levi who invites Jesus to his house. However, it could be Jesus' house as he was the last person mentioned by Mark. Here Mark is ambiguous, I think on purpose, to tell us to pay attention to the text and not to take for granted what we think the narrative is. At the end of this episode Mark will say that Jesus has not come to call or invite the upright, but the sinners. Therefore, it is not Jesus who followed Levi, but Levi who followed Jesus to his house. Here Mark is hinting at something very important: Jesus' community. Jesus had a house in which he could receive people and organise a banquet. By contrast, Matthew and Luke show us a poorer Jesus.

However, according to Mark, Jesus had his house where he could offer a generous banquet. This is important because the scene is familiar and a banquet evokes life and sharing. This is the first time we see Jesus sitting in his own house. In fact, the Greek text says: "*lying down in his house to offer a dinner*". The fact that people are lying down indicates that this is not a normal week-day dinner, but a special dinner as if it was a feast day, a banquet. It is surprising that Jesus, on meeting a person who was considered totally excluded by religion because of his impurity, invites him to follow him without first demanding some purification rites or some penance. The Evangelist does

not even say that this person converted from all the evil he had done.

On the contrary, Mark goes immediately to what is the most important event: the banquet that Jesus offers to this person, in his house, a celebratory dinner, to help us to understand how Jesus does not exclude anyone and how, when we are at his table, we have to live this moment of communion and reconciliation. This is a very interesting page and should be looked at in much more depth because the gesture of lying down will appear again at the end of this Gospel, during the last supper. There again Jesus is lying down with his disciples for a dinner together, but this will be the last time in which he shows this aspect of conviviality which creates communion. However, here it is a scene of openness and acceptance of everyone, in the last supper there will be an atmosphere of betrayal and abandonment.

Eating together meant familiarity and sharing life itself. That is why a devout Jew would never have sat at a table with someone considered utterly unclean. Mark is showing here Jesus' community as a kingdom where even the excluded are welcome. As this banquet with the sinners is a prelude to the last supper, we can understand that the Eucharist is food offered to everyone and no one can feel excluded from it.

Beware that Mark here is making a very strong statement because having a supper with sinners was severely condemned in all early Christian documents. For example, Paul writes: *'In fact what I meant was that you were not to have anything to do with anyone going by the name of brother who is sexually immoral, or is greedy, or worships false gods, or is a slanderer or a drunkard or dishonest; never even have a meal with anybody of that kind'* (1Co 5:11). Paul still keeps this mentality of separation when having a meal. He still defends the stance on purity derived from the Jewish culture, but he does not betray Jesus' ideals because Mark's Gospel will be written at least a decade later. Unfortunately, that is exactly what will happen in the Church: the Eucharist will become the supper for the chosen ones, for the pure, for some categories of people – totally the opposite of what Mark taught us.

Mark writes the episode of Jesus' banquet with sinners to tell us something shocking: he set up a table around which all people will feel welcome independently of their conduct, without asking any purification rites or conversion prior to them taking their seat. With this gesture of conviviality he only wants to show a new way of seeing and relating to people's lives.

Jesus meant to show to this publican that the opportunity to eat with a person who offers you a meal totally freely and not out of self interest or for mean purposes is more important than the money he makes by stealing from people. This is the beauty of the Eucharist: eating together at the same table. With this episode, Mark does not intend to show how good Jesus is for being with sinners, but Jesus' determination to break completely with the mentality relating to the pure and impure. Once this mentality is broken then we can establish a new relationship between us and also with the Lord of life.

Lists of situations that precludes man's communion with God did not exist only in the Old Testament, but we have some today. With this dinner with the sinners, Mark gives us an example of what the Eucharist is.

On the theme of the pure and the impure, the banquet is the highest expression of what may be called conviviality or coming together and, therefore, it leads to breaking these rules. We have seen what Mark tells us that happened in Jesus' house and the role that the rules of the pure and the impure played in developing the mentality of merit. If I am careful and observe all these rules, God has to reward me and I am worthy to receive his blessings because of my strong effort. However,

this effort has to be sustained throughout the whole day, everyday, not just when I go to the temple. Here is why it was necessary to have all those ablutions, to observe all these rules about what to eat, which people to approach and mix with, things and situations to avoid even if they happened by accident. This made life difficult, but my efforts guaranteed a reward for me. This, in essence, was the Pharisaic attitude.

At this banquet there was not only Levy son of Alpheus, but also a wider group of sinners and publicans. This shows a certain level of familiarity and communion that is established when eating together around the same table. Even in our culture, in Spain, we very rarely invite somebody to have a meal in our house if we do not know this person well. We might instead choose to meet in a restaurant to start with. Only after a certain degree of familiarity has been built up he can be admitted to share your family table.

In those days, in a banquet, there was only one big tray of food and no individual plates: all diners picked their food from the same tray. This posed a big problem because if someone touched the tray in an unclean state, all food in that tray would have become contaminated and, automatically, all the people eating from that tray. Mark, with this scene of a banquet, wants to emphasised the novelty brought by Jesus: ***... a number of tax collectors and sinners were also sitting at table with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many of them among his followers.*** It is surprising that around Jesus' table there was not only Levy but also many (as Mark highlights) other publicans and sinners: all people that had been excluded by the religious doctrine of salvation. Jesus welcome them.

Contrast Jesus' attitude with the Old Testament: *'If only, God, you would kill all the wicked'* (Ps 139:19); *'The Most High himself detests sinners'* (Si 12:6). Therefore, God detests anyone who is not worthy to be in his presence for his state of impurity. The best solution is to exterminate all sinners. Scribes and Pharisees had inculcated the doctrine of a God who detested sinners. They used to say that the reason why the Kingdom of God had not come yet was due to this category of people or that the Kingdom could not be strongly felt because people did not comply with the rules about cleanliness. Publicans and sinners were delaying the coming of the Kingdom of God.

In the Gospels we find the exact opposite. Jesus will say that exactly these people that had been excluded, publicans and prostitutes, will overtake Scribes and Pharisees. Marks seems to emphasise the great number of people in these categories that was following Jesus: *'many'* shared in the banquet with Jesus. It looks like that Mark thinks that those who were deemed excluded were more numerous than the Jews. And, astonishingly, the disciples are grouped with them. Mark says: *'publicans and sinners were laying down (literal translation) with Jesus and his disciples'*. It is nice to think of a community where all are guaranteed a place as both disciples and those that are excluded are laying down around the same table. A church of this kind would be the true reflection of Jesus' message. Unfortunately, then as well as now, there were objections.

16 When the Scribes of the Pharisee party saw him eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' Scribes and Pharisees, as usual, avoided referring to Jesus by name. Here they made their entrance. The Scribes were those that interpreted the Old Testament and gave instructions for everything regarding the doctrine. However, the Scribes introduced here also belonged to the Pharisees party and, therefore, they also observed rigidly all the rules that they had established.

You may wonder at what table these Scribes were sitting in Jesus' house considering that he had welcomed those that they had excluded. In fact, this is a literary technique used by the Evangelist to tell us that we all carry within us these Scribes and Pharisees. We continue to query the novelty

brought by Jesus, what he did as he uprooted all the sacred rules and doubt his actions. Appropriately, it is the disciples that are dragged into the Scribes' denunciation and criticism. The Scribes did not address Jesus directly, but instead tried to insinuate into the minds of his disciples that maybe this teacher was not really a teacher, because he ate with publicans and sinners.

As you can see, these Scribes and Pharisees never pronounced Jesus' name. Such is the contempt they held him in, that they soon will say in this Gospel that he drove demons away with the help of the prince of all demons. He was, therefore, a very dangerous person, one to keep at a distance. The Scribes' shocked reaction was due to the fact that they thought that everything in that house was unclean since publicans and sinners were there. Their impurity was cause of death and contaminated all the disciples.

In reality, here, Mark describes the difficulties that the first communities had in accepting those that were excluded. We will see tomorrow with the episode of the healing of the paralytic how these Scribes and Pharisees are nothing else but the censors we all carry within us.

It looks strange that in this early chapter the disciples look to be happily sitting with publicans and sinners when during the rest of the Gospels they find it very difficult to accept Jesus' novelty. Mark is presenting an ideal situation: he wants a community, a church, where all are welcome and no one is excluded so that in this way it is possible to achieve reconciliation. The disciples at the beginning accept all this, but afterwards a doubt is engendered in them: are we doing the right thing, is this the right way, should not we go back to the old rules?

This is the big problem: the novelty brought by Jesus was so shocking that his disciples found it very difficult to assimilate and fully accept. The early Church itself found it very difficult to overcome the Jewish religious taboos and open up to the world of non believers and pagans or to those that they had always believed to be excluded from their communities. Earlier, we mentioned Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where he ordered that Christians should not eat with these categories of people. However, in his letter to the Galatians he highlights Peter's hypocrisy: *'Before certain people from James came, he used to eat with gentiles; but as soon as these came, he backed out and kept apart from them, out of fear of the circumcised'* (Ga 2:12). We see here that even Peter is not so sure: first he eats with pagans, but when the censors come, he backs down.

The difficulty is always that of building a community around a table where no one is prevented from becoming a fellow diner. Mark describes these Scribes and Pharisees in a manner that almost makes them ridiculous. However we have to be aware that this also describes everyone that is still attached to these religious rules. One would like to be open to the novelty, but deep down finds it difficult to be courageous and any semblance of freedom is seen with suspicion so that eventually one goes back to the safety of the Law.

¹⁷ ***When Jesus heard this he said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I came to call not the upright, but sinners.'*** Jesus intervenes in favour of his disciples. However he is not talking about “*the healthy*”, even if his remarks are from a medical perspective. Literally translated it is: *'It is not the strong who need the doctor, but those who feel unwell'*. We know from Isaiah who “The strong” are: they are the leaders of the people, those who control people's lives, those who oppress people with their power (cf. Is 1:31). “Those who feel unwell”, according to Ezekiel, are those who are subjected to abuse and oppression by leaders who are indifferent to people's pain (cf. Ez 34:1-10).

Mark, therefore, identifies two categories of people: the oppressors and the oppressed. It is not the oppressors who need a doctor, but the oppressed. Those who are well established in power and

exercise control over people do not feel the need to be freed or the need for someone to lead them to freedom. In fact, the oppressors consider a threat anyone who poses as a liberator or anyone, such as a doctor, who brings necessary help. For Mark, Jesus has not come as a sort of help for the good behaviour of the “healthy”, but as life giving strength for those who are unwell. Mark does not deny sin, but he defines it as a disease, as something that prevents a person to complete his human development, or slows it down.

However, it is important, according to Mark, to understand that Jesus rejects the idea, so dear to religious people, that a sinner is an infected person that needs to be avoided at all cost. The sinner, instead, is a sick person that needs to be healed and helped. And how do you help him? By offering a banquet, preparing a table and inviting him to seat at it unconditionally. It is the unconditional love of the one who lays the table that heals the sinner. On reading this episode, we feel like having a wry smile: how could we have forgotten this teaching in our Christian tradition and, instead, considered the doctor as a reward for the healthy?

When can you receive communion? Only when you are in a state of purity. If now you do not feel well because you are not in that state, you cannot receive communion. This is the exact opposite of what Jesus told us, and Mark emphasised, with this episode: no one can be barred from his table. We, however, have pursued the opposite for centuries. It is a waste of time to call a doctor for someone who is healthy and strong. The doctor comes for someone who is unwell. And Jesus, in presenting his role as a doctor, adds: *'I came to call not the upright, but sinners'*. This last sentence also shows that it was Jesus who organised a banquet; he invited (called) people to his house.

Jesus is the host and he organises the banquet to get these people around his table. The word “upright” must not be intended as a person who is morally just, straight and fair, but according to the Jewish mentality, a person who, by observing all the rules, draws himself apart from others and, in so doing, warrants his worthiness. Luke, in his Gospel, says that Elizabeth and Zechariah were upright (cf. Lk 1:6) because they observed all the commandments and rules of the Law. Matthew also says that Joseph was upright (cf. Mt 1:19). Joseph, not wanting any ill on his wife, decided to repudiate her in secret.

Therefore, justice is always in relation with zealous fidelity to the Law. Jesus says he has not come for this people. Those who think of themselves as upright are excluded, are not invited to his banquet. This is because the upright exclude others and do not tolerate that others seat at their tables. One might be surprised about this. After all Jesus had also said that he came for all people. Why is he, then, excluding the upright? This can be understood if we understand the word “upright” correctly: he could not invite those who exclude others.

This is obvious: if Jesus came to bring inclusion he cannot address those people who fuel separation, those who refuse to seat with other categories of people. So *'I came to call not the upright'* means that he did not come to call those who foment divisions as he was against any separation. He wanted communion even if there were difference between people sitting around the same table.

Matthew, when recounting this episode in his Gospel, adds that Jesus sends Scribes and Pharisees away with an admonition: *'Go and learn the meaning of the words: Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice. And indeed I came to call not the upright, but sinners'* (Mt 9:13). Scribes and Pharisees were the exponents of a system based on rules about purity, very strict rules that guaranteed suitability to taking part in the rites of worship. They thought that the only way to worship God was to separate out all that was his preserve.

God does not ask people to worship him with sacrifices, but with love, mercy and compassion toward others. Here Jesus repeats the words of the prophet Hosea (cf. Ho 6.6). If we look back at history we realise that those people who remained attached to the idea of offering sacrifices to God ended up sacrificing others; in order to worship God they are ready to sacrifice the well-being of others. Jesus denounces the idea of sacrifice as a means of worshipping God while creating separations through the imposition of boundaries and rules that prevent some people from approaching God. The only way of worshipping the Father is by loving all people, but especially those who are unwell, as he does.

Therefore, the banquet with the sinners leads us to a model of church we still struggle to show. We, like Jesus' disciples, carry censors inside us and doubts come into our minds: why is he sitting with these people? We should free ourselves of these censors that the Church's doctrine has foisted inside us. We should let ourselves be guided by Jesus' example and prepare a table where no one feels excluded, where nobody is singled out for his situation or condition. This is very difficult as we are still with what Paul said: do not eat with these people. Mark completely disagree with Paul.

We have now the opportunity to examine ourselves in the light of Mark's thoughts, to understand the novelty that Jesus brought, to build a Church where mercy is all encompassing and to welcome everyone unconditionally. We must rid ourselves of the idea that offering sacrifices makes us worthy of worshipping God.

The Unforgivable Sin

fr Alberto Maggi

Good morning to everyone. We will resume this morning our theme about sin. We have seen how Jesus changes the meaning of sin from an offence to God to an offence to man. This is because, with Jesus, God has become man. Therefore, what determines the fulfilment of man is not his relationship with the divinity, but that with other people. We have seen yesterday that Jesus does not ask people whether they have believed, but whether they have loved; not if they have made an offering to the Lord, but if they have shared with others. From this we have seen what constitutes impurity, or, in our mentality, sin.

According to the Jewish tradition, there were twelve behaviours that were considered harmful to man. These have been summarised in the golden formula that we all know: do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself. However, for Jesus, this is not enough. Jesus has not come just to tell us not to do evil, but to do good. Therefore, Jesus transforms this rule from negative to positive: whatever you wish people do to you, you do it to them. For Jesus, it is not enough not to do evil, but in order to defeat evil, we need to do good. So, do to others what you want done to you. For example, when one is going through a bad patch or is suffering, what he wants more is for someone to give him a helping hand. Jesus will demonstrate this (and all the Evangelists agree) by presenting a dilemma that is still topical today: how do you behave when doing good to others goes against the divine Law?

We know that the first and foremost commandment in the Jewish tradition (although this was not one of the ten commandments) was: *'You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength'* (Dt 6:5). Therefore, love for God was total. On the other hand, love for others was relative: *'You will love your neighbour as yourself'* (Lv 19:18). From this we understand that if one needs to choose between love for God and love for his neighbour, he has to choose love for God because this requires all the energies that one possesses.

Therefore, if there was a conflict in choosing between love for God and love for man, it was obvious that one had to choose God first; man came after. This was undisputed at the time of Jesus and no one could even think of challenging this spiritual truth. As a consequence, if one was in a situation where he had to choose between observance of the Law, which was an expression of God's will, and the concrete well-being of a person, there was no contest: the Law came first and foremost even if it was to the detriment of that person.

Jesus opposed this doctrine and his opposition led to him being killed. (I have dedicated myself to the reading and analysis of the Gospels for almost forty years and I am still puzzled by how Jesus managed to survive so long. He was really a very dangerous person that needed to be eliminated as soon as possible). Every time that he found himself in a situation of having to choose between God and man, Jesus never had any hesitation: he chose the well-being of man even if this meant that he would collide head on with the Law. And this was not the human Law as it was expressed in the Talmud, but the divine Law. Jesus has always been consistent in his choices: every time there was conflict between God and man's well-being, between the divine Law and man's happiness, he came down in favour of man. This is the teaching of the Gospels: in working for the well-being and

happiness of man we are certain to also work for God.

Too often in the past, as history shows us, we caused suffering to man in order to honour God. Jesus encourages us to change and abandon what was considered the fundamental principle of the traditional morality enforced by Scribes and Pharisees. It consisted in redefining what is good and what is evil. According to the tradition, everything was in function of the Law. Therefore, observing the Law was good while transgressing the Law was evil. Nobody doubted this.

How do you know that your behaviour is good? Simple: if you observe the rules and regulations called for by the Law you are good. If you transgress them you are evil. Well, Jesus operated an immense switch with regard to the moral spirituality of the time: from God to man, from the Law to love. He put man in place of the Law. For Jesus, man is the only sacred, non-negotiable value. Therefore, good is all that contribute to man's well-being, evil anything that leads to man's suffering. And if, in my endeavours to pursue man's well-being, I transgress the Law ...? It does not matter: man's well-being is the most important thing. On the other hand, evil is all that is causing suffering to man, or curtails his freedom or happiness, even if no Law is broken.

As a consequence, Jesus' message cannot be classified with the "religions of the book". Lately, this expression has become rather fashionable and denotes those religions that have a book containing God's will, either because its authors were inspired, such as the Bible, or because the book was dictated directly by God, or Allah, as it is in the case of the Muslims. "Religions of the Book" are those religions that have a sacred book which is considered to contain God's will.

Therefore, Jesus' religion cannot be associated with the religions of the book because it is centred on man. It can be described as 'faith in man'. This is important because, with the support of such a book, one can commit the most negative, terrible and nefarious deeds against man.

Years ago Pope John Paul II apologised for the crimes and sins of the Church. It is interesting to note that at the root of all the misdeeds he apologised for there was the Old Testament and never the Gospels. This is because, in the name of Jesus, one can only do good to people, unless his message is misinterpreted. Instead, the Old Testament was used to justify the burning of women at the stake. They were burned alive accused of witchcraft. This is still causing shock in the Church.

We still do not know how many hundreds of women have been burnt alive because they were thought to be witches. In fact, the book of Leviticus says: You shall burn the witch that is among you (cf. Lv 20:27). If the Bible says so, then I can do it. Is it good for that woman to be burned alive? Certainly not. This is why Jesus has moved the focus from God to man. We cannot, therefore, classify Jesus' message as a religion of the book but a faith in man. Man is the only sacred, non-negotiable value. The word of God, then, becomes fountain of life and stops being a tool that causes suffering or a means to condemn people.

Jesus suggested this switch in Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 12. We will also see his switch from do not do evil to do good.

The Blasphemy against the Spirit

(Mt 12:1-32)

fr Alberto Maggi

However, let us start from the end of Chapter 11 where Jesus said: ²⁸ **'Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest'**. Who are these people who are overburdened? They are the victims of religion, those who are weighed down by Laws, rules and precepts that they cannot or do not want to observe. A consequence of the Law is discrimination because a lot of people cannot or do not want to observe it. Therefore, these people are excluded.

As an example, if we now all agree to make a law to regulate this week of biblical study, in spite of our best intentions, we would end up by excluding some people, because not all of us have the same education, the same spirituality, the same sensitivity and the same needs. Therefore, what would be good for someone might be onerous for others. A law always generates inconvenience for people. Therefore Jesus say to these people: **'Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest'**.

²⁹ **'Shoulder my yoke'**. The Scribes called the yoke all that body of laws, rules and precepts found in the Scriptures. In agricultural terms, as you know, the yoke is a shaped piece of wood that is placed across the necks of oxen to guide their steps. It was, therefore, the image of a weight that kept you on the right path. Jesus, instead said: ²⁹ **'Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest (literally: breath) for your souls.'** ³⁰ **Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light'**. With Jesus, there is no longer the weight of the Law, but there is love. This is the switch that Jesus made. He came to usher in a new relationship between God and man, a relationship that ultimately will change man's behaviour.

The Old Covenant was imposed by Moses who described himself as the servant of the Lord and it was a covenant between servants and their lord and master. The attitude of servants is obedience. The old covenant was, therefore, a covenant between servants and their master based on obedience to God and his Law.

Well, Jesus is the new yoke, but Jesus is not God's servant. He, in fact, is God's Son and God himself. His new covenant is no longer based on obedience to God's Law, but on accepting and imitating his love. This is the 'yoke' that Jesus invites us to accept. The faithful, therefore, are no longer those people who obey God by observing his commandments, but those who resemble the Father by practising a love similar to his.

It is not always possible for people to observe God's Law. However, we all can practice a love similar to the Father's because it is within our capacity to love, pardon and do good to everybody. This is the yoke that Jesus suggests we accept. Jesus spoke of freedom from the yoke of the Law and his disciples behaved accordingly. Let us, then, start reading Chapter twelve, which is very important because it is about this morning's subject: a sin that cannot be forgiven. It may look strange because Jesus forgives all sins, yet there is a sin that is unforgivable.

¹ **At that time Jesus went through the cornfields one Sabbath day.** Holy Lord, one would say, you knew that the commandment of the Sabbath is not like any other commandment! Rabbis, Scribes and Pharisees routinely asked: 'What is the most important commandment?' The standard answer

was: The commandment that God himself observed. 'Which is the commandment that God himself observed?' Of the ten commandments, which one could God observe? Could it be: Honour your father and your mother? ... or ... You shall not kill? Perhaps. If God had observed this last commandment in the Old Testament, maybe the course of history would have been different! Anyway, they established that the commandment that God himself observed was the one about absolute rest on a Sabbath. They believed that in Paradise God and all the angels ceased any activity on this day. The strict observance of this commandment was equivalent to the observance of all the Law; the transgression of this commandment was tantamount to the transgression of the whole Law. Those who dared to transgress this commandment risked the death penalty.

For this reason, in the old Testament, there are some terrifying pages. There were 39 activities that were prohibited on a Sabbath. These were the activities that were performed in the building of the Temple: sowing, ploughing, harvesting, tying, shearing wool, etc. Each one of these activities had been subdivided into 39 different actions for a total of 1521. Therefore, one could not write or lift a weight; one could only walk not more than about half a mile, probably the distance to the synagogue. If the Law was so tight and all people stayed at home on the Sabbath, except for a visit to the synagogue, why you, Holy Lord, did not choose another day to take your disciples for a walk through the countryside? Was it really necessary to do it on a Sabbath day? Undaunted, *'Jesus went through the cornfields one Sabbath day'*.

His disciples were hungry and began to pick ears of corn and eat them. Here, we have at least two transgressions: picking ears of corn, equivalent to harvesting, and walking through the fields. Why do they collect ears of corn and eat them? I do not believe it was because they were hungry. I was brought up in the countryside and we used to collect ears of corn and eat them not because we were hungry, but for their taste, because we liked them.

Jesus spoke about freedom from the yoke of the Law. His disciples behaved accordingly, totally ignoring the most important commandment. And they did it not for an extreme emergency, but for pleasure. If we consider this closely, we are surprised not that Jesus was killed, but that he could survive for so long. Here the Evangelist is demolishing the whole of the Old Testament's spirituality. For the Evangelist, not hunger or necessity are valid reasons for transgressing God's Law, but simply pleasure. This is a real earthquake. If we continue like this, there will not be any restraint. And, most surprisingly, Jesus did not reprimand his disciples. We can understand the walking through the fields: there must have been a reason. However, was there a valid excuse for picking ears of corn? Why couldn't the disciples abstain from this action which was bound to draw the ire of the devout zealots of the Law?

² ***The Pharisees noticed it and said to him, 'Look, your disciples are doing something that is forbidden on the Sabbath'***. Every year we go on a study trip to Israel and visit the places mentioned in the Gospels. After we have climbed down the Mount of the Beatitudes we walk through corn fields and stop to read the equivalent episode in Mark's Gospel. Imagine the scene: we are in open fields, Jesus walks through them with his disciples. All of a sudden the Pharisees appear ... where were they hiding? You see, we can better understand this episode if we place it in its surroundings. The Evangelist wants us to understand that the Pharisaic mentality is so deeply rooted in our mentality that, even after we have accepted Jesus' message of freedom from the Law, we still have doubts and uncertainties. It is the religious mentality that still weighs on us. The Evangelist uses this unlikely encounter with the Pharisees in a corn field to show this.

³ ***But he said to them, 'Have you not read'*** (Jesus, in reminding the Pharisees, who spent their lives

reading the Bible, of a famous episode, treats them as ignorant) **what David did when he and his followers were hungry ...** The comparison, however, does not hold because the disciples picked and ate ears of corn for pleasure and not out of hunger as it had been for David. And while David had transgressed a ritual precept, Jesus excused his disciples who had transgressed the most important commandment for a trivial reason.

⁴ **... how he went into the house of God and they ate the loaves of the offering although neither he nor his followers were permitted to eat them, but only the priests?** Jesus, therefore, reminds the custodians of the orthodoxy that David's needs were more important than observing the Law. As we have seen, though, this comparison is a sleight of hands because Jesus compares one of the many precepts of the Law with the most important commandment.

⁵ **Or again, have you not read in the Law that on the Sabbath day the Temple priests break the Sabbath without committing any fault?** Jesus reminds the Pharisees that priests are allowed to carry out circumcisions and offer sacrifices on a Sabbath even if no work was allowed by Law. The Law, therefore, was made to take second place to the rites of worship. Jesus' argument is this: if the Sabbath commandment loses its paramount status when considering the rites of worship, it has also to go behind man's happiness which God puts before the rites.

⁶ **Now here, I tell you, is something greater than the Temple.** ⁷ **And if you had understood the meaning of the words: Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the blameless.** Therefore, if the commandment of the Sabbath loses out in favour of conducting rites like offering sacrifices, which God does not want, how much more it will lose out to the well-being of man! What God wants primarily is mercy. Rites of worship come well behind.

Jesus says '*... if you had understood ...*'. For the second time Jesus invites the Pharisees to understand the Scriptures. The first was when, after inviting a publican to follow him, he was accused of being a sinner because he mixed and ate with sinners. In that occasion he told them: '*Go and learn the meaning of the words: "Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifices"*' (Mt 9:13). This advice - "*Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifices*" - is taken from the prophet Hosea (cf. Ho 6:6). Jesus, therefore, follows the thinkings of the Old Testament's prophets for whom God was averse to sacrifices.

God did not want sacrifices. It was the priestly cast that, for its own benefit, wanted to offer sacrifices. When you have time, read what Isaiah writes – it looks as if it has been written by an atheist: '*Hear what Yahweh says, you rulers of Sodom; listen to what our God teaches, you people of Gomorrah. What are your endless sacrifices to me?*' says Yahweh. '*I am sick of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of calves. I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come and present yourselves before me, who has asked you to trample through my courts? Bring no more futile cereal offerings, the smoke from them fills me with disgust. New Moons, Sabbaths, assemblies -- I cannot endure solemnity combined with guilt. Your New Moons and your meetings I utterly detest; to me they are a burden I am tired of bearing. When you stretch out your hands I turn my eyes away. You may multiply your prayers, I shall not be listening. Your hands are covered in blood*' (Is1:10-15). God himself, through the prophet, says: '*Who asked for these sacrifices, who asked for all these rites? It is mercy that I want, not sacrifices*'. This is the line taken by God. And he continues: '*Wash, make yourselves clean. Take your wrong-doing out of my sight. Cease doing evil. Learn to do good, search for justice, discipline the violent, be just to the orphan, plead for the widow*' (Is 1:16-17). God himself was against rites and sacrifices, but the interests of the priestly cast had prevailed, in spite of the fact that God had manifested his will very clearly through his prophets. Unfortunately this mentality has also infiltrated our Christian spirituality and the idea of

'sacrifice' translated as 'self-denial' has become one of the mainstay of Christian life. It looks like that all we do has to be done in self-denial, otherwise it has no value.

I belong to an older generation. When I was a child I was taught to make small sacrifices, acts of self-denial, to make the Lord happy. I still remember that, when summer was on its way and ice-cream parlours started to open, priests and catechists were telling us to deny ourselves an ice-cream and offer it to the Virgin Mary. And I did not understand what she had to do with the ice-cream that I craved. I am poking a bit of fun into this now, but the idea of sacrifice and self-denial has greatly influenced our Christian lives in spite of the fact that God opposes this. God does not want our offerings and sacrifices because it is he who offers himself in sacrifice to us. Sacrifice is a term that does not belong to Jesus language. I really hope that, with the renewal of the Liturgy, the word 'sacrifice' will be dropped from the text during mass.

We in Italy have a privilege: it is the only language in the world that the words of the Consecration of bread and wine contain the word 'sacrifice'. The original Latin formula was: this is my body given for you. No mention of sacrifice. Yet the Italian language has: this is my body offered in sacrifice for you. The implication being that if Jesus sacrificed himself for us we are also invited to do the same. However, the Gospels do not have the word 'sacrifice': this is my body given for you. How was the word 'sacrifice' allowed to intrude into the text? During the Second Vatican Council we had the clash between the conservative and modernist wings of the Church. The clash focused on how to call the chapter dedicated to the Eucharist. The conservative wing wanted to call it 'the sacrifice of the holy mass'. The more modern wing wanted it called 'the supper of the Lord' as it is normally called in the Gospels. The issue was that, unfortunately, the Protestants call it 'the supper of the Lord', as well. In the end the compromise was to retain 'The supper of the Lord' in the title of the document, but to allow the word 'sacrifice' in the Italian translation of the mass wording.

Therefore, in this way, they foisted the idea of sacrifice on us with the exhortation to self-denial. However, the reason why Jesus said: *'If you had understood the meaning of the words: Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the blameless'* is that those who make sacrifices to God sooner or later will sacrifice others. Those who live with the mentality of sacrifice inevitably will sacrifice others. Naturally, they will never do it in a brutal way. When they do something that makes you suffer or limit your freedom, they will add the obscene and heartless remark: I've done it for your own good. Be warned! Those people who talk like this are the most dangerous because, under the cover of sacrifice for God, they end up sacrificing others.

Why does Jesus add: ⁸ ***For the Son of man is master (literally: Lord) of the Sabbath***? If there was an orchestra this would have been the final drum blast: a lord is not one who gives orders, but one who is totally free and does not have to obey anyone. In the Gospel, Jesus is defined as Son of God and Son of Man. Son of God is the title the Evangelists attribute to Jesus and represents God in his human condition or how God manifests himself in his human guise. Son of Man is how Jesus calls himself and represent man in his divine condition. This is not a privilege reserved for Jesus exclusively, but an offer available to all those who follow him. All those following Jesus are invited to become sons of God. However, one is not born son of God but he can become such. In the Jewish culture, a son is the one who looks like his father in his behaviour and deeds. Therefore, what Jesus says is that not only he is Lord, but his disciples as well, because lord means a person who is completely free.

Laws must be at the service of man and his well-being and not the opposite. A law that is an obstacle or contrary to man's well-being needs to be ignored. During this incident when Jesus' disciples walk through the fields and transgress the Sabbath provoking the intervention of the

Pharisees, Jesus does not try to calm the tension. Instead he goes to the synagogue and openly challenges Scribes and Pharisees. While his disciples' transgression could have been interpreted as involuntary, Jesus' intervention in the synagogue is intentional, pre-meditated and public: enough to earn him the death penalty.

⁹ ***He moved on from there and went to their synagogue.*** As we have seen, the Pharisees reprimanded Jesus' disciples for the transgression of the Sabbath. Jesus, however, not only defended his disciples and reprehended his adversaries for not understanding the Scriptures, but he also went and confronted them on their own turf, the synagogue, where they imposed their own spirituality on people.

^{10a} ***Now*** (the Evangelists use this word in the Gospels to engender surprise and admiration) ***a man was there with a withered hand.*** The only person that appears inside the synagogue is a disable man. As usual, we need to remember that the Evangelists do not write chronicles, but theology; their main interest is not about presenting facts, but truth; what they write about is not history, but faith; their works are not simple tales, but profound dissertations. This man represents the outcome of what was taught in the synagogue. The word 'withered' (literally: dry) is a reference to the Prophet Ezekiel: *'The hand of Yahweh was on me; he carried me away by the spirit of Yahweh and set me down in the middle of the valley, a valley full of bones. He made me walk up and down and all around among them. There were vast quantities of these bones on the floor of the valley; and they were completely dry ... Then he said, 'Son of man, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They keep saying, "Our bones are dry, our hope has gone; we are done for."' (Ez 37:1-11)*

The bones represented the people of Israel, a people without spirit or life. Therefore, the Evangelist wants to point out that the synagogue produces people without Spirit with their constant drumming the Law into their heads. The Law wastes away the Spirit and, as a consequence, people wither.

^{10b} ***They asked him, 'Is it permitted to cure somebody on the Sabbath day?' hoping for something to charge him with.*** Note how these zealous defenders of the Law could not care less for the well-being of this man. They were indifferent to the sufferings of this man who, because of his disability, could not work. Without a job, he could not live his life with dignity and have a family. He was a social outcast. All this meant nothing to them. All they were after was to get rid of Jesus. They asked him: *'Is it permitted to cure somebody on the Sabbath day'*. They did not ask because they did not know the answer. They knew it very well. The Talmud, which contained the oral tradition, stated that it was not permitted to straighten a fracture, or to keep a sprained hand or foot in cold water. Therefore, on a Sabbath day, it was not allowed to nurse or visit the sick. Least of all, to heal them.

¹¹ ***But he said to them, 'If any one of you here had only one sheep and it fell down a hole on the Sabbath day, would he not get hold of it and lift it out?'*** You will remember the major difference between Jesus and the Pharisees. They were so zealous, so pious and so devout, but also so attached to money. Jesus does not answer their question with theological or philosophical arguments, but goes straight after their weak spot: self-interest. So he says: *'Wouldn't you pull out one of your sheep if it had fallen into a ditch?'* The answer was not so obvious in Jesus' time. However, there was a group of people, the Essenes, that considered the Temple a place of impurity. They had formed a monastic community along the shores of the Dead Sea and they were renowned for their strict rule. They have the answer to Jesus' question in their books: on a Sabbath day, no one should help an animal to give birth or help it out of a cistern if it had fallen into it. Similarly for people: if someone, on a Sabbath day, falls into a cistern full of water, no one should help him out with a

ladder or a rope or with any other object. The answer, therefore, was very clear: nothing could be done on a Sabbath day.

¹² Now a man is far more important than a sheep, so it follows that it is permitted on the Sabbath day to do good. They had asked: is it allowed to heal someone on a Sabbath day. Jesus answers that it is allowed to do good even on a Sabbath day. The well-being of man is paramount and comes before obedience to the divine Law. If we consider this episode solely from a historical perspective, we could think that, since this man had had a withered hand for a considerable time, Jesus could have waited for a few hours and he could have healed him once the Sabbath was over. This man would have been overjoyed all the same: a few hours would not have made that much difference. Was it really necessary to transgress God's commandment to heal this person whom he did not know and, what is more important, to risk his own life for him? Well, Jesus does not even consider such reservations.

¹³ Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out and his hand was restored (notice the verb), **as sound as the other one.** This man had not been born with his handicap, but there had been a time when his hand was healthy. How did it happen that he ended up with a withered hand? This was the effect of frequenting the synagogue. Be on your guard when approaching religious sites. They should have warnings displayed on the outside, similar to those in cigarette packs: 'This may gravely harm your faith'. This is because they foist on you an ideology and an image of God that makes you wither and chokes your life.

It is important to realise that this man was not born with his handicap as, instead, will be the case for the man born blind whose story we will examine on Friday, but became handicapped by frequenting the synagogue. Jesus said '*Stretch out your hand*' without waiting for an answer to his question whether it was permitted to do good on a Sabbath day. Jesus' action constituted a serious transgression because it was intentional, public and pre-meditated, unlike the disciples' transgression that could have been interpreted as unintentional. Such transgression merited the death penalty which the zealous Pharisees, as we will see, will pursue.

¹⁴ At this the Pharisees went out and began to plot against him, discussing how to destroy him. For the Pharisees, on a Sabbath day, a man is not allowed to do good if this goes against their interests, but it is perfectly acceptable to plot to kill. What the Pharisees have at heart is not man's well-being but sacrifices to God and, therefore, they are ready to sacrifice Jesus on God's altar. Their ostentatious praying and devout attitude does nothing but hide the rot and deadly hatred inside them.

¹⁵ Jesus knew this and withdrew from the district. Many followed him and he cured them all. The verb used by the Evangelist is the same used in the Book of Exodus when the Pharaoh tried to kill Moses. Moses 'withdrew' and went to the land of Midian. The comparison is rather stark. The Pharaoh tried to kill Moses to prevent him from freeing the Israeli people from Egyptian slavery. Likewise, the new Pharaohs, the Pharisees, try to kill Jesus who wants to free his people from a different, but much worse, slavery. When slavery was enforced by the Pharaoh one could still think he was a man and one could escape. However, when slavery is enforced in the name of God, there is no way out because God can always reach you wherever you are.

Earlier, we have seen that there was only one handicapped person. Now, strangely, the Evangelist says that Jesus '*cured them all*'. He wants to demonstrate the harm that the synagogue produces in all people. Its spirituality does not come from God, but is a product of the religious institution's lust for power and dominance and will to keep people subjected to it with devastating effects. Therefore,

while we reflect on the conflict between the Pharisees, Scribes and Jesus, let us reflect on how we can recognise what really comes from God and what is purported as coming from God, but, not only does not come from God, it is actually contrary to his will.

Yesterday we have seen that one of the criteria for being able to distinguish the word of God from anybody else's is that God's word creates life. Therefore, if a teaching from the Old Testament does not favour life, but, on the contrary, it limits it or, worse, chokes and kills life, then it does not come from God. In the Gospels we see clearly that those belonging to the religious institution, such as Scribes, Pharisees and priests, by imposing Laws with sanctions attached for those who disregard them, demonstrate that they do not believe in the goodness of their own doctrine. That is why they make it into an obligation to follow it, with sanction attached.

Jesus will never do that. He will always propose and never impose; he will proffer a suggestion, never an obligation. This is a criterion that helps to establish whether a message really comes from God, because God is love and love can only be offered and never imposed. When love is imposed it becomes violence. If I hug a person who does not appreciate my overture, that person will see my action as violence. Therefore, the main characteristic of love is that it is always offered and never imposed.

At this point, therefore, we may ask ourselves why the religious institution's representatives always impose their doctrine with sanctions and obligations. We can see clearly from the Gospels that the reason is that they themselves do not believe in its validity. If something is good you only need to offer it. When what is on offer comes with sanctions and awesome punishments, it means it is not good.

If, as you know, I am a good cook and invite you for dinner you come willingly. I do not need to put pressure on you by saying that if you do not come I will not talk to you again or I will not consider you as my friend any longer. Religious institutions that use sanctions and punishments to coerce people into following their laws and doctrines are the first not to believe in their validity and only use them as a means to keep people subjugated. Let us be clear then that God always proposes and never imposes. Therefore, Jesus *'cured them all'*.

We have seen that the man with a withered hand was symbolic of the people who were subjugated by the synagogue. With the next verse, we will witness another action of liberation carried out by Jesus:

22 Then they brought to him a blind and dumb demoniac; and he cured him, so that the dumb man could speak and see. In describing Jesus' action the Evangelist does not use the verb 'to drive out' which was typical of an exorcism (see when Jesus drove out a demon from the dumb man in Chapter 9), but the verb 'to cure' or 'to heal' which he used for the healing of the man with a withered hand. In this way he links the two episodes. This technique was common in the literature of the time. In both episodes Jesus frees his people (all these individuals represent the people of Israel) from the religious institution's control. It is adhesion to the religious institution that makes people blind through its religious and nationalistic ideology. People become dumb (unable to dialogue) and blind. However the reaction of the crowd is puzzling: the moment they understood that Jesus' healing of this man was symbolic of him freeing people from that nationalistic ideology that preached that Israel was superior to all other peoples, they looked bewildered.

23 All the people were astounded and said, 'Can this be the son of David?' The first doubts about Jesus start appearing. What is the meaning of: *'the son of David'*? We know what a tragic

experience the adoption of monarchy had been for Israel. Because of its failure people were awaiting a messiah, son of David, that would re-establish the Kingdom of Israel. In Jewish culture, “son” does not only mean one that has been generated by a father, but one that resembled someone in his behaviour. David had been the great king who unified the twelve tribes of Israel into one kingdom that in terms of power and territory would remain unmatched thereafter. Solomon, although a great king himself, only managed to shrink his father's kingdom. Through the centuries, in people's eyes, David's son would be the messiah that, with violence and power, would reconstitute the great kingdom of Israel. And here is the source of Jesus' conflict: people's expectations.

We all know the episode when Jesus enters Jerusalem and the crowd goes towards him waving olive branches and singing Hosanna (which means: save us). A few hours later they will scream: crucify him! What happened? Simply a case of mistaken identity. When they realise that Jesus is not the 'son of David' that they were waiting for, the messiah that would reconstitute the kingdom of David using violence and killing people, but the son of God who gives his life and loves his enemies, then they are not interested and they do not know what to do with a messiah like that.

This will also be the drama that early Christian communities will experience. Here the demon is blind and dumb. Elsewhere demons are also deaf. The religious and nationalistic ideology seeps deeply into people's minds and make them deaf, dumb, and unable to see. You might remember James's and John's request when Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem, and in view of the city, told his disciples for the third time that he was going to be killed there. Clear? Very clear! Soon afterwards, James and John approached Jesus and pleaded with him to reserve the two most important seats, one on his right and one on his left, for themselves once in Jerusalem.

For heaven sake! Jesus had just warned them that he will be killed: they hear but do not listen. This is why the Evangelist introduces these two blind men. Who really are these two blind men? They are James and John who are clearly blind because they do not see. In fact they address Jesus as the son of David and this will continue in the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, there is a humorous (it cannot be described otherwise!) episode in there. Jesus, after his resurrection, appeared for forty days to his disciples and, for forty days, talked to them about the Kingdom of God. They, however, had the kingdom of David in their minds and that was what they were waiting for. Jesus, however, had not come to restore the kingdom of David, but to usher in the Kingdom of God. This was the misunderstanding that made them blind, caused Peter's betrayal and led to the failure of their preaching. At the end of the forty days, will they have understood? After all, it was not a mere friar who was teaching them, but the risen Jesus himself. Well, on the fortieth day they asked him: “All well and good, but when will you reconstitute the kingdom of Israel?” For forty days Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God and all they understood was the kingdom of Israel (cf. Ac 1:3-6)!

The crowd, therefore, was baffled: '*Can this be the son of David?*' The Evangelist is preparing the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God. The Pharisees' aim is all about character assassination. Earlier on, one of you asked: 'As you've often said, Jesus risked death on several occasions. Why haven't they killed him before? Why, in spite of several attempts, haven't they stoned him? What prevented them from getting rid of him?' The priestly cast in power, the religious elite did not want simply to kill Jesus. A dead Jesus could have become more dangerous than when alive, because he could be seen as a martyr. They had to destroy his reputation first.

The Jewish Law envisaged that the death penalty be administered by stoning, the Roman Law by beheading: why, then, did they choose the torture of crucifixion for Jesus? Because in the book of Deuteronomy this punishment was reserved for those cursed by God (cf. Dt 21:23). Getting rid of

Jesus was not enough; they needed to have his reputation destroyed. 'How could you believe that this man was the son of God? Look how he died! What does the Deuteronomy say? Cursed by God is the one hanging from a tree. Therefore, how could you have believed, unless the word of God is wrong?' This is why they first tried to destroy his reputation and this operation started earlier in a more subtle way. Let us see how with the episode in which Jesus declared that there is a sin that cannot be forgiven.

²⁴ ***But when the Pharisees heard this they said, 'The man ...'*** It is a constant in all Gospels that Scribes, Pharisees and the chiefs of the people never pronounce the name of Jesus. Jesus, in Hebrew Joshua, means God saves. They, however, do not accept this saviour because if they accept Jesus as a saviour they have to give up their domination over people, their prestige and their privileges. They always refer to Jesus with words that imply contempt like "the man". '***... drives out devils only through Beelzebul, the chief of the devils.***' Here the Pharisees really use a crafty ploy. In the Aramaic language Baal means lord or master. In pagan land there was a god called Baal-Zebub where "zebub" were those flies that are found feeding on dung. According to the second book of Kings, the Philistines, who were bitter enemies of Israel, worshipped this god who was thought to protect from diseases carried by these flies. Israeli people, as well, prayed to this god. Even a king of Israel, king Ahaziah, sent messengers to consult Baal-Zebub to know whether he would recover from his illness. This god attracted great crowds to his temple.

The Pharisees, in their efforts to dissuade Israeli people to worship this god, deformed his name: no longer Baal-Zebub (Lord of the flies), but Baal-Zebul (Lord of dung heaps). While Baal-Zebub protected people from the flies, Baal-Zebul attracted them. When the Pharisees said that '*the man drives out devils only through Beelzebul*' they were warning people to steer clear of Jesus, because he cured people in order to infect them with something more pernicious. This was a subtle, perfidious smear. At the time, in fact, people believed that demons cured people in order to take possession of them.

The Pharisees could not disprove the evidence: Jesus had healed a person. People, though, should be on their guard because he healed in the name of Baal-Zebul and, therefore, those healed by him will, eventually, be afflicted with something to which there is no remedy. This is a terrible accusation to which Jesus reacts:

²⁵ ***Knowing what was in their minds he said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself is heading for ruin; and no town, no household divided against itself can last. ²⁶ Now if Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself; so how can his kingdom last? If I drive Satan away in the name of Satan it means that he is carrying out a struggle against itself. Surely his power would collapse. ²⁷ And if it is through Beelzebul that I drive devils out, through whom do your own experts drive them out? They shall be your judges, then.*** In this way Jesus exposed how hollow their argument was: you say that I free people from demons in the name of one of them. This is utterly stupid because, if demons fight one another, their power is finished. And anyway, if I drive demons away in their name, in whose name do your disciples drive them away? The fact that the Pharisees have two explanations for the same action exposes their hypocrisy. And Jesus continued: ²⁸ ***But if it is through the Spirit of God that I drive out devils, then be sure that the kingdom of God has caught you unawares.*** The Pharisees knew very well that if one had driven demons away one could have done it only through God's power. However they could not admit it because it would have implied the end of their supremacy. And Jesus pressed on:

²⁹ ***'Or again, how can anyone make his way into a strong man's house and plunder his property***

unless he has first tied up the strong man? Only then can he plunder his house. Satan's kingdom does not crumble just because of infighting, but because someone stronger than Satan has appeared, that is God: only God is stronger than Satan. Jesus' action is that of plundering. He does not just occupy Satan's house, but he takes away his goods, that is he frees people from him. Jesus plunders the religious institution represented by the Pharisees and frees people that are under its rule.

Of interest is the verb "to tie" used here. In the end, it will be the Pharisees who tie Jesus when they capture him. Therefore, the religious authorities, instead of collaborating with Jesus to tie up Satan, will be Satan's instruments who will tie up Jesus to prevent him from setting people free.

³⁰**Anyone who is not with me is against me, and anyone who does not gather in with me throws away.** And here is where we wanted to get to: the most important sentence by Jesus. ³¹**And so I tell you** (This is not a teaching for Jesus' community, but a warning for the Pharisees and the religious priestly elite and, therefore: *'I tell you'*), **every human sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.** Since Jesus' teaching was discrediting their doctrine, the Pharisees defend themselves by maligning Jesus. They declare the man over whom had descended God's Spirit as possessed by an impure, evil spirit. The Pharisees, fully conversant with the Scriptures, could not possibly not have known that Jesus' deeds were from God. However, since acknowledging that would have meant giving up their privileges and prestige, they claimed the opposite. And Jesus pressed on: ³²**And anyone who says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but no one who speaks against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven either in this world or in the next.** Jesus forgives those who are baffled by his behaviour and independence from the Law and criticise him for this. This is due to ignorance and human fragility. Here is the certainty that human faults due to man's limitations, fragility and ignorance are all forgiven. However, Jesus considers unforgivable the behaviour of those who, in order to protect their own prestiges, call evil good and good evil (cf. Is 5:20).

The Pharisees, by claiming that Jesus operates through an evil spirit, exclude themselves from the possibility of asking for forgiveness. There was a precedent: when Jesus healed a paralytic the Scribes declared: *'This man is being blasphemous'* (Mt 9:3). Therefore, it is not God that refuses to pardon them, but they, who considers Jesus a blasphemer, that reject God's forgiveness. The Evangelist is telling us something very important: while the utmost leniency will be afforded to those who err, those who lead people to err, however, will be met with the maximum severity. This is the sin against the Holy Spirit.

Let us try and understand this sin a bit better. For their own interest, the Pharisees declared evil what was good. They knew very well the Jesus' deeds of healing people were good, but could not admit it for fear of loosing authority, credibility and, most of all, power. I would like to reassure many Christians who have scruples that, although we can all commit a large repertoire of sins, we cannot commit the sin against the Holy Spirit because this is the sin of the religious authorities.

It is religious authorities that, in order to hold on to their power, keep calling evil what is good. Let us think, for example, about certain Church laws that run against logic and common sense but remain unchanged. Why? Because the Church today cannot permit what a previous pope has prohibited: its credibility and authority are at stake. And therefore, it continue to maintain that it is evil what it knows is good for people. It must safeguard the prestige of the doctrine of the religious institution. For this sin Jesus reserves some terrifying words: *'But no one who speaks against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven either in this world or in the next'*.

To say to people that what is god for them is, actually, bad is for Jesus an unforgivable sin, not

because God cannot forgive, but because these people will not want to ask and receive forgiveness from someone they consider a blasphemer. Therefore, all of man's sins, whatever they are, can be forgiven, but calling evil what is good just to preserve prestige and power cannot be forgiven.

As we will see in the last day of this biblical week, forgiveness does not need to be asked for, but just need to be accepted. Let us ask ourselves, in order to use more suitable wordings: is it right to say that Jesus died in the cross for our sins? I have been told this since I was a child. But even today that I am seventy years old I would admit that I've done some foolish things in my life, committed some sins, but nothing that would cause someone die on a cross ... maybe a small scratch at most! Therefore, can we still go on saying, especially when teaching catechism to small children, that Jesus died for their sins? We work with several psychologists and psychiatrists and in particular with a child psychiatrist who treats several children traumatised in an irreversible manner (his words, not mine) by what they learned at catechism classes. These might have been particularly sensitive and fragile children, but remained distraught even in adult life, troubled by obsessions rooted in the idea of sin.

I remember the words of a father who took his little son to a catechism class. The parish priest said to the children: 'You know what is cancer? Well mortal sin is worse than cancer because cancer kills your body, mortal sin kills your soul'. What is the end result of this catechesis? People either become atheists or psychiatrist's clients. It all stems from the idea of sin, hell and feelings of guilt that Jesus died for our sins. I believe that whoever has accepted Jesus' message might still make mistakes and have failings, but cannot be led to think that he caused Jesus to be tortured and die on a cross. This is a wild exaggeration.

It is, therefore, important that while maintaining the traditional religious formulae we use a language more comprehensible and in tune with the times. Otherwise we see the effects: out of 100 children we prepare for first communion or confirmation possibly as many as 20 will continue to come to parish meetings, 80 will disappear. If I were a factory manager and see that production results are so bad for several years I would at least change the production manager or change method of production. There would be something that need changing. Priests, instead, change nothing. They see that the way catechesis is conducted is a failure and, as a result of that, all take flight, but they do not ask why. They do not ask whether there is something that need changing, whether it is right to stuff children with doctrines and feelings of guilt. We probably should have a review and conduct some verifications.

Jesus' Blasphemy

(Mk 2:1-12)

Fr Ricardo Perez Marquez

The synoptic Gospels, and in particular Mark's, tell us that Jesus has been condemned to death by the High Priest, God's representative on earth, because he had been accused of blaspheming. The charge that attracted the death sentence was that he usurped what was due to God only.

This was what the people of Israel considered a blasphemy and it was put to him, in front of the Sanhedrin, by the High Priest, as we read in Mark's account: '*Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?*' (Mk 14:61). Jesus' answer will be affirmative. Therefore, Jesus, in front of the Sanhedrin, even if he did not say it himself that he is the Son of God, by answering 'I am' he proclaimed his divine nature and assumed all the attributes reserved to God. In fact he will say: '*I am and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven*' (Mk 14:62). This was sufficient to find him guilty of blaspheming. Such a crime entailed the death sentence.

The book of Leviticus is clear that blaspheming is a crime punished with the death sentence: '*There was a man whose mother was an Israelite woman and whose father was an Egyptian. He came out of his house and, in the camp, surrounded by the Israelites, he began to quarrel with a man who was an Israelite. Now the son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name and cursed it. He was then taken to Moses (his mother's name was Shelomith daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan). He was then put under guard until Yahweh's will should be made clear to them. Yahweh spoke to Moses and said: 'Take the man who pronounced the curse outside the camp. All those who heard him must then lay their hands on his head, and the whole community must then stone him. Then say to the Israelites: "Anyone who curses his God will bear the consequences of his sin, and anyone who blasphemes the name of Yahweh will be put to death; the whole community will stone him; be he alien or native-born, if he blasphemes the Name, he will be put to death. Moses having told the Israelites this, they took the man who had pronounced the curse out of the camp and stoned him. And so the Israelites carried out Yahweh's order to Moses'*' (Lv 24:10-16;23). This is the word of God. This is another example of how, in order to maintain the honour of God, man's life is sacrificed. God is always more important than man. This is reflected in the double commandment of the Jewish tradition: '*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself*' (Lk 10:27). From this we can see the difference: give to God our total attention and commitment, to our neighbour what we think is possible. In order to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind it is possible to destroy a life.

The Talmud says that rabbis have given a lot of thoughts to the crime of blaspheming. It was considered a grave crime because it called into question the transcendence of God. Therefore, no one could dare to do that. When someone was accused of blasphemy and was taken to court, he could not repeat what he had said; the witnesses themselves (there needed to be at least two witnesses) could only repeat it in front of the judges after the court room had been cleared. The judges then, on hearing the blaspheme, would tear their clothes as a demonstration of disgust for the gravity of the crime.

Therefore, when in Mark's Gospel Chapter two, which we will examine soon, the Scribes say that Jesus is blaspheming, they do not simply mean that they disagree or are not at ease with what he says, but they declare: this man must die – as it will eventually happen. Jesus' death sentence is not

inflicted because in the end, in the course of an investigation, they find something new. Mark gives us warning that Jesus' death had already been decided at the beginning of his public ministry, in the second chapter of his Gospel.

Therefore, just from this we can understand how dangerous Jesus' message was. Almost as soon as he starts to speak, he attracts the detestation and contempt of the religious authorities. Yesterday we have seen how the rules regarding the pure and impure had created boundaries, had caused a separation in man's life so that if he wanted to have the guarantee of being suitable to take part in the religious rites he had to respect these rules. Jesus came to break and tear down these boundaries. This was intolerable for the religious authorities because by breaking these boundaries the whole structure of society would collapse, cohesion and identity would disintegrate and the right environment for their teaching would not be there any longer.

This is the danger that Jesus posed: he did not simply disagree with or contested certain attitudes, but he showed no interest at all in the whole system. He offered and put forward something totally new. Immediately, this attracted deep suspicions. In Mark's Gospel Chapter two, we see Jesus in front of a Jewish audience. He wants to present the novelty of his message: a God that does not want or recognise any barrier, but jumps over those well established boundaries that religion had imposed to keep people under the control of its leaders. Jesus presented his message in the town of Capernaum. Let us read starting from Mark's chapter two:

¹ When he returned to Capernaum, some time later word went round that he was in the house.

Capernaum is a town situated towards the north of the lake of Tiberias, also known as sea of Galilee or lake of Gennesaret. The lake is formed by the waters of the river Jordan flowing down from mount Hermon. This is the territory of Galilee, Jewish territory. The river then continues along the Jordan Valley and ends up in the Dead Sea.

Beyond the river it was pagan land and the Jewish people were very careful not to go to the other side because that land was considered impure. This was a rule that they had to respect because just by walking over that land people would become impure and contaminated. Capernaum was a border town just before the boundary with pagan land. That is why we said yesterday that Levi, son of Alphaeus, was at his tax booth: people travelling out of Israel towards the north had to pay a toll. It is, however, very significant that Mark introduces the fundamental teaching of Jesus – the universality of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom that accepts everyone – in a border town. With Jesus, there are no borders, boundaries are to be swept away, there must not be anything separating man from man and, especially, man from God.

We are going to examine the episode of the healing of a paralytic. However, in order to understand it properly, we have to look at the context. Before this episode, Mark tells us that Jesus cured a leper and sat down and had a meal with publicans (sinners). Jesus is trying to show a God who ignores all barriers, does not tolerate that any exclusion be made in his name or that anybody may feel marginalised for his condition of impurity like the leper or those who do not observe the Law like the sinners.

Jesus did not tolerate divisions and did everything he could to show that a new way to relate to God was also ushering in a new way to relate to other people. The religious leaders did not accept this because Jesus, in order to introduce a new way for people to relate to God and to others, had to sweep away all the official doctrine.

This episode is also important because for the first time we have the expression “the Son of Man”. Alberto has already introduced it this morning, but we will see that for the first time we will be

introduced to the concept of faith. It is curious that, to introduce faith, the first to be showcased are the pagans. Jesus, for the first time in Mark's Gospel, will praise the faith of the pagans not that of the Israelites. Interesting to see that it is in talking about the forgiveness of sins that Jesus demonstrate to have the authority of the Son of Man. With the episode of the healing of the paralytic, Mark shows us how to experience the offer of forgiveness of sins.

Yesterday, we talked about the statement made by Hosea and picked up by Jesus when he was accused of eating with sinners and publicans: *"Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifices"* (Ho 6:6). Hosea had already experienced forgiveness of the same kind that Jesus now shows to his audience. When we speak about sin and forgiveness we naturally start from the situation man is in. We say that man sinned. Religion normally teaches that if you want to be forgiven you have to repent and convert first and only then ask God for forgiveness. As we have seen yesterday when talking about purity, conversion and repentance came at a cost: you had to offer sacrifices, go through complicated rites of ablutions and cleansing. Starting with Hosea, though, people began to see this in a new way: the starting point is no longer sin, but forgiveness. The first thing one experiences is that of forgiveness. From this moment one can change his behaviour. When one feels he is loved without being asked anything in return he may change his life and convert. Sin is erased and, therefore, there is no longer any sin.

Jesus will teach exactly this, while in Capernaum and in front of a Jewish audience. This will unleash the Scribes' anger, who will react accusing Jesus of blaspheming. The fact that Hosea had said the same many centuries earlier shows that the Scribes read the Scriptures in a selective way: they only take what they are interested in, such as the following from the book of Leviticus: *'Anyone who blasphemes the name of Yahweh shall be put to death'* (Lv 24:16). They had concentrated all their efforts on the legal observance of the laws and rules that people had to comply with and ignored a life-giving lymph that is found in the Scriptures and that Jesus rediscovered and brought to fulfilment.

Furthermore, we said yesterday that the rules of the pure and impure are derived from an incorrect way of reading the book of Genesis. Since God created the world by separation, we as well need to separate. Since God said "according to their species", we as well will have different species and those who do not correspond to their species are out. Jesus does not read the book of Genesis in this way, he reads it from the viewpoint of God's unconditional love. Therefore, Jesus will not talk about purity, he will not accept this category any longer. He, instead, will proclaim an unconditional love as expression of acceptance of others.

To understand this episode properly we need to examine what happened with the leper. For the first time in this Gospel, Jesus felt compassion when he came face to face with a man suffering from leprosy. Therefore he is a God who is touched by human suffering. He is a God who sees a person who is excluded by religion for his impurity. He does not accept a doctrine that could lead to such marginalisation and exclusion. Compassion is the key to understanding what happens with the paralytic.

'Some time later word went round that he was in the house'. We know why Mark says 'some time later'. Jesus had touched the leper and in doing so he had contaminated himself. The Law stated that whoever came into contact with a leper became impure and could not approach anybody and, therefore, had to live outside the village or town. For a few days, Jesus had to avoid his town. When he went back he did it quietly. However, people caught wind that he was back.

What does this 'house' represent? We will learn later that in this house there were also the Scribes

who promptly contested Jesus when he said: “Your sins are forgiven”. This was not Jesus' house. We said yesterday, while talking about Levi, that Jesus had organised a dinner in his house for the publicans. Why would the Scribe be in his house? Jesus is going to present his teaching about overcoming the predominant prejudice among the Jewish people that they were a superior nation. Therefore this house is a literary device employed by the Evangelist to tell us that Jesus is addressing all the Israelites: it is the house of Israel. Often, the Jewish people are referred to as the house of Israel in the Old Testament.

² ***and so many people collected that there was no room left, even in front of the door. He was preaching the word to them.*** The verb used in the Greek text for “collected” is συνάγω (sunagō) which has the same root as 'synagogue'. This implies that those who went to Jesus still had their mentality shaped by the official doctrine. In a way, though, they felt attracted to Jesus because somehow they sensed that the rules governing purity were very cruel and in no way they could be attributed to God's will. People, having heard Jesus, having seen him touching and healing the leper, are drawn to Jesus. The traditional rules, instead, made their lives very complicated. Furthermore, in spite of all the ablutions and purification rites, they could never be assured to have received forgiveness from God.

Since sin was the transgression of the Law, in order to become suitable again to receive God's graces, one had to undergo purification rites, pay, make offerings ... etc. In spite of all this, one was never sure that God had really forgiven me. How could I know? ... people lived in a state of continuous anxiety caused by these rules about purity. I could I know? I might have transgressed an obscure rule or brushed against a woman during her menstrual cycle, or got closed to someone with an illness or missed to wash my hands before putting a bit of food into my mouth, or ... who knows? Therefore, a certain anxiety was always there. And I have to say that scruples of this kind still persist today with some people. They confess the same sins again and again not because they keep committing them, but because they are unsure of having been forgiven.

Mark writes: *'Many people collected ...'*. As I've explained earlier, the choice of this verb implies that people had not abandoned their old mentality. They were still in the clutches of a doctrine that taught them, since their birth, the impurity of their existence: their mothers were considered impure for forty days after their birth! Nonetheless, these people, and, according to Mark, there were many of them, congregated in the house where Jesus was. And Jesus *'preached the word to them'*. But what is Jesus preaching? Jesus understood the difficulty that these people had to free themselves from the official doctrine, from a restrictive religious mentality that was asphyxiating people's lives. Mark, however, does not report Jesus' teaching with a theoretical speech, but with a story. This is typical of the Semitic culture: I'm not going to deliver a great speech, but I will tell you a story. The story that Mark tells us is that of the paralytic. By examining this story we understand what Jesus taught those people. The fact that this story, for its narrative lack of logic and how the sequence of events is put together, makes us raise an eyebrow is proof that this is not the chronicle of an event that actually happened, but a theological piece of work that Mark put together with great ability and literary skill.

³ ***when some people came bringing him a paralytic carried by four men,*** the English translation uses the verb “came” which is a past tense; the Greek text uses the present tense. Mark makes use of the grammar to signify that this is a situation still present now and that we have to deal with, because it affects our lives. Mark also noted that there were four bearers carrying this guy who was lying down on a stretcher, a paralytic. It is strange that during the whole episode Jesus is the only one who speaks. The four people carrying the stretcher are nameless and do not ask or say anything.

They will make the hole in the roof of the house, but, clearly, the only protagonist is Jesus. It is Jesus who can offer hope and an alternative to those people who looked for him. Mark also gives us a reading key to better understand why these people made a hole in the roof and did not walk through the door. In the Israelite culture, the number four is symbolic of the whole humanity, the whole universe: the four cardinal points, the four winds, the four rivers of Eden. Mark wants to tell us that there are a lot of people who do not belong to the house of Israel, that, nevertheless, look for Jesus. ***4 but as they could not get the man to him through the crowd, they stripped the roof over the place where Jesus was; and when they had made an opening, they lowered the stretcher on which the paralytic lay.*** Those people who do not belong to the house of Israel, but want to approach Jesus, find the door blocked by the crowd, and, therefore make a hole in the roof of the house. This is typical of most religious groups. They have their leader, their holy one; they huddle around him because he is theirs and do not let anybody approach him. The crowd blocks the entrance as to say: “He freed us and for us it is very good, but pagans are out”. It is not enough to feel freed, we need to open up to the fact that others want to be freed. If I really feel that I have been freed from all that prevented me from growing at a human level, I also have to work so that no one will be deprived of this. Sometimes people ask for mercy for themselves, but justice for others; they expect compassion for themselves, but apply the full rigour of the Law to others. This is what happened in that house and Jesus wanted people to understand that such an attitude is wrong. These four people, who represent all human beings but do not belong to Israel, having heard of Jesus, are full of hope and want to approach him. Their way, though, is blocked by the nationalistic prejudice of the Jewish people. What can they do then?

Here the Greek text is very interesting. It says: *'They stripped the roof over the place where Jesus was'*. It sounds like that Jesus himself was on the roof. He, obviously, was in the house. We need to keep in mind the two levels on which the Gospels are written. One is the literary level that makes the story plausible, the second is the theological one, which is the level we are most interested in. We know how Palestinian houses were built: the roofs were made of straws and it was possible to open them up to let some breeze in, especially in hot summers. In winter, instead, the straws were laid back on and covered with chalk to make them waterproof.

Mark is keen to show that these people, despite the nationalistic prejudice of the Jewish people, succeeded in reaching Jesus. Their perseverance in physically approaching Jesus by uncovering the roof was symbolic of their persistence in discovering his message. How do they approach Jesus? By presenting him with a situation of utmost prostration: a man lying on his stretcher who could not move, like a corpse.

5 Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'My child, your sins are forgiven'. Here we have the first incongruous detail of the story. These four guys have worked hard to climb to the roof, to open it up, to lift the stretcher with the paralytic up the roof and then to lower it down in front of Jesus. Nonetheless, Jesus does not address them. Why? He instead addresses the paralytic who had done nothing and said nothing. All the poor man could do was lying down on his stretcher. Jesus addresses him in a very tender way: *'My child, your sins are forgiven'*. What about the other four men who had done all the work? He could have addressed all five people and said: *'My children, your sins are forgiven'*. These inconsistencies are inserted in the narrative of the Gospels on purpose. All the Evangelists were very skilful writers and knew very well what they were writing. Origen, father of the Church and great interpreter of the Gospels, said that these inconsistencies are stumbling blocks laid there by the Evangelists to make you stop and try to understand what they are really saying. So, what is Mark really saying here?

Both the paralytic and the four men are representing the same situation: a humanity overcome by the weight of injustices from which it is unable to extricate itself. We know that at the time, in spite of many advances, there were some very grave situations like, for example, slavery. Grave injustices that kept humanity on its knees. In Jesus, these people saw a solution, an alternative, a way out. Mark has split the characters, but they present the same image, two ways of presenting the same reality. On one side the strong will to approach and discover Jesus, on the other side the immense frustration because there are sin and injustice that strangle and reduce a person to a situation of total inanity.

Furthermore, there is a second incongruous detail: why did not Jesus heal the poor guy at once? Mark is slowly developing Jesus' message. If the Kingdom of God is really universal and God's love is for all, then God does not want to be paid in order to give us something in return as religion taught us. He does not want to be used in a way that some are to be excluded from salvation and his love. Jesus is trying to free the people standing in front of him from a mentality that does not allow the novelty of the Kingdom that he proclaims to develop.

Therefore, Jesus praises the faith of these pagan people first, because they tried to find a way out. Jesus call them "My child". This is scandalous for the Jews in front of him because only those belonging to the house of Israel could be called "sons". All others were dogs, pagans, despicable people. Mark here is saying that, with Jesus' novelty, God does not recognise boundaries of any sort and offers his love to all. Therefore, this is not the God of the pure and impure, he is not the God who we are never sure has pardoned us, but he is the fountain of life that offers himself in a totally unconditional way.

Jesus, addressing the paralytic, says: *'Your sins are forgiven'*. It is the second time that we find the word "sin" in this Gospel. The first time was when John the Baptist proclaimed a baptism for the conversion of sins. The Baptist preached a change of life, symbolised by the immersion in water, to obtain forgiveness. The Baptist was still of the old school: you needed to convert in order to obtain forgiveness. Jesus, certainly, does not agree with this. Jesus will never talk about sins when announcing the Kingdom of God. He will always talk about accepting the proposition to enter the Kingdom, the good news. This acceptance will then lead to a change of life. This, however, will be the last time that the word "sin" will appear in Mark's Gospel. Once we have understood that sin is not a barrier to meeting God then there is no need to talk about it.

There is also a third incongruous trait. Jesus does not say: "I forgive you", but says: *'Your sins are forgiven'*. This impersonal way of speaking signifies that, through Jesus, it is God himself who is forgiving: Jesus and God are one and the same. Anyone who sees Jesus sees that God who forgives sins. Jesus had spoken of forgiveness to Levi son of Alphaeus once he had left his toll booth behind. However, with the paralytic, Jesus does not ask if he had converted, did not demand contrition, did not impose a penance. It was enough that he saw their "faith", their will to approach him and go with him. This was enough for ignoring the whole process of justice.

Jesus, therefore, does not prescribe any condition other than that one must feel the desire to be freed from anything that makes you inhuman or prevents him to grow as a fully responsible human being. It may surprise us that Jesus does not first heal this man and, instead, talks about forgiveness of sins. All these incongruous details are there because the Evangelist wants to tell us that this is not a chronicle of an episode that happened at a particular time, but it is a profound theological teaching.

⁶ Now some Scribes were sitting there, and they thought to themselves, ⁷ 'How can this man talk like that? He is being blasphemous. Who but God can forgive sins?' Some Scribes were also

sitting in the house. Sitting is the normal posture taken by teachers, rulers, and by those presenting the official doctrine. This means that these people have an important and assured role in the Israeli community: they are the great teachers of the people. However, in their heart, these Scribes disapprove of Jesus words. It is interesting that they do not openly show their disapproval. They do not say to Jesus: “Sorry, how do you dare to say such thing”. The Greek text says: “they thought in their heart”. The heart, for the people of that time, was the seat of reason and intellect – we would say mind. For them it was inconceivable that a man like the paralytic could be loved by God given the state he was in, that it was enough to give adherence to him for every sin to be completely erased.

However, it is Jesus who teaches with authority and that is why people are attracted to him and follow him, as we will soon see. The fact that the Scribes did not openly challenge Jesus shows us that people who are rooted in doctrines never want to confront themselves with others and never look for a debate. A doctrine cannot be challenged, it is immutable. And this is the great danger: doctrines might as well be good, but they need to be able to be modified and adapted to the changing conditions of human reality.

The fact that they do not engage openly is typical of religious people. You never know who your censor is because he is not prepared to have a debate with you and see whether your thoughts might contain something valid. All of us might have had the experience of meeting a person who is thoroughly entrenched on doctrine and realise that any kind of dialogue is impossible. There is no engagement, you are only told that you are out of your mind, out of the Church, that you will end up in hell and you will be subjected to all sorts of pains and ... oh well!

That is what happened to Jesus. The accusation against Jesus is extreme because, as we have seen in the book of Leviticus, it attracts the death sentence. Jesus does not talk about forgiveness of sin in the same way as John the Baptist; for John, conversion was a pre-requisite to obtain forgiveness. Not so for Jesus: conversion might happen as a consequence of forgiveness. He thoroughly contradicted the official doctrine that stated that to receive forgiveness one had to cleanse himself, bring a whole series of offerings and sacrifices to the temple, with intermediaries and a sacred place to boot. For the Scribes, Jesus was obviously blaspheming. One could not teach such thing. People needed to always have the uncertainty and anxiety about forgiveness because then they will continue to bring offerings to the temple.

This was very important for the institution. If people stopped bringing offerings to the temple because God had already forgiven them, then the whole economy of the institution would suffer and the business model of the temple would fail. They not only had to maintain that there was a great distance between God and man, but especially that God was jealous of his position and privileges: only he could forgive sins. No one else could allow himself to meddle in such thing. When Jesus said '*Your sins are forgiven*', according to the Scribes, he was usurping God's position, he was setting himself up as a rival of God.

Here again we can see how the Scribes disregarded the vision offered in the Book of Genesis. It is stated in there that man and woman were created in the image and likeness of God. If they had taken this into account it would have been perfectly reasonable to accept what Jesus had said. For them, however, this was unthinkable: nobody could have the certainty to be at peace with God and, therefore, nobody was entitled to say such a thing. For us, though, if Jesus says '*Your sins are forgiven*', we have the certainty that we are at one with God, we have nothing to fear and we do not need to feel unworthy to be in his presence.

⁸ And at once, Jesus, inwardly aware that this is what they were thinking, said to them, 'Why do

you have these thoughts in your hearts? As we have seen earlier, the heart is the seat of the mind; the spirit is that process that leads you to know. Jesus realises that these people have congregated in this house because they want to learn from him. However they are hitting this hard rock, the official doctrine, that prevents them from accepting the novelty brought by him. Jesus knows that these people are thinking in this way from his own experience. Therefore, Jesus understands those who cannot accept his teaching in any way because they are rooted in a doctrine.

If we look through the Synoptic Gospels, we realise that, apart from the twelve Apostles, there were many other people following Jesus. However, there was not a single Pharisee among them. It was unthinkable that someone who was considered an excellent person, with a mind shaped by a solid doctrine, could accept Jesus' teaching. His was a teaching that exposed their doctrine as worthless. Jesus realised they did not want to have a debate with him, but only to accuse him of blasphemy. Well, now Jesus tells them that if they want to follow and give their adherence to him they have to break up with the official institution.

It is not possible to follow Jesus and, at the same time, preserve a doctrine that is contrary to what Jesus says. Jesus is in "the House of Israel", but the people of the House of Israel had to give up those false beliefs that prevented the extension of the Kingdom of God and did not accept that God's love was for all the nations. Those who stood there would have accepted Jesus, a prophet who was capable of great deeds, if he had come only for them and had kept the old tradition alive. Jesus pressed on:

⁹ Which of these is easier: to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven" or to say, "Get up, pick up your stretcher and walk"? Jesus does not start a debate or a discussion, does not try to explain with which authority he has made that sort of declaration (*'Your sins are forgiven'*), but he challenges the people around him: what is easier? Anybody could say "Your sins are forgiven". But how can one verify that. Instead, if after saying *"Get up, pick up your stretcher and walk"*, this really happens, then there is no room for doubting because it is visible to all. Jesus, here, is saying something really important: the effect of receiving forgiveness is a radical change in your life, a change that all can see.

¹⁰ But to prove to you that the Son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth' - ¹¹ he said to the paralytic - 'I order you: get up, pick up your stretcher, and go off home'. This is how we can experience that we have received God's forgiveness: when our lives change, when we take responsibility for our lives, when we have such autonomy and self-sufficiency that nobody can limit us, when we can go home on our own, also carrying our own stretcher. All we went through in the past, including mistakes and failures, have become reference points that allow us to walk on our own: this is the sign we have received the grace of God and his forgiveness. This is a fundamental teaching from Mark: one cannot really say "God has forgiven me" and still lean on others. Once you have experienced God's forgiveness, once you realised that God is accepting you as you are, everything that felt like a weight on you has been completely erased, not just forgiven – the Greek text says "erased as if it had never happened". It is, therefore, very important to understand the challenge that Jesus threw at the Scribes because what he did was visible to all. It was a clear sign of a liberating event: a man free to walk on his own. Jesus presents himself as the Son of Man. He does not just say he has the authority to forgive sins, but *'to prove to you that the Son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth'*. It is fundamental to understand the phrase "the Son of Man" in order to appreciate Jesus' teaching as presented by the Evangelists. If we do not understand this expression we cannot understand many passages in the Gospels, such as this one, about the forgiveness of sins. Of all of Jesus' titles in the Gospels, this is certainly the one that is most

frequently used. More frequently even of Son of God and the one most used by Jesus himself. In fact, this is how Jesus wants to be identified because this title has an expansive dimension.

“The Son of Man” means a being that belongs to the human kind. However, since there is the definite article “the”, it does not mean any human being, but the one par excellence. Jesus presents himself as a model human being because on his person shone the maximum of the divine, demonstrated, for example, by the fact that he could forgive sins which was considered God's prerogative. Therefore, all those who identify themselves in Jesus, the Son of Man, automatically are covered by the same divinity and participate in this humanity that can reach the utmost fulfilment. Jesus, therefore, is not talking about himself only, but also about all those who will identify themselves in him: a new model of humanity that he intends to introduce.

God, therefore, does not have any other way of making himself known and understood other than through this humanity that we have met in Jesus and, through him, our own humanity. The Son of Man's authority does not come from anything earthly, such as an authority that comes from a rabbinic school, but it is one that has been put into effect by God himself. And anyone who identifies himself with him will receive the same authority. Therefore, what is the task of the community of believers who identify themselves in Jesus as a model of humanity? Our task is to erase a past that weighs other people down and does not allow them to continue their lives in an autonomous and independent manner: *'get up, pick up your stretcher, and go off home'*. These are the tasks of a community that identifies itself with Jesus, the Son of Man: to erase a past of injustices, to give strength and to communicate life to its members, so that people can start on a path to growth and development towards a full autonomous life.

Jesus had challenged the Scribes that were sitting in the house. Obviously, we cannot take this as historical. Jesus, previously, had touched a leper. It would have been very difficult for the Scribes to sit in the same house as Jesus who had contaminated himself. This is a way of saying that their doctrine was well rooted in the people who were listening to him. They represent that censor that each one of us carries inside, who points out that he seats at the table and eat with sinners. Mark is saying that the doctrine that has been inculcated in people makes them think of those people who call Jesus a blasphemer.

Then the gauntlet that Jesus threw to the Scribes is to get that man on his feet and having him to pick up his stretcher and walk. This is followed by the declaration: *But to prove to you that the Son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth' - he said to the paralytic - 'I order you: get up, pick up your stretcher, and go off home'*. This is interesting: “Go off home” (literally: go to your house). We have seen that Jesus was in the 'House of Israel', the place where the people of Galilee had congregated. However, once this guy was able to stand up, he had to abandon the 'House of Israel' and go to his house.

This is the beauty of the Gospel message: there is no setting to which all have to bow and conform. On the contrary, each person has to assimilate and live that message according to his own characteristics, personality and sensibility. Jesus does not want people to stay in the House of Israel. These pagans have nothing to do with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all those stories of the Old Testament. We, as well, have a lot of all this, but Jesus said it clearly: only those that belong to the House of Israel are bound to that past. For others who come from different experiences: *'go to your house'*. Jesus dismissed him and sent him home so that he could experience for himself the liberation he had obtained.

Let us have a last thought on this phrase “The Son of Man”. Jesus does not say: I forgive you, or I

have the authority to forgive you. This expression, “Son of Man”, is found in the Old Testament, in the book of Daniel, chapter 7, verse 13. It is an Aramaic expression that means “one that belongs to the human race, the son of someone, one that belongs to someone's house. It is an overloaded way to say that someone belongs to humanity. Daniel contrasts this with the world empires which he describes as feral beasts. The human being, instead, receives his true authority and power from God.

God entrusts his power and authority to someone with human features and not to the powerful people of the world who have feral characteristics, similar to terrifying beasts. Therefore, already in the Old Testament, there was this idea that God did not entrust his power and authority with those who raised themselves above all others and used their position to dominate over others, but he gives it to someone who has human features. Unfortunately Daniel, who is a Jew and has a Jewish mentality, thinks that this “Son of Man” will receive his authority on behalf of the people of Israel and all the peoples of the world will have to bow to the glory of Israel.

Mark however changes this phrase and uses it differently from Daniel by adding the definite article “The Son of Man”. This is the man par excellence who has not come to dominate or subjugate anybody, but to give back life and offer an opening to the pagans. The man who was a paralytic had to go back to his house and continue his life according to his experience. Mark used this phrase to underline that Jesus brings with him the Spirit. As I said earlier, this is an expansive title in so much that it extends to all those who identify themselves in Jesus and, for this, receive the same authority and participate in his divinity. This is a new humanity that is able to bring down frontiers, overcome prejudices and foster new relationships of fraternity and solidarity with all people and all nations.

Jesus, therefore, is The Son of Man, who has received the fullness of God's Spirit. At the same time, the fullness of his divine condition was revealed in him as The Son of God. These are the two complementary titles attributed to Jesus.

¹² And the man got up, and at once picked up his stretcher and walked out in front of everyone, so that they were all astonished and praised God saying, 'We have never seen anything like this.' The Greek text does not say “his stretcher”, but “the stretcher”. The stretcher is no longer his. Therefore, it is not his any longer as a past that weighs him down but, on the contrary, it is something that does not deter him from walking on his own without any help. It is obvious that, although his past has been erased, he will always be aware of how he was. This, however, will not be an obstacle on his way forward. The stretcher is there to remind him of how bowed down he had been, which makes him appreciate more intensely the liberation he received. The Evangelist suggests that with the utmost awareness comes the utmost freedom. This is beautiful because one can carry on with his life without being constantly weighed down by a past that he has left behind. The guy is fully free, independent and fully capable of moving thanks to the gift he received from Jesus.

A further thought about the way the paralytic was dismissed: “go to your house”. Jesus does not say “Stay here in the House of Israel”. This is because Jesus does not accept that there are chosen peoples enjoying privileges over others, but maintains that God's love is offered to all peoples. Israel might have had a chronological advantage since it was the first people to make a direct experience of God. However, this advantage does not preclude all other peoples of the earth from enjoying the same status of children of God. The people of Israel, including Jesus' disciples, thought they belonged to a chosen people and, therefore, entitled to a special relationship with God. All the other peoples on earth were excluded from this relationship.

We might think that this way of categorising peoples is outdated but, in fact, we are still reasoning

along the same lines. We talk about first and third world, for example. We consider ourselves as belonging to the first world and, therefore, enjoying rights and privileges that third world people do not have. They cannot challenge our higher standard of living. If they cannot attain the same standard, it is bad, but not our problem. This mentality of being a superior race is akin to the mentality of the Israelites who thought that belonging to the House of Israel was their exclusive privilege. Jesus fought to change that mentality and make people understand that God's love has no boundaries and he does not bestow privileges on anyone.

We, therefore, should learn this teaching and understand that anyone who has been deprived of his dignity or has suffered injustices must be considered in the same way as us. When dealing with people, there is no first class and second class. Unfortunately, when confronted with diversity or strangers, we think they are at a lower level. We have this in our blood in the same way the people who belonged to the House of Israel, including Jesus' disciples, had it in theirs.

Why did Jesus struggle, and still struggles, to free his disciples from this mentality? Because his disciples, then and now, have this mentality: we are the chosen people, we belong to the first world, we are privileged, nobody can indent our rights or our standard of living.

Mark's teaching about the forgiveness of sin is very detailed. He talks about the unconditional love of God and the change that forgiveness brings about in the receiver's life. All can see that you are not the same person any longer. You are no longer bowed down, full of anxiety and feeling lost, but a person that takes control of his own life. Another results is that people finally talk. Before they were thinking in their minds: 'He is a blasphemer'. Now they give glory to God saying: '*We have never seen anything like this*'. Furthermore, those who witnessed the healing ended up praising God, not Jesus, because they see in Jesus the manifestation of the Father. And again, they do not praise God for what Jesus had said but for what they had seen: a man, who was unable to move, now has recovered all his dignity, stood up and started to walk. Jesus, therefore, in spite of what the Scribes think of him, is not a rival of God. In fact, Jesus and God are the same. It is Jesus, the Son of Man, who reveals to us how God really is. This is the new face of God and it is what those people had seen. '*We have never seen anything like this*': no one had shown us that God was like this. What was important to them was not the doctrine but what they had experienced and seen with their own eyes.

Before concluding this session, let us go back to the beginning of this story where it says that the four people bearing the stretcher made a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was. We can now better understand their action because often the problem is about communicating: not knowing who the others are creates prejudices and keeps people apart. These people, by making a hole in the roof, have finally the possibility to communicate. Similarly, when Jesus was baptised, the heavens were torn apart and communication between God and man was guaranteed for ever. When Jesus came out of the water he saw the heavens tearing apart: they cannot be mended any more. According to Mark, he did not see the heavens opening up (which would have implied that the heavens could close again) but tearing apart (they cannot be mended). Here as well, the house had the roof taken off to allow the flow of communication going again. This is why these people can finally speak and are able to express what they feel inside.

It is uplifting to think how Jesus' deeds brought about deep communication between people, took away those blocks and obstacles that prevented people from knowing one another. Mark omits to say that the roof was closed again at the end. This means that a way of communicating remains open. Jesus' community is a community that learns to break all barriers and to keep open all possibilities of dialogue and debate.

¹³ ***He went out again to the shore of the lake; and all the people came to him, and he taught them.*** Jesus, now that people are applauding him, does not hang around to soak up their amazement. Now, that they understand who he is, he is not interested in receiving compliments and praises. He, instead, leaves the house and goes to the shores of the lake (the Greek text has shores of the sea). He does not let himself be captured by people's enthusiasm. The sea is an open space where there are no boundaries and it is a place where it is possible to meet unknown situations.

It is, however, interesting to note that now people do not congregate around Jesus, as it was the case earlier, but go to Jesus unencumbered. They have been freed from the religious mentality that kept them under the yoke of an oppressive doctrine. Jesus went towards the sea followed by all the people as if he was about to embark on a new exodus, a new quest for freedom.

We are just at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, but we already see how Jesus' teaching is about breaking the boundaries between man and God and the boundaries between men themselves: as we have seen yesterday, Jesus has no problem in eating with sinners. With Jesus, there are no longer any barriers.

From the Culture of Sin to the Freedom of God's Children

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The theme I am going to explore with you today is linked to what you are investigating this week: from the culture of sin to the freedom of God's children. As you know, I am not a theologian or an exegete. Therefore, I will not directly comment on the Gospels, I will follow a philosophical approach. Although I use this term, I do not intend to take refuge in abstraction. At the end of the day, philosophy is rather practical because it strives to read the various logics around which we organise our lives. A bad theory or a bad logic, when put into practice, leads to disasters. Therefore, normally there is a link: in any field, be it politics, religion, sport or any other field, it is possible to read the type of logic that guides it.

Therefore, when I say philosophical approach I mean an attempt to read the logic behind Christianity. In fact, as we will see, there are two logics at play that we need to discover:

1 - Firstly, the logic with which Christianity has been accepted in the west with respect to the themes of sin, guilt and human dignity. The Gospel message arrived to us through many vicissitudes and through the mediations of the Greek culture and Roman legislation. The transmission of Christianity to us has really been an inter-cultural process. However, this process has partly betrayed the Gospels because it inserted them into categories that were not evangelical.

2 – Secondly, the intrinsic logic of the Gospels. We can study these pages and carry out a lot of classic exegetical work, but when we stand back, we realise that the whole Bible and the Gospels in particular are underpinned by a logic or a line of thinking that still surprises us. It does not matter that we have heard it and chewed it since we were children. In order to confront ourselves with the evangelical tradition we need to understand the direction of the Gospels and then look in the same direction.

This is the kind of work that we will be doing today.

Cultural environment in Europe

First of all we have to understand the environment in Europe. The context in which the Gospel seed has been received was that of the classical world: Greece and Roman empire. To start with, there was a contrast with Judaic culture, but it is also important to understand how we were culturally before Christianity took root. We need to highlight not so much the Christian roots of Europe, but the European roots of Christianity as we know it. This is more in tune with western culture than open to the novelty of the Gospel. This is why it still takes us often by surprise.

To do this properly, we would need to analyse distinct eras, different authors, different cultural Greek and Roman periods through history. This would take a long time. I will try to condense all this by introducing the idea of a cultural genetic code. This is possible for every great tradition in the world. For example, Hinduism has its own cultural genetic code, that is a particular intuition about life. Raimon Panikkar used to say that there was a founding myth. This means that the intuition about life is neither explained nor demonstrated, but it is an opening towards life from which you start explaining the world. It is, therefore, futile to try and find what there was before the myth, before this original intuition. At most we can try and see what there is inside. I call this: the cultural genetic code. We are, therefore, going to find out what was this code for the Greek and

Roman world, the pre-Christian western world, that inevitably influenced its relationship with Christianity.

Like any other culture, the western world had some bright aspect. I would suggest, for example, its state of uneasiness. The western world was very confrontational, in the good meaning of the word. It always looked for something different, something true and something more. Our era, instead, is very conformist. The logic of the market has become global culture, our common language. Yet, the ability to discuss and assess and the regard reserved to critical thinking were bright aspects of the western tradition. However, I will linger on the darker and more negative aspects of our ancient cultural genetic code, those aspects that were more resistant to the Gospel message. Please, note that “ancient” does not mean “in the past”. The way we used to analyse history was to segment it into different periods: antiquity, middle-ages, modern era, and, then again, post modern era. These sort of divisions, though, are only used by westerners. Although there have been big changes in our history that justify these divisions, there is also a deeper mentality, a kind of collective subconscious, that runs through all historical periods and that has reached us. This hidden continuity, often hidden under the development of our western culture, shows that epoch-making changes were more a radicalization of a previous nucleus rather than an overcoming of it. The modern era does not constitute a total break with the middle-ages. Although it might appear so on the surface, in reality there are many streams of continuity between the two periods. Now I will examine those elements that suggest an explanation of the total reality, elements that have negatively impacted on our way of accepting or rejecting the Gospel message. Although I will only concentrate on negative aspects, western culture is much more than these.

What was the experience (clearly an intuition about life is derived from an experience) of the human condition during the classical Greek era? We have to lend a lot of respect to those myths that point to a cultural code. They did not develop by chance, but from life experiences. We can say that they were an attempt to make life more bearable inasmuch as they made it more comprehensible. Without them, life would hurt, appear discordant and confused and lead us to think of it as absurd. The Greeks said that they wanted to move on from “chaos” to “cosmos”: in Greek, cosmos means order, an order of meaning. The initial experience of the Greek world is that man has been left to his own devices in his human condition, akin to the situation of an orphan. Even if man is not really orphan because he has the gods, these gods, though, are somewhere else, they have characteristics that make them immune to human suffering, death and to that corrosive element that Greeks feared a lot, time.

The greatest reason humans envied the gods was that the gods were beyond time, they were not nailed to a dimension, an era. We humans, instead, are so controlled by time that, in the end, if man had to be defined with only one word, it would be: mortal. You might remember the philosophical syllogism: all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, Socrates is mortal. This is not just a philosophical way of playing with words; it is a vision of the world. In their vision, although they thought of man as a political animal, a social animal, an animal that possessed the “logos” (word that means communication and reason, dialogue and ability to think), they, above all, thought of man as a mortal being, a condition defined as opposite to the condition of the gods.

In the book of *Odyssey* there is a poetic description of the abode of the Gods: “Neither is it shaken by winds nor ever wet with rain, nor does snow fall upon it, but the air is outspread clear and cloudless, and over it hovers a radiant whiteness”. Envy, but also tenderness, transpires from these lines towards the Gods who enjoy a different condition. The same feelings appear in *Rerum Natura* by Lucretius, though this time it is tinged with resentment. These gods do not have the problem of

rain and snow and light flows white, while we men are gripped by pain and abandoned by the gods.

The Greeks, therefore, were not atheists, they did not think that there was no divinity. On the contrary, they put divinity at the centre of philosophy and the gods became the divinity with the concept of Good in Plato and Aristotle. However, man will remain inside the temporal condition of vulnerability, suffering and mortality.

The Greek man, therefore, learned from an early age that he is on his own, that he cannot count on the gods for help. It did not make any sense for a Greek to pray the Immobile Motor or the idea of Good. For them, it was unthinkable that one could have a relationship of any sort with the Origin of Life. Man and divinity inhabited separate worlds. Those who experience this state of abandonment often say that angst is the predominant feeling. Angst is the feeling that tells you that an essential relationship is no there or that, if it is there, it is not to be trusted. Mistrust, in the end, is the most realistic feeling that you can have. What is worse: to think that we are isolated in the cosmos, that there is no origin in the world and that all is accidental, or that there is an origin, there is a divinity, there are some gods, but that they do not take any interest in us and have nothing to do with our lives?

I cannot say which of the two solitudes is worse and more distressing. The Greek man, and here I really mean the male person, develops a mission in the world that is at the crossroad of, or in the mesh of four logics. These are the logics that will guide him in organising his life and society. I will list and explain them because they still affect us. We are not that far away from the same logics with which the man of abandonment, the man who felt he had been abandoned and who had, anyway, a separate fate from that of the gods, has organised his life at that time. Perhaps, today, without being aware of it, we are still inside these logics. When I say logics I do not mean abstractions or concepts, but motions that lead us to organise our lives in this world. We can, therefore, say that they are real, social logics. They are not philosophical exercises, but, on the contrary, they constitute the way with which westerners have organised reality before they came into contact with Christianity.

- ◆ The first logic, fundamental to the western thinking, is what can be defined in the “**principle of identity**”. $A=A$ and A cannot be different from A . We can understand why we are so attached to this principle: it allows us to anchor the world, to emerge from chaos. I can say a clock is a clock and a pen is a pen. It would be a disaster if a pen became a mountain a minute later. I would not be able to understand anything. In order to understand the world we need to stop reality as if it was a still picture and add a label to it. Our identities, therefore, are means to crystallise every existing entity: God, man, nature, all things ...

What is wrong with this principle of identity? According to psychologists or educationalists, it would be a disaster if a person did not create his own identity. The trouble is spelled out in the possessive adjective that is used. It means that the relationship with the other is an external and secondary reality that is not part of your identity. This is different in other cultures. In Indian, Chinese, African, Latin-American cultures at the heart of identity there is relationship. They would not dream to separate them. In fact in some cultures the same word expresses both the uniqueness of a person and his vital relationship on which it is built.

We westerners, instead, think that all individuals have primarily their own separate identities and that relationships come afterwards. As a consequence of this way of thinking, we do not find strange that the normal relationship with others, the very one on which our social

coexistence is based on, is underpinned by competition. Therefore, if the other is only external to me and the relationship is only casual, a sort of external environment, then I am I, regardless. When I meet the other, I either think that he could turn out to be a useful tool that I can use, or a foe that I need to crush, or I do not even see him. Probably we all know people that live next to each other physically, such as work colleagues, but who have never looked into one another's eyes. There is no real relationship.

We come from the mentality of exclusive identity where our relationship with others is considered in terms of contraposition. It would be a disaster if I found that someone else has something in common with me: I would feel I have lost my identity. The other is the one who stole my identity. We, therefore, do not just look at the diversity in others, but also the sameness. If an Albanian or a Senegalese or a Roma person starts looking like me, who am I, then? I have to preserve my characteristics and let the other be the other. He cannot mix with me.

The first logic, then, is: exclusive identity that refutes relationship. In the last few decades, human sciences, philosophy, zoology, all talk about relationship. For us it is such a discovery that we organise conferences on this subject. Other cultures, with all their shortcomings – they are no better than us a priori – at least do not have this problem. For them, identity and relationship walk in step.

This is only the first of the four logics that we are going to examine. However, think what a cultural and psychological barrier it is to understanding and accepting the Gospel message.

- ◆ The second logic that fascinated westerners is **power**. We are people who admire physical power, economic power, religious power, military power. To be means to win and assert yourself. Note, though, that there was at least one more possible choice: there is a type of power that shows itself in the will to welcome, host and give life to others. Women's life experience is more in line with this power. Thomas Aquinas had grasped this in his *Summa Theologica*. At a certain point, when investigating Aristotle's categories, he tried to find a definition of passive power. There is active power and passive power. His definition of passive power is a bit like the definition of human existence. Passive power is the ability to receive your own perfection. You meet a love, a light, a new life and you welcome it; this changes your life. Passive power, therefore is not negative. It is hospitality, fecundity, the capacity to give life, to make life grow and to nurture it.

If you ask Israeli and Palestinian people or, to have an exclusive identity, Catholic and Protestant people in Northern Ireland: "Is politics for you a way of prevailing over your enemy?" If the answer is yes, they will continue to ruin each other's lives for centuries to come. If they think, instead, that politics is about finding a way to live together, then this would be a step forward in history. The tragedy is that the person that understands this, more often than not, is going to end up assassinated.

Normally, we intend power as supremacy and it is an unquestionable value. From Spinoza to Nietzsche, right at the heart of western thinking, when one talks about power one always means male power of victory, supremacy and command. And it is always considered positively. To be impotent means non existence. This, however, is a myopic view because it does not distinguish between the means for reaching an objective. You can feed six million people or you can send six million people to the gas chambers: there is no difference, you are very powerful. The trouble is that objectives and means are set arbitrarily. This is a form

of blindness.

If to win I need to kill someone, or if to come first at an election I need to buy judges and control newspapers, I will do it. I need to have the means to achieve my objectives. I will choose the most effective ones without distinguishing between objectives. This logic is based on an inability to discern.

- ◆ The third logic is very dear to westerners and both believers and non believers reclaim the language of the sacred: it is the logic of **ownership**. The right to private ownership is sacred. This is an idea that is well rooted in the western mentality. We can look to this poor westerner without being judgemental, but with understanding. He is convinced that he had been abandoned in his human condition and that he must head out on his own. Just think of Ulysses who takes advantage of the gods, of the people who give him hospitality, of fellow travellers, of the forces of nature: he uses anything as a tool to get to his utmost objective, going back to Ithaca.

It is an image that says: A=A. I have to go back to myself. Therefore, this man who considers distrust as a trait of his intelligence and his thinking ability becomes cunning or craftiness, although he is a relational being like any other, he negates all kind of relationships. What can he possibly trust? Not other people, but only what he owns. In fact, because he owns, he does not need to trust. Therefore, this kind of people substitutes relationship and trust in others with ownership.

The tragic result of this is that, once you are used to this view of life, you treat people, and paradoxically even the people you love and receive love from, as your possession. You say: “My children” and do not realise that the possessive adjective “my” must be ironic: sons and daughters are not yours ..., my husband, my wife ..., all are possessions. It is clear that you do not have the mental structure that allows you to recognise the freedom, the novelty of the other and how you can relate to him. Without ownership you are without identity.

As you can see, the above three logics, identity, power and ownership dovetail perfectly into each other.

- ◆ The last logic that deformed and conditioned Christianity is that of **sacrifice**. Sacrifice does not come from the Gospels; in fact, in the Gospels, sacrifice is only mentioned to exclude it. Already, in the Old Testament there is a running theme that made clear that the living God, their God, was the only God who did not want sacrifices. For example, look at the episode of Isaac and that of the two mothers in the first book of Kings. However, in reality, in western mentality the idea of sacrifice is a logical compendious that includes all the other three logics because it explains two essential aspects of life.
 - a) Thanks to sacrifice you can transform anything that is negative in your life, such as sufferings, struggles, abnegation, into a sort of powerful creative destruction. Through sacrifice you can transform the negative aspects of life in energy towards positive aspects. In the word sacrifice we have the image of bouncing: you climb down in order to bounce back up, deny yourself something in order to obtain something else. Sacrifice, therefore, is an attempt to rationalise suffering, to turn suffering into energy that allows you to obtain something else.
 - b) Sacrifice is also seen as a transaction or an exchange. Western man has been unable to consider life as a gift from the gods. The gods were somewhere else and did not take any

interest in man. He did not consider life as a gift in relation to his mother. In order not to think that life came from his mother, he brought out the Unmoved Mover, the idea of goodness, male fecundity, etc., anything not to accept female fecundity and that component of gift that is inherent in maternal care. This might not be a biological instinct that is in all women, but generally this is the woman's experience. Western man does not think in terms of gift, but in terms of exchange. Exchange is not gift, it is the opposite. In giving, I care about the other person, I meet his needs and condition. For example, I can judge when a present is wrong. I cannot buy a present for a person and then give it to somebody else. Western man, therefore, does not believe in giving, does not consider life as a gift. You can feel how distant he is from the Gospels! Instead, he thinks he can conquer or merit life and its riches. At the very least, he can obtain something in exchange for something else.

While in giving I care about the other, in exchanging I only worry about obtaining something that is advantageous to me: in selling I look for a profit, in buying I demand a discount. In gaining an advantage I demonstrate my efficacy, my ability and my intelligence. Sacrifice is, therefore, an exchange with the divinity. I say to god: "Dear god, I sacrifice my daughter Iphigenia, or I sacrifice a lamb or whatever else, but you have to give me something else". A sacrifice is not an end to itself, but it is always offered with the view of obtaining something. Christianity inherited this mentality: the object to be obtained might be eternal life, but there is always something to be obtained in exchange, otherwise sacrificing would be daft and madness.

A sacrifice, therefore, is an exchange, a gift is not an exchange. If after receiving a gift you feel gratitude and give in turn, this must not be a mechanical reaction, that is, it must not be an exchange, but a new gratuitous action. When we parents say to a child of ours "Say thank you" after he has been given a gift, we force him to be thankful. In doing so we falsify the freedom of the gift. Instead, when, after receiving a gift, you feel like giving as well, this must not be simply in exchange for the gift you received. It must instead feed into the dynamic of giving in another way and with utmost freedom, so much so that the gift from one who has received may be for a third person and not for the person who had donated in the first place. Therefore, a gift is expression of a free relationship where the only consideration is the other person. A gift with other considerations is not a gift. Aid to the third world is a form of colonialism and not a gift: it is an attempt to dominate and control.

A sacrifice is, therefore, an exchange. There is, however, another disconcerting aspect about sacrifice that is often overlooked. In a sacrifice something that is alive is first destroyed and then offered: it is the offering of a carcass or, in human sacrifices, of a corpse. A living being, very valuable while alive, is first killed and then offered. It is the gift of death: a living being must first be killed otherwise it is not really a gift.

A sacrifice is, therefore, a pretended gift. We must not consider sacrifice as a real gift. In a sacrifice I go through a destructive and symbolic gesture in the pretence of serving God. In Christianity it is often thought that we should destroy or give up our sexuality, our freedom or our reason as a sacrifice to God as if God were a Father who wanted his children mutilated or handicapped and one who would accept a relationship with them only at that condition. In a sacrifice there is a negative aspect that wants to be positive. This bouncing game is typical of our western mentality.

Here is a small example. We Italians often hear that we are in Afghanistan participating in a peace mission. We make peace by using bombers and tanks! This is a subtle trick of our mentality that makes us think that a passage through evil is a necessary condition to arrive at something good. Instead, in the dynamic of giving, what is given, be it time, consideration, trust, education, objects, knowledge, etc. is not thought of as destroyed or lost. On the contrary, in this dynamics, what is shared, even if given to others, is yours for ever and you will never lose it. All you have given is part of your personality and, therefore, it will never be lost.

The Gospel is very clear on this: what you have accumulated and hidden in a vault can be lost from a day to the next (the recent economic crisis must have taught us this). Therefore, what you retain is wasted, what you share is yours for ever and nobody can take it away from you. We enter into this dynamics when we learn to receive (too many times we hear: to give your life for others, Jesus sacrificed himself for others ... this rhetoric is outside life). In real life we start learning when we start accepting gifts. In fact, the threshold of life is gratitude for life itself. Although resentment and depression towards life is common, it is gratitude that makes you say: "Heavens, what I am has been given to me, all the good I've experienced has come from others even if, subsequently, I've developed it".

However, the real way to receive is not by closing my hands around what I have received, but by sharing it with others. At that point it becomes part of myself. In the western world, all this dynamics has been seen through the lenses of sacrifice and, therefore it has been distorted. The idea of exchange, that aspect of shrewdness has wormed its way around it. On one side, I recognise that God is superior and I must sacrifice my life, or my first born, for him; on the other I behave like a shrewd trader who tries to influence God and obtain what I want.

Even those that in a most honest way are aware of their own sacrifices are unable to establish a boundary with someone else's sacrifice. Let us take, for example, a mother who always sacrificed her life for her children (a part from the fact that she has ruined her gift by creating a gigantic feeling of anguish in them) and is unable to differentiate between her sacrifices and somebody else's. Sacrifice has become the engine of history. Even today, we are convinced that without sacrifices there is no religion, morals or economics. Have a look at the language used by economy experts of the World Bank or of the International Monetary Fund: they talk about sacrifices, we have to reduce our rights, reduce education and NHS expenditures and compress democracy because all these things are luxury items. Instead, we have to work harder and produce more in order to increase our Gross Domestic Product, otherwise investors (how kind of them!) will not invest in our country.

Therefore, this mentality about sacrifice has become fundamental to our society, political life and, obviously, the religious structures with which we have interpreted Christianity in our western world. People have it in their minds that life is suffering and you have to strive to make it produce for you. Through suffering you may gain love and salvation. It is the old idea of merit that is at the root of the logic of sacrifice. Sacrifice becomes a currency to get a medal or an adequate recompense ... after all, I suffered a lot, so I must deserve a lot.

Our civilisation, imbued with this mentality, is very far from perceiving life as a gift.

The Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano defines resentment as not being able to come to terms with the fact that you are a mother. The Greek civilisation, in all its greatness – I wish we were as great as them, just think of Homer and the ancient Greek playwrights – was a civilisation in angst because people found themselves in the condition where happiness was for the gods, for themselves there was misfortune; for the gods there was eternity, for themselves, instead, life was ephemeral and ended in death; perfection belonged to the gods, in man there was every form of imperfections.

The Logic of the Gospels

Let us now try and put these four logics together. Imagine a man that is afraid of death and, at the same time, is anguished by life because he knows that with life comes the possibility of suffering, taking losses, be in an absurd situation and whose behaviour is driven by:

- a) the logic of an exclusive identity: incapable to relate to others;
- b) the logic of power as exercised by man, in the chauvinistic sense;
- c) the logic of ownership for which he is prepared to break any bond of fraternity and friendship;
- d) the logic of sacrifice for which he has to produce suffering and self-denial for himself and, most likely, for others because this will lead to an eventual advantage.

Now think about his reaction when he caught up with the Gospel's message. Paradoxically, it was that of accepting human condition as inferior and show contempt for it, instead of having a feeling of dignity and self esteem as children of God. Saying that man has come from an original sin, an hereditary sin, is a sign that Christians still accept the Greek attitude towards man.

Still today, as a sign of banality and intellectual laziness, we say that man is evil by nature and nothing can be done about it, and accept it as an explanation of our identity. Lowering man's dignity has been the condition for accepting Christianity. God is God. Jesus of Nazareth is God dressed up as man but, surely, he is not like us. We place him on top of the alter while man is in a state of constant indignity and lives with an hereditary sin. In this mentality, the structure of sacrifice becomes the great religious bridge that allows us to negotiate with God. It is through sacrifice that we become more presentable and the purification so obtained will get us salvation.

It is equivalent to saying that, in the meeting between the western mentality and Christianity, we have not been able to go beyond the old code. At most, it has been reworked in a parasitic manner and it has acquired some Christian elements, but these have been aligned to the old code's perspective. The first thing that could happen, therefore, was that Christianity became a religion rebuilt on the logics of exclusive identity, power (think about the omnipotence of God...), ownership (Christian very quickly lost the idea of sharing and returned to make property sacred) and, especially, sacrifice. Even today, if you say to a theologian that sacrifice has nothing to do with Christianity, he will consider you an heretic who messes around with the fundamental tenets of faith: a non believer.

As you can see, there has been a religious reworking of Christianity along the lines of those logics. This is a concept of life that is not open to meeting a God who is love. Within this pseudo-Christian reworking, sin and guilt, bound to an older tradition, paradoxically, take centre stage. It is as if the mirror of human condition that tells you who you really are is not Jesus of Nazareth but sin. The more you recognise yourself in it, the more you have to sacrifice.

The Christian civilisation, therefore, has created structures of self-denial and fragmentation of life. The religious Christianity is dualist in as much as it has a logic that splits instead of unifying, because it sees self-denial as the only existential attitude apt to maintain a relationship with this God perceived in a Greek way. We will see soon, in more depth, how this strange meeting between

Greek culture and the Gospel message has produced a theological output that is not altogether clear. In particular, there are twelve fabrications that have become commonplace and that we all, believers, non believers and agnostics, have accepted for centuries and millennia. We have breathed these prejudices since we were born and have linked our Christian life to them.

There has been a mutual contamination between the old code and the new Gospel message. The fundamental aspect is this: the deep angst present in western man had not been overcome and healed, and led to a pre-comprehension of the new message even after the message of love is brought formally into relief by the Gospels.

Think about the great novelty that God is love with respect to the old mentality. Please note that Aristotle had already said that God is an object of love, that God draws people to himself. However, it would have been nonsensical for Aristotle to think that God is the subject of love. This would have made God less godlike, precarious, vulnerable and imperfect. Plato, following the Greek idea of perfection, stated that the good is good because it lacks nothing. For them perfection meant complete self-sufficiency. One is perfect when he owes nothing and lacks nothing: he is complete. It was, therefore, incomprehensible that God were the subject of love. That would have made him like man. Although popular religion often presented gods behaving like human beings and, therefore, having feelings like human beings, philosophy (especially Plato and Aristotle) had purified this idea and established that the divine cannot be thought of in human terms. A loving God would have been totally incomprehensible to them.

It is worth noting that, contrary to the Jewish tradition, according to which thoughts became words, it was the word that gave rise to thoughts. Even for Plato, who was very fond of dialogue, dialogue was only a tool that could lead to the truth and once you got to the truth there was nothing else left but contemplate it. No need of dialogue any longer. For them, thought was more and more without words, power of abstraction and reconfiguration of reality inside mental processes rather than inside real relations. For them, this was the fabric of philosophy, the way to do philosophy.

Within that vision God can be the object of love in the sense that he draws our tensions and, especially, our cognitive efforts. We need to know that, for Greek philosophers, the only acceptable love was love for knowledge; every other love was considered an interference and a weakness. The proclamation of a loving God, a God who is the subject of love, meant to go out of the normal landscape and to change the normal coordinates of culture. However, this message of a loving God arrived when deep down people were still affected by the old vision of God. A God that loved without taking merits into consideration, without expecting an exchange (which had been the anthropological and social foundation of the old culture) could not displace our deep attraction for a God of power. Our western civilisation always believed in power and not in love. Even today, when we proffer the word love, we mean an emotion, a feeling, a passion, even a malaise that will go away. I am not even remotely thinking of it:

- primarily as a form of life, i.e. it gives form to human life
- secondly as the greatest expression of human dignity.

All this means that, if I learn to love, I am not just a social or political or rational mortal, but I can transform into love even suffering. This quality that is rooted in human nature has not been seen as an identifying feature of human being.

Since life is not a gift and man is not a being that loves, we are beings that have other characteristics. Therefore, while this type of feeling was maintained, the affective and emotional basis with which we read the Gospels remained faith in power and not faith in love. Therefore, when we say love we really mean power. If love has no power, e.g. a God that cannot send you to

hell if you disobey, what God is he? He is not credible! Credibility comes from power and not from love. Love is, therefore, predicated in the language of power due to this deep feeling of distrust. Just think of Christianity as rebuilt and translated to us according to the categories of Greek thinking. In the case of St Augustine, the origin was Plato; in the case of Thomas Aquinas the origin was Aristotle. This has led to a reduction of the Gospel message and in both cases you can detect the contamination from a different culture. Still today, for example, we hear people talking about the immortality of the soul, as in Plato, and not about the resurrection of the flesh. This is because of the strong influence from the Greek culture.

Areas of contamination of the Gospel message

Therefore, given that there has been a contamination, what are the theological results of this strange meeting of cultures? I have identified twelve areas where the Gospel message has suffered a reduction due to contamination with Greek culture.

- 1) The first one is about the credibility of this message, that is, how can we imagine truth. Why should I trust this message? What is truth? What is real and credible so that I can base my life on it? There has been a reduction in the relationship between the human being and truth. When we talk about relationship, we usually mean relationship between people. But we can also have a relationship with knowledge. The pursuit of truth is not the pursuit of an object or of information. Truth is neither subjective nor objective (which would be part of the same model); it is not something vague, external and lifeless. Truth is not knowledge about a truth as if it was the sum of some pieces of information. Truth is live, it is not less alive than us. We are, therefore, called to enter into a relationship with truth. The first contamination that I examine here is the reduction of truth to dogma, a doctrine or a body of orthodox theories that must be accepted. This does not include adhesion to truth, does not imply a conversion but only acceptance of orthodoxy. The important thing is that you must have the right and correct theology, correct ideas about God, the right narrative of the reality of God. However, changing your way of living is not central in all this. It is far easier to be in the orthodoxy than being born again which would entail a new life.

Orthodoxy gives you two great assets:

- a) you can continue your life as before, do not need to go to the effort of changing it.
- b) You convince yourself that you are right and can, therefore, judge others as being outside of the truth. We have gone through centuries in which this made the difference between life and death. Orthodoxy was not an opinion without consequences; it was a decisive factor in your life.

In this way, there has been a rejection of a relationship with truth, that is we no longer accept that there is a possible action on behalf of truth on us which could engender a liberation or the capacity to stay in this relationship.

The other side of the coin is, therefore, that, because we do not accept a relationship with truth, we do not recognise man as an interlocutor worthy of truth. Relationship means the truth itself accepts man as a worthy interlocutor and, therefore, truth comes and looks for you because it wants to talk to you and wants to establish a relationship with you.

Truth, therefore, has been reduced to something objective. Objectivity, though, is not a category that belongs to truth, it is a reduction of truth. A watch, a table, a sheet of paper are objective. Truth is not purely outside man and whoever finds it becomes its owner and establishes an orthodoxy or a monopoly. Truth is not subjective in the sense that one can

call truth whatever he wants. Truth is not even absolute, that is something that stands on its own, solitary and not subject to any change. We would not be able either to name or to think of a truth of this sort because it has no relationship with us and we would know nothing about it. Therefore, even if we call it a mystery or an enigma, we still have some sort of relationship with it, although paradoxical and not very clear. A truth totally by itself would be absent from our condition of human being and we would not have the problem of truth. The Gospels, instead, present truth on one side as an initiative of life, the origin of life and the reality of life-loving God himself. On the other side as evolving, which does not mean that it suddenly changes and it is all relative. This means that it is live and evolves; it is not in the past, but it is present and in the future. All integralists of the world, when they speak about truth, look to the past, to elements, representations or events that are already complete. Since they can be circumscribed, you can get hold of them. If truth is a living entity, it is also in the present and in the future. You cannot close it inside a dogma, a display window or inside what you own. You have to realize that the relationship is still open and evolving.

In Christianity, this relationship is so evolving that the ultimate image of truth is the communion of God with all his creation. Truth is a relationship, not an isolated item. Therefore, if I isolate it by calling it objective, subjective or absolute I break this relationship. Truth is full relationship that becomes communion and as a consequence it is expressed in people's lives.

Jesus' declaration in John's Gospel: "I am the truth" is not an act of arrogance. He only says that he is the door through which we can also walk. It means that truth has fully come into our human condition and it is not a prerogative of Jesus of Nazareth as only son of the Father, but of all of us as sons and daughters of God. Therefore, "I am the truth" means: you can make your life true, the life of each one of us can become true, that is, to the level at which is your relationship with the living truth, God.

All this has been pushed into the background to the advantage of doctrine, orthodoxy, the right theology and, naturally, the authority of tradition and of Church's teaching. The teachings and the tradition of the Gospels have been supplanted by the teachings and tradition of the religious authority still today claiming, as a justification, to represent a continuation from Jesus, through the Apostle. In reality we have slipped from believing in Jesus' God, to believing in the God of religion. This is a faith that serves as a reference to itself and loses its relationship with the living God.

This is a religion that believes in itself, in its own traditions, that thinks that what is older in chronological sense is nearer God. It, therefore, looks for God in the Latin Mass because Latin is the language nearer to God according to its tradition. All this instead of experiencing a relationship with God.

Summarising this first point we can say that dogmas are human formulations of truth. If I accept it as such and, therefore, understanding its limitations, it might also be necessary. The problem is that we perceive as truth what is only a human formulation of truth. When this happens then all sorts of integralism, particularism, follies and heresies are passed off as orthodoxy where clericalism is the utmost heresy because it insists on having ownership of this truth and derives its power from it.

- 2) The truth announced by Christians is not just a living truth, and, therefore, not subjective or objective or absolute, but it is a living reality that is evolving and includes you on condition that your freedom grows. Truth, for Christians, besides being living, is characterised by

radical love, a love that is unknown to us but more human than the humanity we experience, a love that implies a human consummation that we still do not know, except in the rarest of moments. When we experience love, we really find it is mixed with egoism, possessiveness and a series of features that may make it either violent or unreliable.

In the Gospels, love means a radical love that is characterised by creativity. It is never destructive, always merciful, faithful, patient, liberating and never oppressive. This is a love that is so human that it looks new to us, not because this love might seem supernatural, but because we are not fully human yet. It is as if we are saying that creation is still evolving. This truth that is love has not been recognised as radical love, but, on the contrary, love itself has been made into a doctrinal truth, up to the point that they say “*caritas in veritate*” (love in truth). This means that love is measured by truth, the doctrinal truth. We have subordinated even love to doctrine. We cannot say “*veritas in caritate*” (truth in love), i.e. that there is no other truth than love, truth is measured by love and the truth of all truths is radical love. It is not a theoretical truth that can judge love, but radical love that tells you if something is true or false.

This has been a very important reduction and it has brought about a very concrete consequence. The consequence is that it brought about a number of substitutions. Not having recognised truth as love and as a very deep love that becomes foundation of life, it substituted love with other forces. Love has not been seen as the force that gives form to life. As a consequence, since religion had to organize society and relationships between people, it has substituted love with religious Christianity: where you should find love, you find something else.

Which have been the principal substitutes? First and foremost dogma, doctrine a theoretical truth. A grotesque result is that if you take two Catholic people and ask them what idea they have of God, they will not find agreement. Historically, the doctrinal truth is not a factor that leads to communion, but it leads to divisions. Here, unexpectedly, in the heart of the ecclesiastic experience, we find a kind of rationalism.

Rationalism is not found only in the Age of Enlightenment or in atheistic philosophers. There is also an ecclesiastic rationalism that passes off definitions, syllogisms and chains of ideological concepts as truth; everything else is relative. Therefore love has been substituted by dogma. However, who is the custodian of dogma? The authority. Therefore, love has been substituted by authority. As a consequence, sacraments such as Baptism and the Eucharist that should change people's lives, become, instead, magical rites that do not change anything. We have preferred to believe in sacraments as magical events. Finally, the last substitution involves suffering. Just not to believe in the love that was safeguarded in the Gospels, we have accepted the old mentality of sacrifice, we believed that suffering brings salvation. Still today, we say that Christ sacrificed himself for us and has suffered for us meaning that suffering has the power to obtain salvation.

Obviously, this is a distorted mentality. In life as in the Gospels, it is not suffering that saves. Suffering, in itself, crushes. If anything, it is how we respond to suffering that is important. If we respond with love then we are able to bear suffering and engender salvation even from a suffering condition. However, the distortion is in saying that suffering brings salvation, it is suffering that makes us deserve God's love, that, thanks to Christ's suffering on the cross, God reconciled himself with humanity, and that if he did not drink the cup that the Father offered him, there would not have been any reconciliation. Not even the worse of human fathers would have done that!

However, why was love substituted by dogma, authority, magical sacraments and suffering? Because love, as seen in the Gospels and read with the old mentality, is the height of weakness, vulnerability and guaranteed loss. In fact, the cross is read as: the God that has been discomfited, the crucified God. A love of that kind is destructive for the people who live by it and no one would voluntarily choose a love of this kind: it would mean to make oneself open to any violence. It is, therefore, much better to talk about love, but stuff it with more powerful and efficient contents that eventually become substitutes.

So far, we have seen the first two reductions: the first one was the reduction of living truth to an all theoretical truth, such as dogma and doctrine; the second reduction was to overlook that at the heart of truth there is love and to substitute love with other forces and forms of efficacy that seem more credible.

- 3) Third reduction: absence. What does it entail in being open to the experience of God, to a relationship with God? Here, in my view, there is the key to the enigma of the absence of God. The Christian God, at least the one revealed in the Gospels, is particularly new for the Jews because the other gods, based on power, were imagined like a supreme judge or an omnipotent magician. We all know very well that when man fantasises God he always thinks of him as the supreme judge or an omnipotent magician. The Christian God, instead, reveals himself as the God-love, but he is always absent, you cannot see him, he never caresses you and you never meet him. Christianity asks us to believe in a God who is sublime for his love, but unforgivable for his absence. We denounce a father, who never sees his children, a wretched father, i.e. not a real father. Freud says that a God of this sort is a puerile illusion. He felt sorry for those who still believed in a God as a good father that loves them so much, even if absent. Therefore, you either remain scandalised and conclude that he cannot exist – they are telling us a comforting story that makes us feel better – or, if you insist in believing, you must stuff this father with contents. You have to fill in his absence: there is a missing God that you must make present in institutions, in sacraments, in a morality, in traditions, in forms of power ... in other words, in what we call a Christian civilisation. So much so that, when in Catholic circles we talk about the past, we are nostalgic of it: we are in a secular society now, we no longer live in a Christian culture ... a Christian culture that, somehow, had filled in that absence.

The real issue with regard to this third reduction is that this absence is insurmountable not because God is far away, but because we have not been born in his presence yet, we remain shut to a relationship with him. Therefore, while we remain shut, the feeling we have, even in good faith, is that there is no God. In reality, the relationship that the Gospels require is not with orthodoxy or with a Christian ideology. We are not asked to fight for some non-negotiable values that, in the end, would mean for some abstract values. This does not exist in the Gospels.

The Gospels do not proclaim values. On the contrary Jesus himself was victim of some moral values: in the name of the Sabbath or some other values considered absolute you tread on the dignity of human beings. The Gospels, instead, ask for a relationship that is a journey. A relationship, in fact, is a journey and not a passive/static looking at each other. Young people say: "I have a story". This is true: a relationship is a story. It is a story or a journey of a new birth, i.e. you come out of the life you know and go into a new world.

Francis and Clare of Assisi went through this journey. They left their world, the categories of their culture and they came back in with a new perspective. They were still the same people, but they were profoundly changed. Therefore, the Christian truth asks such an

adhesion from you that it demands that you go through a new birth. When you are on this journey of a new birth you experience a relationship with that God that, although he remains invisible to your senses, nonetheless he is very present in your heart and life. We have to put at the centre of our life this rebirth, which means we are children of God or, better, we are in the process of becoming children of God. We are not objects built by a magician, like Pinocchio was carved by Geppetto. We become children of God with an act of freedom, a free choice, that sends us on a journey that changes our lives.

All this should have brought the realisation of the great dignity bestowed on man: to be sons of God means to have the same dignity as the father. In some cultures to be a son often means to be a minor, which implies one that is dependent on someone else, a subordinate, someone who still needs mum and dad. In the Gospels, son is someone who can express, in his way of being and of loving, the same dignity of God: this is what Jesus of Nazareth lived for and proved.

Putting at centre stage our status of “sons” would have entailed not only an emphasis on fraternity but also on sorority which would have put into sharp relief women's inclination to giving, rather than the more common male attitude of exchanging. This would have had an enormous impact on our way of living. Instead, by almost ignoring our sonship, Christianity has become adhesion to a moral code.

NB: sorority is a little used word that means a relationship of friendship, solidarity and communion between sisters or between sisters and brothers. This relationship can be lived within a family or, at a wider human level, between people living in the same place or environment or between people that are culturally and geographically distant or between people who lived in different eras.

We have therefore no longer a journey towards a new birth, but obedience to a moral code. The rather grotesque aspect of it is that 80% of this code is to do with sexual behaviour which is very strictly dealt with. Many other aspects of human behaviour, such as political or economic attitudes, are treated with much more tolerance and Christianity is easily inclined towards compromises with the logic of this world. Oddly enough, rules and prohibitions related to the sexual sphere are very strict. However, this is the sphere where man starts experiencing happiness and positive feelings towards others.

Still today, while browsing the Universal Catholic Catechism, you can read that the death penalty can be justified in certain cases, masturbation, instead is a very serious moral disorder. There is a disproportionate imbalance between the way that the sexual sphere and the collective, social and civil sphere are treated: very strict with sexuality, rather permissive in other spheres.

Christianity, therefore, has been reduced to a moral code of conduct, a series of rules and prohibitions. A moral code of conduct does not demand a journey towards a rebirth, you only have to follow some rules. What it gives you, instead, is the satisfaction of being able to judge all other people who do not adhere to these rules: homosexuals, divorcees, etc. ... all those categories of people we judge as irregular.

- 4) The reduction of the origin of man. Man, from son of God endowed with divine dignity (otherwise the designation of son of God has no meaning), has been reduced to son of original sin. One could say that this sin is so prolific that can be called originating sin: i.e. sin has become the principal driving force of history. If I asked: What is there in the belief of original sin, for those who belatedly developed this doctrine, which is not evangelical? There is contempt for man. When I listen to God, I feel there is great respect for the human creature. When I listen to the theologians of original sin, I find that there is contempt, as if anything human were something that has no value since the beginning, as if evil were

intrinsic to our human nature.

As a consequence, on one account, I am utterly guilty and already in sin even before I was born. My freedom is bad, not for what I do with it, but for what it is. Imagine you enter a hospital maternity ward and see all those newborn babies: they are all utterly wicked and utterly guilty. If we only based our judgement on our experience of life, we would never think that these babies are covered in sin, that each one of them constituted added evil to the world.

On another account, although utterly guilty, we are also utterly not responsible. If our nature is evil, the sins I commit are only a consequence of my nature and, therefore, I am not responsible. Furthermore, I do not feel responsible to change or to indemnify victims. At most, I go to confession, cleanse the vestment of my soul (sin intended as a blot), but, in the end, I am not responsible for changing anything.

Things being as they are, Christians have become the major defenders of the established order, those who say that the course of history cannot be changed, that the poor, wars and wickedness will always be with us because our nature is evil. We started by saying that we are sons of God, but we end up saying that our true father is the evil because evil is mirroring our identity. This has generated the true culture of sin according to which we are told that our mirror is not Jesus of Nazareth, not the sonship of God, but evil. You have, therefore, to self-sacrifice, repent and remember that you will die. When the actor Troisi was told: "Remember you will die", he replied: "Wait, I'll make a note". With this gag he poured ridicule on all this vision. In reality, acceptance of God has been broken. We have gone back to the Greek idea: God exists, but we are part of another condition. Ultimately even God cannot change it. He might be the judge that will use rigour or leniency, but he will be unable to change our human condition.

- 5) The fifth reduction is a consequence of the above. Christians have seen history as the jurisdiction of evil. If goodness exists, it is in the after world. This has given form to a political Christianity that is always ready to any compromise and deeply cynical. On this earth evil is a tool and we need to use it. If you talk to a self proclaimed Christian politician (a part few exceptions), he will say: "Faith ... yes, but politics is something different and it is part of a different logic made up of abuse of power, war, shrewdness and cynicism. In reality, this form of unfaithful and perverse Christianity transform the soul of a people into a desert. People do not believe any more in democracy, moral progress and responsibility towards history because they know that goodness does not exist here; it can only be found in the after world. History is the kingdom of evil, a wretched passage that we need to go through to reach goodness.
- 6) The reduction of gift to sacrifice. The gift is there, obviously. God gave us our lives, Christ has donated himself, he self-sacrificed for us. The language of giving is present in the Church language, but always presented with the meaning of sacrifice. The paradox is that the Church has gone against the letter of the Gospels. In Mathews 9:13 and 12:7 Jesus repeats the words pronounced by the prophet Hosea found in Hosea's 6:6: "Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice". This statement has been erased or suppressed. We have ended up with a tradition that says the exact opposite: "Sacrifice I want, not mercy".

We have built a hierarchy: at the top the consecrated, the ordained people such as the clergy; below them, those who are not so perfect or worthy, the secular people who marry; and so on. This encourages people to think that the more you practice self-denial the more you resemble Christ, because you sacrifice part of you for God. Therefore, Jesus' life itself has

become a means of exchange, the currency with which God could forgive us and allow to reach salvation, obviously, for those who deserve it.

In his book, *The City of God*, St Augustine rails sarcastically against those he scornfully calls the merciful. He says: those who believe that God mercifully loves all of us beyond the difference between good and bad, that he has got no classification tables, that he is interested in the rebirth of people, do not understand that in the concept of eternal life there is also necessarily the concept of eternal punishment. God is, therefore, the supreme judge for whom justice means retribution. Merits are rewarded, sins are punished. Given our concept of justice, this is obvious: we did not need a revelation from God! It is a pity that this idea of retribution is akin to revenge: revenge is also remunerative.

Divine justice, as described by Mathews in 5:20, is greater than human justice and calculations of merit, guilt, religiosity, conformity and obedience. God's justice is really scandalous because it puts at the centre of everything love, a love that goes beyond any calculation.

- 7) Another reduction has been the repudiation of the maternal experience that, nonetheless, was central in those that met Jesus. The fact that women's experience could be a non rationalistic opening, not centred on power and hierarchy, but open to divine fullness, has been considered immediately as inferior. This has entailed that anything womanly is impure, meaning it is not worthy of a relationship with God, and imperfect. God is a powerful Father, not a mother. In truth, however, if we have not experienced God's motherly love for us, even if we say that God is a father, we do not know what we are talking about: God as a father will remain a purely abstract concept.

Therefore, you cannot experience God as a Father if you do not feel his maternal tenderness. Naturally, paternal and maternal are human images. Maternal means all that helps you being born, the factor that is bringing you to life if your freedom wakes up, if you learn to love with the same attitude as a mother. Anything that was maternal and feminine, anything that takes you back to this experience has been completely removed with the usual double ethical logic: on one side by vilifying it, on the other side by praising it.

On one hand, we have the woman that leads you to sin, the woman is the first to be seduced by Satan's deceit; on the other hand, the Virgin Mary who, although a sublime figure in some ways, is ultimately detached from love. This happened because of the shift from mercy to justice. Mercy is not a small itch on injustice. We Italians would think it is a bit of clemency. Because of this, Jewish thinkers refute our concept of forgiveness: they think we take it as a reprieve, as if we were looking for some mitigating circumstances or excuses to forgive.

- 8) This leads us to another reduction: pardoning is not forgiving, looking for excuses or granting a reprieve. This would be the traditional way of seeing forgiveness as a remedial gesture in an exceptional moment, perhaps to be put into the hands of Mary, sure in the knowledge that, eventually, the retributive justice will take control by punishing sins up to the ultimate eternal sanction. The retributive justice, typical of the exchange, has taken the place of the justice of mercy. Why are justice and mercy the same in the Gospels? Because justice means to love someone for his dignity, for the fact that it is him and he embodies an infinite value that is so precious that there are no ways of making it more valuable. Love is not given for a reason: it is given because it is you and not for a quality that you have. Therefore, why is mercy just? We can understand it by comparing it with forgiveness. In forgiveness I have a double memory. I remember the evil you did to me (I cannot forget

about it otherwise there would be no reason for forgiveness ... what can I forgive you if I cannot remember?), but I also remember that you are my brother, I value you more than the memory of what wrong you did to me. Therefore, I do not identify you with evil: this is being open to forgiveness.

Mercy, instead, is more radical than forgiveness. With forgiveness, first I remind myself what has been done to me and then I go towards and embrace the perpetrator. In mercy I realise that the perpetrator, by doing something wrong to me, is actually damaging himself; by being destructive, he jumped into an auto-destructive spiral. I, therefore, feel compassion for him, I feel for him because I feel that the evil he commits is evil that he perpetrates on himself.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Gospel says: *'While he was still a long way off, his father saw him'* (Lk 15:20). That *a long way off* means that this son of his had not gone through a conversion. He was thinking in terms of an exchange: he was hoping that his father would treat him better than a pig and would no longer have to eat husks. He did not repent, he only made an utilitarian calculation. He was not sorry for the pain he inflicted on his father, he was only worried about himself. When his father saw him he said: *'We will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life'* (Lk 15:23-24). On one hand, mercy feels the pain of the evil one is doing to himself, on the other, feels also the joy that the other exists in spite of the evil he is doing and, therefore, embraces him and says: let us have a feast because this son can be born again.

Therefore, in mercy I rejoice because the other exists, the evil he is responsible for is not a blot that prevents me from rejoicing. This attitude is not a sugary sentimental feeling; happiness is at the heart of the mystery of love. If you want a definition of love, we can say: to love is to rejoice because the other exists. Happiness is not a goal to achieve in this life, while wondering whether it exists in the after-life. If we limit it to become a goal we misunderstand it and we become depressed and cynical. Happiness is something we already experience in our sentimental relationships: there might be illness, suffering and toil, but if you love someone you love him/her simply because s/he exists.

Therefore, in mercy you are happy even for the person that did wrong to you and your relationship with him/her will lead to an embrace. This is the kind of justice that is capable of defeating evil. Mercy is the power of love, it is stronger than evil and, when faced with evil, it replies with an embrace. If we do not see it as justice, mercy is only a word for sacred places, mentioned in pious homilies, a kind of residual feminine quality. But it has not become the real identity of love and we do not see it as the radical love of God or the love we offer to others. Unfortunately, centre stage has been given to retributive justice.

- 9) Consecrated life has been elevated to a superior category in comparison with other . If we accept sacrifice, then there must be a separate caste that administers sacrifices. If we take sacrifice away from religion then there is no need for a separate caste. Furthermore, how can the priest preserve such authority if even women can be priests ... If we look deep down, there is no reason to have a separate role if we set up the life of a community within the perspective of mercy, i.e., within the perspective of a new birth. It cannot be that someone has had a privileged birth and can become priest, while all the others can only be laymen. So much so that the human world has been split into three segments: clergy, men and women. Below these, then, there are animals and inanimate nature. This is a hierarchical structure that is alien to the communal spirit of the Gospels.

We have, therefore, a rigid structure where the clergy is like a separate world and it has been

charged with the tasks of preserving the orthodoxy and administering sacrifices. If we take orthodoxy and sacrifice away there is no longer the structure of a Church as we know it. For us, today, it would be very difficult because we do not have alternative references. If we take the original sin and sacrifice away, what is left for us? How can we still be Christian? To start with, we would be gazing into an empty space, something with no definite boundaries; we would not be able to devise an alternative, such is the grip that the present tradition has on us.

- 10) Centrality of the individual. This is often presented as a positive attitude. The religious, but warped, Christianity has made it its own. Who among politicians and economists would have the courage to question the centrality of the individual? It is a legacy of Christianity, even if few would formally endorse it. What is wrong with the centrality of the individual? We have separated the centrality of the individual from brotherly relationship. We have acclaimed the individuality of a person and forgotten his brotherly and, obviously, sororal ties with others. All that remains is the individual person, which means me.

We are very fond of the individual because we mean ourselves. However we have to understand that there is no fullness of the individual if there are no ties of universal fraternity and sorority. As this does not come easy to us, we need a cultural and spiritual change. We are continually reminded that we are coming out of this economical crisis, But they never say we are coming out of the crisis together. For them, that adverb “together” is a grammatical error because I come out of the crisis if I push someone else into it. We become more competitive if the Chinese and Indian people go backwards; The African continent has remained backward, so there is no problem there. We aim to gain from other people's regression.

We are unable to view humanity as a community. An extra terrestrial would say: these people are crazy. They are a family in which two of its components live in opulence and four in squalor and think that they can progress with this logic. In the Gospels we certainly have the individual, but he is viewed in his brotherly and sororal relationship. A person without his fraternal ties leads to individualism: such a person can do the worse deeds in the world, if he wants. Communism naively preached radical atheism: God does not exist. Capitalism is subtler. It does not say that God does not exist, on the contrary, it gives churches donations through its very bank foundations. However it attacks human dignity and instils in you the idea that money, exchange and competition are more important than people. This, therefore, is a practical and militant atheism, a radical nihilism.

All religions, not just Christianity, should have denounced this culture because otherwise they would end up becoming folklore, and purely decorative when facing the power of this mentality which has become widespread worldwide. Even today, the official social doctrine of the Church is to condemn the excesses of capitalism, but not capitalism itself as a inhuman and nihilist mentality. It is clear that excesses are always bad and to be condemned. However this does not mean much: the church should provide an evaluation of the system itself. In this, the Church has been short sighted because it has not seen the ties between people as important. Any system that breaks these ties is harmful and detrimental to man's well-being.

What should we say about a culture that proclaims that the normal relationship with others is competition? Just denounce the excesses of capitalism? Do not amass exaggerated profits? It is not a matter of percentages. It is its mentality that is totally wrong. Because we did not recognise the importance of brotherly ties we retreated towards a restricted idea of fraternity

that is suitable for friars, monks and life in monasteries. In the wider society, we have ignored a brotherly regime in favour of a regime that designates anybody but me as “other”. What does “other” mean for us? Other is the one who is worth less than me or comes after me. It is a waste of time to teach our children to respect others when others do not have a face. They always come after me. Between me and the other, I always win. And, especially, I am unable to see the other as a brother. The Gospels see the other as a brother or a sister, our mentality makes us see our brother or sister as the other. In this way, the principle of the Gospels has been completely turned upside down. I can, therefore, treat the other as I want: in any case, he is the other.

- 11) Nature has been reduced to simple matter that we must dominate. Nature is no longer the creation of which we are its voice, conscience and responsible custodian. What does the wrong theology do to nature? It assigns a pre-established order to it. Therefore it can say: this is against nature, or this is according to nature as if nature itself contained a moral code. This implies that we regress to before human freedom. If nature already tells us biologically what is good and what is evil, what need is there for freedom and responsibility? No need. It is, however, wrong to think that nature has a pre-programmed order. Nature is open. St Paul realised that, when he wrote: *'We are well aware that the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labour pains'* (Rm 8:22). He means that although there are elements of harmony and order in nature, it is, also, ambivalent because inside there is life, death, struggle, kindness and selflessness. We often say that nature is a struggle or a jungle because we cast our savagery onto it. In fact we say: homo homini lupus (man is wolf to man) which is a slur on wolves because they do not torture one another and do not have concentration camps. We say: mad cow because of the way we have reared it, and so on. In so doing, we cast our brutality on nature. On the other hand we conceive it with a pre-imposed order: e.g. we say homosexuality is against nature, etc. We do not realise that we should be responsible custodians of a process of harmonization that also engages natural life.

Whom should I ask to take upon himself the harmonious management of the natural world? A cherry tree? A kitten? A cloud? Or the human being? It must clearly be the human being that has the task of responsibly looking after the garden of creation. We, instead, supported by the wrong theology, modern spirit and a sense of omnipotence, go in the direction of dominating over nature and not towards harmonising it. Failing to appreciate human fraternity leads us to failing to appreciate our fraternity with all nature.

This is really why Francis of Assisi has been misunderstood. He recovered poverty and maternal feelings towards one another. He used to say to his brothers: be mothers to one another, be in communion with nature and put an end to all hierarchies. There were, certainly, those who wanted to tame him, to bring him back to the rules and the logic of power because they understood that he had really taken the Gospels seriously and had demolished all these stereotypes.

- 12) What happens to faith, then? Faith remains, but it becomes faith in religion. To have faith does not mean to believe in my head that there is a God somewhere: this is a mental attitude. Faith means existential commitment, i.e. you adhere to a relationship. Think of the most important relationship you have in your life with the person you love, a friend or your father or sister, the most important person in your life: the adhesion you have to that relationship is faith. There cannot be faith without love and without relationship. Putting faith love and relationship together means to adhere. The human being must give his life for something: be it cigarette, power, work, drugs, religion or whatever you like. No one can

hold on to life. To adhere is the content of faith, it is an act of love and dedication to which you commit all your life. However, faith has been perverted to be adhesion to a religious system, in which case it becomes invulnerable and overwhelming. We need to free ourselves from this encrustation, from all the religious sediments we are covered in. (Maybe Jesus of Nazareth had this in mind when he talked about a rebirth: he did not mean we need to free ourselves of a biological condition. Instead, we need to free ourselves from a religious condition: this is the meaning of rebirth). We should say, even if it is really hard, that faith, once freed from this religious captivity, is entrusting your life to a credible love like the one revealed by Jesus and, therefore, you are willing to change life.

If you think you have faith while you are not prepared to change life then you have no faith. If you go on this journey, you realise that faith is not an end to itself. Faith is not for faith itself, and it is not only the opposite of religion, a binary opposition: faith versus religion or religion versus faith. Some theologians would say that this is an abstract opposition because faith takes flesh in religion through its rites, practices, traditions, priests, etc. Without all this what kind of faith would it be? In fact the true incarnation of faith is in the brotherly and sororal love required by the Gospels. You do not have to build a religious system, but you need to build a form of life that leads to that kind of love and you need to translate it in your community, in your civil and economic life and in your family environment.

The incarnation of faith, therefore, is not religion, but love. This love, however, is incomprehensible and impossible to practise if we do not go towards a rebirth. And here is a third word to keep in mind after religion and faith: promised humanity. The new humanity is the humanity that has been reborn thanks to the maternal endeavour of this love. The promised land of the Old Testament is a metaphor for the promised humanity, a humanity that finally awakes to its divine status. Faith, therefore, in the rebirth of a new humanity capable to love in this way, and not faith in a new religious system. Otherwise we, even we progressive Catholics who speak like myself of the clerical tradition, remain religious. It is not enough to be a bit progressive, to be a bit critical of certain theology, to lean onto a more liberal theology. By doing just this, we remain in the same religious form without realising it, because, by criticising someone, we have the illusion of being advanced in our outlook. This is false. Only by going through a new birth in our relationships allows the emergence of the promised humanity. It is not just a hope that it will happen in future, it is a duty of gratitude. There have been examples of lives, communities, often young people or children that have been capable of loving in this way and we should acknowledge and remember them. Let us stop saying that man is bad by nature. You have forgotten about those who have loved like Jesus of Nazareth: they are the true tradition of the Church and it is the tradition of those who accept the novelty.

Therefore, if we acknowledge all this, we realise that we are born into religion. However, if this shell opens and we find the faith that leads us to a credible love, we go through a rebirth and a new humanity arises: it is what I called the promised humanity. It is clear that, while we are submerged in theological common places and we want to base our lives on them, our mental attitude and our culture become an obstacle and a barrier that prevents us to open up not only our minds but especially our hearts and see with serenity this curious promised humanity.

We know life as evil, death, depression, dejection; but is life only this? Or could life offer something brighter to us, something that we do not see because our minds and hearts are closed? If they are, for fear of losing something, we lose everything.

The journey towards a new life: the freedom of God's children.

So far we have only seen the negative elements tied up with a certain tradition, but we have not yet explored the theme of the freedom of God's children. However, we have briefly explained that first image from John's Gospel of the rebirth which risks to be missed or bypassed or, otherwise, remain an empty expression if we do not thoroughly understand this journey towards a new life.

What is the meaning and how can we make the experience of a rebirth? It is what Nicodemus asked Jesus (cf. Jn 3). It does not mean to go backwards or to remain child-like, which would be a misinterpretation. Let us answer this question starting from another perspective: what does it mean to think of yourself as a son? In our biological family environment, there are often problems arising from being in the condition of sons/daughters: this is normal and, generally, positive.

However think of a person that has been maltreated and abandoned by his/her father and you say: God is Father. That person will answer: thank you very much, I have one and that's more than enough! Therefore, I do not want to follow a similitude that might have links with some of our concrete experiences. For us, it is difficult to be sons, daughters, brothers or sisters within a biological family. Here we are talking about making the experience of being sons/daughters within Christianity. The first concrete element is perhaps being aware of a contradiction between a reality that we can describe as insufficient or 'confused' (as Aldo Capitini, Italian philosopher of non violence, called it) and a 'liberated' reality. The first is contradictory and painful. We have adapted to it and we can say that we are at the survival level. We do not say it is a tragic survival in extreme conditions, but, maybe, a survival as routine. We can often predict what we will be doing on Monday, Tuesday ... Friday evening, that in August we will take to the motorways and that on 20th December we will be shopping for Christmas presents. We are predictable and survival is intended as life as usual, routines that may have brought us some wounds, but we have also been able to build defences and we have become attached to. All this is, however, to allow life to go through and flow rapidly by repeating itself, always the same: we call it the usual life.

On the other hand, there is a liberated reality. This is the one that may have been prefigured in our hearts and one we can really call a true life. Danilo Dolci, an architect born in Trieste, said that at a certain point in his life, at the age of 26, he asked himself: where is my life? He realised that there was a divergence between what he was doing with his life and the real life he was after. In his memory, he went through the poorest parts of Italy he had lived in, while a child. His father was a railway worker and moved frequently through Italy. He remembered Sicily and decided to go and work there. He went there because he did not repress his desire for an authentic life, he did not settle down in routine, he was not happy with his usual life.

Perhaps, the discovery of sonship means, first of all, to be aware of the contradiction between what we normally are and what we feel we could be, between what we adapt to and what is imprinted in our dignity, in spite of the fact that we are told (even by contemporary philosophies) that we are mired in limitation. Philosophers use this word to say that we are born, we grow up, we become old (if all goes well), we get distressed about it and then we die. And this, however, is not the last word, because after this comes oblivion and after a few weeks nobody will remember you. This is the limitation we live in, caught between life and death.

In reality, I am conscious of my dignity, as it is myself. Paradoxically, it is something that makes me, but I cannot sell it or buy it. I can, however, betray it or realise it. It is something that makes me, but it is not in the form of a property. It is in the form of a responsibility which gives it a totally different meaning. Now, if I listen to my dignity or someone else's dignity, I realise that, death or no death, there is an infinite value in it. Therefore, when I look for the infinite, I do not need to look at mathematics or astronomy: the infinite is the value of every person, it is a living value, radical,

immeasurable, it cannot be turned into money and it is unquantifiable. This is the reason why the perspective of merit and guilt or merit and sin does not do justice to the dignity of a person. Even in the context of court justice, trial and punishment, a state is democratic when it safeguards the dignity of a person beyond the crime s/he has committed. You cannot treat these people as you like, torture them or hand out capital punishment. No, there is a limit dictated by their infinite and unmeasurable dignity.

Therefore, once we take stock of this contradiction, it is important that we take a different path in our life, a path that is not the repetition of the life we have been leading. Jesus calls us to a new life in which our relationship with reality is completely new. The blind can see, the deaf can hear, the dead rise, the dumb speak: these are all concrete images that describe the effects of a thorough change. It is still us with our frailties, but the conditions of our relationship with reality have changed.

The Spanish philosopher that I have mentioned this morning, Maria Zambrano, when she explains the revelation of man in the Gospels, says that the journey through life either results in going around in circles and losing the way, or in a journey towards a rebirth. She typifies three essential conditions that we can experience and suffer from.

1. The first condition is one that perhaps nobody can avoid or bypass; it is a phase in life (and it is fine if it is only a phase) that she calls delirium. She does not use this word with its psychiatric meaning but as an existential category. "Lira", in Latin, is the furrow that marks the boundaries between two fields. De-lirium, therefore, means going beyond the boundaries. Which boundaries? They are the boundaries of true life: we go beyond what should be our territory and lead a life that is not really for us. In one way, it could be thought as the opposite of a rebirth. It is equivalent to falsifying our life and entering a fictitious condition that we might wish for.

She thinks that the powerful emotion that pushes us into this trap is envy. Envy is one of the forms with which fear manifests itself. You are not afraid because you have nothing, but because you think you are nobody. You, therefore, envy not what another person has, but what he is. The other person becomes your role model: for a child it is one of the parents, for man it is God, for the one who has not succeeded the one who has. In this way, the other person is a painful model that seems to be the fulfilment of identity, while you are nothing and feel you are nobody. When you fall into the spiral of envy, you fear that you do not exist as a unique and precious person, you are not loved and you are wasting your life. Due to this fear you are tempted to become what you are not. It is the opposite of a true rebirth. An example is when man wants to become omnipotent and be like God, when he does not accept his condition of sonship.

One reason for not accepting God's sonship is not just because we feel it is too much (it is too much to be divine), but also to feel that it is too little: we want to be omnipotent, we want to be able to decide about life and death and we want to be in control of other people's destiny. When you become the director of somebody else's life you claim for yourself an omnipotent power over somebody else. When we have these feelings we are in the delirium, i.e. we are not on an authentic journey towards a rebirth, instead we are falsifying our existence.

According to Maria Zambrano, this is a mistake, it is a kind of exile that we choose for ourselves. It is, however, unavoidable because in life we cannot immediately access the authentic path. The beginning of a rebirth is when we get out of this delirium and accept our condition as sons which is neither too much nor too little. It is not too much for us to have a

divine origin, and it is not too little in the sense that we must not wish to suppress our relationship with God.

We could, therefore, say that reducing Christianity to a religion of power and conservation of established powers is a form of collective delirium. It means to have missed the Gospel's message, and to have put together a Christian identity that betrays its authentic message.

2. The second condition identified by Maria Zambrano could be called “renouncing a rebirth”. This happens when, in our life journey we come to a boundary. Already, being born physically is like stepping over the boundary of your mother's body and entering a new territory. It is not so strange that any boundary crossing brings some worries: after all I abandon a known land and go towards the unknown. When one realises that this crossing becomes too distressing or one feels he is not yet ready, there is a tendency to pull back. For example, having understood the Gospel message, I choose to remain in religion, to keep that environment that does not ask me to change life, but allows me to carry on life as usual, where religion honours us, gives us legitimacy and furnishes our lives with rites and traditions.

Renouncing a rebirth can be pathological if one pulls back from any possible opportunity to grow, from any space offering an authentic life because the fear of crossing the boundary is too big and real for me. It could be physiological because only a part of me is ready to cross over the boundary, but the whole of me is not ready yet.

You will remember the Biblical “Shema Israel” (Hear Israel) : *'You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength ...'* (Dt 6:4-9). That is, the whole of yourself. In the end it could be a safe instinct to say: I do not feel the whole of me is in this, I have not yet harmonised my whole being and readied myself for this choice. Therefore, quite rightly, I step back: it is a physiological act of self-defence. I am only hinting here, but there should be a whole conversation about the big issue of upbringing and being trained to do the big choices in life, those choices that permeates the whole of our lives. To become a monk, to get married, to choose a career (even admitting that it is possible) are all big choices in life. How do you approach these choices? There is a part of you, a projection, a dream, a feeling and your story: is it really a vocation? Normally, all the choices we make, to marry, to not marry, to leave, to stay, etc., find us unprepared. This is why a lot of people are afraid of choosing and delude themselves that by not making a choice they preserve their freedom: obviously that is the best way to waste it and hollow it out.

There is, therefore, the risk that a choice becomes yet again a sacrifice. This happens when you only follow a feeling or hear a call, but because, you are not ready to make a choice, you cut all else out. As a consequence you will carry regrets and will miss what was not part of your choice. A typical sign of a choice that did not involve the whole of you is mourning about the other ninety nine possible choices you have discarded. We are, normally, not ready to make true choices: we do not know what we do when we get married or become a monk. Who knows in advance what it means to become a parent? We will learn from life while going along. There are some ironies in life: it is the little child that teaches you how to be a parent, it is the immigrant that teaches you how to be a host. That means that you open yourself to life and life itself becomes your teacher. In life, when big choices are involved, those who want to be in control of everything will never be able to make a choice.

Therefore, if in making a choice you feel broken and torn apart, then it becomes a sacrifice and this sacrifice is not the right start to a new life. In fact, it smothers a new birth and, not

by chance, it brings the opposite of happiness. Where there is sacrifice there cannot be happiness understood as life shared with others. It is another thing when we make a choice wholeheartedly in response to a call to an authentic life even if we cannot initially fathom all that it involves.

Every authentic choice is the answer to a call that, somehow, has reached me and has spoken directly to me. It might be a spoken word, an event, a meeting, your answer to suffering or a dream: the important aspect of it is that you answer and make a choice. If you invent it, it means that your choice is a fake and tomorrow, possibly, you will look for something different. When your choice comes from the whole of yourself then you will not regret what you have rejected as alternative possible choices. What you have chosen will repay you for all other choices you have rejected. This is the real meaning of the popular expression: we live only once. You cannot lead five or ten lives: you have to go on your journey. The real problem is that you have to grow your capacity to orientate, answer and keep all you are together.

Summarising Maria Zambrano's thoughts so far, we have seen that she identified two conditions: the first is delirium, which means missing the road. In the case of Christianity, it means not realising that there is a rebirth, building an identity that bypasses the path leading to a new birth. It is exemplified by that sort of Christianity that starts as a religion and remains religious because it does not understand that religion is like an initial shell that must be broken. The Gospels would say that it is a seed that must die to bear fruit, it must accept to rot underground to produce fruit. Delirium in our lives means that we continue to move in circles without ever identifying our path. Renouncing a rebirth means we take a step backward either for pathological or physiological reasons. Therefore, what does it really mean to go through a rebirth for Maria Zambrano?

In her comment to the Gospel message, she says that a rebirth firstly means to accept our condition as sons and that this gift is neither too big nor too little. This means we are made of love which must be complementary to matter. We are in this world because of our parents' love and if we have grown and developed into what we are it is because someone took care and nurtured us in ever renewing waves of love. It is really in sonship that we realise that life does not come merely from life. It is not only a biological process. Therefore, if life comes from love then the opposite of life is not death, but lack of love. It is useful to consider a binary relationship: life-death. However, I would not fully understand it if, together with life-death, I did not also consider love-lack of love. Therefore, not a binary relationship, but a relationship between four aspects.

Death in itself is not the other half that completes life. Death is not a natural event or part of life. Life is a natural phenomenon, and has a biological structure. However, while it exists inside nature, it also exceeds it. It has an existential meaning that is not only biological, but, on the contrary, it asks us to confront ourselves with good, evil and love. In sonship, therefore, we discover that life exists and grows if there is love. If love is absent, not only because you do not give an ounce of love, but also because you do not receive an ounce of it, then you are dead even if you live till you are a hundred years old. You are dead even if biologically you are still alive. Instead there are people that, although biologically dead, are able, paradoxically, to give and receive love provided we maintain a relationship with them. If I give life-death a purely biological reading I will not understand it. I have to read it in terms of love or lack of it. Therefore, for Maria Zambrano, to be sons means to accept this identity. Note that this is not the identity that we build for ourselves.

What is the downside of the identity that we build for ourselves? It breaks relationships. In the name of this identity we (we Catholics, we clergy, we married people ...) break the universal ties, the deep communion at all levels, even beyond death the Gospel would say, that binds us all together. Think of the forward step taken by the second Vatican Council that proclaimed that the Church is God's people. Maybe we can even take a little step beyond this and say that God's people is the whole of humanity. It is not confined to the Catholics or to those who have been baptised, a narrow section of world's population, but it encompasses the entire creation.

Therefore, the identities we build (irony dictates that the most closed, hard and indestructible identities are the religious ones) break that network of communion that is, instead, universal. Identity becomes a poison and a cause of death. On the other hand, the sonship identity goes beyond these identities and encourages us to have an open mind that leads us to be welcoming and warming up, first of all, to God. We, then, become able to see him as Father, Mother and the loving fountain of life. We will not say any more: "Yes, it would be wonderful, but how can we do it?" If we ask ourselves this question it means we are still in a situation of division. It is not that the question is unimportant, but it shows that we have not gone through a rebirth yet.

Therefore, according to Maria Zambrano, we firstly have to recognise our condition of sons. However, secondly, this implies that we have brothers and sisters. The sonship condition is not exclusive of others or a privilege for some. Sonship is in relation with brotherhood and sisterhood with all other people.

3. The third condition that Maria Zambrano identifies is that, when we really come into life, when we, as human being (not as superhuman being gifted with special power, but only with our frailty), learn to keep a distance (Gandhi would say: non collaboration) between us and evil. We are really reborn when we manage to live without any collusion with evil. The old theory regarding the original sin postulated that this was beyond man: if our nature is evil, how can we keep a distance from evil? The freedom of God's sons does not mean we are immune from evil. Evil can hit us, but cannot win if we do not adhere to it. Evil means destruction, mendacity and blackmail.

Evil comes and tells you: I am good, I am religion, I am national security: all positive things. Afterwards, when you become part of its mechanism, obviously in good faith (most disasters are caused by people convinced of doing good), even if you later discover it is an evil mechanism, evil blackmails you and says: "You now cannot live in any other way". It takes your freedom away: today you cannot not compete, not use sharp methods, not structure your life in that way otherwise you are ruined. Which Christian can afford to ignore market mechanisms? Which Christian can afford to do politics according to non violence, justice and mercy?

Evil, therefore, becomes destruction of life, values and truth. It is falsehood because it tells you that what is bad is good and, in the end, it blackmails you. There is an entry in Kafka's diary which says: once you have adhered to it, evil does not expect any longer that you believe in it. That is, you realise that something is bad, but you continue anyway because you think that changing direction would lead to ruin and you will not be able to go forward any longer.

You probably have experienced for yourselves that understanding something in your mind does not lead to a change in life because we remain attached to our old ways. We, instead, should maintain a safe distance from evil. This means that, even if evil hits me, I will not

collaborate with it. On the contrary, I will answer with good deeds, forgiveness and justice. I will resist it with means that are different from those used by it. At this point, we can say that we need to overcome and confront fear. Evil exploits the fact that we think that we are ruined if we do not follow it. In reality, it is not only due to fear. A person, who was detained in Milan Bollate prison after he had been on the run abroad, said he felt relieved when he was captured. He added that it was not only fear that kept him on the wrong side of the law, but also all the attachments he had.

For us all, it is not only fear, but also attachment to something we are prepared to do anything for. We, therefore, need to consider what we are attached to that prevents us from changing direction in our lives. To get to the point we are free from evil is not superhuman, it is just about accepting a new way of living. Dealing with fear is certainly one aspect, but we also need to ascertain what we are attached to.

What are we attached to, or, put in a more concrete way, what do we think our needs are? The Gospels pay a lot of attention to people's deep seated needs such as freedom from hunger, thirst, illnesses. We need, therefore, to verify whether the system we have built and live in is adequate, or whether we live in a whitewashed tomb: i.e. we are locked in a life that is not proper life and does not allow us to be open and free.

Maria Zambrano says that it is by establishing a distance from evil and by making the experience of being free from (not attached to) evil that we experience a rebirth here on earth, without postponing it to the afterlife. When speaking of rebirth, we probably should think about the Gospel announcement of the resurrection that Christians, normally, have moved to the afterlife. They treat it as a kind of magic, a miracle that affected Jesus, a private affair between the Father who recompenses his Son who is raised from the dead for his good behaviour. If we thought that resurrection is also for us, we moved it to the afterlife and it is subject to acquiring merits: resurrection is, maybe, for those who deserve it, but not a new life open to all.

In the Gospels, the resurrection of Jesus is treated with sobriety, mostly just hinted at. It is during Jesus' life, in his preaching and deeds that scenes of resurrection mostly appear. We mentioned this morning: '*... your brother here was dead and has come to life*' (Lk 15:32). He was not talking about a biological death, but about another type of death. How is the experience of resurrection, while still alive, introduced by the Gospels? From the beatitudes, to the resurrection of the son of the widow of Naim; from the healing of Jairus's daughter, to Lazzaro's resurrection; from the relief derived from pardoning, to the forgiveness accorded to the sinful woman; i.e. from all those episodes in which life was restarted when it seemed fatally compromised. We can identify three constant elements:

1. A life-giving word that reaches you. Nothing magic: it is a call that looks for you and expects an answer from you.
2. If you listen to it you have to renounce fear. The feeling of fear is in us all: we cannot ignore it, but we need to take it into account. However, the moment comes when you become really free and renounce fear. To renounce does not mean to sacrifice, but to destroy, to kill something that is alive in a symbolic or real way. '*If your hand or your foot should be your downfall, cut it off and throw it away ... And if your eye should be your downfall, tear it out and throw it away*' (Mt18:8-9). It sounds like the apex of the logic of sacrifice, in fact it is the opposite. It means that if you are so attached to a small, marginal and oppressive thing that it chokes you, you have to cut yourself free from it, otherwise you sacrifice the whole of your life for it. An example could be your work and career: if you become too attached to them and sacrifice the whole of your life for them, when you retire you will feel as if you were dying.

Therefore, in order to be really free you have to learn the art of renouncing everything that oppresses you. The Hindu tradition would add here that what would have looked as an act of renunciation to start with, it was in fact the opposite: you had become attached to something that oppressed you. Healthy renunciation leads to freedom; sacrifice, instead means mortification. You trust the one that invited you to renounce your fears, so that you may go forth towards a new life. This is the boundary where there is freedom. It is when we remain attached to something that oppresses us, thinking that it is our protection and salvation, that we sacrifice our lives.

On the other hand, when we renounce this perverse attachment we find the freedom that makes us happy. Renunciation and sacrifice are not the same concept. The Greek stoics used to say: no one can oppress you if you do not allow it, if you in your inner self have not surrendered yourself to an oppressive mechanism. This is freedom. Summarising so far: a word has reached you and asked you to free yourself from fear and anything that oppresses you.

3. Change of heart. From a closed heart, a heart chocking from a life as usual, to a heart that opens itself because you free yourself from that emotive feeling of unworthiness, which is rooted in the culture of sin (deep down you feel you deserve nothing), and think that sacrifice is right because you bear the guilt of being alive. When you are convinced that you are nothing and you have done nothing, then this feeling of guilt becomes your mirror. On the other hand, when your heart opens itself, then you feel you are welcomed and loved for what you are.

Please note that there are two extreme views: on one hand, the old doctrine of the original sin says that man is basically only capable of evil doing; on the other hand the opposite doctrine of a man that is already the beneficiary of redemption, positive and architect of his history and of paradise on earth. This is an idealised image of man that in the end shows the same contempt for man because he is not valued for what he is, but, maybe, for what he will be or for what he should be: disgust for what man is, but admiration for the ideal man.

According to the Gospels, you become open hearted when you feel you are loved for what you are and not because you will convert and will strive to be better in the future. There is no perfectionism in Christianity. We do not need to assure God of a certain level of performance to deserve his love. A change of heart, therefore, is essential.

It is not a coincidence that these three elements (a call that reaches you, renouncing fear while listening to this call and the feeling of being loved) are summarised in Luke's Gospel with this sentence: "The sons of God are the sons of resurrection" (cf Lk 20:36). It means that by accepting this sonship you are begotten to a new life today, during your life. You do not have to project it in the future, after your death. It will come after death as well, but if there is no freedom from evil here and now, freedom from death is abstract and has no consistency because we need to be freed from evil while we are here.

Jesus of Nazareth is a person who accepted having that love shaping his life. It is not an emotional feeling, it is a conscious power that gently shapes your life and thoroughly renews it. He trusted that call. He once said: 'I am the resurrection, the way, the truth and the life'. He did not say this because he was megalomaniac, but because he wanted to say that this is a path that is open to each one of us. If you adhere to this form of life the experience of death, felt as destruction, becomes less and less traumatic because you are inside a form of life over which death has no power. And, to start with, you take on yourself the death and suffering of others. You avoid the egoistic idea of your own individual salvation, but feel responsible for the salvation of others. Therefore, when you

adhere to this, your own physical death takes on a different perspective.

What I have just said is not a form of comforting escapism: our personal experiences tell us that physical death does not have the power to erase the value of our existence. Our relationships of love persist in spite of physical death. In this way, our hearts are freed of the fears of living and dying I was talking about earlier on. Therefore, now, all the contents of sonship, i.e. the true freedom of God's sons and daughters, become something we can experience in our lives.

Finally, therefore, how can we translate all this in our daily life or in our daily way of being Church and a community of faith, considering that it is so easy to slip back into the religious mechanism where we represent certain values but cannot live by them? What are the essential elements that implement the values, as presented in the Gospels, in our daily lives?

I think the first principle that I would suggest is to have the courage to be faithful to happiness. The aspiration of every human being, written in our dignity, is to have a happy and successful life. No father, no mother, no God brings into this world a human being to consign him to suffering and death. The Bible says that there is never a day when God creates death. We can read in the Book of Wisdom: *'For God did not make Death, he takes no pleasure in destroying the living'* (Ws 1:13).

Therefore, faithfulness and happiness are not utopian aims. They mean that I accept to remain in an affective relationships and learn to love, where happiness means a shared good life and attachment to other people who become our reason for living. I am happy because others exist. Happiness, then, is not only a goal, but more importantly, an experience rooted in loving relationship. If happiness is not this, it is nothing and it will never be an aim.

At this level, faithfulness and happiness demand courage, demand that you do not give in to your fear of suffering, fear of taking losses or fear of being swamped by life: I think this courage is the main ingredient. When considering our normal state of unhappiness, I would call it a desire to change life. A person can fail to answer a call to a new life if he feels upright and already on the right path. One must feel a deep desire for change: this is probably generated by failure. When you realise that your wishes and projects did not come true you then see open spaces for a new life. The heartfelt desire for a true life is inside us all; the problem is listening to it and let yourself be guided by the energy that springs out of us.

The second suggestion is to understand that happiness does not come from good luck or privilege but from being aware of having made the right choices. We all met, on one hand, well off people who are not happy, on the other, people who suffer political pressure, disease, suffering of any kind and yet are happy. Happiness is not determined by events but by how we respond to events. Our salvation does not come from suffering but from how we react to life's negative events. Therefore, because happiness does not depend either on good luck or privilege, inside it there is real justice, i.e. not the retributive justice made up of merits and sins because this is unjust. In the Gospels, true justice is welcoming all without exclusions or barriers. We have a true community not when we have a house or a church, but when all mental and, often, religious barriers fall. Those barriers made you see your brother as an enemy. When they fall then you have a community.

This is why expressions such as “inside the Church” or “outside the Church” are foolish. The Church is not a space to fill, but a way of being. Being Church means having a loving attitude that does not contemplate barriers. When there are barriers, even if you live in Vatican City, you do not experience a community of love. We must consider justice as a welcoming and healing attitude. Man's justice hits the baddies when all goes well, the Gospel's justice does not hit anybody. It heals and restores all situations to a healthy condition: the blind can see, the deaf can hear. This is the justice of love that does not dish out blows or honours.

The third element that comes from the Gospel is that justice implies restitution, i.e. the Gospel

gives you back your qualities and dignity. You, who were covered in contempt, marginalised and treated as an object in need of assistance and help, have received your dignity back. God does not see in you an object of pity but a subject with dignity. Serving this kind of justice is fundamental for a community that wants to be Church in an open and brotherly way.

Let us conclude with a few observations. First of all I must underline that there is Church where there is an exodus from religion. If we meet in churches and monasteries to endlessly reaffirm the religious approach, we have not understood God's message. On the contrary, our coming together must help us to overcome that sort of religious infantilism that makes us think that our God asks a certain performance, obedience and sacrifice from us. Therefore coming together means to heal together from the religious disease, start an exodus and go beyond religion and not to shut ourselves inside a place.

Secondly we must open up to the novelty of the word. I have started by saying that if the word does not reach you, if you are too well shielded, you cannot invent a new life. Therefore we must try an integral reading of the Gospels so that we let the Gospels read ourselves. The first encounter with the Gospels is passive: it is the Gospel that reads you, not you the Gospel. In the past, we have often manipulated the Gospel to adapt it to our view of life. Think about the fact that we still say: "Offered in sacrifice for you". This is not in the Gospel and it is a gigantic manipulation of it.

We, therefore, know how to manipulate the text. We need, instead, to let the text read our lives and who we are. This is Christ as judgement on our lives: a liberating mirroring, not a judgement in a court of Law. Those who talk about God's universal judgement see it as one where the good people will be on one side and the bad ones on the other ... No! God's judgement is Jesus of Nazareth, that is liberation and a mirror view on where we are with our lives, not a judgement of condemnation. It tells you: "Get out of certain mechanisms, be aware that true life is different".

Once we let the Gospel read ourselves, we can read it and understand its message and, together with the Gospel, read our lives and history. As Christians, we can no longer support dictators, oppressive regimes, market economies ... This is no longer possible. We need to learn how to read the signs of the times to understand what we are responsible for.

You can no longer say: "I really do not understand politics or economy or sociology; I read the Gospel". No, if you read the Gospel you must also read the history you belong to. Therefore, we have to let ourselves be read by the word and read our lives in the light of the word, but also read our collective history. When seen in this light, choosing the Gospel is not an intellectual choice: I do not ask myself whether the Gospel is rational. We often feel the need to demonstrate to science or to the Enlightenment movement that the Gospel is rational. However this is not the point. The question to ask is: does the Gospel answer my desire for a true life, beyond the usual life? This is a personal quest in addition to a communal one.

In third place, we have to recognise that if human life still endures on planet Earth it is not by chance. The powers of concrete evils (I am not talking about supernatural powers), such as political or economic evils, would be enough to destroy human life on earth. If life persists it is because there is a love that is more powerful than evil. We need to become aware that what has been given to us does not come from nowhere, but from a love that does not abandon us and that this love is stronger than evil, otherwise we would have been swept away already.

It is not the fact that we are still around while many others have been swept away as victims of history that comforts us. This is no consolation, it is a source of responsibility. We cannot comfortably despair thinking that, while the world is in a ruinous state, we can still carry on with our lives. Those that are in desperate situations cannot afford to despair. They have to fight and find answers, another way of living. Here is where Christians can contribute by realising that life

continues thanks to an ever revitalising love.

And lastly we need to recognise that when we experience something good, either given or received, we realise that there is an unforeseen dynamic at play, but we must also realise that this is not something we invented or a technological product. When you experience something good you realise you are drawing from a bigger good. You are participating in a bigger good and, because of this, you pass it on to others. It is like swimming together because we are in the sea. Neither I nor you have invented the sea; having the illusion of inventing and controlling it would mean we are delirious.

Therefore, when experiencing something good we cannot but realise that there is a bigger source that asks us to pass it on to others and, if anything, it is our responsibility to intensify it. The logic of the Gospel is not so strange, it is not beautiful but impossible to follow. On the contrary, it talks directly to us about our lives and it shows us that the true future is not years away after our death, but besides us, walking with us day after day. We only need to open our hearts and minds and we will discover that a life suited to our dignity is inside us now.

To me, this seems to be the freedom of God's sons and daughters. We have to discover a way to make concrete our beliefs (otherwise they are not beliefs). If then we experience something that opens our eyes and we realise that the one we thought was asking us to sacrifice everything, in fact, does not want any sacrifice but want us free and to enjoy fullness of life, then we see that happiness is not egoistic, but attached to relationships and how we live these relationships with others.

Therefore, the freedom of God's sons and daughters is not a personal freedom, but a freedom shared with our brothers and sisters. If it is not shared it is not real.

Sin according to Moses and Jesus

(Jn 9:1-40)

fr Alberto Maggi

In the past few days, we have seen that there are different opinions about what constitutes a sin. We need to understand what sort of behaviour is really sinful and what is not, according to the Gospels. There are those who think that transgressing God's Law is sinful because it offends God. On the other hand, there are those, like Jesus, who think that offending man is sinful.

The Gospel passage where this conflict is examined more than anywhere else is John's Chapter nine. This is an extraordinary chapter. Let's hope to be able to dig out and appreciate all the richness of this passage where we witness the clash between two theological positions on sin: the first one advocated by the religious authorities who will arrive to declare that Jesus is a sinner, the other one supported by Jesus.

Yet again, I would like to remind you that the Gospels are not about history, but about theology. They were not written to report events, but to present truths. The Evangelist is not interested in the tale of a healing, a miracle carried out by Jesus, but in a deep theological teaching that is useful to the Christian communities of all times.

The context first: Jesus has just escaped an attempt on his life by the religious authorities in the temple of Jerusalem. Chapter eight ended with the words: '*At this they picked up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself and left the Temple*' (Jn 8:59). The temple is a place of death. The places that are considered sacred are totally immune from any intervention by the Holy Spirit and hostile to any divine action: from the synagogue of Nazareth where they tried to lynch him, to the temple of Jerusalem where they tried to stone him. Jesus, however, on coming away from the temple, goes and meets the very people that were banned from entering it: this is Jesus' attitude.

We have seen that there is a Law and there is a temple where this Law is taught. However, this is a place that was reserved to those who could and were willing to enter it according to certain conditions. The Law, as we have already seen, prevented many people from acceding to God or his temple. Jesus, therefore, changes tack: it is no longer necessary for people to walk up to the temple to meet God, but it is God that comes out of the temple and meets them. Who is Jesus meeting on his way out of the temple? Exactly those people who, for their condition or situation, could not enter the temple. Let us, now, read John's Chapter nine.

¹ ***As he went along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth.*** Jesus, on coming out of the temple, meets those people who could not accede to it for an anathema that dated back to king David: blind people could not enter the temple. At the time of Jesus, a blind person was not simply an invalid or handicapped person, but a person that had been cursed by God. Blindness was not considered a physical disablement, but a curse from God that was aggravated by the fact that prevented a person from studying the Law. John's characteristic is that doctrinal statements by Jesus are always demonstrated by episodes. In a previous Chapter Jesus had stated: '*I am the light of the world*' (Jn 8:12). Here Jesus shows in what way he is the light of the world: '*... he saw a man who had been blind from birth*'.

² ***His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should have been born blind?'*** Jesus' disciples have no doubts: as we have already seen, God punishes the sins of the

fathers on their sons and illnesses were considered retribution inflicted by God for certain sins. Here we have a man born blind and the disciples have no doubts that this is punishment for sin. They only query whether he was the one who sinned before being born or his parents. They are certain that this ailment is a consequence of sin. It is a typical characteristic of religion to say that all the sufferings that we endure during the course of our lives is meted out by God for our sins.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to free ourselves of this idea. While all is well we understand, but at the first reversal in life or at the first bereavement there is always someone who says: "What have I done to deserve this?" To his disciples' question Jesus answers categorically and peremptorily that there is no link between infirmity and sin. He rejected this connection for ever.

³ ***'Neither he nor his parents sinned,' Jesus answered, 'he was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him'.*** Jesus excludes any relationship between disease and sin. God does not punish man for his sins and, least of all, hands out diseases. Furthermore, he says to his disciples that exactly on this person, who was considered as cursed by God by religion and marginalised by society (we will soon see that this person was a beggar), God will manifest his creative action. The Evangelist takes the word "works" from the Book of Genesis where at the end of creation we read that *'God had completed the work he had been doing'* (Gn 2:2).

We have already said that Jesus does not answer the eternal question of why there is suffering. He only takes care of ill people. However, he lets us into his idea of evil and suffering. People in Israel believed that God had created a perfect world. There was no doubt about that. He had worked for six days and rested on the seventh day. Afterwards, man spoiled God's creation by introducing death, illnesses and sufferings. Jesus does not agree with this view. After the clash he had with the religious authorities on the occasion he cured the man at the Pool of Bethesda, he said: *'My Father still goes on working, and I am at work, too'* (Jn 5:17). According to Jesus, God's creation is not finished yet, but it is a work in progress and needs the cooperation of all those who adhere to him. Jesus re-interprets the account of Creation: there is no regret for an irretrievably lost paradise, but a prophecy of a paradise to be built. This is why Jesus does not observe the Sabbath. The fact that God rested on the seventh day was an indication that his creation was complete and perfect. Jesus, instead, thinks that God's creative action is still at work and it will be demonstrated by what he will be doing: in this man you will witness God's action at work. Then Jesus continues, but using the plural form:

⁴ ***'As long as day lasts we must carry out the work of the one who sent me ...'*** By using the plural, Jesus invites his disciples to take part in his activity. God's creative action is always about communicating life to man.

'... the night will soon be here when no one can work'. The work do be done with Jesus and like Jesus is always about freeing man from all that prevents him from accomplish his Father's project: every man has the possibility to become his son by practising a kind of love similar to his. Jesus then reiterates what he had said previously:

⁵ ***'As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world'***. For Jesus, it is this creative action that is the light of man kind. To make this readily understandable the Evangelist assigns to Jesus the same gestures used by God during creation. We all know how God created man: he took some mud, shaped it, and blew his spirit in it and the mud become alive. Well, Jesus executed the same gestures on the blind man.

⁶ ***Having said this, he spat on the ground, made a paste with the spittle, put this over the eyes of the blind man.*** (To understand this text properly we need to look at a more literal translation: *'When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle, and anointed the eyes of the*

blind man with the clay' [Translation taken from the ESV]). Jesus made some clay with his spittle and anointed the blind man's eyes with it. This is strange: one does not use clay to anoint! What does the Evangelist mean? Jesus continues God's work even on this person who did not know what light was. Jesus, therefore, repeats the Creator's gestures as described in the Book of Genesis: '*God shaped man from the clay of the ground and blew the breath of life in his nostrils, and the man became a living being*' (Gn 2:7). The prophet Isaiah says: '*O Lord, You are our Father, We are the clay, and You our potter*' (Is 64:8). But what about the use of the verb 'to anoint' in this context? This verb has the same root as Messiah: it means 'The anointed of God'. Therefore, the Evangelist models the blind man as the New Man (the use of mud as in the Genesis creation) anointed by the Spirit of the Messiah (Jesus): a man who has the Divine condition.

⁷ ***And said to him, 'Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam' (the name means 'one who has been sent')***. This pool had a syphon that intermittently pushed water into it. The Evangelist, by explaining the meaning of the the pool's name, applies it to Jesus: Jesus is the one who was sent and from whom flows not water, but the Spirit. It is, therefore, Jesus' invitation to give adherence to him. ***So he went off and washed and came back able to see.*** The blind man believes in Jesus' words, washes his eyes in the pool's water, symbol of the Spirit, and the light that was missing from the man's life was communicated to him not through a doctrine but through a life experience. The darkness vanished from his life when confronted with the revelation of Jesus' God. In front of Jesus, light of the world, the blind man meets the light and he can now see. This is the miracle: this man, born blind, is approached by Jesus who is the light of the world, he pledges his adherence to him and he starts to see. This man, who lived in darkness, is now flooded with light. This is the starting point. Now, through a frantic escalation, we will get to the heart of this page.

⁸ ***His neighbours and the people who used to see him before (for he was a beggar) said, 'Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?'*** Now John let us know that this man was a beggar and, therefore, depended on people's pity and handouts.

⁹ ***Some said, 'Yes, it is the same one.' Others said, 'No, but he looks just like him.'*** This is strange because the physical looks of a blind person does not change after he starts seeing. How is it possible, then, that some of his neighbours would not recognise him? His neighbours knew him well, yet some have doubts and say that he is not the person they knew, but someone looking like him.

Their perplexity stemmed not only from the fact that the Old Testament did not mention any instances of a man born blind acquiring his sight, but also from the profound interior change in a man who was blind and now looks a new person. What surprised them was not any changes in his physical looks, but his inner transformation. Subjugated people do not recognise free people. When a person finds freedom and life, he becomes a new person while externally appearing the same. This is what is perplexing the blind man's neighbours.

The doubts about the identity of the man born blind is a reflection of the novelty brought about by the Spirit: while he is still himself, he has become a new person. This is the difference between a man without freedom and a free man, a man without dignity and a man that found his self-respect again. He is the new man Paul writes about. And, sensationally, he declares: ***The man himself said, 'Yes, I am the one'*** (lit.: 'Yes, I am'). What the man born blind says is unheard of. "I am" is a formula that John uses only for Jesus every time that he lays claim to his divine condition. We all know the episode of Moses and the burning bush (cf. Ex 3:1-15). When Moses asked the voice coming from the burning bush who he was, the reply was: "I am". From that moment, "I am" became the name of God. Jesus often presented himself with the expression "I am" when stating his divine condition. However, no one else is introduced in such a way in the Gospels. Yet, the blind

man answered with the same expression used by Jesus. How could he dare! This is because he has been anointed by the Spirit who transforms people into children of God. Therefore, the project of the Creator, who wishes all people to become his children, is realised in a man that the religious authorities considered a sinner and society marginalised for being a beggar.

In this Gospel's prologue, the Evangelist wrote: *'To those who did accept him (Jesus), he gave the power to become children of God'* (Jn 1:12). This is the work of God on man: that he becomes his son in his image and likeness. Therefore, this blind man, considered cursed by God and marginalised by society, once he met Jesus, not only he became sighted, but also acquired divine condition.

Now, however, troubles start. While he was blind and a beggar, he was not a problem. Once he recovered his dignity and freedom, which is what religious authorities fear most, all hell broke loose. In no time, this poor guy, from having been the recipient of a miracle, became a defendant. And a trial started.

¹⁰ ***So they said to him, 'Then how is it that your eyes were opened?'*** This is what worried the religious authorities. They did not ask how he had become sighted, but how his eyes were opened. This expression appears seven times and, as we know, the number seven means “totality”. Jesus opened his eyes completely. In the prophetic Books, opening eyes does not mean becoming physically sighted, but liberated from oppression. When the prophets described the action of the future Messiah, they said that he will come to open the eyes of the blind, which was a metaphor for liberation from darkness, freedom from oppression.

Therefore, this is what worries and angers them. That a blind man becomes sighted is not a problem, but if people (the blind man represent the people of Israel) open their eyes then alarm bells start ringing in the ears of the religious authorities. They can dominate over and subjugate people while people are blind, but if people open their eyes their time is up. So they asked him for the first time: *'how is it that your eyes were opened?'*

¹¹ ***He answered, 'The man called Jesus ...'*** Here the Evangelist makes a series of theological statements: the blind man defines Jesus as *a man called Jesus*. We know that Jesus means “God saves”. *'... made a paste (lit.: clay)...'*. Making clay was the work of the Creator. John, therefore, insinuates that God is manifested in Jesus. *'... daubed my eyes with it and said to me, "Go off and wash at Siloam"; so I went, and when I washed I gained my sight'*.

¹² ***They asked, 'Where is he?'*** ***He answered, 'I don't know'***. Jesus did not cure him, did not free him to tie him to himself or to increase the number of his followers, but to make him a free man. Meeting Jesus has the effect of making people free. Then, it is up to them to decide whether to follow Jesus or otherwise. Jesus does not operate his prodigies contingent upon people choosing to follow him.

¹³ ***They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind.*** The verb “to bring” (Greek: αγω) means to bring someone against his own will. It will be the same verb used when, after capturing Jesus, they brought him to Caiaphas's house. Why do they take the formerly blind man to the Pharisees? Here we have a man born blind who becomes sighted: the normal reaction would be to rejoice and have a celebration. But there is something that does not quite fit. People who are subjugated by religion have lost the ability to think with their own head. They always need to consult the authorities who are thought to be superior. They are the ones who decide what is good and what is evil. The people who were present to the healing of the blind man are unable to evaluate what happened. Yet it was a good turn of events. This man was blind and now he can see: it must be good! Instead submission to religion impairs their ability to think and discern. John's denunciation is merciless. So they take him to the Pharisees, the people most compliant with the Law, to sound

their opinion and conform to it. However, what was the cause of their perplexity? The Evangelist finally reveals it in the next verse.

¹⁴ *It had been a Sabbath day when Jesus made the paste (lit.: clay) and opened the man's eyes ...*

As we have already seen, the commandment to respect the Sabbath was the most important one because even God observed it. Transgression of this commandment could comport a death penalty. Is it possible to kill a man just because he transgresses the Sabbath? Yes, it is! Have a look at a chilling episode told in the Book of Numbers, Chapter 15 verses 32-36. A man was caught collecting wood in the desert during the Exodus on a Sabbath. He was not stealing, just collecting wood. One collects wood to warm himself up or to cook some food, perfectly legitimate activities. He was captured and brought to Moses because it was a Sabbath day. Moses, after consulting Yahweh, emitted his sentence: this man has to be stoned. An so it was! Is it possible to kill a person just for collecting wood? Common sense would suggest that there is a great disproportion between the perceived transgression and the penalty. But for religious people this is perfectly acceptable. Why? Because this man transgressed God's Law. It was clear, therefore, that the commandment about the Sabbath was the most important one. Transgressing it was equivalent to transgressing the whole Law and entailed the death penalty.

This is why this man was brought to the Pharisees. There was a man that had been healed from his blindness and it happened on a Sabbath, when no work was allowed.

¹⁵ *... so when the Pharisees asked him how he had gained his sight, he said, 'He put a paste (lit.: clay) on my eyes, and I washed, and I can see.'* The healing of the man born blind alarms the Pharisees: they are used to judge everything with the rulebook in their hands. A normal person would have said: how wonderful, let us rejoice and thank God with prayers. Not the Pharisees. They, being so religious, are alarmed at the modality of this healing and all they want to know is the way the healing happened. They are only interested in finding out whether any transgression of rules or Laws took place in this healing.

¹⁶ *Then some of the Pharisees said, 'That man cannot be from God: he does not keep the Sabbath'.* This is the beauty of religion: it is always very clear and logical: there is a Law, those who observe it come from God, those who transgress it cannot come from God. The well-being of man is not a concern of theirs.

Let us remind us who the Pharisees were. The word "Pharisee" means "separate" because through the strict observance of all the precepts of the Law (there were 365 precepts to observe, 1521 actions that were prohibited on a Sabbath, all the rules about what was clean and unclean to follow, etc.) they set themselves apart from the rest of the people. They did that to be in communion with God. Well, the people who were considered nearest to God for their pious and religious life, when God manifested himself in their midst, not only they did not recognise him, but say : *'This man cannot be from God'*. And, in a sense, this was true: this man was not from their god because God, in the meantime, had become man to come nearer to his people.

They, in their pretence to climb towards God, set themselves apart from the rest of humanity, while God, in order to be nearer to his people, had climbed down towards them: absolute incompatibility. Be warned: certain religious practices, that set some people apart from others, make those people godless and unable to recognise the presence of God in them. These Pharisees were not dishonest people; they are pious, devout and very religious people . Their religion, though, made them blind to God's action, so much so that when God manifested himself, not only they did not recognise him, but sanctimoniously declared that this man was not from God because their God was only interested

in the observance of the Law and not in the well-being of people. For them God is the one from the Book of Numbers who sanctioned the death of a man because he gathered wood on a Sabbath. Therefore, their only guiding principle is the observance of the Law and not man's well-being. The Law abiding people are from God; those who transgress the Law cannot be from God. For the Pharisees, being in a good relationship with God depended unquestionably on the observance of the Law which was considered the line separating those who were welcomed by God from those who were not.

The Evangelist, therefore, denounces the fact that the Law is the barrier that hides the Creator's love for his creatures, the Father's love for his children. The Pharisees know all about what God can do and cannot do, and it is all very logical: God cannot go against his own Law. Their God observes the Sabbath. Can he transgress it? No! This man, therefore, who transgresses the Sabbath cannot be from God. Their reasoning was watertight. The Evangelist here puts us face to face with the problem of what is good and what is evil.

The Pharisees say: *'That man cannot be from God: he does not keep the Sabbath'* because for them being from God is solely in relation to the Law which is a written book, the most sacred of books. For Jesus, instead, being from God is in relation to man and his well-being. A book, according to Jesus, cannot know human realities, single cases or personal situations. That is why Christianity should not and must not be a religion of the book, but, instead, in place of a book, we should put man's well-being as a guiding line. There is an insurmountable conflict between observance of the Law and man's well-being. And the Evangelist warns us about it: in relation to the Law, the Pharisees declared that Jesus was not from God. Jesus, instead, contended that it is love towards man that shows whether someone is from God.

Others said, 'How can a sinner produce signs like this?' And there was division among them.

Jesus was dangerous because he succeeded in fracturing the compact front of the Pharisees. Some of them had no doubts: this man does not come from God. Others, though, were wandering: if he is a sinner, how can he produce such signs? And so there was division among them. Never, in the history of Israel, as reported in the Old Testament, was there a case in which a blind man became sighted. Therefore they pressed the man again:

¹⁷ ***So they spoke to the blind man again,*** ... This is strange: why do they still refer to the man as the blind man? He is no longer blind! The Evangelist wants to show us that the Pharisees do not see the novelty in this man. In reality, the blind ones are the Pharisees as they are made blind by religion and by their spirituality. This is the surprising teaching of this episode. They did not see that this man had become sighted because they had become blind. So they asked the blind man:

'What have you to say about him yourself, now that he has opened your eyes?' Please note the words that the Evangelist uses: *'he has opened your eyes'*. This worried them: his eyes had been opened. The man himself, though, has no doubt, while there are divisions among the Pharisees. How can a sinner produce such signs? The man who had been blind can see clearly:

The man answered, 'He is a prophet.' And, therefore, he is a man from God. The alarm is becoming more intense. They decide to take the case to a higher court. The Pharisees were spiritual guides of the people, but lay. They not only do not have a clear answer, but the situation had become more confused. As they were divided between themselves, they decided to go to the highest authorities.

¹⁸ ***However, the Jews ...*** In John's Gospel, the word "Jews" does not mean the people of Israel, but the religious authorities. Since the Pharisees were divided and could not solve the conundrum of

this man who was born blind but became sighted through the work carried out by Jesus on a Sabbath, the case was brought to the attention of the religious authorities. Please note how religion prevents people of any status to use their own head.

... would not believe that the man had been blind without first sending for the parents of the man who had gained his sight ... The highest authorities simply deny the evidence brought by the Pharisees who had witness the event. They cannot contemplate admitting that the transgression of the most important commandment, a commandment that they used to exercise control over people, could lead to something so beneficial happening to someone. Such admission would have caused their whole theological edifice to crash down. The authorities, therefore, in order to defend their doctrine, must deny the evidence.

Ultimately, for the religious authorities, defending their doctrine and their theology means defending themselves, their prestige and their interest which is the only god they really believe in and serve. They are willing to do anything to preserve their dominance. Let us always keep in mind that Jesus was not killed because this was God's will, but for the convenience of the priestly cast that held power. The high priest, Caiaphas, had already said to the other priests: *'You do not seem to have grasped the situation at all; you fail to see that it is to your advantage that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish'* (Jn 11:49-50). The religious priestly caste who held power was solely interested in maintaining their dominant position over the people of Israel and not in promoting truth and their people's well-being.

Therefore, when faced with a divine intervention, the man who had been born blind and, therefore, considered cursed by God since he could not read the sacred Scriptures, proclaims his belief that Jesus is a prophet. The keen readers of the Scriptures, instead, those who were tasked with showing God's will to the people proved to be blind. Why are they so reluctant to accept what happened? Because it goes against their doctrine and demolishes the theological castle that they had built. They, therefore, send for the man's parents.

¹⁹ **... asking them , ...** Imagine the scene: on one side there are the religious authorities wearing rich and distinctive dresses and tall headgears, on the other side the parents of a beggar and, therefore, a family of limited resources. It must have been intimidating for them. **... 'Is this man really the son of yours ... who you say was born blind?'** They accuse the parents of being dishonourable. "Are you sure this is your son who, you say, was born blind?" With this line of questioning they show that they consider the healing of the man as a crime his parents are responsible for. Unwilling to discard their doctrine, they deny the facts and insinuate it is all a scam. Since dogmas cannot be wrong, they contest the evidence. Therefore, in the clash between evidence and theological prejudice it is doctrine that have to come up as winner because God cannot go against the Law that he himself had established for the benefit of man. The well-being of man is an evil and offensive to God. They continue their grilling of the couple: ***If so, how is it that he is now able to see?'*** Maybe they were cheating and, maybe for money, they pretended that their son had been born blind.

²⁰ ***His parents answered, 'We know he is our son and we know he was born blind, ²¹ but how he can see, we don't know, nor who opened his eyes.*** They offload responsibility onto him. We will see why later on. ***Ask him. He is old enough: let him speak for himself.'*** The parents were intimidated and fearful. Just imagine how they must have felt facing those solemn and imposing figures. They reacted as if the fact that their son had become sighted were a crime of which they could be proved guilty: they offloaded responsibility onto their son saying he was of age and could

speak for himself. The expression “he is of age” indicates that this person had just passed the age of thirteen (age at which one was considered adult in those days), otherwise they would not have spoken like that. This man, therefore, was not a middle aged person, but just over thirteen.

²² ***His parents spoke like this out of fear of the Jews*** (as stated before, the Jews were the religious authorities), ***who had already agreed to ban from the synagogue anyone who should acknowledge Jesus as the Christ.*** There is anger amid the religious authorities. They have understood that Jesus was a man sent by God, they were not stupid after all, but he did not fit their criteria and he was a threat to them. They needed to get rid of him if they did not want to lose their prestige and power over their people. During Jesus trial in front of Pilate, they will arrive to commit the ultimate sin for religious people, that of apostasy, a technical term that mean a public rejection of God: '*We have no king except Caesar*' (Jn 19:15). They rejected the God who freed them from slavery and preferred the Roman emperor who oppressed them, just to preserve their power and status over the people. The Jews '*had already agreed to ban from the synagogue anyone who should acknowledge Jesus as the Christ*'. To be expelled from the synagogue did not just imply to be prevented from accessing a sacred place, which would not have been all that bad, but was equivalent to a civil death. One could not buy from, or sell to, those expelled from the synagogue. But, especially, one needed to keep a distance of four steps from those who had been expelled. This meant they became totally isolated from their communities. This is why the Evangelist writes: ²³ ***This was why his parents said, 'He is old enough; ask him.'***

As we have seen, therefore, while there was a split among the Pharisees about Jesus' action, the front of the religious authorities was compact: they had no doubts, because of the teaching they had received.

²⁴ ***So the Jews sent for the man again and said to him, 'Give glory to God! ...'*** '*To give glory to God*' is a formula used in the Old Testament that meant 'to admit' or 'to acknowledge', and it was a call to someone to be utterly sincere even if whatever he said would in the end prove to be to his detriment. So, the man that had been blind is summoned yet again to be questioned and encouraged (with that 'Give glory to God) to admit that it had been a bad thing for him to have become sighted at the hand of a sinner.

... We are satisfied that this man is a sinner'. Here the Evangelist suggest how bad the situation was: the religious authorities not only did not want to see, but also they wanted to prevent people from seeing. In doing so they commit the sin of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. It must be seen as a good thing when a man, who has been blind, becomes sighted and, at the same time, it must have been obvious that the healing must have happened only through God's intervention. One does not need great intelligence or a long and deep theological education to understand this. However, because admitting it would have fractured the doctrine from which their power was derived, they were left clutching at straws. Therefore, as the prophet Isaiah warned, these people say that evil is good and good is evil (cf. Is 5:20). This is the sin against the Holy Spirit. Only religious authorities can commit this sin, not us.

Religious authorities force their point of view on people and deny them any right to have an opinion. This man, albeit belatedly, had said: '*He is a prophet*', while the religious authorities say: '*We are satisfied that this man is a sinner*'. Their judgement, based on their doctrine, is more valid than this man's life experience. The arrogance they display here ('*We are satisfied...*' - religious authorities always display great certainty when they speak), in fact, hides deep ignorance: they do not know God and, therefore, they do not understand Jesus and his relationship with God.

Therefore, the man who had been blind had no alternative: allegiance to God and his Law demanded that he admitted that it would have been better for him to have remained blind, rather than having been healed at the hands of a sinner. He had his back to the wall. In the following verse we see John's irony and sense of humour.

²⁵ ***The man answered, 'Whether he is a sinner I don't know ...*** in other words, the man says: I do not know anything about theological issues, you are the expert on those ... - what the Evangelist says here is a bomb that shatters all doctrines, truths or dogmas.

... all I know is that I was blind and now I can see. ... and this is what counts for me! - This is a true earth shattering explosion. To the religious authorities who are sure Jesus is a sinner, the man replies that theology and doctrine are not his field of expertise, but his experience of being able to see is the most important event that could have happened to him. 'He might be a sinner, but now I can see and for me this is good'. The man answers with his own life experience to the religious authorities who are trying to make him adhere to their doctrine. Here there is a conflict between doctrine and man's life experience. Man has to stifle his life experience because a religious doctrine tells him: the way you are living is evil, is sinful. Does man has to stifle his experience and freedom in the name of a doctrine, even when his experience tells him that it is good to ignore or transgress that doctrine? This is a true earthquake because if what determine what is true is man's life experience, then bye bye doctrine! With these sort of teaching it is not surprising that Jesus got killed; rather, it is surprising that he survived for so long. The greatness of Jesus, of his good news and of the Gospel message is that he put man and his conscience at the centre. It is man's conscience that has precedence on choices and decisions, even when it is to the detriment of officially revealed doctrines, religious truths or any dogma. The Church had great difficulties in digesting this. Less than two hundred years ago, when the issue of freedom of conscience started to be raised, pope Gregory XVI wrote in his 1832 encyclical letter: 'That absurd and erroneous thought or, rather, delirium, according to which freedom of conscience should be allowed and guaranteed to everyone, is a most poisonous error'. Afterwards we will have the Second Vatican Council that, in its document about human dignity, will establish the supremacy of man's freedom of conscience. Nonetheless, all along the nineteenth century, popes were against freedom of conscience.

Therefore, let us not laugh about these Jews for trying to make the man say that it would have been better for him to remain blind rather than to have been healed by Jesus, whom they considered to be a sinner. Church people have done similar things many times over, until about two hundred years ago. This happened because religious authorities are used to consulting a text, considered sacred and, therefore, immutable, and accept laws that, because they were thought to come from God, were considered valid for ever, even if they were written thousands of years ago. Society may change, life may change, but the teachings in the 'sacred texts' are immutable and valid for ever and in these texts it is possible to find an answer to everything. Religious authorities never think that they might need to learn something new or modify some of their doctrines; they see all novelties as attacks to their teaching and certainties. The Jews, then, at the cost of denying the evidence, cannot accept the healing of the man born blind because it would dent the authority of their teaching. If someone will suffer because of this then, oh well, God will provide.

Therefore, the theological deliberations of the religious authorities are superior to man's life experiences, their judgement infallible and, for its very nature, immutable. It is people who have to bow to them. The man born blind blows their doctrine out of the water with only one sentence: I do not know whether he is a sinner or not (I'm not an expert in theology), all I know is that before I was unable to see and now I can see: for me it could not be better and I do not want to go back and

be blind again just to make you happy!

²⁶ **They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?'** Look at the religious authorities' anxiety: they are not worried about a blind man that becomes sighted ... they can cope with that. What really worries them is that there is someone around that opens people's eyes. This would spell the end for them. The first thing that people would do, once they open their eyes, would be to ask the authorities who gave them the right to direct people's lives, tell them what is sin and have control over them. This is what the authorities fear. *'How did he open your eyes?'* The man's obduracy in not admitting that it would have been better for him to be blind enrages the authorities who insist in quizzing him again. They had already asked him that question. But they are so worried. While people had their eyes closed, they could pontificate. The moment, however, they start seeing, it is the end for the authorities. When people start seeing the true face of the Father, of a life-loving God, of a God at the service of man, all those who want to dominate find that they have no authority to do so.

²⁷ **He replied ...** Here the Evangelist shows some humour. Imagine this young man, who is just over thirteen years of age, standing in front of people who were used to be always treated with utmost deference. He answered them with confidence and brazenness. *'... I have told you once and you wouldn't listen ...* This is normal: people of that level do not listen. However, a hierarchy that does not listen cannot expect to be listened to. To listen, one has to come down. In order to teach, one has to learn first. So he says: *'You wouldn't listen'. '... Why do you want to hear it all again? ...'* and his face brighten up *'... Do you want to become his disciples yourselves?'* Here the Evangelist is awesome in his denunciation of the authorities. They are deaf to people's problems. By being so detached from people, by living at a different level, what can they know of people's difficulties? Since they do not listen, they have nothing to say to people. With a lot of irony, the Evangelist compares and contrasts the knowledge of the religious authorities, which was based on books, with the man's knowledge based on his own experience of life. Therefore, the man, with no little cheek, added: *'Do you want to become his disciples yourselves?'* Had he never said it!

²⁸ **At this they hurled abuse at him...** When the authorities run out of arguments, they resort to violence: sometimes physical if they think they can get away with it, or otherwise verbal violence. So they said: ***'It is you who are his disciple, we are disciples of Moses ...'*** How arrogant! They would never be disciples of Jesus, a living person, but are happy to declare that they follow Moses, a person who had died several centuries before. They never pronounce the name of the living Jesus, whom they always refer to with contempt, but fill their mouths with the name of the dead man Moses. For them, to be called Jesus' disciples is an insult. As champions of a legislator God, they cannot understand the work of a creator God: a God that does not reveal himself in the Law or doctrine, but in works that communicate life. Here we have the conflict between the legislator God who reveals his will through the Law and the creator God who reveals himself through his work of continuous creation and, therefore, continuous source of life. The religious authorities are facing a choice: to learn from life and then all is clear – the man was unable to see, now he can see – or to keep reading the sacred Scriptures and then life becomes inexplicable. The result of the work of God is creation, which manifests itself in life. And life is always new and unpredictable. God's work does not repeat the past, but makes novelty blossom. The prophet Isaiah understood this well: *'No need to remember past events, no need to think about what was done before. Look, I am doing something new, now it emerges; can you not see it?'* (Is 43:18-19). The authorities, therefore, have a choice to make: to read God directly from life and accept the new and the unpredictable or to read life through the Law and the doctrine. And here is their choice:

²⁹ **'... we know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this man, we don't know where he comes from.'** *'This man ...'*: again not referring to Jesus by name shows their contempt for him. John, in his prologue, had contrasted Jesus and Moses when he wrote: *'The Law was given through Moses, grace and truth (Hebrew expression that means 'faithful love') have come through Jesus Christ'* (Jn 1:17). With Jesus, a new relationship with God starts, as we have seen during the past few days. The man of faith is no longer the one who obeys God by observing his commandments, but the one that resembles the Father by practising a kind of love similar to his. Well, the religious authorities seek refuge in their traditions just to reject Jesus' novelty. *'...We don't know where he comes from'* means they do not know him. Jesus had already told them in the previous chapter: *'You do not know me, nor do you know my Father; if you did know me, you would know my Father as well'* (Jn 8:19). How is it they do not know God? Anyone who does not know Jesus, who always works in favour of people, cannot know who the Father is: the God who always works in favour of people. Whoever does not have an attitude of mercy towards people cannot understand God.

Please note: the failure to know the Father will bring serious consequences. Further on in this Gospel, Jesus will say: *'They will expel you from the synagogues, and indeed the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is doing a holy service to God. They will do these things because they have never known either the Father or me'* (Jn16:2). But the God of the religious authorities is not Jesus' God but a murderous god. Unfortunately, during its history, the Church has sometimes behaved just like this. Jesus warns that all those who pride themselves for following the orthodoxy and believe to show their faithfulness to God by observing the Law, in reality do not know him. God does not manifest himself in the Law but in life and life is always in favour of man's well-being. Therefore, the advocates of the Law do not accepted God as Father. Many times, they use the Law as a cover for their own interests. Religious authorities are always the first in transgressing the Law if it is in their interest to do so. And Jesus pointed this out. In fact he had previously said to them: *'Did not Moses give you the Law? And yet not one of you keeps the Law'* (Jn 7:19). They invoked the Law only when it was to their advantage, otherwise they were the first ones not to keep it.

³⁰ ***The man replied, ...*** Note how this young man stood up to the authorities! ... ***'That is just what is so amazing! You don't know where he comes from and he has opened my eyes!'*** John's portrayal of the authorities is pitiless. Through the lips of this tremendous young man, who was considered ignorant and brutish because he could not read the Scriptures, the Evangelist shows how vacuous and heedless they were. Normal people and even some of the Pharisees could see that Jesus works came from God. They do not! There is a chasm between the religious authorities' doctrine and people's experience. People understand what the authorities will never do. People's common sense is more reliable than their doctrine. Therefore, what should guide our choices is common sense. Still today, there are some 'theological truths' that have no place either in heaven or on earth. They are irrational and illogic, yet they are imposed. People of common sense, though, see that they are founded on shallow and shaky ground. People always get it before the authorities.

Now, this young man will use the plural form and, therefore, speaks for all people. ³¹ ***We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but God does listen to people who are devout and do his will.*** This man, who they considered a sinner, reminded them of some of the most basic principles of the catechism. He showed that those who had the presumption of being people's teachers were, in fact, ignorant of the most basic concept of their religion: God does not listen to sinners, God listen to people who do his will.

³² ***Ever since the world began it is unheard of for anyone to open the eyes of someone born blind***

The fact that nobody had ever heard of a person born blind becoming sighted was proof that there must have been a divine intervention. Normal people understand this, the authorities do not. And the young man continues his catechism lesson.

If this man were not from God, he wouldn't have been able to do anything'. This is such a clear line of reasoning! People's common sense delivers a resounding knock-out to the religious authorities doctrine and pokes ridicule on their theological acrobatics. *'If this man were not from God, he wouldn't have been able to do anything'*: it is all so clear and logic that the authorities do not know how to answer back. They, therefore, turn to insults and violence.

³⁴ ***They retorted, 'Are you trying to teach us, and you a sinner through and through ever since you were born!'*** This is people's crime: teaching to the authorities. You will remember at the beginning of this story that Jesus' disciples had no doubt: someone had sinned. The only uncertainty was whether it was he or his parents. The authorities had no doubt as well: *'You a sinner through and through ever since you were born. How can you teach us?'* ***And they ejected him.*** They do not wish to learn anything from him. It is they who are the teachers and people have to listen to and obey them, not the other way round. And when they cannot come up with valid arguments, they turn first to verbal violence - *'You a sinner through and through ever since you were born'* – and then to institutional violence – *'They ejected him'*. I remind you that being ejected from the synagogue meant civil death and total isolation. Having run out of theological arguments to rebut the evidence of what had happened, they resorted to insults and reminded the young man that he had been cursed by God (blindness was considered a curse) and they condemned him to the margins of society.

Their violence, however, is hiding their fear of losing their prestige and power over people. People should go back and be blind so that they could always be incontestably right and in place of God. We have seen that what is important is man's life experience. Instead, for the religious authorities, what counts is their doctrine. This, unfortunately, is true even today. People are sometimes told that, to avoid living in sin, they have to give up living.

Well, it has not been too bad for the blind man to be expelled from the religious institution. In fact,

³⁵ ***Jesus heard they had ejected him, and when he found him he said to him, 'Do you believe in the Son of man?'*** ³⁶ ***'Sir,' the man replied, 'tell me who he is so that I may believe in him.'***

³⁷ ***Jesus said, 'You have seen him; he is speaking to you.'*** ³⁸ ***The man said, 'Lord, I believe,' and worshipped him.*** The man, who was expelled by religion, met with faith. Expelled by the God of the Temple and persecuted by the religious authorities, who were all intent in protecting their self-interest, he met the true God who manifested himself in Jesus and, therefore, he gives his adhesion to him. He does not discover something new, but now he can give a name to what he had experienced. His expulsion did not cause the feared ruin, but proved to be the providential occasion to meeting the Lord.

This is not the end though. Now Jesus passes his judgement on the perpetrators of the man's expulsion. ³⁹ ***Jesus said: It is for judgement that I have come into this world ...*** His judgement is not for the sinners but for the religious authorities who, in order to protect their interests, defiled the face of God. And the judgement? ... ***So that those without sight may see and those with sight may become blind.*** Jesus' judgement will shake all religious institutions. Those people who, like the man born blind, were never able to experience the light, will be able to experience it, thanks to the works of God. Those who should have known, but, instead, deceived and took advantage of people with their false doctrine, will remain blind. To understand what Jesus says, we need to remember that a

title the Pharisees craved for was that of 'Blind People's Guides'. In reality, Jesus says, they were the blind ones.

⁴⁰ Hearing this, some Pharisees who were present said to him, 'So we are blind, are we?' ⁴¹ Jesus replied: If you were blind, you would not be guilty, but since you say, 'We can see,' your guilt remains. Jesus demolishes the Pharisees expectations. The Pharisees showed total indifference towards the well-being of man together with their pretence to be other people's guides. Busying themselves with safeguarding God's Law made them guilty for their blindness.

In order to be able to see, one has to consider the well-being of man as the highest prize of one's life. Otherwise one cannot be a blind man's guide, but will be a blind guide. We know what happens to those who follow a blind guide: ruin. However, the religious authorities are blind, not only because they do not want to see, but also because they force falsehood on people as it were the truth: a God who abhors people's happiness. For Jesus, not only these people are not guides, but are blind, and blind by choice; they are dangerous because they try to make other people blind. They are to be avoided.

In the other Gospels, Jesus will say that they are like whitewashed tombs: behind the appearances of holiness there is rot. Not only they cannot be approached, but one has to run away from them. Therefore, these people who pose as defenders of the doctrine, supporters of the Law and flaunt their holiness not only are blind themselves, but they also try to blind others. They are dangerous and to be kept at a distance.

This Chapter of John Gospel is not just beautiful for its literary accomplishment, but also explosive for the theology expressed in it. John, with this episode, puts man's conscience above any doctrine or revealed truth. When there is a conflict between a doctrine, a truth or a dogma and your life experience, it is the latter that has precedence.

Now we can understand very well why Jesus was killed. In fact it is surprising that he managed to live for so long. Simply, whenever the atmosphere was getting too dangerous, he went on the run, not out of cowardice, but because he needed to form a group that could continue his work. When he thought this time had come, it was he who decided to go to Jerusalem and take on the religious authorities, knowing very well that that will cost him his life.

Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing

(Lk 23:34)

fr Alberto Maggi

We have spoken about sin and the novelty brought by Jesus. This morning we will see what man must do when he realises he is in sin. Better still we will see what God does when he meets a sinner. The Evangelist that explored this theme more than any other was Luke, but he has done it in such an extreme way that the Church found him uncomfortable.

There has been a deep change in the Church from the fourth century onwards. That was when the Christian faith stopped being persecuted and became an imposed faith. This happened simply because the Roman emperor chose to get baptised out of convenience and political expedience and certainly not out of firm belief or desire to follow Christ. Since then, the whole population of the empire was forced to get baptised. I always remember that episode when Charlemagne entered a village in France accompanied by the priest with the holy water for baptising and the executioner with his axe. Those who agreed to be baptised were led to the priest, the others to the executioner. Chronicles of the time attest that, on that day, eight hundred people had their heads chopped off. You can imagine how much enthusiasm for the Christian faith the people who preferred to keep their head on had. As a consequence, the Gospel started to become an obstacle in governing these Christians who did not feel any desire or conviction to become follower of Christ. They just felt they were compelled.

Therefore, it became necessary to resort to the weapon that religion has always used: fear. Not fear of men, because it is always possible to dodge human threats and avoid obeying people, but fear of God. That is how a sort of religious terrorism started and very severe conditions were imposed to obtain forgiveness. This however was in stark contrast with Jesus' teachings and especially with what Luke had written in his Gospel. Therefore, this Gospel was the one that most suffered in the transition from a persecuted to an imposed faith. The Church found itself with the embarrassment of a God not only good, but exclusively good, a merciful God that did not feel constrained by fixed rules or rigid doctrines and, above anything else, did not threaten punishment and torments.

Since then, therefore, this Gospel has been censured and watered down. Let us go, then, on a brief excursion of this Gospel because Luke is the Evangelist that more than any other describe the meeting of God with sinners from the beginning to the end, from the episode of the shepherds to the scandalous one of the crucified Jesus. Let us start from this last one.

We know that the words that Luke ascribes to the crucified Jesus are: **'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing'**. (Lk 23:34). This is so far from the image we would rather have had, and possibly, preferred, of God. Maybe, in our childish fantasies, we might have wondered why Jesus, who is God, did not strike with lightnings those who were hammering nails into his hands. But this God is not one who strikes sinners with lightnings. Instead his love is such that he does not pull back when facing hatred. Jesus' last words on the cross are words of forgiveness for his executioners.

We have already hinted that Jesus crucifixion was not a death penalty, but a terrible form of torture reserved to the dregs of society, to the worse criminals who had committed the most brutal

atrocities. The two people condemned with Jesus had, therefore, committed very grave crimes. People were not sentenced to crucifixion when convicted of 'normal crimes'. The cross was reserved for the worse criminals, revolutionaries and those that had, anyway, been cursed by God. Well, next to Jesus, there is someone else condemned to crucifixion. If he had been sentenced to crucifixion, it meant he had committed grave crimes. In spite of his guilt, this criminal understood about Jesus what both the High Priests and Jesus' own disciples failed to understand. He asked Jesus only one thing: to remember him when Jesus will be in his kingdom (cf. Lk 23:42). Jesus' answer was so scandalous and inconvenient that the episode has been swiftly watered down. Why? I repeat: this person was not innocent, he was a criminal who had committed grave crimes otherwise he would not have been sentenced to crucifixion. Jesus could have answered: "I will remember ...". Instead Jesus, in a sensational manner, said: ***'Today you will be with me in Paradise'*** (Lk 23:43).

Jesus' answer is scandalous because this statement calls into question the institution of the sacrament of Confession which asks for a conversion. However, why did Jesus mention Paradise? In the Gospels, he never spoke about Paradise. He taught about eternal life – eternal describing life's indestructible quality and not its duration – and about resurrection, but never about Paradise. The reason is that the Evangelist wants to contrast two opposing images of God: the God of the Old Testament that banned the sinners from Paradise, and the God of Jesus who is totally different. The sinner that religion had excluded from Paradise enters it first with Jesus because his God welcomes all. This undermines the religious institution from its foundations! *'Today you will be with me in Paradise'* ... I would dare saying ... a bit of purgatory ... a bit of penance, perhaps? Jesus could have said: 'I will remember you, but, first of all, do at least forty day penance because you caused a lot of harm. Cleanse yourself first and then you will merit Paradise!' Well, the Evangelist concludes his Gospel with this statement which is its central thread: God's love cannot be merited, it can only be accepted. This, however, enrages religious people of all times. They want to deserve God's love for all their efforts.

We have already said that God's love is not a prize to be won, but a gift. A prize is given as a reward for a particular effort or action carried out by a person; a gift, instead is only dependent on the good heart of the donor.

Therefore, this is the novelty brought by Jesus, a novelty that religious institution never managed to digest: God's love is not a prize to be won by people's efforts, but a gift for their needs. What were the merits of this man condemned to be crucified with Jesus? None, he was a criminal, a killer, perhaps. What chances did he have to end up in paradise? None, he was a brigand and for this he had been condemned. Well, God's love does not look at people's merits but at their needs. *'Today you will be with me in Paradise'*. This is unacceptable, intolerable! What then, of all that is said about people who have to confess their sins and repent in order to be pardoned? And this pardon is never fully granted, because it leaves something to be atoned for at the end of times. To be pardoned now is only a down payment, the full payment will come later ... think about the purgatory.

The Church will swiftly water down this episode by adding the caption: 'Jesus and the good thief'. Firstly we do not know whether he was a thief ... probably not, because thieves very rarely ended up on a cross; the cross was reserved for assassins. And, secondly, why good? We could, at most, say that this criminal has been clever. In any way, Jesus' reaction went much further than this offender had hoped for. He had asked: *'Remember me when you come into your kingdom'*. Jesus not only remembers him, but he leads him directly into his kingdom. It is really scandalous that the first person to go to paradise with Jesus is a criminal. Really intolerable. The Church, therefore, to make

him more palatable, invented this character of the good thief, gave him the name (baptised him?) of Dismas, venerated him as a saint, made him protector of thieves and brigands and created a feast day for him on the 25th March.

The Evangelist starts his Gospel in the same vein. For the religious authorities, there were three categories of people who were considered sinners without any hope, because they were already damned: tax collectors, also called publicans, prostitutes and shepherds. They thought that the reconstitution of kingdom of Israel was being delayed because of these people. When the Messiah would come, they said, he would physically rid Israel of these people.

The Gospel, instead, starts with an incredible scene: the angel of God – who is not a messenger sent by God, but God himself – approached one of these groups, the shepherds. The Evangelist writes: *'... and the glory of the Lord shone around them'* (Lk 2:9). When God meets sinners, what happens is exactly the opposite of what religion teaches. God does not humiliate, does not punish or reprimand sinners, but floods them with his light which is symbol of his love. The angel of the Lord could have said to those shepherds: if you repent, if you do penance and cleanse yourselves, you will meet the Lord. On the contrary, when God meets with sinners, he does without all these spiritual rites that religion has invented and insists upon, and simply envelops them with his light.

These shepherds, therefore, are submerged by the light of the Lord while the angels proclaiming the novelty brought about by Jesus: ***'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace for those he loves'*** (Lk 2:14). The visible manifestation of what is in the highest heaven is peace that most contributes to man's happiness. God manifests what he is, visibly, by offering peace and happiness to people he loves, i.e. all people. This was God's project. However, how was this possible when, from the fourth century onwards, the Church became so rigid and intransigent to recover the sphere of merits that Jesus had rejected? How was it possible to accept that God's love could envelope all humanity? It was possible by modifying the Gospel: *'those he loves'* became *'those of good will'*.

It is, therefore, clear: peace to those of good will, i.e. to those who deserve it. Now justice is restored ... to the detriment of the Gospel. Unfortunately, this translation has remained with us until the Second Vatican Council. Generations and generations have grown up with this erroneous and misleading translation. *Glory to God in the highest heavens and peace to those people who deserve it, the people of good will.* No! Luke had written the opposite: *peace on earth to people who he loves, and God loves all people.* Those shepherds were shocked by the novelty; they would have expected to be torched by God's ire, instead they found themselves being enveloped by the warmth of his love. And so they go to the place of Jesus' birth and then they tell people what had happened. All people were disconcerted because there was something that did not quite tally: is it not that God is supposed to detest sinners? Is he not supposed to punish and destroy them? Obviously, something does not tally. Furthermore, the ending of this story is thoroughly unsettling. In order to understand it properly, we need to refer to the culture of the time.

We have seen that God lives in the highest Heaven, distant from, and inaccessible to, man. At the time, this was their understanding of the world: there was the earth and, above it, the celestial vault where sun, moon and stars were pinned to. Above this heaven, there were a second and third heaven (paradise was understood to be here), followed by more heavens up to the seventh heaven that was thought to be God's abode. The rabbis, who liked precision, had worked out that between earth and the first heaven and between the heavens there was a distance corresponding to a five hundred year walk. Therefore, it would have taken 3500 years to reach God. Obviously, no man could ever reach him. God, high in the seventh heaven, was surrounded by seven angels whose task was to serve, laud and glorify him continuously.

Well, let us follow Luke's narration: ***And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as they had been told*** (Lk 2:20). Those people, who were considered the furthest ones from God and excluded by him, people that God had to punish for their behaviour and lifestyle, once they met God, found themselves being cast at the same level of God's angels, who were the most pure and spiritual beings and nearest to God. This is the shocking novelty of the Gospels. This is the good news that people, who have been humiliated by the Church and dishonoured by religion, are waiting for. Even those people who are thought to be the furthest from God, once they meet him, are enveloped by his love and not kept at a distance, no need of a purification path.

Question: How is it that the psalm says 'The Lord is my shepherd' if shepherds had such a bad reputation?

Answer: This used to cause rabbis great distress. We now understand that we need to distinguish two separate stages in the history of Israel. The first stage was when the people of Israel were a people of nomads living in the desert. There, the shepherd is very important: he is the one who guides, protects and saves the flock. The leaders of the people were called shepherds. The psalm you mentioned was conceived during this period, when shepherds were very important and even God was portrayed as a shepherd of the people of Israel. Later on, as we know from history, people settled down and an irreconcilable conflict started between farmers and shepherds because of opposite interests. Shepherds needed free pasture areas, farmers blocked the way to flocks because they would destroy their crops.

Therefore, at the beginning of Israel's history, shepherds were seen as positive figures, but subsequently, with the development of agriculture, they were seen with suspicion. Add to that the fact that when people settled down, villages and towns were formed, and synagogues, where the Scriptures were taught, were built. Shepherds, instead, lived outside these communities and could not go to the synagogue and participate to liturgical rites, communal prayers and learn the Scriptures. Over time, they were seen as pariahs. The Talmud teaches that, if you find a shepherd in a ditch, you should not bother to help him out because for him there is no hope of salvation. A father was prohibited from encouraging a son to become a shepherd.

Furthermore, shepherds lived with their animals, surrounded by excrements and, therefore, considered impure. As they did not get paid, they scraped a living by stealing. They all carried knives and settled their disputes between themselves, often violently, without accessing the courts. Because of this, people were not allowed to buy anything from a shepherd as it could be stolen goods. They were really considered the scum of society. Therefore, there were these two phases in the history of Israel.

Luke, with this episode, anticipates what will be Jesus' activity. But how could he arrive at the portrayal of a God-Love, considering the mentality of the time? Just let us remind ourselves how John the Baptist addressed the crowds: '***Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming retribution?***' (Mt 3:7), or, in a more figurative way: '***Even now the axe is being laid to the root of the trees, so that any tree failing to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire***' (Mt 3:10). This is the God preached by religion: a God that puts fear into people, punishes his children, make them suffer and condemns them to eternal perdition. It is a paradox that religious people, not only accept a God that put fear on people, but are very fond of such a god. On the contrary, Jesus' God is a Father that never condemns, but always forgives; never excludes anybody, but welcomes all. This God scandalises religious people.

How could Jesus, in an environment as the one described by John the Baptist who portrays God as full of ire and inclined to chop down any tree that does not bear fruit, speak of a God-love? Those people that John the Baptist predicted will be the victims of God's ire, the sinners, are the ones that Jesus calls to follow him. Some of the people following Jesus were publicans and prostitutes. Jesus distanced himself from the teachings of John the Baptist. It was in stark contrast with John's teaching that Jesus said that, if a tree does not bear fruit, he is not going to fell it, but, on the contrary, he is going to dig around it and manure it, so that it can be fruitful in the future (cf. Lk 13:6-9).

Jesus' work is always positive and this attracted great incomprehension like when he went into the synagogue of his home town, Nazareth. Why do they try to lynch him? Jesus did not go into a disreputable tavern full of criminals, but into a sacred place full, presumably, of religious and pious people. Yet those people tried to kill him. Why? Because Jesus spoke about God's universal love, a love that went beyond Israel's and religion's boundaries, a love that was offered to all people. Jesus not only spoke about salvation for pagans, but portrayed them as examples of faith (cf. Lk 4:16-30).

In another episode, the one about a pagan Roman centurion, Jesus said: ***'In truth I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found faith as great as this'*** (cf. Mt 8:5:13). This was cause of great perplexity for the people around Jesus, so much so that members of his family thought he was mad. Even John the Baptist, who had previously identified him as the Messiah, sent him an ultimatum that rather resembled an excommunication: ***'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?'*** (Mt 11:2). John must have thought: "He is behaving differently than I have imagined. I thought he would have an axe in his hand and he has none; I thought he would have brought justice and, instead, he eats with sinners".

Jesus answers with a list of actions, all life communicating actions, taken from the prophet Isaiah: ***'Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again, and the lame walk, those suffering from virulent skin-diseases are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor'*** (Mt 11:3-4). The good news proclaimed to the poor is a reference to what Jesus will do to put an end to their poverty. Luke, however, will present two further episodes that still scandalise people today.

A few years ago, after considering how Jesus forgave sinners, at a retreat for priests, some of them said: "We can understand this, but we cannot preach it to ordinary people because it reverses everything that went on so far". When Jesus meet sinners who live in situations from which they cannot escape and continue to live in those situations, what does he do?

Let us look at what the Evangelist Luke writes: he introduces two women linked together by the same Jesus' pronouncement: ***'Your faith has saved you; go in peace'*** (Lk 7:50, 8:48). However, these two women were seen by religion as sinners and unclean. One was a prostitute, the second suffering from a flow of blood. They were not allowed to approach people and touch them. When they touched Jesus they committed such a grave sacrilege that they could have been sentenced to death because they, on purpose, touched him and made him unclean. These two women are in a dead-end situation. Religion prohibited them approaching Jesus who, they felt, could help them. But if they did, they would commit a sacrilege. What did they do?

Well, Jesus during that dinner in Simon the Pharisee's house, neither reprimanded the prostitute nor jumped away from her when she started massaging his feet. It is a really disconcerting episode. And, in fact, Simon the Pharisee, who had invited Jesus, said: ***'If this man were a prophet, he would know who this woman is and what sort of person it is who is touching him and what a bad***

name she has' (Lk 7:39). He sees a sin in this woman's behaviour. Why did not Jesus keep this woman at a safe distance? And why did Jesus allow himself to be touched by the woman suffering from that nasty venereal disease that caused her to bleed for twelve years? He should have reacted: 'How did you dare touching me, the Son of God, you ...?' Now, according to religion, Jesus himself had become unclean.

Well, what religion considers a sacrilege, is an expression of faith for Jesus. If this is true, there is no religion any longer! Thanks, Jesus: religion is finished, but faith has started! This is a great message even for today. How many people do not dare to approach Jesus because they think they are in sin and if they approach him in this state of sin they commit a sacrilege? However, the day they dare to do it, they do not receive a reprimand from Jesus but a blessing. Therefore, to these two women who have committed a sacrilege, Jesus say: *'Your faith has saved you; go in peace'*.

What is a sacrilege in the eyes of religion, it is an expression of faith in Jesus' eyes. I hope we understand that this is sensational, especially in the case of the prostitute. Jesus does not say to her what he will later say to the adulterous woman: *'Go away, and from this moment sin no more'* (Jn 8:11). Jesus did not say to her: 'Your faith has saved you, now stop with you sinful life and repent'. No, Jesus only said: *'Your faith has saved you; go in peace'* without saddling her with the condition to change her sinful lifestyle. The Church has never been able to swallow this bitter pill. It always demanded people to repent and change their sinful ways as a condition for forgiveness. No conditions of any sort for the prostitute. We do not know whether, after leaving Jesus, she went and met a client of hers.

Therefore, since the Church was unable to swallow this because it was embarrassing for straight-laced people, pope Gregory the Great, who for many other aspects has been a very good pope, in the sixth century, launched a public relation operation that has been so effective that its results are still with us today. The Gospel prostitute was nameless. Anonymous characters in the Gospels are important because they represent all those people who are in the same situation as that character. It is, therefore, important not to assign names to these characters. Pope Gregory fused the story of Luke's prostitute with the story of Mary, Lazarus's sister, and that of Mary Magdalene into a single person. According to John's Gospel, Lazarus's sister had anointed Jesus' feet with perfume after her brother's resurrection: this was to signify that the perfume of life that Jesus had communicated to Lazarus was stronger than the stink of death – remember what Martha had said: 'Lord, by now he will smell as he has already been dead for days' (cf Jn 11: 39). Mary Magdalene, on the other hand, became a leader of the first Christian community; she was the one that announced Jesus' resurrection to his disciples. However, she was also the one that stood at the foot of the cross. Here we have it then: the prostitute who repented is Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross. With great relief of all goody-goodies. From an historical point of view, we do not know who this woman was and what she has done afterwards. Luke, though, leaves a tenuous clue because, soon after this episode, he writes that Jesus was followed, in his travels, by his disciples and also, inconceivably in those days, by a group of women. You can imagine the scandal that Jesus aroused in an environment where a rabbi would never go out of his house accompanied by his wife, where it was unthinkable that men and women walked together, where women were always hidden from view.

Yet, Jesus had also female disciples! In the culture of the time, only prostitutes lived outside a family environment. A woman had always to be kept under the control of her father, or husband, or, if need be, her son. A woman could not lead an independent life outside of a family, unless she was a prostitute. Those women following Jesus, therefore, did not enjoy great reputation. Mary Magdalene was the one who had been possessed by seven demons and was cured by Jesus. Joanna

was the wife of Herod's finance minister, Chuza. Imagine what a scandal: she had left her husband to follow a young prophet! There were several others and, therefore, we can not exclude that also this prostitute started following Jesus. But this is just a conjecture.

Following Luke's narrative we find that it leads to a situation where the devil become unemployed. As you might remember, the function of the devil was to travel through earth spying on people and then go back to heaven and accuse the sinners in order to punish them. However, with a God such as the Father who neither rewards the upright nor punishes the sinners, his function ceases to exist. That is why Jesus said: *'I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven'* (Lk 10:18). Throughout his Gospel Jesus shows with his behaviour and his teaching a totally different God than people had envisaged. But, especially, he changed the procedure that people needed to follow in order to obtain forgiveness.

The procedure was that, after sinning, man had to repent, offer sacrifices in atonement for his sins and in the end he would obtain God's forgiveness. The path to follow for a sinner was clear: repentance and conversion, the offer of a sacrifice and forgiveness. Jesus reverses this procedure: forgiveness is not at the end of the procedure, but comes first. God forgives first, there is no need of sacrifices and there might or might not be a conversion. In this way, Jesus links up with the prophet Hosea who had married a woman that from time to time ran away with her lovers and betrayed him. After the umpteenth time that she ran away and Hosea retraced her, he listed all her misdemeanours to her and was about to emit his sentence: an adulterous woman was to be stoned. But his love was stronger than his wounded honour. So, he offered her a new honeymoon and said to her: "From now on, you will call me 'My Husband' and no longer 'My Master'" (cf Ho 2:4-19). He understood why his wife was running away from him. Hosea offered his wife forgiveness without any guarantee. Jesus does the same.

God's forgiveness is given in advance, before man asks for it. For this reason I keep repeating that the most useless action a believer can take is that of asking God for forgiveness. It is a waste of time to ask God for forgiveness: we are already forgiven. You will never find in the Gospels an episode where Jesus invites a sinner to ask for God's forgiveness. Jesus, instead, insistently invites people to forgive one another. We are already forgiven by God, but this forgiveness becomes effective and operative when we forgive others.

Jesus explained all this with the parable of the prodigal son (cf 15:11-32). As we all know it, I will just summarise it. This son has only his self interest at heart. It is to pursue his self interest that he abandons his father, totally oblivious to the pain that he is causing to him. So much pain that his father lived on as if he had suffered a bereavement (*'... your brother was dead ...'*). It is, also, out of self interest that he comes back. After he debased himself to the point of becoming a swineherd without anything to eat, he does not think back to the pain he caused to his father: remorse was not one of his feeling. He coolly reasoned: 'Here I am dying of starvation, at home my father's house servants have plenty of food, what should I do? Simple, I go back home. According to the Law, I have forfeited my ranking as a son, but hopefully, he will accept me as one of his servant. At least I will have food and a lot of it'. This boy, therefore, does not go back because he is overcome by remorse, but because he is desperate for food.

To improve his chances of a favourable welcome he practises an act of contrition: "Father, I've sinned against heaven and earth. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired men". He clearly goes back out of self interest. His father, however, is not interested in the reason why his son has come back. He bowls him over with love. The Evangelist recounts the meeting between Father and son as if in slow motion. The father ignores all the norms of tradition.

He spots his son when he is still far away and he should have waited and perhaps grabbed a cudgel and make him pay for his behaviour. Instead, he, not only goes towards his son, but he runs towards him. This is unprecedented. In the Semitic world haste does not exist (I know this from experience!) and, were it to be exhibited in public, it would be considered bad manners. Running was dishonourable. A father would never run towards his son, at most it is the son that runs towards his father.

Well, the father runs because his desire to restore honour to his son is greater than any consideration for his own honour. This father dishonours himself to restore honour to his son. Therefore, he sees his son, runs towards him and flings his arms around him and ... I often say that in order to properly appreciate the Gospel we should put ourselves in the shoes of those people who heard it for the first time ... I would have imagined: he run towards him, flung his arms around him and throttled him. "Idiot, who made you do this? You were master in your house, look what you turned yourself into: a swineherd!" Why does the Evangelist writes that the father run towards his son, flung his arms around him and kissed him? Because he wants to reference the first great act of forgiveness that appears in the Bible when Esau forgave his brother for cheating him out of his inheritance (cf Gn 33:1-11).

Esau and Jacob were brothers, Esau was the elder one, but Jacob misled their old and blind father who, confusing a son for another, bestowed the inheritance to his younger son. Once he stole his brother's inheritance, he ran off as fast as he could. Now imagine Jacob when he saw Esau coming towards him with a group of four hundred horsemen. He must have thought that that was the end for him. The writer said the Esau started towards Jacob, met with his brother, through himself at his neck and kissed him. In the Jewish symbolism, a kiss was a sign of forgiveness and it showed the nobility of the elder brother who, in spite of having been cheated out of his inheritance, still preserved a great love for his brother. Therefore the father's kiss was an extraordinary sign of forgiveness, even before the youngster had a chance to recite his act of contrition, before he could show any repentance, before he could denounce his sins and before he could express any desire not to err again. The father forgives him before forgiveness is even asked for.

The son, however, is so surprised by this welcome that he starts his pre-prepared speech, nonetheless. His father does not even let him finish and issues two important orders to his servants, important because they show how he forgives him and how we should forgive. The first order may seem a bit strange: **'Quick! Bring out the best robe ...'**. It is not as it is sometimes interpreted: his clothes were worn out and filthy, having been a swineherd, and his father wished to have him changed into clean clothes; after all, having embraced him, he had become unclean as well. Here as well, Luke wants to make us understand the novelty brought by Jesus: it is not the son that makes his father unclean, it is the father that makes his son clean.

Why *'Bring out the best robe'*? In those days honours were awarded with expensive and precious robes. We all know the story of Joseph and the Pharaoh in the ancient Egypt (cf. Genesis, chapters 39-41). Joseph had been unjustly accused and sent to prison. When the error was discovered, the Pharaoh ordered his officials to give him a new robe that was the vestment of the kingdom's administrator. In this way the honour of a dishonoured man was re-established. Therefore, in this parable, what does the father do to his son who had dishonoured himself by sliding down the social ladder to the point of becoming a swineherd and had just returned home out of self interest? He gives him a greater honour than he had before. That is why he gave his servants a second order: **'Put a ring on his finger'**.

It may seem strange that, during such an emotive moment, the father might think of putting a ring

on his son's finger. How could he think of that, what has a ring to do with all this? One could understand the robe, because his son's clothes might have been frayed and dirty, but why has he thought of the ring? Is it possible, that in such an emotive situation, the father, who had considered his son coming back as a resurrection, could think of a piece of jewellery for his son. The ring, however, was not just an ornament. The ring in those days was the equivalent of our credit card. It was worn by the administrator of the household, it incorporated the seal of the family and was used in financial transactions. This son, therefore, who had demonstrated to be utterly incapable of administering his own money and undeserving of any trust, is given greater trust than he had before: he is made administrator of the whole household.

Is the father crazy? None of us would do anything similar. You put in the hands of this boy, who proved to have been totally inept in administering his inheritance, the administration of your family's estate. Tonight, when you are all asleep after the celebrations, he could run away again and in the morning you find yourself with nothing left. He is crazy, but God's love is crazy: he gives back to an untrustworthy person even more trust.

Finally, do you remember what the boy had planned to say in his act of contrition? *'Treat me as one of your hired men'*. Well, his father ordered: *'Put sandals on his feet'*. Why sandals? Because only masters worn sandals, servants went bare feet. With this gesture, therefore, the father signified that this boy was to be re-instated into the family as a son and not as a servant. He was returned to the dignity that he had before.

This is how God forgives: he bestows on you a greater honour than your dishonour, a greater trust than the trust that you forfeited and your dignity will be fully restored. Obviously, this grated with the religious people. Jesus, therefore, tells them another parable that clarified how God forgives.

Two people go to the temple (cf. Lk 18:9-14): one is a Pharisee, considered the closest to God; the other is a publican, considered the furthest from God. Publicans are considered unclean to the core, for them there is absolutely no hope of redemption, for ever branded with the mark of impurity. The Pharisee talked grandly in front of God: "I give you thanks, for this and for that ..." while eyeing with contempt the publican. On the other hand, the publican, not daring to raise his eyes, practically says: "Lord, I am aware of my wretched life, but, all the same, show me your mercy". The publican could not change his life, he could not go back in time: this was his life. Yet he says: "Show me your mercy". Well, God's love skips over the Pharisee's merits, but is irresistibly attracted by the needs of the sinner. Why? Because God does not bestow his love as a reward for acquired merits (see the Pharisee), but as a gift for people's needs. God, therefore, disregards the Pharisee's useless merits and becomes sensitive to the publican's needs. This is how our Lord loves.

How God Forgives

(Jn 8:2-11)

fr Alberto Maggi

We have seen that the line taken by Luke is that God's mercy has no barriers. We have also seen that this idea was badly tolerated by the Church from the third/fourth century onwards because it went against its hard line and severity in the penitential field. We have seen how Jesus turned upside down the classic spiritual tradition where the sinner had, firstly, to repent, then do penance and, finally, ask for forgiveness. With Jesus, instead, forgiveness is given in advance, and then, eventually, it was up to man to change attitude and behaviour.

This, however, was not readily accepted and Luke's Gospel has been censored and watered down wherever possible. But, more significantly, there were eleven verses that the early Christian communities considered scandalous and refused to accept. As you know, at the beginning every community had their own Gospel written by their founder. Then they started to exchange Gospels between communities, so that communities who had Matthew's Gospel would make a copy and send it to communities who had Luke's Gospel, and so on. However, when a community received Luke's Gospel, it would, as a norm, excise these eleven verses and remit them to the sender. Eventually, these verses, that originally were in Chapter 21 after verse 38 of Luke's Gospel, found a place in John's Gospel at the beginning of Chapter eight. If you omit these verses from John's Gospel, you realise that the narrative is more homogeneous and flows better. In the same way, if you add them to Luke's Gospel you realise that they are in their right context. These verses contain the episode of the adulterous woman. In a world and culture where adulterous women were stoned to death, Jesus forgiveness was considered utterly unacceptable. We have a proof of all this in one of St Augustine works, *De Coniugiis Adulterinis Libri Duo*, in which he sternly reprimanded those communities that refused to accept this episode of the Gospels:

“Some people of weak faith, or rather, enemies of the authentic faith, for fear of awarding their wives impunity of sinning, excise from their books the act of mercy that Jesus did towards the adulterous woman as if what he had said to her '*Go away, and from this moment sin no more*' were a licence to continue sinning”. Here we have it: the husbands in these communities were worried their wives would realise how easily Jesus forgave adulterous women. Let us, therefore, have a look at this page of John's Gospel that started to be read during the celebration of the Eucharist only in the fifth century and commented upon only from the ninth century. Chapter eight of Jon's Gospel:

² At daybreak he appeared in the Temple again; and as all the people came to him, he sat down and began to teach them. Jesus was in the temple, the place where Moses' Law was taught. Jesus proposition is to abandon the Law and accept God's love and people are fascinated by it. However, Scribes and Pharisees sprung the umpteenth trap for him and the time it is a perfect trap: they brought to him a woman caught committing adultery and they ask him: “Moses told us to stone these women; what do you say?” If Jesus says: “Let us be merciful”, he goes against Moses' Law and, therefore, he can be arrested for blasphemy. If instead he says: “Let us stone her as Moses commanded”, all this crowd that followed him because he always had words of mercy and compassion would remain disappointed and he would loose popularity. Once he had lost the support of the crowds, they would no longer be afraid of arresting him.

³ The Scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in the middle ... meanwhile, something is missing here ... caught

committing adultery ... where is the man? As you can see, religion always shows special consideration and leniency for men. The Law commanded to stone the adulterers, both men and women. Here the man has run away, they captured only the woman. In order to understand this episode, we need to go back to the matrimonial customs of the Jewish people; they are different from ours.

What we call matrimony happened in two separate stages in those days in Israel. We might call the first stage marriage and the second one wedding. There is an interval of one year between the two stages. During the first stage, the bridegroom would go to the house of the bride accompanied by his parents. Normally, this was the first time that he had seen the girl, as marriages were arranged by parents. The girl was evaluated for the payment of the dowry. At the end the boy would put his veil of prayer over the girl's head and said: "You are my wife". The girl would reply: "You are my husband". In accordance with the legislation, this happened when the boy was eighteen and the girl twelve years old. As the function of matrimony was solely to procreate, a twelve year old girl was not usually strong enough to give birth. Therefore, after the first stage, the man would go back home with his parents and the girl would continue to live in her parent's house. From the Law point of view, however, the two were fully married. A year later, the bride, all dressed up and accompanied by her girlfriends and family would go to her husband's house where there would be the wedding feast and the newly wed would start living together.

Adultery was punished with the death sentence. If it happened during the year the youngsters lived apart, the sentence would be carried out by stoning, afterwards by strangling. I am clarifying this because many times the adulterous woman of this episode is portrayed in paintings and films as a busty grown up woman when in fact she was a young girl that had not reached her teens yet. In those days, adultery, although difficult to commit, was quite common because marriages were arranged by families and not driven by love.

Here the woman has been caught committing adultery. However, what can a man do if he suspects that his wife is unfaithful, but has no proof of it? If you want to know, read Chapter five of the Book of Numbers – word of God. You will be horrified. They had devised a kind of "truth" machine. It worked like this. The man had to take his wife to a priest in the temple. The priest would tear the woman's scarf off her head, which was considered an insult that caused tremendous shame. He, then, would write all her husband's accusations and all the curses that an adulterer would incur on a piece of papyrus, tear the papyrus to pieces, sweep the floor of the temple and put everything he could collect, together with the torn piece of papyrus, into a jug of water and make the woman drink it. If she developed a tummy ache, she was guilty of adultery. You may laugh, but, in technical terms, it was called "the Ordeal" (God's proof or judgement), and thousands of women have been subjected to this ordeal.

⁴ ***they said to Jesus, 'Master (lit.: Teacher), this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, ...*** As usual, religious people are insincere: they call him Teacher, but they have no intention to learn from him. They are there to judge him and trick him. For them, Jesus is not a teacher, but a dangerous man that needs to be eliminated. And here is their trap:

⁵ ***and in the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind...*** (note their contempt. They do not care about this girl. She is only a tool that they are planning to use to eliminate Jesus). ***What have you got to say?***' How can Jesus reply? If he pleaded not to stone her, he would go against the Law; if he advocated to stone her, he would lose popularity. Whatever he said, he was in the temple and surrounded by Scribes and Pharisees ... But the Evangelist underlines the following:

⁶ ***They asked him this as a test, looking for an accusation to use against him.*** The verb “to test” is the same used for the devil's temptations in the desert. These zealous custodians of the Law, these fanatical expounders of orthodoxy, in reality, are agents of the devil because they harbour deadly intentions. In his first letter John writes: *'Whoever does not love, remains in death'* (1Jn 3:14).

But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger. We might be puzzled: why does not Jesus answer, but, instead, does he write with his finger on the ground? Most probably Jesus' action is a reference to the prophet Jeremiah who said: *'All who abandon you will be put to shame, those who turn from you will be registered in the underworld (lit. will have their names written in the earth)'* (Jr 17:13). These Scribes and Pharisees had come close to Jesus, but, effectively, they had turned away from him because the God of Jesus is love and whoever harbours feelings of hatred has abandoned him. Jesus' writing on the ground has overtones of a sentence for the girl's accusers.

⁷ ***As they persisted with their question, he straightened up and said, 'Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her.'*** As they insist, Jesus replied. And his answer has become a commonly used saying. However, even Jesus' reply must be understood in the context of the custom of the time. We think it is about picking up stones and hurling them at the girl. In fact, it not like that. Stoning was conducted according to a ritual: the person sentenced to stoning was taken near a pit about two meters deep and thrown backwards into it; the two accusers (at least, two witnesses were always needed to pass a death sentence), then, had to throw into the pit a stone that was so big that could only be carried by two people (about fifty kg). Normally, this was enough to kill the person at the bottom of the pit. Afterwards, all the other people present at the execution would continue to throw stones into the pit until it was full. Therefore, those who threw the first stone were the ones who, effectively, carried out the death sentence. So, what Jesus says is: *'Let the one among you who is guiltless carry out the sentence'*.

⁸ ***Then he bent down and continued writing on the ground.*** ⁹ ***When they heard this they went away one by one ...*** Luke is fantastic! Those who were as one in accusing the girl, the moment they are unmasked, they slip away one by one. ... ***beginning with the eldest, until the last one had gone and Jesus was left alone with the woman, who remained in the middle.*** The term “eldest” does not mean “oldest”. The Sanhedrin was made up of three groups of people: the high priests, the Scribes (the theologians) and the elders: it was the elders' responsibility to pronounce the sentence. Therefore, once the elders left, no sentence could be passed. And here is the stupendous ending to the story:

¹⁰ ***Jesus again straightened up and said, 'Woman, where are they?'*** Jesus addresses this person with great respect. While Scribes and Pharisees had said: *'Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind'*, Jesus shows great respect and addresses her with the word “woman”. This was the word used when addressing married women. ***'Has no one condemned you?'*** Jesus had said: *'Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her'*. Well, Jesus could have thrown the first stone: *'No one has condemned you? But I will do it'*. Or, at least, Jesus could have severely reprimanded her for her sin and assign some penance for her. Nothing of all this!

¹¹ ***'No one, sir,' she replied.*** The conclusion is disconcerting. Here is a show of love that scandalised Christian communities for centuries: ***'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus. 'Go away, and from this moment sin no more'***. Not a stone that crashes a person, but a word that, like bread, nourishes. This is the way God forgives.

Therefore, in a meeting between a sinner and God, God does not humiliate a person, does not keep tabs, does not act as an investigator. In this meeting, it is not the sinner who has to speak, but God. The sinner only listen. It is not, as we have been told in the past, that we have to list our mean deeds in a puerile and humiliating fashion. God knows what we do and, maybe, some actions we consider sins are not such in God's eyes. We have seen how, in the brief arc of the past fifty years, many actions once considered sinful are no longer so today. Who knows how many of the deeds that we consider sinful today will still be considered in such a way in fifty years time?

John writes in his letter: *'This will be the proof that we belong to the truth, and it will convince us in his presence, even if our own feelings condemn us, that God is greater than our feelings and knows all things* (1Jn 3:19-20). Therefore the meeting of a sinner with the Father should not consists in listing our failures; God already knows them. And, indeed, some deeds that we might consider sinful are not so in God's eyes. It is the meeting with God's word (in this case, the meeting of Jesus with this woman) that helps a person to get back on the right track and restart that project of fullness of life that God has assigned to every person. There is never humiliation and shame in this meeting, but always an enriching love that comes from God's word.