

“The least of all...”

(Mark 4: 30)

Narrating parables rather than issuing proclamations

1. Foreword

“What are these conversations you are making among yourselves on the way?”
(Lk 24:17)

Reaching the two disciples conversing with each other, Jesus, starting with the question (“what are these conversations?”) and the consequent pause over the Scriptures, and the breaking of the bread, turns their walk into a “U”. Our discourses are now at a decisive point, a certain conversion has taken place, we have to account for it. The Word of God, heard and combined with the events around us, presses in and gives us light. The Church, the believing conscience of each member, is shaken today. While wars rage around us, we have enjoyed the spiritual conversation, listened to so many octants, so many imperatives, attempts to read reality, complex, disturbing...: what can we say? It is, again, time to lift our gaze to the inspiring light of the Gospel. The Gospel does not produce solutions but reveals the dynamism, always surprising, of the Spirit, which gives fulfilment.

Well, from the place where I had the grace to be, on the margins of the Synod and in prayer, with Father Timothy we were drawn to this Gospel. The two little parables in ch. 4 of Mark, the identity card of the Kingdom, are one of the sacred places of the revelation of Jesus’ own, and of how Jesus sees his church as the servant of the Kingdom—light is shed on the synod’s journey as well.

2. The question is intriguing

“To what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we make use of?”

Jesus begins with a double question. As if to engage his interlocutor – today, the question bounces around this holy assembly – in his quest to propose to God’s people, and beyond, a summary of the journey.

Jesus has already told so many parables, “the beauty of his revelation is that he spoke to us of God and man together, one in the other. This is why “Jesus’ revelation is parabolic, and such must be Christian existence” (B. Maggioni).

For this reason, Jesus here draws the hearers into his narrative art. And the question concerns us profoundly today. The kingdom of God must always be announced “in a parable”, that is, at a point of conjunction between its presence and our experience, otherwise its transcendent mystery sounds foreign. A point of conjunction symbolically indicative, not conclusive.

So how can we say today the mystery of the Kingdom, of the surprising and dramatic growth, narrating these days of the synodal journey, with words of flesh?

3. As a sown seed, fallen into the earth

The point of the parable is the contrast. Tremendous seed—great hospitable plant. It gives us an insight into how Jesus sees his own history, and that of the church; and what his style is. The image of the seed is dear to him, he takes it up again and again: even and precisely at the final hour, before the Greeks who ask to see: "If the grain of wheat that falls into the earth does not die, it remains alone; if it dies, it bears much fruit (...) where I am, there will my disciple be also" (Jn 12:24). There the image will have all its paschal light. It is a light: the secret of the grain that is cast, delivered, mixed with the earth until it dies, becomes a hospitable plant. We are called to grasp the inspiring scope of the image. It is a mystery of generation, of gratuitous covenant. The great challenge of God, lover of humans.

Jesus, as the Son fully surrendered to the will of the Father, fully trusting in the power of the One who sent him into the world, elaborates here his own *kenosis* in the earth, paradoxically discerns the signs of what might appear to be a failure, and offers his church the insight to discern the signs of the Kingdom.

In this way, he prevents the paradox of the Kingdom from being diluted into a mystifying understanding – which so seduces the disciples, always – before the cross offers the final and decisive interpretative sign. It is in Jesus' ultimate delivery, in the Eucharist celebrated in the middle of the night, that the Church, clinging to that "blessed arbor", grows and branches out. And it protrudes in new branches, with each sudden flock of birds seeking shade, seeking a nest for new generations.

And so, we are provoked to weave our parabolic narrative, to mature Gospel response to the challenges, the poverty, the disorientation of today.

4. Grasping the revelatory and performing power of the parable

It takes a lot of silence, and true humility, to grasp the *dynamis* of the Word in oneself and in the church and make room for it. The surprising sense of the small as the bearer of the future marks the style of Jesus. It says the tastes of God. The Kingdom of God comes like this. Jesus sees himself in the lowest and naked and despicable seed, inapparent, abject, without beauty, alone (until it dies), inert in appearance, rotting – through the handing over to the earth – it comes alive in an unpredictable, unstoppable, hospitable dynamism. And in the dynamism of the

handing over to the earth, it gives rise to the Kingdom. And it becomes a shelter so that in its shadow all the birds of the air may find rest and a place to nest.

Contrast and continuity between the humility of the starting point (the seed) and the greatness of the finishing point (the tree) also mark the experience of faith: this must surprise us again today. We have perceived it, in the many speeches in the hall. And from the Gospel we receive the thread of meaning.

The parable thus gives us the language to interpret the itinerary of this month of sowing. Today - in a culture of striving for supremacy, profit and followers, or evasion—the patient sowing of this synod is, in itself, like a profoundly subversive and revolutionary act. In the logic of the smallest of seeds sinking into the ground. Thus, the synod seems to me to find itself called to dare a synthesis-as-sowing, to open up a path towards reform – new form –, which life requires.

It is a matter of seizing – among the many words heard – “the smallest”, full of the future, and daring to imagine how to deliver it to the earth that will make it mature and become a hospitable place: “With what parable shall we tell?” “How shall it come to pass?” wondered Mary of Nazareth (Lk. 1:33, 37). And she, overshadowed by the Spirit, learns

this art from her own womb, and sings her impossible parable in the Magnificat. And she teaches us how even a little one, the little girl from Galilee, can harmonize with the power of the Spirit and read history. To propose bold visions. To pose prophetic gestures. Without protections of the powerful and the rich.

It is from the Spirit, the art of grasping and narrating unprecedented similarities between the Kingdom of God and the simplest, most minimal, fragile and vital, realities of the earth, similarities that open up the future.

And here, what similarities do we trace, in the conversations of these blessed days, and how do we tell them? The daily history of churches is full of parables, which await narration with our gaze fixed on the eyes of Jesus. In each church story we are called to recognize the Christological form of smallness and the Christological form of transformation fully revealed in the cross, “high arbor.” Hospitable greatness matured through descent into the earth; free, loving surrender.

In contrast, the stories being told today draw thread of meaning from the clichés of a homogenized culture, or from melancholy miracle fictions, or conversely from disconsolate Godot reruns.

Much silence and true humility are needed.

5. The formation of the conscience of the baptized

God is transforming the world, healing wounds and forgiving and overcoming our failures, visibly placing himself – as “the least of these” – alongside the processes of the world and within those processes. The question is to see it, and to create, and nurture, concrete narratives of it. “In the earth”: place of non-appearance, darkness of roots, place of promising gestation. Humanity tempted by the post-human. There is a Kingdom service that requires discerning, trusting patience. And shrewd care.

The parable forcefully calls us to take seriously that “least one” who is man (Ps. 8), who harbors a transcendent generative force. Root work must mature from the formation of consciousness. The smallest is – in Jesus – every baptized person, who, however, is called to enter into

synergy with the surprising dynamism of the sown seed. Which means decisively disassociating pastoral work from any statistical, efficientistic, procedural perspective erected as a system. Focusing on the formation of the conscience of the baptized. In a world saturated with hubris, tempted by the post-human.

I pray that this Synod will receive the art of new narratives, the radical humility of those who learn to recognize the likeness of the Kingdom in the truest, most vital dynamisms of the human, of the primary bonds, of the life that pulses mysteriously in all the worlds and spheres of human existence, in an admirable hidden harmony. With such patience. The ability to peer into the night.

Wishing you good final work: in the telling of new parables that give to think, grow, hope, walk—together.