

## **“His face was set”**

**Luke 9: 51-56**

### ***Pre-Eucharist Reflection***

As He did when from the burning bush on Mount Horeb He called Moses, the exiled shepherd burnt from the desert (Ex 3: 1ff.), so also today the Lord God makes His Word heard from the heart of the Eucharist (Heb 12: 18-24).

In the light of that ultimate offering of Jesus, this word also unleashes its creative power for the Church today, unveiling a wise vision. Even today for this Assembly, even on this eve. At the same time, the Gospel “grows” as it enters every human conscience that welcomes it—even in these days of retreat now drawing to a close.

The Gospel proclaimed today in the Eucharistic celebration tells of a radical turning point: after the ministry in Galilee – the so-called “Galilean spring” – with controversial outcomes, Jesus makes the firm decision of the great journey to Jerusalem. Resoluteness is carved on his face, and at the same time, meek patience (Lk 9: 51-55), and the disciples are branded with it. We also open ourselves to that fire, to its light, most generative for the synodal journey.

We are at the beginning of the decisive journey, a paradigm for the journey

of all disciples, as already prophesied by the innumerable itineraries of the people of God tirelessly called to go out to return to the Lord (first reading). However, on this ancient path, with his decision as beloved and loving Son, Jesus inaugurates a style of journey, not a matter of course even today. He asks for tireless and profound listening.

Jesus decides to go up to the holy city, and His face becomes hard as stone. And Luke gives focal importance to this decision. The reference to the direction of the journey remains constantly in the background and structures the rich sequence of Jesus’ encounters and teachings. The time of a privileged, itinerant attention to the disciples begins. He decides the way, and sends His own people ahead (until now they followed Him, now they must go alone). And this section concerns us closely.

His is a face of stone. Not a muscular stiffening, much less autocratic rigidity, but a sign of the intensity of the passion that has bound Him to the Father since childhood. (Lk 2: 49) Like the starting leap of an athlete. And like a great athlete, Jesus concentrates on the path that now brings Him closer to the finish line (Heb 12: 1-3). Not without His people.

He suffered on the way to Jerusalem. In fact, that journey about which Jesus tried to instruct His disciples with the previous two announcements

of his passion (Lk 9:22. 43-45), imposes very strict conditions in order to reach the destination (24:36-52): the following of Jesus never – in any of its stages – is added to the life of before, but demands always to keep choosing anew the “other” way, in His footsteps.

Immediately the path encounters an obstacle, a village of Samaritans, not by chance; and immediately the obstacle highlights the persistent – yet fruitful – divergence between Jesus and the disciples.

“Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?” (9:54), say the more zealous James and John. It is their way of decisively committing themselves to the cause. But the hardness of Jesus’ face has a totally different meaning. Immediately, from the first stage, the lack of attunement between Jesus and the followers emerges (already earlier, at the second announcement of the passion, it had punctually occurred in terms of a block in communication: 9:44-45). They follow Him: but they do not know where He is going, and – as yet – they do not want what He wants. Yet they follow Him.

A textual variant here inserts words of fire from Jesus for James and John: “You do not know what spirit you are of. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (as He will say in Jericho, in Lk 19:10). At the moment they, struggling with their

own thoughts, do not understand. Yet they follow Him. Until the Spirit, with the breath of the Risen One, enters them (Jn 20:22).

The quality of the conversion of mentality that following Jesus demands – announced by His face turned towards Jerusalem – is radical, never taken for granted, not even among His closest collaborators. It is an unstoppable process, between events, driven by the Spirit. On the way, there are losses that one cannot get caught up in. A process not devoid of pitfalls and misunderstandings, which the synodal path is also familiar with. This is also the meaning of the synod prayer “Adsumus”, is it not? There the Church recognizes herself to be in a state of permanent conversion.

In Luke’s narrative, the encounter with the Samaritans sets the tone, and a thousand resonances radiate throughout the history of the Christian communities, from the earliest times to the present day. Samaria, the place of surprising encounters. At first, on the testimony of the Samaritan woman, she accepted Jesus (Jn 4:1-30.41-42). Now she rejects Him. And it is precisely from this rejection (juxtaposed to the rejection of His own in Galilee) that Jesus understands what form His path to Jerusalem must take. A sort of reversal of messianic style. Really a reversal? Or the fulfilment of ancient prophecy? Let us think of the hardening of the face of Jere-

miah, of Ezekiel. Surprisingly, it will happen –after the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1) that Samaria will be the first stage of the outgoing apostolic proclamation (8:4-8). It is the style of the Gospel, which Jesus from the beginning tried to suggest to His own, and which He wants to imprint today, the face marked, sculpted, by the places of the heart, by rejections and the passion of love.

Thus begins here, in Lk 9:51, an adventure of faith whose style – celebrated in the Eucharist and internalized – touches this synodal journey of ours to the very depths. The human and Christian quality of ecclesial belonging today – as already in the beginning (1 Jn 1:1; 2:24; 3:11) – calls for a decisive resizing, a radical rethinking of our approach in the mission. Freeing our gaze from all impatience and business activism, from so many demands, from all resentment and spirit of retaliation.

A firm face is not to be confused with the determination to proceed at any cost in one's own project, but is inspired by the passion of desire that draws one towards the fulfilment of the Father's will. Which is unconditional mercy.

“This is the will of Him who sent Me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given Me” (Jn 6:39).

The hardness of that face is carved with humility and meekness of heart, which the continuation of the journey will fully reveal. With no stone on which to lay one's head, with no safe exit.

What unites us synodally here and today is – can we say it? – our gaze fixed on Jesus, the human face of the faithful God, the foundation stone and gushing spring in the desert. A gaze that reconfigures the vision of others, of history, of the world. A steadfast hope.

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