

שִׁירַת הַיָּם

Ex 15,1-21¹

In this Lectio we will deal with the Song of the Sea, in order to perceive all its richness and all its nuances which, if we read it in a haste in translation, are necessarily lost.

The sea has finally been crossed at the end of a very difficult night, full of fears, menaces, liberty and joy all mixed together, the decisive night in the upbuilding of Israel's faith in God and in Moses His servant.

And at the end of that night, when God's deeds have been performed and Moses' obedience is full, on the seashore he sings to his God and about his God. This is the fulfilment of the work of salvation which started with the Lord's Word, and which went on with the events brought about by that Word, and which was fulfilled by man's thanksgiving:

*The people I have shaped for myself
will broadcast my praises.*

Is 43:21

The same process or 'movement' can be seen in the Gospel of St Luke, when the ten lepers are healed. After going and showing themselves to the priests, only one of them, finding himself cured, turns back praising God and throws himself prostrate at the feet of Jesus and thanks Him. He is a Samaritan. "Your faith has saved you."

Thank you, for letting us pass from healing to salvation,
from liberation to salvation:

*The Lord is my strength and my song,
to Him I owe my deliverance.*

THE LORD

It was then that Moses and the Israelites sang this song in the Lord's honour:

I shall sing to the Lord

for He has covered Himself in glory,

horse and rider

He has thrown into the sea.

(Ex 15:1)

¹ This Lectio draws on Prof. M. P. Scanu's course, to whom I dedicate this work with gratitude for what she is teaching us, in a very competent and passionate way. The Talmud says: "Treat your disciple as if he were your companion. Treat your companion as if he were your master. Treat your master as if he were your God."

The Rabbis note that up to the crossing of the sea no one had ever sung a song to God: this is the first song. Here the Israelites have all the reasons to sing.

THEN means that the Heavenly throne was firmly established, after the Jews had crossed the Sea of Reeds and intoned that song. In fact, the proof can be found in Psalm 93:2, where it is said: 'Your throne is set firm from of old, / from all eternity You exist'.

*Prior to this God was known as the Creator of heaven and of earth; after the victory at the Sea of Reeds, He showed His involvement in the history of mankind: God, the creator and king of the universe, showed His care for, the quality of His kingship and of His lordship with respect to both individuals and nations. In fact, Psalm 93:1 says: 'The Lord is king, robed in majesty'.
(Midrash on Exodus)*

The *midrāš* says that only after liberation from slavery His lordship is truly established, has sure foundations, and He can truly reign because He has shown His involvement in mankind's history ('The Kingdom of God is close at hand').

In this text the Song is not only addressed to the Lord; it is also about the Lord: it is addressed to Him as a prayer, and it is addressed to the listeners as a witness.

Moses and the Israelites *said, saying*, that is, they said in order to be able to say further things. A midrash says: *this must be interpreted as 'in order to say', that is, 'in order to repeat', so that in the future, when you are free from anguish, you will attribute your victory to God and not to your own strength, and offer this song of triumph to Him.*

God's greatness that Moses sings about is revealed by His involvement in the vicissitudes of man's life. This greatness is known to Israel only, not to the surrounding peoples who know just a Creator God.

In this world, the Israelites testify that God, majestic and sublime, must be extolled highly: He has played an active role in the vicissitudes of man's life and of the nations. This is Israel's very feature, that they are aware of this, while the surrounding peoples aren't. In fact, Israel acknowledges his God as the Creator who dwells on high in the heavens, but whose very interest resides in human vicissitudes. Psalm 113:5-6 says: 'Who is like the Lord our God? / His throne is set on high, / but He stoops to look down on Heaven and earth'. On the contrary, according to all the other nations' mindset, Adonai is sublime and His glory is just in the heavens.

*The Lord is my strength and my song,
to Him I owe my deliverance.
He is my God and I shall praise Him,
my father's God and I shall extol Him.
Ex 15,2*

Instead of ‘strength’, the Greek Septuagint reads ‘secret refuge’: the secret strength of the heart, its most profound certitude, its true richness.

to Him I owe my deliverance: in Exodus 14:30 the text proclaimed that “That day, the Lord rescued Israel from the clutches of the Egyptians”. This is the view of someone who understands that everything that happened (slavery, sorrow, flights, history’s winding and contradictory events) are not conducive to death but to salvation. They happened so that, through them, we could be saved. Moses sings that everything he had to pass through was conducive to his salvation; in the most obscure night both his people and he have been reached by God’s salvation and they have been formed by it: *to Him I owe my deliverance*.

I shall praise Him: the verb נָוָה, *nāwâh*, ‘to glorify’, means ‘to beautify, to decorate by one’s praise’.

my father’s God and I shall extol Him. A midrash explains that ‘to extol’ means ‘to let God’s holiness be known further’:

What did the Israelites sing? They sang about that knowledge of God which had already been proclaimed by their forefathers, but which now had to be raised up by their efforts in the sight of all the peoples. Each and every generation must do its part in order to increase God’s knowledge more and more, in the service of praise and in thanksgiving to God.

*The Lord (’ādōnay) is a warrior;
the Lord (’ādōnay) is His name.
Ex 15,3*

In Exodus 14,14 Moses said: “The Lord will do the fighting for you; all you need to do is to keep calm”. And again in Ex 14,25 the Egyptians realized that the Lord was fighting on the Israelites’ side against them.

God fights on His people’s side. God is involved in Israel’s fights. Israel is aware that when they meet an enemy or just an adversary, they are not fighting on their own. In fact, Israel’s victory does not depend on their human powers and on their warriors: it is God who gives victory to Israel and frees them from their enemies.

In the rabbinical interpretation, the two names *’ādōnay* and *’ēlohîm* are closely linked to two fundamental features: *’ādōnay* to tenderness and love; *’ēlohîm* to justice. However, here *’ādōnay* is a warrior:

The Torah highlights and stresses that the fight against evil that God has started does not diminish, does not lessen, does not reduce His love. Love is and remains His eternal feature. God is patient with sinners just because of His love for Israel: this is not a sign of weakness. And the destruction of evil is a blessing not only for Israel but for the whole mankind, given that it allows God’s love to show itself in all its fullness.

Starting from the Exodus, God is given the name *'ādōnay*. This name is linked to the Israelites' experience of God: they call Him *'ādōnay* because of what happened, because of what He did, and of how He revealed Himself. He is the One who calls to existence, the One who gives life, the One who makes things happen, the One who makes things and people progress.

God is the One who originates life, existence, becoming.

He is the One who calls Israel into existence, who generates it, who keeps it into being.

The following lines convey – through powerful images and sounds – the strength and the efficacy of God's intervention, that Israel perfectly realized as something which did not have to face any obstacles:

*Pharaoh's chariots and army He has hurled into the sea,
the pick of his officers have been drowned in the Sea of Reeds.
The ocean has closed over them;
they have sunk to the bottom like a stone.
Your right hand, Lord, wins glory by its strength,
Your right hand, Lord, shatters Your foes,
and by Your great majesty You fell Your assailants;
You unleash Your fury, it consumes them like chaff.
A blast from Your nostrils and the waters piled high;
the waves stood firm as a dyke;
the bed of the sea became firm ground.
(Ex 15:4-8)*

God 'has hurled' into the sea Pharaoh's chariots and army, in the same way as one could hurl a spear. He has drowned the 'pick' of Pharaoh's officers: the word comes from a term which means 'three' and gives the idea of the best troops of an army gathered together.

The 'abysses' (or 'ocean') that closed over them are the abysses or waters that were part of the original chaos of Genesis 1, preceding Creation, the waters to which God set a limit.

His greatness destroyed those bent on personal aggrandizement, those who raise themselves up against Him.

*The enemy said, 'I shall give chase and overtake,
I shall share out the spoil and glut myself on them,
I shall draw my sword, my hand will destroy them.'
(Ex 15:9)*

In this speech by the enemy, the stress is either on the first person ('I') or on the possessive adjective ('my'): 'I shall give chase...', 'I shall overtake...', 'I shall share out the spoil...', 'my sword', 'my hand'...

*You blew with Your breath, the sea closed over them;
They sank like lead in the terrible waters.
(Ex 15:10)*

To the enemy's haughtiness responds the true power of God, who seems not to make any effort when crushing that 'I' who would like to dominate.

In the Song of the Sea the confrontation between God and Pharaoh and the Egyptians is disproportionate. In Exodus 14 we can feel chariots and horses giving chase to the Israelites; then Pharaoh's change of mind; then the fact that Pharaoh is employing all his army to take back the Israelites, and the Israelites' fears. In Exodus 14 the victory comes in a progressive way; here, on the contrary, it is presented from the very beginning and reconfirmed subsequently. Here God's deeds never find anything to contrast them or to pose a threat to them. In fact, God's power is so infinitely superior to both Pharaoh's and his army's, that they sink like lead. God does not have to make an effort to win and His deed is fulfilled in all its efficaciousness: Pharaoh's human power is shattered to pieces.

*Lord, who is like You, majestic in sanctity,
who like You among the holy ones,
fearsome of deed, worker of wonders?
You stretched Your right hand out, the earth swallowed them!
Ex 15,11-12*

who like You among the holy ones? The term for 'holy ones' or 'gods' employed here is not 'ēlōhîm but 'ēlim. אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm contains the ה 'h' which is a guttural aspirated consonant. The ה 'h' is a symbol of the fact that God can create, that is, make something pass from chaos to order and rhythm. He is the One who owns this ה 'h' and who created the world through this ה 'h'.

Why was the world created through an ה 'h'? Because He created it by speaking and the ה 'h' is the symbol of breathing. He made the elements distinct one from the other by calling them by name. Hence, God 'ēlōhîm is distinguished from all the other gods or 'ēlim thanks to His power to create. The 'ēlim do not have the power to create because they cannot speak. 'ēlim can be 'vowelized' also as אִלִּים 'illēm, which means 'dumb'. God is *majestic in sanctity*, that is, completely distinct from anything else, and He cannot be compared to the 'ēlim.

This first part of the poem sings about two of God's victories: His victory over the Egyptians and His victory over the cosmic waters, waters that evoke the chaos God managed not only to govern but also to employ in order to fulfil His objectives. The victory is not only over the Egyptians but also over the forces of chaos that God managed to contain. This text acknowledges a deed greater than Creation: in Genesis 1 God set a limit to the waters, while here in Exodus 15 God makes use of them to bring about victory.

Therefore, God cannot be compared to anybody else: there is nobody like Him, no power is really a power before Him. God, who triumphs over Israel's enemies as well as over the forces of nature, is showing His distinct, separate character, which cannot be compared to anything else: *Lord, who is like You?*

Somebody said that this is just another version of the crossing of the sea: here we do find God's triumph, with no discussions, efforts on His part, and by making use of what in Exodus 14 were presented as dangers, such as the army and the sea.

Exodus 14,21 starts with Moses stretching out his hand, and ends with Moses dividing the sea. However, an easterly wind is mentioned, blowing all night...

Exodus 15 does not mention this easterly wind. Instead, we do find "You unleash Your fury", and "a blast from your nostrils", that is, no natural element but God blowing with His breath, putting an end to the Egyptians' arrogance.

The description of the waters is also different. In Exodus 14 we see the Israelites going on dry ground right through the sea and the Egyptians following them, then progressively clogged; and then finally we see the returning waters washing right over the Egyptians' chariots and horsemen. In Exodus 15 the Song does not tell about Israel going into the waters; and the Egyptians have been thrown into the sea by God; the sea is the place where they drown.

Another very important element: in Exodus 15 Moses does not play any part, except singing the Song. On the contrary, Exodus 14 shows God and Moses' synergy. Moses' intervention was important to reassure the Israelites when they saw the Egyptians giving chase to them and wanted to go back to Egypt. And it was important when God told him to raise his staff and he had to stretch out his hand and divide the sea so that the Israelites could pass through it. In Exodus 15 Moses does not cooperate with God. The 'hand' mentioned there is God's 'right hand'.

In a similar way, there is no mention of either the angel of God preceding the Israelites or of the cloud, giving light to the Israelites and darkness to the Egyptians (cf Ex 14,19-20).

The Song of the Sea then celebrates God's deed, God's intervention in a direct and immediate way, with no further intermediations: it is God's direct intervention, making use of nature, then fulfilling His justice in the human world, saving the Israelites while letting the others perish.

Please note that this kind of language must be placed within its literary context. It is not meant to extol violence, but rather to make us understand that when we have to face menaces, we must rely on God who is fighting on our side by His strongest power. His fight is not against man, but rather against what is oppressing man, against what would like to reduce man to workforce, enslave him, oppress him through violence and injustice. It is a fight against the world of injustice and violence as well as against everything man is afraid of (let us keep in mind that Pharaoh's power relied on terror). The Lord stands as Lord in-between what might seem terrifying, unstoppable, and man; in-between chaos and man, in-between evil and man, so that there may still be some dry land for man to dwell; so that there may still be a limit to waters; so that there may still be life. God's victory over the world, His

unstoppable and uncontrolled power, is love, love that “so much loved the world that He gave His Son”. Nothing can prevent God from loving us so, up to the very end:

*I have told you all this
so that you may find peace in me.
In the world you will have hardship,
but be courageous:
I have conquered the world.
Jn 16,33*

The Jewish tradition has pondered on these ideas too: in the Passover Seder, when the horsemen who sunk into the sea are mentioned, the Jews spill some drops of wine, given that one cannot experience full joy if the children of God are perishing. A midrash teaches that while the Egyptians were drowning in the sea, the angels would like to intone the song of victory, but God prevented them from doing so and made them keep quiet instead, because His children were dying and there could not be any joy in that very moment.

THE SHEPHERD OF ISRAEL

*In Your faithful love You led out the people You had redeemed,
in Your strength You have guided them
to Your holy dwelling.
Ex 15,13*

The second part of the poem focuses on God’s leadership, which is revealed in two different forms:

*You led out the people You had redeemed
and
in Your strength You have guided them to Your holy dwelling.*

The preposition *b^e* expresses two different meanings, attributed to God’s leadership: He guided the people ‘by’ His love, but He also guided them ‘into’ His love, that is, He made them experience the **חֶסֶד** *hesed*, a radical and complete love that brings about mutual belonging. Israel belongs to God and God belongs to Israel. God also guided His people by love, that is, He showed His love in all situations and ‘in’ love, leading them to experience it, to go into it.

The second deed of the shepherd is to lead his flock in order to make them rest, **נָחַל**, *nāhal*. In this case, the Shepherd is leading them by His power towards “the delicious dwelling of His holiness”. Here we find once again a term **נִוְהַ**, *nāwêh* that in line 2b had been used in its verbal form: *He is my God and I shall praise Him, / my father’s God and I shall extol Him.*

נִוְהַ, *nāwêh* has different meanings: it may mean ‘beauty’, ‘pleasing to the eye’, but also ‘place’, ‘seat’, ‘house’, ‘dwelling’. It is a place, a pleasant and delicious dwelling, with beautiful features.

Then the leadership movement is twofold:

to guide towards love by love;

to guide forcefully to the delicious place of Your holiness.

The sequence of these two verbs is similar to that we find in Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

In grassy meadows He lets me lie.

By tranquil streams He leads me (יְנַוְהֵנִי)

to restore my spirit.

He guides me (יְנַוְהֵנִי) in paths of saving justice

as befits His name.

Ps 23,1-3

נַחַה *nāhâh*, where the subject is God, refers to an ethical meaning, and is closely linked to ‘relationship’: in Psalm 23 we find the “paths of saving justice”, while here in Exodus 15, “in Your faithful love”.

נָהַל *nāhal* means to guide towards the place of rest: in the psalm this place of rest is “grassy meadows” and “tranquil streams”, that is, abundance of life; while here is “Your holy dwelling”.

Hearing of this, the peoples tremble;

pangs seize on the people of Philistia;

the chieftains of Edom are dismayed,

Moab’s princes - panic has seized them,

all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.

(Ex 15:14-15)

Hearing of this: here we do not find גוֹיִם *gôyîm*, but עַמִּים *‘ammîm*. גוֹיִם *gôyîm* is the term employed for the Gentiles, while עַמִּים *‘ammîm* acknowledges to the peoples a certain familiarity with God, being part of His big family. In the following lines four peoples are mentioned, related to the four cardinal points: Philistines (West); Edomites (South); Moabites (East); Canaanites (North). They represent all the nations of the earth. Their reactions include a whole series of verbs and adjectives, expressing fear and panic both as feelings and as external, visible reactions, such as trembling, pangs, dismay, panic, frenzy.

Internal reactions occur too: terror and dread, dumbness after hearing of the enemy’s proud project:

On them fall terror and dread;

*through the power of Your arm they are still as stone
while Your people are passing, Lord,
while the people You have purchased are passing.
Ex 15,16*

Line 13 spoke of the people as a ‘redeemed people’: the verb used was גָּאָל *gā’al*. Ransom is a juridical act through which a relative, if he can, ransoms one of his relatives who has lost his freedom and who has been enslaved to somebody else. By paying a ransom, that relative can be freed. In line 13 this concept is attributed to God.

Here, we do find the verb קָנָה *qānâh*, which means: ‘to buy’. It is the same verb used in Genesis 4:1 when Eve says, “I have acquired a man with the help of the Lord”, that is, she has come to own a son after generating him. Here God has ransomed Israel, He has bought them, but not thanks to money but rather by generating them. God generated this people, He originated them, and this is the reason why they have become His.

*You will bring them in and plant them
on the mountain which is Your heritage,
the place which You, Lord, have made Your dwelling,
the sanctuary, Lord, prepared by Your own hands.
The Lord will be king for ever and ever.
Ex 15,17-18*

Here the text specifies that the Israelites have been planted: this image, taken from the vegetable world, means that Israel is a never-ending reality, a reality which can always start to grow and to produce shoots.

And the place has been prepared by the Lord’s hands: this denotes belonging, and *’ādōnay* is described as an architect:

Why is it said that ‘Your hands did found’? God established the sanctuary by His own hands, but when He created the world He made use of just one of them. Where is the proof? Is 48:13: “My hand laid the foundations of earth...” This implies that establishing holiness in Creation and in His people matters more to God than Creation itself.

In lines 17-18 the universal mission of Israel is proclaimed: to establish God’s Kingdom on earth. The place where God dwells is also the place where He rules the world from, He blesses it, extends His dominion over all the earth. This is the revelation of Israel’s universal mission: to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, or at least, to make it known.

This second part (lines 12-18) deals with the nations’ tribute. The liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, God’s triumph over the Egyptians, acquires a universal meaning. What happened to Israel is relevant not only to them but to all the other

nations too, including the Egyptians. After hearing the news, all the peoples are called to acknowledge it; and to pay tribute to this manifestation of God's power, to His sovereignty, to His majesty.

God's behaviour towards Israel is presented as 'liberation, redemption, ransom', so that Israel may be 'His' people.

The purpose of the Exodus, of liberation, was not simply to give back freedom to Israel, to free it from its oppressors. In fact, God's plan was to establish it as a people in relationship with Himself; this plan will be shown from chapter 19 onwards, that is, on Sinai: Israel is a priestly people, a holy nation.

These events of salvation must end up in God and Israel's mutual belonging. The mountain of God's heritage, the mountain that is inhabited by God's holiness and that Israel must reach, is not a geographical place, but implies living within this mutual belonging.

Israel is not established as a people on the basis of a territory where to dwell. Israel is a people established by its relationship with God. Its identity is based on that belonging.

The Pentateuch does end with the Land. God freed them to take His people to the place of His holiness. In Ex 29:45-46, where God gives instructions on how to build the sanctuary, we find the following passage:

And I shall live with the Israelites and be their God.

And they will know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of Egypt to live among them: I, the Lord their God.

The Exodus is conducive to this common dwelling: it takes them to the place where God's holiness is dwelling, to the mountain of His holiness.

In the Babylonian stories, creation is concluded by the building of the palace, of the temple, where the creator gods dwell and from which they govern the created world.

God does not do that: His dwelling is Israel, His people, and by dwelling in the midst of His people He also rules over all the other peoples.

The place where God dwells does not belong to the physical dimension: the people who adheres to Him in all trust becomes God's dwelling. Of course a physical space, the shrine, is necessary too, but only to build up the people.

God is the one and only Lord, the one and only Sovereign Israel's life can depend on, given that by exercising His lordship God keeps it free and safe. God keeps it free because the reciprocal relationship must be established in freedom: freedom is necessary to be able to choose.

God is the one and only Lord, the one and only Sovereign who, after liberating this people, keeps it free, because the relationship He offers entails a dialectic, a continual reciprocal choice.

This Lord can govern Israel like a shepherd, and gives it rest (Ps 23), leads it to a pleasant place, gives consistency to man's freedom.

MIRIAM THE PROPHETESS

The last part of the Song of the Sea is a narrative part. When the text of Exodus 15 is read during the Easter vigil, these lines are missing, even though they are part of the conclusion. As we read the beginning, we should read the ending as well, given that it is a unity: from line 1 to line 21.

For when Pharaoh's cavalry, with his chariots and horsemen, had gone into the sea, the Lord brought the waters of the sea back over them, though the Israelites went on dry ground right through the sea.

The prophetess Miriam, Aaron's sister, took up a tambourine, and all the women followed her with tambourines, dancing...

Ex 15,19-20

Miriam is defined as 'the prophetess', *hann^ebî'âh*: 'the' prophetess, not 'a' prophetess. She is included in the seven prophetesses of Israel's history: Miriam; Deborah (דְּבוֹרָה: Jg 4-5); Huldah (חֻלְדָּה: 2 K 22:14); Noadiah (נוֹעֲדִיָּה: Ne 6:14); Hannah (חַנָּה: 1 S 1); Abigail (אַבְיָיִל: 1 S 25); (אֶסְתֵּר), Esther. These seven women are recognised by the rabbis as prophetesses.

Why here Miriam is recognised as 'the' prophetess par excellence? In order to be recognised as a prophet, one has to speak: the prophet is he who utters God's Words, who is God's spokesman. Miriam's role is very important, from the birth of Moses onwards, when she had to be the mediatrix between Pharaoh's daughter and the child's mother. In fact, her influence over the subsequent course of events was great, events which culminated in the liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

The midrash says that *God's prophetic spirit reigns over everyone, over the Jews and Gentiles alike, over men and women alike, over slaves and free men alike, but depending on their actions.*

...while Miriam took up from them the refrain:

Sing to the Lord, for He has covered Himself in glory,

horse and rider He has thrown into the sea.

(Ex 15:21)

The very peculiar thing of this verse is the verb עָנָה *'ānâh*, which has a twofold meaning: 'to start to speak', or 'to respond'. If we choose one of the two, we lose something that the text, in its complexity, is trying to express: she 'responded to them', and also she 'started saying to them'. Then, are the women responding to the song of the Israelites, or are the women starting to speak? We cannot choose between the two alternative interpretations, because 'Sing to the Lord' is an invitation, an exhortation.

Some guessed that Moses said the song once, then Miriam and the women intoned it in their turn; others guessed that there were two choirs taking the lead from

each other and singing antiphonally. Miriam also took up a tambourine. This might imply that the first time it was sung ‘a cappella’, while the second time the singing was accompanied by the instruments. The midrash says:

Moses made men sing, Miriam women and men alike. She had a greater following because she personified the upright woman whose virtues were shown from the very beginning of slavery in Egypt: women were able to pass on their spirit of wisdom and their trust to the rest of the people. They took the initiative to protect children from Pharaoh’s edict and Miriam is the symbol, the model of somebody who kindles God’s love in the Israelites’ hearts. This is why she can say šîrû layhwh, that is, Sing to the Lord.

CONCLUSIONS

I’d like to conclude this Lectio by wishing you something for our lives as Catholic and consecrated women. I will draw on a midrash dealing with the meaning of **וְאֲנִי־הוֹדֵי** *w^e ’anwēhû*, ‘I want to extol Him’.

We have seen that this **נֹהַ** *nāwâh* is referred to in line 13 too: ‘in the seat (**נֹהַ** *nāwêh*) of His holiness’. The rabbis highlight that link: given that the possible meanings are ‘beauty’, ‘house, dwelling’, they say that here there is a hint to the building of the Temple. They read **וְאֲנִי־הוֹדֵי** *’anwēhû* as an acrostic made up of:

אֲנִי, *’anî*, I;

then **נֹהַ**, *nāwêh*, beauty, dwelling;

and **הוֹדֵי**, *hû*, Him.

And they translate: ‘I want to offer myself as a house for Him; I want to be the adorned dwelling, a house for Him’.

And then, ‘May my being, all my life, become a temple for His glorification and the dwelling of His revelation’.

Or: ‘I, the beauty of Him’.

Or, again: ‘I want to follow Him, imitate Him in love’.

DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION

For all of you are the children of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus, since every one of you that has been baptised has clothed in Christ. There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female – for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

And simply by being Christ’s, you are that progeny of Abraham, the heirs named in the promise.

Ga 3:26-29

In the cloud and in the sea they were all baptised into Moses; all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink, since they drank from the spiritual rock which followed them, and that rock was Christ.

1 Co 10:2-4

By studying the Song of the Sea, light is shed on the experience of baptism, when we are generated as children of God, and become one body, which is the object of God's salvation. Baptism is an event of grace, undeserved and that cannot be deserved, where death, sin, evil, are overcome; an event thanks to which we can be part of that life that has been given back to us by Christ's victory.

I suggest that you take the liturgical texts of the Easter Vigil, or of the Rite of Baptism or of the Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults. And then look for the paschal references to this sacrament, finding also the Biblical references and direct or indirect references to the crossing of the sea.

You may also read the gospel passages dealing with Jesus' baptism: waters welcome Him, and the sky opens up. His true baptism is in fact His death. From the Cross Christ gives us as a gift "blood and water".

I hope you may contemplate these biblical and liturgical texts and savour them in all their richness and complexity. In particular, I hope you may focus on the many references to salvation.

Lets us enter, then, with wonder and gratitude, in this forthcoming Easter.

Excursus

IT'S ME. DON'T BE AFRAID!

Jesus, as He realised they were about to come and take Him by force and make Him king, fled back to the hills alone.

That evening the disciples went down to the shore of the sea and got into a boat to make for Capernaum on the other side of the sea. It was getting dark by now and Jesus had still not rejoined them. The wind was strong, and the sea was getting rough. They had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming towards the boat. They were afraid, but He said, 'It's me. Don't be afraid.' They were ready to take Him into the boat, and immediately it reached the shore at the place they were making for.

(Jn 6:15-21)

In a way, Jn 6 quotes Exodus 14-15. It was the Passover. To understand Jesus as the Bread of life, the food God gave us as He gave manna in the desert to the Israelites, entails a 'passover': to recognize Him as Lord. In a similar way to the Israelites of Exodus 14-15 who had to cross the sea and acknowledge that God gave them salvation, the disciples had to recognise the risen Jesus. Thus, they could experience that their lives depended on Him.

Only those who, by crossing the place of death, are able to recognise that God is their salvation and experience it, can welcome the Bread of life, who is the meaning of life, the bread nourishing us and giving us life. Israel made a similar experience when, by following Moses and going into the sea, they came to know God's salvation. That experience allowed them to experience God's food in the desert.

What was that 'bread'? Not only 'manna' to be eaten, but also the Word of God (cf Dt 8), because we must live on it.

In the Gospel of St John's account, the disciples are crossing the sea, that is, they have to acknowledge in the difficult situation the presence and the salvation offered them by the risen Lord. And by trusting in Him, they immediately reach the place they were making for.

The crowd, on the contrary, who did the crossing during the day, could not experience salvation. They did not acknowledge Him as Lord and consequently they could not welcome the food coming from Him. Maybe they were convinced they did not need it. So, one by one, they left.

After this, many of His disciples went away and accompanied Him no more.

Then Jesus said to the Twelve, 'What about you, do you want to go away too?' Simon Peter answered, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.'

(Jn 6:66-69)