

BIBLICAL PAGES

by Sr Clare Elisabeth of Mary

LECTIO on Exodus

Lectio n° 5

**In those days, in the long ones:
silence and crying
Ex 2:23-24**

LECTIO

THE HIDDEN YEARS

*During this long period the king of Egypt died.
The Israelites, groaning in their slavery, cried out for help
and from the depths of their slavery their cry came up to God.
God heard their desperate cry;
God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
God saw the Israelites
and took note.
(Ex 2:23-24)*

bayyāmîm hārabbîm, in those days, in the long ones.
The long period of time stands for ‘the long days’.

The Scripture does not tell us for how long Moses stayed in the desert, for how many years he worked as a shepherd: this period is described as ‘long days’. According to the Hebrew tradition, many years – perhaps decades – lapsed between his flight and his return into Egypt.

The Torah is silent about Moses’ silence during those hidden years.

Moses disappears.

We have no news of him; we do not know how he lives, what he thinks.

Everything is wrapped in silence.

All the increase of his human maturity, all the spiritual growth described in the previous lines, are but a memory of the past during those long days, months, years of silence and desert.

We do not know anything about the changes occurring in the period of time between the flight from Pharaoh and the burning bush, when Moses is sent to free his people.

We do not know anything about Abraham before he was called by God too; but when the Scripture starts telling his story, there is no break in the events of his life. From its beginning to its end, the patriarch's story presents no 'black holes', even though we do not know what precedes it and what follows it.

Moses' story is different.

The Torah accompanies Moses from birth to death. We can learn about his infancy and youth up to the smallest details, such as the simple gestures of his mother caring for him when he was a baby. And after his meeting with God at the burning bush we start learning everything again, up to his death on Mount Nebo.

The silence of the Torah does not refer to the periods before and after God's calling, as in Abraham's case; it occurs in the middle period, when the story is already unfolding.

The silence of the text is the form through which the Torah tells us about the silence in Moses' life: what seems to be non-history is in fact history.

In fact, there is no missing chapter in Moses' life. Things are related in their fullness through silence. Silence expresses in its fullness what Moses is experiencing in the desert and solitude.

In those two words, 'In those days, in the long ones', silence tells us about the silence in Moses' life.

This step in Moses' life is just as important as the previous events: he has to disappear.

He has to reach the border of the desert,
in a way he has to perceive the limits of his good intentions,
of his generosity, of his passion,
of what he wants to decide for himself.

He has to 'lose' himself, he has to 'die'.

He has to be cocooned and hidden from sight while he is being transformed.

In all truth I tell you, unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest. 25 Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me, must follow me, and my servant will be with me wherever I am. If anyone serves me, my Father will honour him.
(Jn 12:24-26)

Jesus' going, Jesus' leaving in order to make room for a new deed on God's part is a voluntary action:

Still, I am telling you the truth: it is for your own good that I am going, because unless I go, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.
(Jn 16,7)

On the contrary, in Moses' case as well as in ours, it is independent from our own will.

Life inexorably seems to free us from our best features.

We must be pruned, so that we can bear fruit.

And in the end, sooner or later, through different paths, we all reach the limit of everything, we all reach the desert, so that we can go beyond the desert.

This is not the desert of the great procession of a people advancing towards freedom, towards God's revelation on the mountain. This is not the desert of the great fights, but an 'inglorious desert', a humble desert made of the usual voices, little steps, everyday actions.

It is a wide and vast expanse which belittles us, which lowers our self-importance,

which makes us reach the limits of our own dreams and hopes and willpower, so that we may become aware that something more is needed.

And then, only then, there is room for the sacred, there is room for God talking to us.

Only then 'the mountain comes to the fore to meet us', as a Midrash puts it.

And we can start afresh,

we can be born again, we can be born from above, this time,

that is, we are ready for God's action.

We are ready to start afresh,

not counting on our own hearts, but on His.

3 'In all truth I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.' 4 Nicodemus said, 'How can anyone who is already old be born? Is it possible to go back into the womb again and be born?' 5 Jesus replied: 'In all truth I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born through water and the Spirit; 6 what is born of human nature is human; what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be surprised when I say: You must be born from above. 8 The wind blows where it pleases; you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

(Jn 3:3-8)

We can call them 'vocational crises', 'identity crises', 'affective crises', 'middle-age crises'... Whatever their name may be, they are the situations in which we do learn that God is different from us.

They prepare us to become disciples of that love, hope and service which are greater than ourselves and our own hearts, and which are able to surpass our own powers and shortcomings.

Here Moses disappears; here God appears.

Beyond the desert.

The days turn into a long wait, while we are making room for the One who efficaciously listens to everybody's cries.

Those 'long days' of silence and crying are a scandal we have to put up with. Actions which are solely our own must be 'silenced', given that they have to enter God's sacred space.

'Long days' during which we can learn to act according to God's time, according to His love for mankind; long days during which we can learn the same things that His heart 'learns' from mankind.

This kind of learning is brought about by compassion:

we learn to be mindful of the little ones,

we learn to be at their service,

we learn to be one with their cry, going up to God.

THE CRY

*The Israelites, **groaning** in their slavery,*

***cried out** for help*

*and... their **cry** came up to God.*

*God heard their **desperate cry**.*

Four different words to express the idea of the 'cry'.

They are verbs or nouns linked to a Hebrew form (consecutive 'waw' with the imperfect tense) which denotes an action made in the past, at a definite time, at an exact moment in time, and not just something elusive. It is an event: a definite story, voices, faces, people, exact times and places, all crying.

The first cry is the verb *'ānah*: "The Israelites, groaning..."

It occurs 12 times in the Scriptures and it is linked to the experience of waiting and begging for the fullness of time, for the fulfilment of the promises.

It bears in itself the sorrowful and scandalized question: "How long?"

It is the sigh of the people ruled by the wicked.¹

It is the groaning of the hearts when the vine is withering away and the new wine is mourning.²

It is the groaning of the cattle that have no pasture.³

It is the groaning of a woman in labour.⁴

In the Book of Lamentations it is the new name of the inhabitants of Zion, the *ne'ēnāhîm mēbaqqēšîm lehem*, groaning, looking for something to eat;⁵ in the midst of devastation the groaning of the priests,⁶ the groaning of Jerusalem.⁷

¹ cf Pr 29:2.

² cf Is 24:7.

³ cf Jl 1:18.

⁴ cf Jr 22:23.

⁵ cf Lm 1:11.

It is the groaning of the prophet Ezekiel over the downfall of Jerusalem,⁸ and the lamentation of those who grieve over the loathsome practices in it, and who will be marked on their foreheads with the ‘tav’, the sign of salvation.⁹

The second cry is the verb *zā‘aq*, the cry for help of the poor and wretched who groan and weep.¹⁰

It occurs many many times in the technical phrase, “The Israelites cried to the Lord”, who then raises for them a deliverer: Othniel, son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother;¹¹ or Ehud, son of Gera, a Benjaminites;¹² or a prophet and then Gideon.¹³

It is the cry of those who are in distress,¹⁴ of those under the weight of oppression.¹⁵

It is the cry of those who are begging forgiveness for their sins,¹⁶ the cry of Samuel interceding for his people,¹⁷

the cry of David mourning for his son Absalom.¹⁸

It is the voice of the psalmist crying to the Lord:

*To the Lord I cry out my plea.
To the Lord I cry out with entreaty.
I pour out my worry in His presence,
in His presence I unfold my troubles.
However faint my spirit,
You are watching over my path.
(Ps 142:1-3)*

And confessing that the Lord is his refuge, his share, his one and only good:

*I cry out to You, Lord,
I affirm, ‘You are my refuge,
my share in the land of the living!’
(Ps 142:5)*

The Septuagint translates this verb with the Greek ‘avnaboa,w’, that occurs only once in the New Testament, referring to a cry which includes all the tears of mankind:

⁶ cf Lm 1:4.

⁷ cf Lm 1:8, 21.

⁸ cf Ezk 21:11-12.

⁹ cf Ezk 9:4.

¹⁰ cf Is 30:19.

¹¹ cf Jg 3:9.

¹² cf Jg 3:15.

¹³ cf Jg 6:6-8:34.

¹⁴ cf Ps 22:6; 107:13, 19.

¹⁵ cf Jb 35:9.

¹⁶ cf Jg 10:10; 1 S 12:10.

¹⁷ cf 1 S 7:9.

¹⁸ cf 2 S 19:5.

*And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice,
‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’,
that is,
‘My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?’
(Mt 27:46)*

The third cry is expressed by the noun *šaw‘âh*, a term denoting the cry for help, the clamour, the cry for help coming from a wretched condition. It is closely linked to the root of the verb *yāša* ‘, ‘to save’, from which the name of Jesus derives: *yēšū‘* ‘. It is the cry of those who implore: ‘Save us!’ It occurs 11 times, usually in prayers:

*I called to the Lord in my anguish,
I cried for help to my God;
from His Temple He heard my voice,
my cry came to His ears. (Ps 18:6)*

*Lord, hear my prayer,
listen to my cry for help,
do not remain deaf to my weeping.
For I am a stranger in Your house,
a nomad like all my ancestors. (Ps 39:12)*

*I waited, I waited for the Lord,
then He stooped to me
and heard my cry for help. (Ps 40:1)*

*Lord, hear my prayer,
let my cry for help reach You. (Ps 102:1)*

*Lord, I called on Your name
from the deep pit.
You heard my voice, do not close Your ear
to my prayer, to my cry. (Lm 3:55-56)*

*The eyes of the Lord are on the upright,
His ear turned to their cry. (Ps 34:15)*

*He fulfils the desires of all who fear Him,
He hears their cry and He saves them. (Ps 145:19)*

The fourth cry is the praying groan, *n^e‘āqâh*, which occurs only 4 times in the Scriptures. The Septuagint translates it as ‘stenagmo,j’, a term which occurs only twice in the New Testament, the first time in Ac 7:34 (St Stephen’s speech), which is a quotation of Ex 2:24; the second time in Rm 8:26, the Holy Spirit’s “groans that cannot be put into words”:

And as well as this, the Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness, for, when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in

groans that cannot be put into words; and He who can see into all hearts knows what the Spirit means because the prayers that the Spirit makes for God's holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God.

(Rm 8:26-27)

The Spirit cries.

At the beginning of everything there is the cry of the Holy Spirit, who, with groans that cannot be put into words, groans while invoking the Father, groans and suffers so that all men may become children of God.

Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, with a divine wind sweeping over the waters.

(Gn 1:2)

In the Book of Genesis, the Holy Spirit's presence over the formless void gives hope,

because we are aware that in each and every expression of nothingness there is a cry continually going up to God, a desire waiting for Him, a love that can recognize the path to life for all things:

At the very beginning of each and every experience of divine salvation we always find a cry coming from the depths of creatures: it is the cry of the people of Israel oppressed in the land of Egypt; it is the cry of Christ forsaken on the Roman cross; it is a cry going up from the depths of our wretchedness, a cry God listens to. He leads His people from slavery to the freedom of the promised land; and His Christ from death to life of the world to come.

Nowadays, from the waste lands of the Earth, the groaning of creatures who would like to live while in fact they are bound to die, goes up to God: the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labour pains (Rm 8:22). Creation suffers under the weight of time; creation dies because of the violence of death, and progresses towards the presence of the eternal God, in whom it can live and dwell.

Today, from the waste lands of the Earth, expectancy is going up to God, as well as the direct invocation to a God who is able to free mankind and to pour down into us a new life. In this cry, threatened creation opens up to the coming of the Spirit of God. The whole creation that has not experienced redemption yet, is enveloped by sorrow, but at the same time it is wrapped up in expectation. Thus, in those groans and cries, addressed to the divine power that can save us, we perceive that the Holy Spirit is approaching us,

*interceding on our behalf with groans that cannot be put into words (Rm 8:26).*¹⁹

To cry out to God in all possible ways.
To cry in God's cry.

And wherever there is a man crying or groaning,
there is a path starting, because God listens.
And the path starts because we become able to cry out.

The motherly cry accompanies the baby when he is given birth,
the cry of the child resounds while he is given birth.
And in the cry of mankind
we can discover once again and always the voice of the Spirit
waiting for the new creation
and the cry, the ultimate cry, thanks to which the children can return home.

But Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed His last.
(Mk 15:37)

*Jesus cried out in a loud voice saying,
'Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit'.
With these words He breathed His last.*
(Lk 23:46)

But Jesus, again crying out in a loud voice, yielded up His spirit.
(Mt 27:50)

Here, in the text from Exodus, it is the very situation that 'cries out'.
The oppression,
people debased by turning them into labour force,
people debased by making them the property of another man,
all that cries out to God, even though no one prays for it.

There are other passages from the Scripture where we do find the same mindset, for instance the passage that relates the first homicide:

*'What have you done?' the Lord asked.
'Listen! Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground.'*
(Gn 4:10)

And again, in the Book of Exodus, in the framework of the Covenant Code,
there is an 'alternative' passage denouncing any kind of usury, both the legal and

¹⁹ J. Moltmann

illegal one, as well as the economic systems made of debts, credits, interests, producing poverty and violence, injustice and exploitation.

*You will not ill-treat widows or orphans;
if you ill-treat them in any way and they make an appeal to me for help,
I shall certainly hear their appeal,
my anger will be roused and I shall put you to the sword;
then your own wives will be widows and your own children orphans.*

*If you lend money to any of my people, to anyone poor among you,
you will not play the usurer with him: you will not demand interest from him.
If you take someone's cloak in pledge, you will return it to him at sunset.
It is all the covering he has;
it is the cloak he wraps his body in;
what else will he sleep in?
If he appeals to me, I shall listen.
At least with me he will find compassion!
(Ex 22:21-26)*

In the New Testament too we find the same principle, that is, the revelation of a God who is not insensitive to injustice: it is oppression in itself, any abuse of man, that cries out to God.

*Can you hear crying out against you
the wages which you kept back from the labourers mowing your fields?
The cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord Sabaoth.
(Jm 5:4)*

The far-reaching consequences for each and every believer are that he cannot be silent in front of the oppression of man.

THE COVENANT

*God heard their groaning;
God remembered His Covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
God saw the Israelites
and took note.
(Ex 2:24)*

These few lines mark the transition from the introduction to the first part of the Book of Exodus. In them we find a meditation of extraordinary wisdom on the whole History of Salvation.

Here God's decision to intervene comes to the fore.
And God reveals Himself as the God of the oppressed,

the Defender of the rights of those who are crushed,
the Judge of the oppressors,
the vindicator of the afflicted,
a God who listens, remembers, sees, knows.
Four verbs responding to four cries:
they will be repeated also by the Voice in the burning bush.
In two additional passages God hears the Israelites' cry for help (Ex 3:7, 9),
and He also sees the misery of His people
and He is well aware of their sufferings.

And again: God remembers.

God remembers His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
wayyizkōr 'ēlōhîm 'eth-b^erîtô 'eth-'abhrāhām 'eth-yishāq w^e 'eth-ya'ăqōb.

The same expression occurs four times in the Old Testament, in similar contexts.

When God remembers, He reveals His compassion for those who are in mortal danger, or are experiencing death due to sterility or slavery. God's compassion precedes and introduces God's salvific action...

God remembered Noah, *wayyizkōr 'ēlōhîm 'eth-nōāh*, and then the flood was over and he could go out of the ark because the land was dry.

Genesis 19:29 deals with the salvation of one man, Lot, and with the destruction of Sodom and other cities, because God remembered Abraham, *wayyizkōr 'ēlōhîm 'eth-'abhrāhām.*

In Genesis 30:22, God remembers Rachel, *wayyizkōr 'ēlōhîm 'eth-rāhēl*, and fulfils her prayer, taking away her sterility and making her conceive and give birth to Joseph.

Therefore God stoops down so that His people may be raised up.
Now it is the time of God's Exodus.

DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER

1) In order to make use of this text for prayer, we need to supplicate, implore, cry out to God.

I suggest that you go through the Book of Psalms in order to find the very lines and passages that may help us cry out to God.

If you like, you can make your own compilation of Psalms, like St Francis of Assisi did. This prayer would be in line with your own sensibility.

As an example, here I enclose one of the Psalms from St Francis' Office of Passion, n^o 3. Please note how St Francis addresses God: according to some authorities, he makes Christ's voice his own:

Take pity on me, God, take pity on me,

*for in You I take refuge,
in the shadow of Your wings I take refuge,
until the destruction is past. (Ps 57:1)*

*I call to God the Most High,
to God who has done everything for me;
may He send from heaven and save me,
and check those who harry me;
may God send His faithful love
and His constancy. (Ps 57:2-3)*

*I lie surrounded by lions,
greedy for human prey,
their teeth are spears and arrows,
their tongue a sharp sword. (Ps 57:4)*

*Be exalted above the heavens, God!
Your glory over all the earth!
They laid a snare in my path
- I was bowed with care -
they dug a pit ahead of me,
but fell in it themselves. (Ps 57:5-6)*

*My heart is ready, God, my heart is ready;
I will sing and make music for You.
Awake, my glory, awake, lyre and harp,
that I may awake the Dawn. (Ps 57:7-8)*

*I will praise You among the peoples, Lord,
I will make music for You among nations,
for Your faithful love towers to heaven,
Your constancy to the clouds.
Be exalted above the heavens, God!
Your glory over all the earth! (Ps 57:9-11)*

2) Then you can meditate on Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*, Chapter 2, nos 186-196 in particular.

187. Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid. A mere glance at the Scriptures is enough to make us see how our gracious Father wants to hear the cry of the poor: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their

taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them... so I will send you..." (Ex 3:7-8, 10). We also see how he is concerned for their needs: "When the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a deliverer" (Jg 3:15). If we, who are God's means of hearing the poor, turn deaf ears to this plea, we oppose the Father's will and his plan; that poor person "might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt" (Dt 15:9). A lack of solidarity towards his or her needs will directly affect our relationship with God: "For if in bitterness of soul he calls down a curse upon you, his Creator will hear his prayer" (Sir 4:6).