

Friday 5 September 2014

Third reflection: **‘we cannot stop speaking’ (Acts 1:22)**

After the Pentecost we find the long speech of Peter to the crowd (2:14-36), at the end of which we have the first conversions (the text says that ‘when the people heard this, they were deeply troubled’) and the question of the people: ‘what shall we do?’ (2:37).

This is an important question. Some say that it is questions that distinguish us from the animals. Because in posing them freedom and intelligence are used. An animal is programmed by instinct; such is not the case with man. To ask oneself ‘what shall I do?’, expresses, on the one hand, a *readiness to help* and, on the other, *trust*. These are two fundamental prerequisites in carrying out a transformation, a change in one’s life.

Luke is the evangelist of *Kérygma* and the whole of the third gospel is in its entirety *Kérygma*, the proclamation of salvation.

The first element of this proclaiming that I would like to highlight is the reference, always, to an *experienced situation*, one that is present.

Kérygma always starts from an experience that man is engaged in, it refers to a situation which we – both I who am speaking and the person who is listening to me – are experiencing.

This means that the proclaiming of the gospel is never a matter of abstract words. Christ has risen, we agree on that: what does that mean, what does it tell me? Christ freed us from our sins, what has that to do with my life?

Often the situation of a ‘connection’ with the life of the person who is listening is, in concrete terms, a living Christian community, a living experience of Christianity, an experience of welcoming the poor, of service to justice, of life, of fraternal forgiveness, of joy lived in a community.

A second element is the presence of *God in action*.

These concrete facts or (visible, lived, experienced) signs mean that *God has glorified his Son*.

What does this mean for the life of the person who is listening?

God holds in His hands your life, He has not abandoned you, God has you in mind, you are important for Him: we are called, that is to say, to ‘actualise’ this expression of *Kérygma* for us, for me personally.

The third element: this *God overturns appearances*: ‘you killed him by letting sinful men crucify him. But God raised him from death’ (Acts 2:23-24). The rejected one was ‘glorified’, he who seemed rejected by man was raised up. God overturned human appearances; He overturned the way men see things by glorifying Jesus.

Things seem to go in a certain way which generates diffidence, defeatism, a lack of confidence, and a sense of uselessness: we must not stop there, God can overturn the situation of our lives in the same way that He overturned the situation of, the human judgement on, the life of Jesus.

The fourth element: the very person of Jesus.

Jesus comes to us and warms our hearts through his way of speaking, his way of drawing near to us, in forms that are not humanly demonstrable but which can be intuited; and he changes our mentalities and lives.

Lastly, I would like to emphasise another aspect. **The presence of Jesus takes place through a gift that is a new vitality from within and this is the gift of the Spirit.**

Thus *Kérygma*, starting from the present situation of man, by placing in it the powerful action of God, presents this God who overturns human situations by raising Jesus, who is able to overturn our lives and place a vitality within us, a new power to work which is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Kérygma always ends with the reality of the Spirit who changes us from within. All of this is expressed in many ways: with the words ‘the Holy Spirit which the Father has promised us’, or with the phrase ‘the forgiveness of sins’.

It means, therefore, taking away from our lives everything that is a burden, that crushes us, that does not allow us to express our spontaneous vitality as we would like to. Taking away from our lives those obstacles, those burdens and those closures that do not allow us to be ourselves and which make us discontented.

Now, after reflecting on the structure of *Kérygma*, we can proceed to see how this is often ‘silenced’. And how it nonetheless **provides the strength and courage not to ‘stay silent’.**

At the beginning of our story, Peter is a man who has been prevented from speaking. They do this forcefully, making him keep quiet, interrupting him at the finest point, perhaps at the moment when he thought that he had made a breach in the hearts of his listeners.

How do Peter and John react to this disappointment? They are put in prison. They cannot even be joyful about the success of their work and their words. And yet Peter and John are not afraid.

Their frankness disorientates the authorities, as verse 13 relates: ‘The members of the Council were amazed to see how bold Peter and John were and to learn that they were ordinary men of no education. They realised then that they had been companions of Jesus’.

These people who put Peter and John on trial were not used to seeing faith, freedom of conscience, and the courage that comes from the action of the Spirit, as decisive in the lives of men.

For them only prestige, social background, the job one has, at the most education, counted.

They encountered difficulty in recognising other values, and when they were faced with action that obeyed different lines and dynamics they were disturbed, they did not know what to do.

The situation was overturned: it is they who began to fear the Apostles, to be afraid of them.

The power of the world (religious power, as in this case, as well) needs servants, slaves and people who have forgone their freedom and their consciences to be

exercised. This is power that functions through fear but which lasts exactly as long as the fear lasts of those who want to dominate.

In this episode what ‘having the strength of the Holy Spirit’ means emerges therefore in a clear way.

A frankness (and the clarification is useful) that never overflows into an arrogance of tone, into contempt for the other, into a taste for polemic for its own sake, into a wish for a clash at all costs, or into the trap of pride which leads to the other being prevented from speaking.

There is a strength of the spirit which keeps us *calm* even when our projects seem to fail, even when unjustly we are prevented from speaking, even when our enthusiasm of the outset seems to be braked, to be ‘stopped’ by a negative event, by an injustice, by a hurried or violent decision that seeks to injure it or eliminate it.

Peter and John, in prison, do not lose their balance, they do not hurriedly give the name of a defeat or shipwreck to that adventure of faith that they have just begun and which seems destined to fail.

They are not frightened by the fact that words have been temporarily ‘silenced’. Instead, they continue to believe that these words are greater than they are.

Often the moment when everything seems to be lost turns out to be a moment of grace. The Lord seems to like interrupted pathways, stories that are apparently broken and closed.

He has an ability, an inventiveness that is all His own, by which to put them back together again and launch them anew.

If at times we are led to think that we find ourselves in a disappointment that is too strong, an injustice that is too great, a trial that goes beyond our capacity to bear it, we need to believe that the Lord will unexpectedly open up a road beneath our steps.

The strength of the spirit is given to us so that we may learn the art of perseverance.