

BIBLICAL PAGES

by Sr Clare Elisabeth of Mary

LECTIO Ex 34 – God’s names

“The Lord, the Lord, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy”

Ex 33:18-34:9

[Moses] then said, ‘Please show me your glory.’

The Lord said, ‘I shall make all my goodness pass before you, and before you I shall pronounce the name Yahweh; and I am gracious to those to whom I am gracious and I take pity on those to whom I take pity.

But my face’, he said, ‘you cannot see, for no human being can see me and survive.’

Then the Lord said, ‘Here is a place near me. You will stand on the rock, and when my glory passes by, I shall put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with my hand until I have gone past. Then I shall take my hand away and you will see my back; but my face will not be seen.’

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Cut two tablets of stone like the first ones and come up to me on the mountain, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready at dawn; at dawn come up Mount Sinai and wait for me there at the top of the mountain. No one may come up with you, no one may be seen anywhere on the mountain; the flocks and herds may not even graze in front of this mountain. So he cut two tablets of stone like the first and, with the two tablets of stone in his hands, Moses went up Mount Sinai in the early morning as the Lord had ordered.

And the Lord descended in a cloud and stood with him there and pronounced the name Yahweh.

Then the Lord passed before him and called out, ‘The Lord, the Lord, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy, maintaining His faithful love to thousands, forgiving fault, crime and sin, yet letting nothing go unchecked, and punishing the parent’s fault in the children and in the grandchildren to the third and fourth generation!’

Moses immediately bowed to the ground in worship, then he said, ‘If indeed I do enjoy Your favour, please, my Lord, come with us, although they are an obstinate people; and forgive our faults and sins, and adopt us as Your heritage.’

Lectio

Entrusted to us in His name

The name and the identity of a person are one and the same thing.

According to the Scriptures, to know somebody’s name is equal to know what he is, in his essence, in his relations with the world, in his being in the world.

To know somebody’s name means to own him, and to be able to call him, either angrily or with sorrow, with tenderness, in poverty and in need.

To call him modifies both my behaviour and his heart.

To call him means that he is connected to me.

That is why God’s name cannot be uttered:

it would imply that He is in our power, that we can determine Him.

In spite of all that, God gave us His name,
 He wanted us to know Him,
 so that we can make use – I would even say ‘abuse’ – of Him.
 By giving us His name He entrusted Himself to us,
 to our voice;
 and also He made us able to know and recognise Him.
 His name is the place where He ‘turns’ into one of us,
 where He becomes accessible through prayer.

This passage from Exodus shows us one of the summits of the Biblical experience. In this text God reveals to Moses who He is, through four names and an extraordinary definition of mercy. He is the One

“maintaining His faithful love to thousands, forgiving fault, crime and sin, yet letting nothing go unchecked, and punishing the parent’s fault in the children and in the grandchildren to the third and fourth generation!”

Given that Hebrew does not have the superlative form, in order to let us understand how much we are loved by God, He defines Himself as the One punishing the parent’s fault in the children and in the grandchildren to the third and fourth generation.

And He maintains His faithful love to thousands.

Three and thousands. A short breath and for ever. A second and eternity.

The five names of God

‘The Lord, the Lord, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy...’

‘Adonay’

The first name, repeated twice, is YAHWEH (‘Lord’), pronounced as ‘Adonay’.

It is a verbal form, coming from the verb ‘hayah’, which means ‘to live, to exist, to be, to become, to happen’.

The imperfect tense shows that the action was started in the past and is still going on.

And it comes also from the imperfect ‘Hiphil’, showing who is the one who makes it happen.

Therefore, it may be rendered as:

the One who causes to be,
 the One who brings into existence,
 the One who makes all things live,
 the One who makes all things happen,
 the One who makes all things become...

God is the One who gives life, existence, motion to all things.

He is the One who brings Israel into existence, who generates is, who causes it to be.

He is the One who makes man live, who causes him to be, who brings him into existence.

The name Yahweh is rendered in the Greek of the Septuagint as ‘to be’, especially with reference to Ex 3:13, when God replies to Moses’ first objection (‘Who am I to go to Pharaoh...’) introducing Himself as “I shall be with you”.

Another reference to the verb ‘to be’ can be found in Ex 3:13. God reveals Himself in the burning bush as “I am He-who-shall-be” or “I am He-who-is-for-you”.

In the first case, “I am He-who-shall-be” implies a dynamic dimension: God makes history move on. It is as if He said: “You will know me from what I shall do for you”.

In the second case, ‘being’ should not be understood as ‘existence’, but rather as ‘presence’, that is, ‘to be in a relationship with’, ‘to be present for the other’. It may be translated as:

‘I am the One who is next to your people’,

‘I am the One who is present’,

‘I am the One who is present before you’,

‘I am the One who is next to you, the One who never deserts you’.

This definition dispels our fears: you are not alone, I stand by your side.

God who reveals Himself to Moses, first in the burning bush and then on Mount Sinai, cannot be encountered in a place, but within a relationship.

I search for Him and I can find Him if I say Yes to the relationship with Him,

in the very moment when I let each and every step of my existence

be received by His love,

stay before His face,

and when I entrust them to Him.

‘Rahum’

Rendered as ‘tender’, ‘(God) of tenderness’, it is an adjective coming from the verb ‘raham’, which means ‘to love tenderly, motherly’.

It is the mother’s love for her child that makes of her a mother.

It could be translated even as ‘Mother’. ‘I am the One-who-is-Mother’.

According to the Scriptures, motherly love is defined by one special feature:

*“Zion was saying, ‘The Lord has abandoned me,
the Lord has forgotten me.’
Can a woman forget her baby at the breast,
feel no pity for the child she has borne?
Even if these were to forget,
I shall not forget you.
Look, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands,
your ramparts are ever before me.”*
(Is 49:14-16)

A mother will never forget about her child.

She remembers him. She is his memory.

Therefore ‘raham’ could be translated as ‘Memory-of-you’, ‘I am Memory-of-you’.

In His descent to Hades, Christ is an icon of the motherly God:

In His Son, God remembers those who were lost.

The memory of the other is an icon of God’s name.

‘In memory of me’ can be translated also as ‘memory of the other’.

To remember love and to remember that we have loved.
 Memory is a vehicle for the idea that I am not alone.
 My actions are not just ‘my own business’,
 in fact they are a memory and memorial of both those who are near and those who are far away
 from me.
 To remember is equal to love.
 It is a divine thing.

‘Hannun’

Rendered as ‘compassionate’, ‘(God) of compassion’, it is an adjective coming from the verb
 ‘hanan’, whose basic meaning is linked to the very concept of beauty,
 to the aspect showing someone’s quality,
 to the pleasant feeling aroused in others.
 God’s beauty is His benevolence,
 His compassion,
 His longing for the object of His love.

It is a face illumined by this love,
 a face thoroughly focussed on others,
 which has become radiant because of the encounter.

It is a word that is uttered
 with kindness and gentleness.

It is a term linked to the motherly and fatherly features too,
 a verb clearly containing the idea of ‘gift’,
 a spontaneous gift.
 It is the free benevolence
 of someone who spontaneously bends down towards somebody who is smaller and poorer,
 of a father who bends down to help his son whenever he stumbles,
 who takes him in his arms whenever his son lifts his hands,
 who bends down to better grasp his son’s voice and words.
 God is drawn to littleness and to someone who is in need and who begs for help.

The meaning of this name could therefore be rendered with ‘Bent-down-on-you’.
 My name is ‘Bent-down-on-you’.
 These are the very images that we find in Chapter 11 of the prophet Hosea:

*“When Israel was a child I loved him,
 and I called my son out of Egypt.
 But the more I called,
 the further they went away from me;
 they offered sacrifice to Baal
 and burnt incense to idols.
 I myself taught Ephraim to walk,
 I myself took them by the arm,
 but they did not know
 that I was the one caring for them,
 that I was leading them with human ties,
 with leading-strings of love,*

*that, with them I was like someone
lifting an infant to his cheek,
and that I bent down to feed him.”*
(Hos 11:1-3)

This is the verb opening Psalm 51 (‘Miserere’), poorly translated as “Have mercy on me, O God...”
In fact, it is not the frightened cry of the condemned,
but of the little ones asking God to draw near them,
of the little ones begging for God’s forgiveness:
‘Bend down on me, O God’.

God is bending down on us through His Son,
who “emptied Himself” for us,
“taking the form of a slave”,
accepting human death,
and receiving “the name which is above all other names”. (cf Ph 2:7-9)

Rich in faithful love (‘Hesed’)

The term ‘Hesed’ occurs 255 times in the Scriptures, and in 245 of its lines. It is almost impossible to translate this term, given that its meaning is so wide.

It does refer to human relations of mutual love and help, such as those between father and son, friends, husband and wife, host and guest, sovereign and subjects.

It describes a relation which is born and subsists thanks to the openness of one to the other, and vice versa.

It is the love of the Covenant: it becomes a love with which constantly and forever

God belongs to His people

and makes of His people His own property.

The God of Hesed is the God who chooses man as the ‘you’ of His existence, and presents Himself to man as the partner of an eternal covenant.

It is the nuptial love par excellence,

the love of the new and eternally new Covenant.

The New Testament icon of this name is indeed the Eucharist.

When Christ gives Himself as a gift to His Church, He makes of her His bride, and she cannot have any other bridegroom apart from Him.

There is a correspondence between the word of the Bridegroom,

‘This is my Body for you’,

and the virginity of the Church

that can have no other Bridegroom but Christ.

The absolute gift of God’s life

prevents the Church from being out of that love.

She is wholly His,

bought by His life.

This love reminds us of the fact that our life belongs to Him.

God of ‘emet’

It comes from the verb ‘aman’, ‘to believe’,
 where to believe means to be able to build on a sure foundation,
 outside of ourselves,
 that will not fail us.

It refers to a sure foundation
 on which I can build something that will not fall down.
 The cornerstone, the house built on rock...
 God’s emet shows that He is trustworthy. I am Trustworthy-for-you.

This word is missing from the Book of Job,
 because innocent sorrow questions the fact that God can be trusted.
 Bonhoeffer writes that it is not right to say that everything comes from God’s will:
 evil, death, violence, sorrow, are not part of God’s will. However, we can say that in each of those
 situations we can find a path leading us to God’s will, as well as a path through which God’s will is
 reaching us.
 That is why Christians can search for God’s path
 especially where He seems to be absent from.
 Christians are aware that it is possible to love,
 that love can be found always and everywhere,
 that Love and Love only is trustworthy.

‘Father, into Your hands I commit my Spirit’.
(Lk 23:46)

‘Emet’ is the last invocation of the Innocent Man
 who committed His Spirit
 to a Father He could not perceive any longer,
 to a Father who deserted Him and consigned Him to death.
 God is trustworthy.

THE CLEFT IN THE ROCK

God reveals His name to Moses while He is passing by him, after putting him in a cleft of the rock.
 According to Origen, the cleft in the rock
 is the wound inflicted by the Verb’s incarnation,
 through which we can know that love we have been loved with.

God wounded our humanity by His love.

Thanks to this wound,
 thanks to humanity which is now able to reveal love,
 we can know who God is
 and how big His love for us is.
 Even before being wounded by sin,
 our own humanity has been wounded by love:
 we must search for the signs of that wound
 exactly like Thomas who wanted to put his finger into Christ’ pierced side.

What is genuinely human – the love of a father, mother, husband, wife or friend – can become a way to know God.
 This humanity, the place of the Verb’s incarnation,
 is the earthly icon letting us see partially who God is,
 the witness and manifestation of a love who chose to reveal Himself in such a way.
 This humanity is constantly in need of going back to God,
 in need of receiving His truth from Him,
 from the Father from whom every fatherhood takes its name,
 from the one and only Bridegroom of the Church,
 from the One who has called us ‘friends’ and ‘children’.

Directions for prayer

The aim of this first Lectio was to present the God of Exodus, the God who prompted His people to walk and who indeed turned some tribes into a people.
 You will have to go back to this first Lectio while you progress on this year’s path.
 In my text, the Lectio is closely interwoven with the ‘meditatio’: I do hope that you will easily find cues and put them into practice in your very lives.

However, I would also like to invite you to stop in front of God’s face and contemplate Him, in order to learn to invoke Him and call Him by name.

This Lectio should also reconcile ourselves with our own humanity, made beautiful by the One who embraced it: it is a Word that can renew it and make it genuine; it is a treasure in which we can find a valuable help for our lives.

As a further direction I would recommend that you enter the ‘mystical sense’ of the Scriptures, that is, their constant reference to Christ.
 To enter the ‘mystical sense’ we must see Christ in everything, and recapitulate all things in Him.
 It is the Easter experience of the two Emmaus pilgrims: He explained to them “the passages throughout the Scriptures that were about Himself”.

In order to help you, I transcribe Monsignor Bruno Forte’s Profession of Faith, in which the various elements of the Book of Exodus we have seen in the Lectio become the flesh and history of the Son. This text is to be kept in mind too, as it may nourish our prayer.

Monsignor Bruno Forte’s Profession of Faith

I believe in You, Father,	
God of Jesus Christ,	
God of our fathers and our God:	
You, who loved the world so much	Jn 3:16
that You gave up Your Only-Begotten Son	Rm 8:32
for us sinners,	
are God, and God is Love.	1 Jn 4:8, 16
You are the Principle without principle of Love,	
You who love us out of utter gratuitousness,	
just for the sake of love, which is radiant joy.	

You are Love which eternally begins,
 the eternal Spring from which
 every perfect gift flows.
 You have made us for You,
 impressing in us the longing for Your Love
 and infecting us with Your contagious charity
 so that our restless hearts may find peace.

Jm 1:17

Rm 5:5

I believe in You, Lord Jesus Christ,
 the eternally beloved Son,
 sent into the world
 to reconcile sinners to the Father.
 You are the pure welcoming of Love,
 You who love in infinite gratitude
 and teach us that to receive is a divine thing
 and to let oneself be loved is no less divine than to love.
 You are the eternal Word come out of Silence,
 the never-ending dialogue of Love,
 the Beloved who receives everything
 and gives back everything.
 The days of Your Incarnation
 were lived in complete obedience to the Father:
 silence at Nazareth, spring in Galilee,
 the journey to Jerusalem, the story of the Passion,
 the new life of Resurrection Sunday;
 all that infects us with Love’s thanksgiving,
 and makes of us who follow You
 the ones who have believed in Love,
 and live waiting for His coming.

Mk 1:11

Rm 5:10

2 Co 5:19

Jn 17:23

Jn 1:1ff

Jn 20:21

Heb 5:7ff

1 Jn 4:16

1 Co 11:26

I believe in You, Holy Spirit,
 Lord and Giver-of-life,
 who were sweeping over the waters before Creation
 and came down on the welcoming Virgin
 and on the waters of the new creation.
 You are the bond of eternal charity,
 unity and peace
 of the Beloved and of the Lover,
 in the eternal dialogue of Love.
 You are the ecstasy and the gift of God,
 the One in whom God’s gift
 opens up in all freedom,
 to kindle love and infect everything with love.
 Your presence makes of us the Church,
 the people of charity,
 unity which is both a sign and a prophecy
 of the unity of the world.
 You make of us the Church of freedom,
 open to the ‘new’
 and attentive to the wonderful variety
 that You have given rise to out of Love.

Gn 1:2

Lk 1:35

Mk 1:10 par

Ac 1:8

Ac 2:1ff

2 Co 3:17

1 Co 12

You are hope burning in us,
You who make time and eternity one,
the pilgrim Church and the Heavenly Church,
You who unlock God’s heart
so that it may welcome those who do not keep God in their hearts;
You who open up the hearts of us all, poor wretches and sinners,
to the gift of Love without setting.

Rm 8

Through You we are given the water of life,
through You the Heavenly bread,
through You forgiveness of sins,
through You we receive the pledge
of the joy of the age to come.

Jn 7:37-39

Jn 6:63

Jn 20:22ff

2 Co 1:22

I believe in You, one God of Love,
eternal Lover, eternal Beloved,
eternal unity and freedom of Love.
In You I live and find rest, giving my heart to You
and begging You that I may be hidden in You
and that You may dwell in me.
Amen.

Mt 28:20

Col 3:3

Jn 14:23