

Saturday 6 September 2014

Fifth Reflection: 'What must I do?' (*Acts 16: 6-34*)

'What must I do?' is the question that the jailer asks of Paul and Silas. And it is a question that we have already referred to because of the frequency with which it is to be found in the writings of Luke. This question is important because it places man in a singular situation: that of *readiness to help* and that of *trust*.

When a man is 'ready to help' it means that he places himself in a stance of welcoming. He is 'open', that is to say, to what is new. He does not preclude or obstruct.

Welcome requires a space of 'hospitality'. The capacity to make something and somebody 'come in' to one's life. It means 'cleaning out' everything that impedes this accessibility.

Trust, on the other hand, means 'abandonment', or 'allowing oneself to go', with the contents of expectation and hope.

Who is challenged, 'entrusts himself', puts 'himself in the hands of', and hands himself over.

Our question is truly the first step that opens up to the adventure of faith.

The first part of the passage, from verse 6 to verse 15, describes a part of the journey of Paul after the events and controversies of his first journey, and after the great assembly of the Council of Jerusalem. This is a journey that is animated by two tensions, both of which are very strong in the mind of the apostle.

The first is that of the *strengthening of ties*: Paul returns to visit the communities that he himself had founded.

He strengthens old friendships, comforts the believers in their difficulties, and personally inspects the conditions of 'his' churches.

We could say that this is a journey of consolation, rich in care, in tenderness, of concern for friends that he has never forgotten.

This is a journey that allows Paul not only to comfort but also to feel comforted: amidst a thousand difficulties and by no means a few mistakes the church is nonetheless growing, the number of faithful is increasing, and the word is being spread.

But Paul, during this second missionary journey, does not confine himself to revisiting churches that he already knows.

The attraction of new frontiers is always strong in him. It is not a question only of comforting but also of *expanding*. And if returning to visit his brethren is a reason for joy, equal joy comes from accepting the *challenges* of new meetings, **from moving about without any system of protection, something that Paul has chosen as his missionary style.**

Paul goes back to travelling and he does this passing through cities and churches that he himself had founded and built.

He goes backwards, he retraces his steps. And yet he does this with a different style.

For him, travelling roads that he already knows does not mean repeating without end the same acts, the same words, and the same speeches.

It means finding *new accents, new messages, new acts of evangelisation and of consolation*.

For this reason his second journey is not disappointing and it is not repetitive.

Paul **comes out of the temptation to repeat himself**, to propose anew the same schema, to rediscover at any cost the ‘magic’ of the first meeting.

To understand matters well, this is a temptation that we can often experience.

We look for and we ask for the new but we end up by repeating the same schemata, the same deeds, the same languages and the same things.

The second journey of Paul, therefore, is a *resumption* and not a repetition.

The apostle does not ask himself how he can retrieve the success or the magic of the previous meeting but, rather, how to comfort, to meet in a spirit of renewal, and produce the growth of, the communities that he finds on his path.

Paul never thinks, not even for a moment, of ‘closing’ or of ‘closing himself’.

He does not think of closing: he does not abandon to themselves, to flight, the communities that he has founded and which still need him.

For him, as well, the moment of farewell will arrive, the final salutation (in the afternoon we will hear the moved salutation of the elderly people of Ephesus at the port of Miletus, Acts 20), but for the moment it is too early for that.

Paul is in no hurry to end a relationship that he believes is important and which is decisive for both parties.

At the same time he does not think, not even for a moment, of closing himself, of wrapping himself up in this relationship, in order to allow himself to be kept by his first communities.

He knows that faithfulness to the Gospel takes him *beyond*, it asks of him a constant opening of horizons, and its asks of him the risk of leaving.

In this relationship of his, and in his capacity to overcome the temptation of closing and of closing himself, Paul becomes a teacher of relationships and teaches us to read every relationship of ours anew with new eyes.

What are the *closures* that I run the risk of living most frequently? Which relationships in my life need a little oxygen, a little breath? Which, instead, ask to be read anew with greater patience? Which need comfort, a supplement of attention and care?

In this ‘change of course’ that life demands, listening to the voice of the Spirit was of capital importance for Paul.

And this voice made itself heard above all through the failures and the sad experiences of doors that closed.

We are called with a great deal of serenity *to think through the failures* of our actions, to understand what there is behind a ‘no, behind a door that closes.

Our normal reaction is an angry and vindictive one, or one of frustration and depression.

Whatever the case, it is a sterile one. This can be communicated through a paradoxical question: what does a door that closes open for me?

The first Christian communities in Europe did not arise through complex pastoral analyses, and not even after complicated evangelising strategic actions.

They arose from simple weekday acts, from a prayer recited together with chance listeners.

They arose in a very humble and very poor context.

They arose from an assembly – as far as we are led to believe – of women on their own, and we well know how little women counted at the time of Paul, and perhaps also how much difficulty the ‘misogynous’ Paul had in relating to women.

The Church today, which is so habituated to great events, to vast and spectacular demonstrations, would also need to rediscover the pleasure and the importance of poor and weekday acts, *the wisdom of daily life, the strength of normality*.

We should also believe in relation to the ‘little world’ of our communities, of our convocations.

We are tempted to assess the efficacy of our action on the basis of the number of participants or the relevance to the mass media of an event.

Almost never do we look to the power of simple, repeated, obstinate deeds that invest in the long term rather than in the emotional impact of the moment.

This also applies to our personal, ordinary, lives.

We run the risk of imagining our spiritual growth as an ‘enlargement’ marked by dramatic events, by sudden conversions, and by overwhelming changes. Usually, as a rule, things are not like that.

Changes and shifts take place over time, nurtured by patience, by realities of weekdays, by poverty and by a simplicity of heart.

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Sixth reflection: ‘Taken by the Spirit’ (Acts 20:7-38)

I will end with two narrations of ‘farewell’. We can thus see this last reflection as a sort of ‘viaticum’. A further reserve of ‘food’ for our pathway.

The Christians of Troas are with Paul for the last time (verses 7-12). The apostle and his friends will never see each other again.

The pathos and the emotion that we find a little later, in the salutation to the elderly of Ephesus at the port of Miletus, are not described. With great discretion, however, Luke takes us into the heart of Paul and of this little community which has welcomed him and loved him.

The Christians of Troas, therefore, host Paul for a whole night because they know that he has to leave and that they will not see him again.

It is the moment to say farewell and there are very many things that must be asked and related; very many questions have to be asked; and very many problems have to be dealt with.

They do not want him to go but they know that they cannot hold him back; and fighting against sleep they give themselves a last night to listen to the word and celebrate the Eucharist, to be amongst brethren and comfort each other and strengthen each other in the faith.

First of all we feel that we are invited *to fully appreciate the people who are near to us*, their presence, and the richness of their hearts.

We do not know for how long the Lord will allow them to be near to us, we do not know if it will be possible to see them again, to hear them, to touch them...

And we would like to be able to say goodbye to them without too many regrets, without paralysing nostalgia, keeping in our hearts memories that are at times marked by a thread of melancholy but always and whatever the case a capital of gratitude.

It is a real sin, after time has passed, having to recognise that we did not understand or appreciate enough the presence of a religious brother who has passed away: in vain do we try to reconstruct the features of our relationships, the episodes that characterised our meetings, and the phrases that marked us and struck us.

We feel that a great deal escapes our labile memories, even when we can see the images again and hear again the words that sealed our friendship.

Nothing gives back the living presence, the being able to touch, the looking into eyes, and living the same feelings side by side.

In these circumstances it is a source of peace to know that one has enjoyed and experienced the presence of the other, used well the opportunities that were given to us be close to him without suffocating him, to love him without making him a slave.

This text teaches to us *the importance of learning to say farewell*.

The moment of farewell is always a very delicate one.

Not that of the final farewell, of our deaths, which is radically inaccessible to our calculations regarding the time and way in which it will take place.

We do not know if we will die calmly or defeated, in a bed or in the street, while asleep or after a long illness...

But before the final farewell there are many others.

We are called to leave our father and mother; we may change our city or country, ministry or school, to leave a community, to start all over again in a place which until a short time ago was completely unknown to us.

There are relationships in which we find ourselves glued; ones that are not free and not clear; relationships where the risk of using the other is high (or of allowing ourselves to be used knowingly by him).

There are others where we do not have the courage to acknowledge that the conditions of the starting point have changed: a relationship of help has become an affective one; spiritual accompanying has been transformed into a mutual unfruitful reflecting of each other: esteem and affection have collapsed in the worship of a

person; gratitude has been transformed into slavery, as though the whole of life was a debt that had to be paid...

The list is endless, as we well know.

To ask for the gift of clarity, in these circumstances, also means *asking for the grace of a farewell*, the strength to know how to ask to learn to journey anew.

Still today, in various circumstances, what Paul and the believers of Troas did is done by people: the sealing of an important moment with a celebration of the Eucharist.

But our commemorative celebrations of the Eucharist, or ones of the end of the year, or ones to say farewell to a religious brother who is leaving, in reality have little to do with at the level of time and form with the Eucharist that was celebrated in Troas.

In the narration of the Acts we encounter certain elements that are characteristic of the first Christians: **the room on the upper floor, listening to the word, the breaking of bread, the first day of the week.**

The *place*, like the dining room, of this room as well is 'raised'; it is not given to us to know if this location was a matter of chance but whatever the case it is significant: it emphasises the need for 'separation' and distance, for the quiet and silence which should accompany every celebration of the Eucharist.

The *time* at which the rite takes place is also interesting: at the end of a day of work with a great deal of tiredness.

But only the 'external' elements of this long *generation of graces* are described.

Luke also enables us to perceive the *feelings* of this community.

The first is the *wish to come together*.

If there is one thing that appears clearly in this passage from the Acts it is that this community wants to be together.

The second is the need *to get through the night*.

The large number of lamps which are in the location of the assembly do not only describe the 'furnishing' of the room that is hosting the believers of Troas. It also describes their wish to have in their hands a *small light* which will allow them to walk in the dark, to overcome their fears, and not to get lost in the darkness.

The story of these humble believers is the story of the whole Church, of all Christians. Called to be the 'light of the world', they for the most part experience the difficulties of their journey, the abysses of evil that are inside us and outside us, and the uncertainty of their journey.

Our task is *to keep many lights alight*, to make sure that there is oil for the lamps, to conserve a flame of good and goodness, of courage and patience, to continue to be a 'lantern that shines in a dark place'

At the centre of the whole of the nocturnal celebration of Troas are **the proclaiming of the word and the breaking of bread**. The rest is secondary.

The word is proclaimed with an abundance that we might be led to see as exaggerated. Paul never stops talking about it.

On the one hand there is a man who talks, Paul, but on the other there is a *word* that 'governs' this man, that 'moves him', we would say (forcing English grammar) that governs him, that has won him over.

It is the word itself that conserves, that augments and transforms the reality of those who allow themselves to be touched and won over by it.

Starting with these observations, Cardinal Martini offers some practical suggestions by which to enter the secret of the effective communication of the word, and sums them up in three passages.

The first: 'from the heart'. 'Christian preaching arises from interiority, from my deep conviction and also from my deep sufferings. To enter the heart we have to engage in a certain journey because it is not easy to fish in one's own interiority: a time of reflection is needed. Often Christian preaching gives the impression of a certain shallowness and repetitiveness, and people realise that things have not been suffered, endured, lived'.

The second: 'the heart'. 'There is a heart to every oral and written exposition that should have a meaning, a substance. If this does not exist, the preacher wanders, the phrases are out of line, placed one after the other without really understanding what the speaker wishes to communicate. One should search for the heart, try to find what the message is that I really want to communicate'.

The third: 'to the heart'. 'Communication should be able to reach what a person lives or would like to live in his interiority. Interiority in its broad meaning: moves towards God and also interior dismay, worries, shadows, fears. What matters is to reach this heart of the person. This is not a matter of transforming my language by camouflaging it or translating it, but, rather, of starting from my interiority which is identical, in its tribulations, sufferings, aspirations, to that of all men, without any exceptions'.