

Fr. Alberto Maggi OSM

***"I WAS A STRANGER..."***

***THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OTHER  
IN GOSPELS***

In depth Biblical Study by F. Alberto Maggi

Treviso, January 26,27,28 2001

*Transposition of an audio-recording **not reviewed by the author***

**Note:** *the transposition is liberal, incidental errors may be due to the difference between oral and written language and punctuation has been made by ear..*

Let's start this biblical meeting entitled "I was a stranger". We will consider all strangers found in Gospels, that is "the good news".

The first concept that comes out from Gospels: all strangers, but Pilat (who embodies power), are positive characters carrying with them great riches.

We will analyze then all episodes of Gospels referring to strangers and we will try to understand their meaning. Evangelists never intended to report some historical facts or chronicles; their aim is to communicate some deep truths of faith, regarding the life of Christians of all times.

**Let's disclose a clear fact, which can seem amazing: the more we are far from religion, the more we are able to feel God's presence and signs.** Those who are pious, devout, seem very in sensitive to God's presence. That's why Jesus will openly praise strangers.

The word "stranger" in Gospels doesn't only mean "foreigner", but "pagan", that is someone who worships other divinities. Well, strangers and pagans, those who are considered far from God's love, are the most capable to recognize Him and welcome Him.

This is the thread of Gospels.

Who is the stranger? In ancient world, killing was the easiest way to get rid of a stranger. Chasing away the strangers, it's not an invention of some mayors today, but a very old habit. Gradually, while societies progressed (at least in some places), strangers were starting to be welcomed. Why does a stranger arouse fear? Because the "stranger" is a diverse; and every person who looks different from what we think to be usual, causes apprehension.

You know that the word "barbarian", which means "stranger" in Greek, is a term that derives from βάρβαρος (literally "stammerer"). Because a stranger is the one who speaks a different language, which is not ours, so we consider this language we don't understand a sort of "non-language". We take it for granted that our habits are the ideal ones.

We talk about "stranger", not just to indicate the foreigner, the one who lives out of our country, but all people who live the condition of a "stranger", those whom we feel different from us, those which we find difficult to recognize and understand. Parents experience this with their children. Children often speak a different language, are strangely dressed, etc...

And this happens through generations. Young people fortunately have a different way of living from their parents, and this leads to tensions.

We will talk about all those who are different, due to their nationality, religion, behavior and sexual preferences.

Usually we think that it's up to others to conform to our life standard. These supposed truths are disowned by Gospels.

Who is the "stranger" in Gospels?

Jesus was born in a very racist culture. Israel thought to be the elected people, the one who would have dominated all other nations, having being freed by God; but this is a misunderstanding that God will try to correct through prophets.

Israel's aim was to inaugurate the Kingdom of Israel, one that, through violence, would have put down all other pagan people. When Jesus was born there was such a racist culture; every male Hebrew had to pray every day three times by repeating: "Lord, I thank you for having not created me as a pagan and as a woman" (note that women used to say: thanks for having created me according to your will).

All strangers, namely pagans, were the dregs of society, the ones that God would have destroyed. In the Hebraic law order, there was a significant difference between homicide and "evilicide". Killing a pagan was not considered as a homicide, but a "evilicide", that is keeping evil away. For this reason killing a pagan was not a crime. Why? Because he had no opportunity of salvation; after death he had no hope for resurrection.

In this lecture we will often speak about Talmud. Talmud was the Sacred Book of Hebrew, which has the same importance of Bible, and we find on it this statement: "Kill the best of pagans and you will eliminate the worst of snakes".

If you are familiar with the Bible go and see, for example, the last parts of the Book Isaiah (which don't belong to Isaiah himself; only the initial chapters do, the rest belongs to other authors that took the name of this prophet later on) where we find some fanaticism, some nationalism; the author imagines the Kingdom of God in this way:

*The house of Israel will possess the nations as menservants and maidservants in the LORD's land, (the author says in his hallucination) Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD. And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD".*

Jerusalem would have seized the entire universe and all people would have been subject to it. Jesus, who is part of this mentality, detaches from it very firmly. The title of this conference is: "I was a stranger", but we could add "and I was not a Catholic", which is the maximum provocation. It's shocking. Jesus says: "I was poor, I was naked, I was hungry" and even "I was in prison". Jesus identifies with a criminal. Maybe criminal, but he is part of our race, but when Jesus states to be "a stranger", this is unbelievable. He identifies with a pagan, that is a God-less.

Let's start now looking for strangers in Gospels, starting from the first page to the last one.

The first evangelist is Matthew and he really makes fun of us. Should we be Jews, pious Jews, we would shiver. You have to know that women in genealogy counted for nothing. In Hebraic world the word "parents" doesn't exist. We find the word "father" who is the one who begets, and "mother", the one who gives birth. A woman is just a sort of incubator, who receives the semen of the man, makes the fetus grow in order to delivering it. In this culture, women doesn't transmit anything to the son.

Let's go the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew: *Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, etc.* for many generations. But Matthew inserts some women in this genealogy. He says that Jesus descends from a genealogy where 4 women are present, and this is strange already, but they also had a bad reputation. Who are they?

The first one is Tamar (which means "palm"). You can find the story of Tamar in chap. 38 of Genesis and is quite a thorny one. Matthew didn't get information at the registry office, he's not introducing an historical reconstruction, but a truth of faith. Matthew could have chosen other saint women of Israel, like Sarah, Rebecca, Susan. He chose Tamar. Her story is the following: Judah, one of Jesus's great-great-grandfather, is looking for a wife for his son Er and choses one from Cana, a pagan girl, Tamar. Then the author writes that "*Er was wicked in the LORD's sight*". But he doesn't specify the reason why. The Lord was very brusque at that time and *put him to death*.

At that time there was the law of levirate. The word "levirate" comes from *levir*, a Latin word which means "brother-in-law". What is it all about? When the husband used to die, and the woman was left alone, without children, the brother-in-law was in charge of fecundating her. Her son would have been named like the dead husband so that the inheritance of the clan could remain within the same family. Er's brother, Tamar's brother-in-law, is Onan. The author writes: "*But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his*" (being named with the name of the dead) "*so whenever he lay with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother*" "*What he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so he put*

*him to death also". There was another son left, called Shelah. But two of them had already died due to this woman... maybe the best thing is sending her back home. "So Tamar went to live in her father's house".*

A married woman sent back home, would have never been welcomed by another clan, the only chance she had was prostitution. And Tamar becomes a sacred prostitute (a very saint one) next to the idolatrous temple. In the meantime *Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died*, and in order to cheer up he goes and looks for prostitutes. Tamar sees him and disguises herself. Judah pretends not to recognize her and had a sexual intercourse with her. She doesn't accept money from him but only wants him to give her his seal and its cord. Some months later he discovers that Tamar is pregnant and is worried about the dishonor eventually brought upon his family and decides to burn her to death.

And Tamar says *"I am pregnant by the man who owns these,"*. She was pregnant by her father-in-law! She is the first woman we find in the Gospel in the genealogy of Jesus. A nice family, isn't it? Such a good descent!

But this is not enough, the evangelist still prepares other shocks. This Gospel is read during Christmas time, it seems a sort of endless list of names with no significance. But if we read them with an Hebraic mentality this is a very troublesome passage.

A second woman enters the narrative; she is a real prostitute. Her name, Rahab, literally means "the widened". This was the pejorative epithet given to prostitutes.

Rahab was the madam of a brothel near to Jericho. I hope that all the pious persons attending this meeting don't think that the entire lecture will have such a tenor; there will be other interesting things. Therefore, it's important to analyze those aspects in order to better understand the news and the disconcertment of Jesus message.

Rahab shelters two spies sent by Joshua and, in exchange for her life, allows enemies to patrol the city that will be destroyed. All this description is important because the evangelist wants to teach us that also those persons that we would naturally discard own a divine life. Should we regard at these episodes in an historical way, we would see that between Rahab and Booz, her son, there are about two centuries. Nothing is impossible for God, but this would be even difficult for him.

The third woman we find is Ruth. She is a pagan, too, a stranger, but she is the subject of one of the thorniest pages of the Bible. There was Lot, brother of Abram who had only two daughters. These two said: "we will have no descendants, let's make dad drunk, and let's take turns to sleep with him". This incest will give birth to the people of Moabites. Ruth is a Moabite.

We met Tamar, Rahab and Ruth.

Ruth, after being widowed, has a sexual intercourse with a rich man who wakes up in the morning and exclaims "Oh, who's this woman?", you see, he didn't realize...

Ruth gets pregnant and gives birth to Obed, the great-father of King David.

So we get to the last female character of the genealogy, Bathsheba, a very ambitious woman. Realizing that David went on much more than her husband, she allows him to seduce her, she gets pregnant and they decide together to kill her husband.

This is the beginning of the Gospel. Four stranger and pagan women that we would discard. Nonetheless they were Jesus ancestors.

Let's skip Mary, who either has sort of irregular marriage and let's talk about the first characters who show a deep theological value. They are the first who realize the gift of God to mankind.

In chapt. 2 of Matthew's Gospel we read: *"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem"*.

These characters have been censured because of their origin and their activity; we either don't know their names. Pious translators have turned them into "magi". Is it a plural? Which is the singular? They are magicians.

At that time in Greek they used the word μάγος (magician) to indicate a quack, a cheat. They were fortunetellers, those using astrology and magic. This art was condemned by the Bible, it was forbidden. In the first Christian catechism, the so called Διδαχή, a Greek term meaning "teaching", the prohibition of exercising magic is put along with abortion and homicide, all punished with death sentence.

**The first who realize the presence of the Creator on earth, are the most far from religion.**

Here is the first shock given by the evangelist, and there will be many others.

*And asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*

The star is not an aster, it's a symbolic image deriving from the Old Testament, witnessing a sign or a display by God.

In verse n. 3 of this Gospel we find an amazing reaction: *"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed"*. We understand why Herod was afraid. He was an unlawful king, as he was not a Jew but an Idumean (region in the South of Israel - today we would name him Arab). The Book of Deuteronomy forbids non-Judean to become king. Herod was a brave and at the age of 15 was already a skillful official, served as a mercenary in Judea, entered the court of Hasmonean, the lawful kings of Israel, married the daughter of Hasmonean King and killed all her relatives. After some times he killed his wife, too, and proclaimed himself King of the Jews. He always lived with the suspicion and the fear of being dethroned, as he was unlawfully proclaimed. He even killed his three sons, being afraid of someone taking his place.

But what really amazes is the continuation: *"and all Jerusalem with him"*.

Why Jerusalem (Gr. Ἱεροσόλυμα)? Jerusalem was the Sacred City where God's Temple was, the most sacred place in the world, the house of Higher Priests and religious hierarchy. When the eagerly awaited king of the Jews was born, we understand that Herod is afraid, but why is Jerusalem, too?

The evangelist reveals that Jerusalem is worried about what it will lose due to the birth of the Immanuel, God with Us. Jerusalem could maintain its prestige as long as priests, theologians and scribes were passing off a false image of God. When "God with Us", that's the name that Matthew uses, reveals himself the false one is automatically dethroned.

The untrue one was the God who used to ask for tithes, offerings, sacrifices; he was destroyed and replaced with the one who devotes himself.

The God of Jesus doesn't require anything, doesn't take anything away; he just gives. Jerusalem is afraid (and not only Jerusalem is), because Jesus introduces a new God who serves men, who doesn't like to be worshipped in a Temple!

**God doesn't require to be served, but has come to serve.**

The world changes completely. Herod gathered all High Priests and scribes to be informed about the place of birth of the Messiah. They answered that, according to Bible, he was to be born in Bethlehem, but... that's interesting, even knowing the place, they don't move.

The evangelist wants to highlight that the knowledge of the Bible doesn't guarantee its right understanding. They knew the Bible, but they didn't understand it.

*Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem.*

*After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them.*

Since from the beginning the evangelist introduces Jerusalem under a ominous light. In Jerusalem the star, that is the Divine display, will never shine. It stops before reaching Jerusalem and reappears only since the Magi leave it. Jerusalem is the city of death and God's signs will not be recognizable.

*"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed".* Jerusalem is frightened, the Magi are overjoyed.

*"Coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."*

Gold, incense and myrrh are three very important gifts. Gold is the symbol of regality, something that only kings deserve. By acknowledging Jesus as a King, they recognize He's not only the King of the Jews, but also the king of pagans. The evangelist discloses what will be the thread of the announcement of Jesus, which will be difficult to understand, even for his disciples. Jesus has not come to begin the Kingdom of Israel, but the Kingdom of God. It will be very difficult for disciples to understand this new concept. If you read Acts, the author writes:

*He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"*

For Heaven's Sake! Jesus appeared, taught them about the kingdom of God for forty days and what do they ask then? About restoring the kingdom of Israel!

Which is the difference between the two? The kingdom of God has no borders, no barriers created by nationalism or patriotism. There are three things that represents the sacred value for mankind: God, Homeland and Family. These are the three values for which it's worth losing one's life or killing somebody. Jesus (and that's why he was convicted to death) will state that these are not real values, they are diabolical, strongly averse to God's project. **According to Jesus, God, homeland and family are not true values, but hostile values.**

Homeland means that there are bounds to defend. **According to Jesus, no homeland exists, there is only the kingdom of God; no more borders.** The love of God goes far beyond any existing border. God doesn't chose a particular country, by electing its people; his love has to reach all mankind. It's for this reason that the one who welcomes this Fatherly love, like Jesus and with Jesus, has to pull down all existent boundaries of races and countries, because they just create rivalry and hate.



Jesus will clearly say: *"you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name and gospel"*.

I hope we will have enough time to talk about the other two presumed values: God and Family.

Going back to the gifts of the Magi... Incense was a specific element of priestly service. Only priests were allowed to offer incense to God. The fact that the Magi offer incense to Jesus has a very special meaning: **the prerogative of Israel of being the only priestly people is extended to everybody**. This is something sensational! What did "priest" mean? People couldn't address directly to God, a priestly mediation was needed. Only priests could communicate with God. Thus, the evangelist says that, according to Jesus, everybody can address directly to God. **There's no need of a special category who acts as mediator between men and God, because every single creature** (apart from her religion, apart from her behavior) **has an immediate relationship with God**.

People of Israel used also to consider themselves as the spouse of God. In the parable of Samaritan, the prophet Hosea defines the relationship between God and his people as a marriage, where God is the husband and people is the bride, which is an exclusive characteristic of Israel.

Myrrh was the special perfume that a bride used for her first wedding night. This means that, by presenting Jesus with myrrh the whole mankind becomes the bride of Jesus, not only Israel. Which is the meaning of "being God's spouse"? It means a great intimacy, a full sharing.

These gifts have a great value, then. The evangelist ends this narrative with a very painful expression: *"And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route"*. The same expression "by another route" (δι' ἄλλης ὁδοῦ) is present only another time in the Old Testament, in the First Book of Kings to indicate a sanctuary that became the house of sin, for it contained the Golden Calf. In order to leave this place you had to *"pass by another route"*. According to the evangelist, Jerusalem was the city of the temple of God, which became the house of sin, being an idolatrous temple. So we have to leave it in order to discover Jesus.

Jesus is not in a temple, but in the streets, among the common people. The most dangerous places, according to Jesus, are the sacred ones: synagogues and temples. The most secure are the houses of pagan people, because they are open to the message of Jesus, the sinners, those who live beyond laws.

There's a parable that highlights this concept very clearly: the parable of Samaritan. Through this parable Jesus changes two key concepts of religion: the believer and the neighbor.

Who's the believer according to Hebraism? He's the one who obeys God, observing laws.

Jesus will say: **a believer is not the one who obeys God by observing his laws, but the one who is like the Father, by practicing a similar love.** And we will see the inauspicious effects of such a religiousness. **Obedience to God's laws just leads to death.**

In Jesus language the word "obedience" is absent. The verb "to obey" (ὕπακούω) only appears five times in the Gospels and refers to elements which seem hostile to man: the sea, the storm, or other things. **Jesus never asks his disciple to obey God, or to obey him or someone else.** In Gospels we find a totally different concept: resemblance to the Father.

The other important change that we find in this parable is the concept of "neighbor". In Hebraism the neighbor was the object of love only in order to obtain a reward from God.

When we read a passage of Gospel it's essential to put it in its real context. We cannot take the passage and separate it from the rest, without looking at what comes before or after. Let's first talk about the context, then: Jesus sent the twelve. Who are they? In the Bible, and in Gospels, numbers go far beyond their numerical value, but represent symbols. So we have to interpret them in a figurative way. For example we also say something like "a thousand times"; we do not really mean thousand, we mean many. For sure we didn't count them.

So when we find "twelve" in Gospels, they were not twelve real persons, but simply a mean to indicate all those who followed Jesus, because number twelve represented the tribes of Israel. Historically speaking we really don't know how many they were (maybe eleven or thirteen), but we gave a figurative value to number twelve. When we find "twelve" referred to Jesus or to his teaching, that means that we are talking about the people of Israel who followed him.

Well, Jesus sent the twelve to announce the Good News of the Kingdom of God, but they, full of traditionalism and nationalism, go and proclaim the Kingdom of Israel. As a matter of fact, their action is ineffective. Jesus gives them the ability of driving out demons and evil spirits but they don't succeed.

Who are demons and evil spirits? They represent all ideologies who prevent from welcoming the message of Jesus. Why didn't the disciple succeed in driving out

demons? Because they are imbued with those same negative ideologies, also restraining those who would succeed.

You all know the statement made by the two disciples John and James: *"we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."*

Jesus gave them the authority to drive out demons, but they didn't succeed. They see one that is able to drive them out and stop him. You see the arrogance: *"because he was not one of us"*. Jesus doesn't agree on this point: *"Do not stop him, no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me"*.

**Jesus is giving a teaching of an extraordinary significance: everyone has the right of proclaiming his belonging to Jesus, even without identifying with the community who claims to own the exclusive right on the message of the Lord.**

Consequently, having those twelve totally failed, Jesus sends other 72. Please remember that numbers in the Bible have a figurative or theological value. Why exactly 72? Should you read the Greek text of beatitudes, you will notice that they are 8, but they are formed by exactly 72 words.

At that time the known pagan countries were identified with "seventy-two". You find this also in the Book of Genesis.

Therefore Jesus sends the other 72 because the 12 have failed, being strictly focused on the kingdom of Israel. The 72, on the contrary, not coming from Israel, maybe will accomplish their mission. As a matter of fact they come back full of joy and say: *Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name"*.

On this matter Jesus replies: *"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."* This is very important. Previously John and James were not welcomed in a Samaritan village. They were sad and came back to Jesus: *"Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"*

You see, nationalism is always violent and fanatic. Jesus just replies: *"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."* If we understand the meaning of this reply, our relationship with God (and consequently with others) would change completely. Satan was a sort of official of the Eternal Father who had a specific role: he used to stay on the earth investigating men's behavior and if they sinned he run back to God to report the fact. He used to say: "Look that man did this, give me leave to punish him" and God gave it to him. For this reason Satan was called "the accuser". Jesus states that the mission of Satan is over, *"Satan falls from heaven"*; that is he hasn't the opportunity to go to heaven and accuse men anymore.

Why was Satan laid off? Because Jesus, in Luke's Gospel makes a special announcement: *"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked."*

**While religion introduces a God who rewards the good and punishes the wicked, Jesus teaches about a Father whose love falls on good and wicked. The love of the Father is never subject to man's behavior.**

If an individual doesn't welcome His love, God doesn't stop loving him. So, if God doesn't punish and incessantly loves all men, Satan loses his job, he is fired.

This is the first time in Gospels that Jesus is *"full of joy"*. If the evangelist highlights this, it means it is very important. Jesus is full of joy through the Holy Spirit and says: *"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth"*. Once that Satan has been fired, and with him this false image of God has been eliminated, God can be proclaimed as the Lord of heaven and earth.

It continues: *"because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."*

Pagans, those despised by Jews, have been able to announce the Kingdom of God. But this very same truth has been hidden to the learned. They were the scribes, the theologians of Israel, who were still preaching the supremacy of the elected people.

Let's analyze then chapt. 10 of Luke's Gospel, v. 25 in order to understand the bad reaction of all the learned and wise, the doctors of law. They were lay people who devoted their lives to the study of the sacred scriptures, but also to those interpretations and traditions acquired during the centuries.

At the age of 40, which they thought to be a venerable age, they received the spirit of Moses through imposition of hands. Since that moment they became "the authentic and official mastership of sacred scriptures". Their authority was higher than the same Word of God. We read in Talmud: when there's a difference between the sentence of a scribe and scriptures, you must follow the one of the scribe.

*"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up"* so we're talking of an expert. What did he stand up for? *"to test Jesus"*.

The verb "to test", or much better "to tempt" (ἐκπειράζω), in Luke's Gospel, is used only twice. When Jesus is tempted by the devil in the desert (Lk 4,13b): *"he (the devil) left him until an opportune time (ἄχρι καιροῦ)"*. This is the right time! **According to the evangelist the doctor of law is the devil.**

Those who have to deliver God's will are, in fact, the embodiment of God's enemies. So this expert in the law stood up by calling him *"Teacher"*. What a falseness! There's the typical ambiguity of religious contexts. Addressing to someone with the expression "teacher" means that you want to learn from him. This is not the case. In fact he asks: *"what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

This problem of eternal life is really interesting. Jesus never talks about eternal life, Jesus is not interested in the next life. He didn't come to teach a new way towards eternal life, but **towards the Kingdom of God, that is changing the relationships between individuals here, on earth. Therefore he never refers to "eternal life", but only to LIFE.**

Every time that Jesus is asked about eternal life is by very rich or very religious people who want to maintain their present richness (or position) in the next life.

Jesus is amazed about the question. The man is the real expert! He replies: *"What is written in the Law?"* and ironically adds *"How do you read it?"*. Reading the Bible is not enough, we have to understand it. The criteria that Jesus will use is the following: **Reading doesn't guarantee understanding. You're sure of having correctly understood when the sake of others will be your most important value.**

In John's Gospel there's a clear example. During the questioning of Pilate Jesus talks about "the truth" and Pilate asks *"What is truth?"*. Jesus replies: *"Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."* We would expect the contrary "Everyone who listens to me is on the side of the truth". In order to comprehend the word of God the individual has to be on the truth side, and the truth versus God is the truth versus men. Those who are not on that side can preach it, can announce it, but never will understand it. So Jesus is asking to the scribe: What do you understand from what you read? He replies: *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind'*. The scribe answers that we must love God totally, and then adds a phrase from Deuteronomy: *"and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*

The two kinds of love are different. There's a radical love, the one to God, and a limited one related to neighbor.

A great topic of today is still this misunderstanding of Christian spirituality. If you ask to believers about the commandment of love they reply by citing the one given by the scribe. *"Love your neighbor as yourself"*. **Pay attention, this is something pertaining to Hebraic world.** This answer is accepted by Jesus because is given by a scribe, but it's not a Christian answer. *A Christian believer is not the one who loves God with all his heart and soul and his neighbor as himself; he is the one who loves the neighbor with all his heart and soul, just like he feels God loves him. In John's*

**Gospel Jesus gives a unique commandment, which replaces all previous ones: *"Love each other as I have loved you"*.**

Jesus answers to the scribe: *"You have answered correctly"*. Ok the answer is correct, but Jesus adds an action *"do this and you will live"*. Knowing the orthodoxy is not enough, you have to practice it.

The scribe, wanting to justify himself, asked: *"And who is my neighbor?"*

We saw that the answer is "love your neighbor as yourself", but where does the concept of neighbor arrive? At the time of Jesus there was a debate about this. Some said that neighbor was a member of one's own family, some others said that he was someone living within Israel. The scribe then wants to know up to where my love has to extend.

In order to better explain this concept, Jesus starts with the parable of Samaritan.

*"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho"* (Jerusalem is more than 800 meters above sea level, Jericho is about 400 meters under sea level. There are about 30 Km distance between the two, desert land) *"when he fell into the hands of robbers"* (it was the ideal place for robbers). *"They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead."*

This detail is very important. In the desert way from Jerusalem to Jericho, if a man is wounded, he has not possibility of surviving. In that region in winter there are 40°, and this wounded man has no possibility of surviving, unless somebody passes by.

In fact, *"A priest happened to be going down the same road"*. The man is safe, then!

Why is the priest *"going down the same road"*?

Jericho was a priestly city, inhabited by the priestly castes. They used to go periodically to Jerusalem to serve to the Temple, for a 8 days turn. In order to be suitable for the worship they had to undergo complicated purification rites, as they could approach God only by being perfectly purified. This should be a perfectly pure priest, after 8 days spent in the temple.

*"and when he saw the man, so we're sure he saw him, "he passed by on the other side"*. How comes? Jesus isn't reporting an inhuman behavior by the priest, but aims to demonstrate the effects of fruitless obedience to the laws of God. The priest is just complying with the law and in the Book of Leviticus we read that a priest cannot touch dead or blood, otherwise he becomes impure. After all purifications he had undergone, by assisting a dying we would have become impure, breaking his relationship with God!

**Here is the aberration of religion, passed off as the law of God: helping a dying man breaks the relationship with God!**

Religion is inauspicious, it is the enemy of life and God. All what represents life, is seen as negative by religion. The worst thing that religion made, regarding purity or impurity, is the miracle of life. If there's a sacred moment, in which we can touch the presence of God, is the birth of a child. Religion either turned this moment into an impure one. In the Book of Leviticus we read that a woman who gives birth to a son is unclean for 33 days, and for 66 days if she gives birth to a daughter. This is a terrible precept that was observed until some decades ago. Going back to the parable. The priest is not inhuman, he's just a religious. And religious persons are the most dangerous ones. When someone experiments some difficulties or is needy, it's better for him not to meet religious persons. If robbers wound, religious persons kill!

**The priest obeys the law sacrificing the man!**

What is translated with "*he passed by on the other side*", in Greek text is given by a single word (ἀντιπαρῆλθεν): this is the tombstone of religion.

Religion is unable to form loving men, it can produce only useless and obsequious individuals. **According to Jesus obeying the law is like a poison, a very toxic poison that paralyses the natural loving experiences of men. Jesus has been killed in the name of religion!**

"A priest cannot touch a dying", it doesn't matter if this person suffers or needs his help. Maybe he will remember him in his prayers. Pious persons never help you, they pray for you, and that's it.

The poor man of the parable has another opportunity: "*So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him*".

Levites belonged to a tribe that was in charge of all services at the temple: liturgy, order keeping, police services. They were supposed to be pure, too, accessing and serving the temple. That's why he "*passed by on the other side*", too.

By highlighting the behavior of the priest and the Levite Jesus states that law can kill man. The dilemma he poses to auditors and law officials is: "must the law be obeyed even when it causes damage and suffering to people?"

Which is the right answer? In case of conflict between the observance of the "divine law" and the suffering of an individual, what shall we choose? Well, an expert in the law will surely agree with the priest and the Levite. Jesus teaches that at first there's only the sake of the individual. He has no doubt: man's sake is at the first

place. One could raise an objection: but this is the so-called "law of God"! It doesn't matter. **No divine law can oppose man's sake.**

On this matter, let's have a look to John's Gospel. Jesus heals a man born blind while breaking the Sabbath. The commandment of Sabbath was the most important commandment, because it was the one that God himself had observed. Therefore Jesus doesn't violate the Sabbath alone, but the entire law. In the narrative, the authorities tried to convince the blind that it would be better for him to remain blind than being healed by a sinner, one who doesn't keep the Sabbath. The answer of the man is fantastic: I'm not an expert of theology like you are! *"One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"*

**Between a truth of faith and a life experience, always choose the second one!**

That's true, theology states that a behavior is wrong, catechism states that my condition is not regular, but I feel good, I'm happy! Jesus teaches us that even if we are in conflict with a law, even if it is the law of God, our life experience has a greater value. Do you understand why Jesus has been killed? Just wonder how he lived so longer!

The parable goes on with: *"But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was"*, we would expect to read "and killed him". Why?

The grudge between Jews and Samaritans started seven centuries earlier, after the deportation of Samaritans to Syria. Syria had occupied this region and many pagans went and live there. The racial mix of stranger colonists and Samaritans gave birth to an hybrid people, strongly hated by Jews. Even the term "Samaritan" was considered as the worst insult. Whoever pronounced this word deserved 39 lashes. Believe me, Jesus caused a great scandal by pronouncing this term. Samaritans were Godless and were not allowed to enter the temple. Just to try and make an effective example: let's say that a boy is riding his bicycle and has an accident. A bishop passes by because has to say Mass; a mayor passes by because has a meeting and finally arrives an Albanian pedophile immigrant. Let's think about the worst that could have happened. We would expect he would kill him!

The parable provides a big surprise: *"and when he saw him, he took pity on him"*. What Jesus is stating is something very heavy. The priest avoids him, the Levite doesn't take care of him, the Samaritan took pity on him. The verb "to take pity" (σπλαγχνίζομαι) is the one used in the Old Testament to exclusively indicate an action performed by God, not by a common person. This doesn't only indicate a feeling, but a divine action, by which God communicates life.



In Luke's Gospel this verb is used twice: in the passage of the Widow's Son, when Jesus took pity of her and rises her son and in the parable of the Lost Son when the father sees the son coming back, took pity on him and gives him back his dignity.

Jesus wants to explain that that man, the Samaritan, who is supposed to be Godless, doesn't obey laws and recite prayers is the perfect believer, because he behaves as God does.

**This is the radical change of the concept of a believer: he not the one who obeys God by observing his laws, but the one who is like God, by practicing a love similar to His one!**

This is amazing because all those ancient theological teachings provided to Israel fall down.

Even today, we may provide a right definition of a believer. According to Jesus message, a believer is the one who looks like the Father. Religion's typical obedience make people childish for there's one who commands and the other who obeys, and there's no equality between the two. Religion is always afraid of persons looking like the Father, and is always in need of those who simply obey. In religion the believers never grow up because always wait for someone telling them what is right or wrong. Jesus makes a clean sweep of obedience and clearly states: *"do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ"*.

Let's go back to the parable. *"He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him"*. This particular is also important, because that was a very hard journey due to the lack of oxygen (remember you pass from 800 meters above sea level to 400 meters under sea level) and the Samaritan puts the man on his donkey, so he completely achieves the presence of God. He turns himself into a servant of the wounded.

*"The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'*

The Samaritan gives his time and his money for free, without worrying about getting something back. Jesus sentences: *"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

Jesus changes the question completely. The expert in the law used to ask who his neighbor was, but Jesus asks which of the three characters was a neighbor to the

man who fell into the hands of robbers. The first wanted to know till where he had to spread his love and Jesus answers by stating from where this love had to spring.

In this parable Jesus changes the concept of "believer" and the concept of "neighbor". Neighbor is not the one I love in order to get a reward by God, he is the one who gets near to the other in order to love him. So he's not the "object" of my love, but he's the subject who loves like God does. Each of us is required to love as God loves; this is the condition to become neighbor of the other. **The expert wanted to know who his neighbor was, Jesus wants him to ask himself to whom he could be neighbor.**

The narrative goes on with the answer of the expert in the law. Jesus used the verb "to take pity" (σπλαγχνίζομαι) (a divine action), the man answers with the verb "to have mercy" (ποιέω ἔλεος) (a human action). He's not able to acknowledge that the behavior of Samaritan was a divine action and even doesn't name him.

*The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."*

Jesus invites him to do the same. *"Go and do likewise."*

Let's ask ourselves: will the expert in the law learn the lesson? According to Gospels, the answer is No. There's another passage where Jesus meets a sick on a Sabbath and asks to the experts in the law: *"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?"*

This law was the most important one. When the experts in the law ask Jesus which one was the most important commandment, they don't want to learn, but to test him. They knew which one was the most important, because God observed it too. They thought that God didn't work on Sabbath. And Jesus asks again: *"I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"*

The indication given by him is very important, because it changes the concept of morals. For religious persons this concept is linked to the observance of the law. How do you know if something is good or not? Simple, just observe the law. You'll be always aware of your sin.

**According to Jesus law is not important, the sake of the man in as the first place, even if a law states the contrary, because there's no law, also a divine one, that can hamper man's sake.**

Let's leave now Luke's Gospel and take Matthew's one. There's a very amazing episode, the one of the Faith of the Centurion: he is also a very significant character as he's not only a stranger but a representative of roman power, a real enemy.

When we read a passage of Gospels, it's always important to see it in its context, by examining also the previous one or the following.

Well, in chapt 8 of Matthew's Gospel, the one before that of the centurion, there's an episode that introduces all what will happen in the next chapter.

It starts with Jesus coming down from the mountainside, the one where Jesus proclaimed Beatitudes and "*large crowds followed him*". The first character is a man with leprosy (λεπρός). When we find characters without a name it means that they represent all those who find themselves in the same situations or conditions. The condition of a man with leprosy in Israel was tragic, he was a damned. In the ancient mentality leprosy was considered a terrible God's punishment, not only a illness. Recovery was practically impossible. Why? Because a leper was impure and wasn't allowed to get in touch with God. But the only one who could heal him was God in person, but he couldn't even address to Him.

In the episode the man "*came and knelt before him and said, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.'*" (καθαρίσαι)

He doesn't ask to be recovered, because he thought this was impossible, but to be healed, that is allowed to address to God. The leper breaks a law, because he was to stay outside of the built-up area and far from people, but he had heard the Sermon on the Mount, talking about a Father who loved everybody apart from their condition. **In Gospels, each expression of love and life appears to happen after a disobedience to the law.**

The leper, then, gets up the courage after having heard the words of Jesus, breaks the law and approaches him.

*"Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!'"*

**In this verse there's the demolition of the whole theological castle that scribes had created, spoiling the image of God.**

Jesus reaches out his hand. This gesture has a double meaning. In the Old Testament, in the famous episode of the Ten Plagues in Egypt, every time God or Moses reach out their hand is to communicate death and destruction to sinners and enemies; in this passage Jesus for the first time reaches out his hand and touches him for something positive. Why does he touch him? He had no reason to touch him; we will see in the following episode that Jesus heals only through the power of his message. The Book of Leviticus forbids to touch a leper because if a pure person touches an impure one, his impurity passes on. In order to demonstrate the falseness of this religious law, which used to discriminate men in the name of God, Jesus touches that man.

Not only the impurity doesn't pass on, but the purity of Jesus is transmitted to the leper and he becomes pure. Law was false. An untruthful law created by scribes disfigured God's true face. The evangelist wants to teach us a very important concept: **Jesus doesn't accept any discrimination made in the name of God, there's no individual who, due to his moral or religious condition is left out from God's love. While religion states that you have to be pure in order to welcome the Lord, Jesus teaches that you become pure by welcoming the Lord. It's a completely upside down theological concept.**

The episode we are going to analyze is just on this matter: God's love is addressed also to those who are considered sinners and left out.

*"When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him".* In the last passage it was a leper, now a centurion comes to him. It's something amazing, a centurion represented the army that occupied Palestine, a roman ruler, a pagan, a stranger, that is somebody to avoid. Why does he come to him? Because Jesus, on the mountain, spoke about the Kingdom of God, a kingdom without barriers or bounders.

*"asking for help."Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."*

Jesus could turn the other way to this usurper. He didn't deserve anything. Jesus replies instead: *"I will go and heal him".*

*"The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed".*

We use this expression, or a similar one, during our Eucharist. What does the evangelist mean? Disciples had to proclaim the word of Jesus and the strength of his message healed people by itself. The same thing states the centurion; according to the Hebraic mentality he thinks that Jesus could not enter his house in order not to become impure. The passage just indicates that whoever welcomes the message (it doesn't matter whether Jesus is present or not) can experiment salvation.

Then the centurion goes on by using a military reasoning *For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."*

*When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith."* (He's quite categorical).

For the first time, in Matthew's Gospel, we find the term **faith** (πίστις): **faith is not a gift from God, but the answer of people to God's love.** Jesus made a love

offering to the centurion by going to his house and he replied with a great faith. Why is Jesus sure that no one in Israel had his same faith? **Because religion killed every glimpse or opportunity of faith among people.** This is the concept of exodus that Jesus suggests in order to free people, as far as they are slave of religious institution, they cannot feel God's gift to mankind. Religious institution is very different from the church, the community that Jesus suggested and created. The Christian community is a dynamic one, animated by the Spirit (loving energy). It always puts out the message of Jesus in new ways. **The Church is, therefore, a dynamic community animated by the Spirit; the religious institution is rigid and regulated by laws. There's an absolute incompatibility between these two experiences, because where there's the law, Spirit is not present.**

This is a special praise Jesus addresses to the centurion and also states: *"I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."*

What Jesus says is unheard-of. All religious tradition, which introduced Israel as the elected people to rule all pagan... Well Jesus doesn't agree. Strangers are not to be ruled or reduced to slavery. From the east and the west, that is also pagan people, will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Pagan will be invited, too.

Matthew in his Gospel addresses to Jews, and doesn't mention the name of God, as it was in Hebraic tradition. So he uses the expression "heaven", in order to indicate the Kingdom of God which is a community where God doesn't promulgate any laws, but communicate his loving ability to all his sons. Matthew reproaches the Jews and states "be careful you who think to be the elected people, the superior one, because those you will cast out, will sit down at your place."

We have to bear in mind that Pharisees used to say that the Kingdom of God was late because of the existence of two categories of people: prostitutes and publicans, that is taxmen. Without these two the Kingdom would have been achieved. Jesus will remind them that these two categories already entered the Kingdom of God, while they were still outside. In fact we read *"I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you"*. By saying 'ahead of you' he doesn't mean 'before you', but 'in place of you'.

Pious persons thought that the Kingdom of God was not achieved because of prostitutes and tax collectors, which were impure categories, to be set apart. Jesus talks about excluding too, with reference to the sons of Kingdom, those who had the right of entering: *"But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* This expression in the Bible means a complete failure: they thought they were at first places, but as they

were entering, they realized that their places had already been taken by those who were supposed to be excluded by their Christian communities.

The evangelist wants to highlight this message because he thinks it is a always-valid faith criteria. Every community, at all times, risks to consider itself the privileged one, to deserve special rights in the name of God, and closes the door to many other people. Jesus warns: be careful, those you exclude already entered the Kingdom of God and you will remain outside crying for your failure.

Going on with the narrative, Jesus addresses to the centurion: *"Go! It will be done just as you believed it would. And his servant was healed at that very hour."*

Jesus doesn't cure the centurion's servant; it's the faith of the centurion that cures the servant! The word of the Lord, once it is welcome, arouses such a quality of life to be able to transmit life to whom doesn't have it.

Let's go on with chapt. 11, verse 21, the weep that Jesus expresses for the villages he visited during his preaching: *"Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!"*. Translators use the term 'woe', but this is not the right one. In Greek it was 'uàì' (ὠαί), a lament used during funereal watches. Jesus doesn't anathematize anybody, he weeps for some situations that he perceives as death. When Jesus says 'uàì' to the rich, this is not in order to threaten them, but he weeps for them because they are already dead, putrefied, with no life at all.

In this passage Jesus weeps for these villages because: *"If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, (the village where he used to live, the one that heard his teaching) will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom (the punished town), it would have remained to this day."*

These warnings have to be taken seriously, for while Korazine and Bethsaida are compared with Tyre and Sidon, the punished (but forgiven) towns, Capernaum is compared to Sodom, a town that, according to Bible's tradition, was completely destroyed by God. Capernaum's attitude is worse than that of Sodom! John writes in his prologue: *"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him"*.

Let's finish this part with a question: why did Jesus come to those who were waiting for him, but he was not recognized or welcome, but killed? If evangelists insist on this concept it means that there's the risk for Christian communities of all times, that, in the name of God, they will not be able to recognize God's messengers! Jesus states it very clearly: be careful, for you kill prophets and then you raise monuments

in their honor, but in the name of this killed prophet you go on killing others! Christian communities run the risk of ignoring God as he reveals himself, of opposing him, of killing his messengers and then, usually after 5 or more centuries, they realize... It's not such a long time compared to God's times... So they often ask for forgiveness in the name of the prophet they've killed, while still persecuting the one who is present in that very moment!

Prophets, that are God's voice, always bring something new; there's no repetition of ancient or traditional devotions. Jesus warns to open minds, to accept a renewal, but, first of all, to be so deeply and evangelically sensitive as to recognize God's messengers, because they never appear according to our schemes, but always in new ways.

Next passage of the Gospel that we are going to analyze will be the one of John, chapter 4, the episode of the Samaritan Woman.

I already described what the adjective 'samaritan' meant for Jews. It was something horrible. This episode is even worst. It's not only about a Samaritan, but a woman.

How were women considered in the Bible? Bible is thought to be the word of God, and sure it is, but it has been written by men, and it is quite evident because of how they talk about women. The different authors didn't get along even on first woman's creation. The Bible is not a book that came down from heaven, but a collection of books in which often an author disputes the other, even within the same book. For man's creation, there's no difficulty, but for woman there are some. As you remember in the Scriptures there are two main streams: the first is about a Lawmaker God, put forward by scribes and priests; the other is about a Creator God, put forward by prophets. Jesus will take part to prophets' line, opposing the other. Well, these two streams are fully present in woman's creation. There's no agreement in the Bible on how the first woman was created. The first to describe her creation were prophets, who gave an extraordinary picture, not understandable for the patriarchal society of that time.

*We read that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them".*

Therefore there's a perfect equality before God: man and woman are created by God in his own image, with the same dignity and, of course, with the same rights. But this was too difficult to understand for patriarchal mentality which saw the woman as a sort of 'sub-human' being. This definition will be modified by priests and legislators who rewrite the text of the creation (in Genesis we find both of them) contradicting the previous one.

They state that man and woman haven't been created in God's own image; only man has. Woman has been created from the man's rib; therefore she's only one part of him. She hasn't the same dignity, she depends on him. In the Scriptures, and this is something really disconcerting, God never addresses to a woman, apart from once. But he repented at such a point as to never talking to a woman again. He addressed to Sarah, Abraham's wife, but she lied a little bit; God told her 'you and your husband will have a son...'. She started sneering and replied that her husband was too old and she was past the age of childbearing. God realizes she was laughing and asks "did you laugh?". She denies. God gets so terribly angry with this lie as to never address to a woman again in the future history of Israel!

Woman was considered unable to testify, not credible and the cause of all evils of mankind. One of the most recent books of the Old Testament says that death entered the world because of woman, of woman's sin (devil tempted the woman); so she was considered a human lower species. Every male Jew had to bless God three times every morning by saying "I thank you for not having created me as a woman", while women, poor them, had to say, "I thank you for having created me according to your will".

This was the condition of woman in the Bible, so the fact that Jesus addresses to a woman, and what's more a Samaritan, it's something really amazing for the disciples. The Talmud says "Samaritan women are impure since their birth". Why Jesus specifically addresses to this woman? Scriptures, even Gospels, don't come down from heaven, but are the fruits of the history of their people.

John, in his chapter 4, draws his inspiration from one of the most important prophets in the Old Testament, the one whom Jesus often refers and that we often mention (*"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice"*). We talk about Hosea, the one who compared the relationship between husband and wife to the one between God and Israel people. But most surprisingly, he comes to understand this, one of the most theological and spiritual innovations, through his tragic family story. His wife was called Gomer and gave birth to three children but she happened to be 'like a female camel in heat'; as she smelled the scent of a man, she used to escape. Hosea was in love with his wife and every time he went around looking for her and taking her back home. Nothing to do, next time, always the same story. One day Hosea loses his patience, he finds her wife and brings her to trial, the fixed sentence for adulterous wives was stoning. Once in court, Hosea starts listing all her misdeeds, her infidelities and at the end of the sentence he says "for this reason... (and we would expect him saying "I sentence you to death....) ... let's go and leave for another honeymoon in the desert, there will be only you and me". At last he understood why the woman used to be unfaithful to him and goes on by saying: *"you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master'."*



In Hebraic language the term "husband" means 'master', because in that culture the man was his wife's master. Hosea realizes that the woman escaped because was looking for love and affection, the ones that a master would have never been able to provide.

A very important concept is explained, and it allows a better understanding of the passage we are going to examine. Hosea highlights that while for religion repentance was a fundamental condition in order to obtain mercy, he, on the contrary, forgiveness performed with love, comes before repentance.

Hosea forgives without any guarantees that his wife would not escape again. This is a great revolution for religious spirituality and it is the same revolution that Jesus will bring and that S. Paul will express in this way: *"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"*.

For religion a sinner is forgiven only if he repents or is converted. **Well, God, through the prophet Hosea, explains that this is false. He is the first who forgives without any conditions. The result of this unconditional forgiveness will be conversion.** This is the great passage from religion to faith! The Father never forgives as he is never offended. **In Gospels Jesus never asks sinners to ask for God's forgiveness. Please try and find such an exhortation made by Jesus in Gospels; you won't find any. You will only find the exhortation to forgive others.**

Before the last liturgical reform, we had to recite that senseless nursery rhyme called 'the act of contrition' during the gloomy rite of confession. 'O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you... But God is never offended! **Second Vatican Council states that sin is not an offence to God, but a limit that an individual puts on his growth.** We are destined to a never ending growth, a sin is a stop to this growth. God is not offended, he is an incessantly communication of love to men. That's why Jesus insists on incessantly forgive others. **The forgiveness that God freely grants, becomes effective and operating when equally transferred to others.**

If I'm forgiven by God but don't forgive my brother, this forgiveness remains ineffective.

This new chapter of Gospel (John n. 4) is about the Samaritan Woman. From the very beginning there's something strange in this episode: *"Jesus had to go through Samaria"*. He was in the north, in Galilee and had to reach South-Judea. It was not necessary to pass through Samaria. Travelers normally avoided to pass through Samaria, they preferred to pass along Jordan's valley because there was a great hostility between these two peoples. They used to kill each other in the name of God

and both of them thought to be right. This chosen journey was not a geographical itinerary but 'a loving itinerary', covered by Jesus in order to regain his adulterous spouse.

The key for better interpreting this episode is the term 'woman' that Jesus uses addressing to the Samaritan. Three are female characters in John's Gospel to whom Jesus addresses by calling them 'woman' (γυνή), which means 'wife' or 'married woman'.

- The first one is Mary in the wedding of Cana; a son would never address to his mother by calling her 'woman', that is 'wife'; why did Jesus call her mother 'woman'? Because his mother represents the faithful spouse of Israel, of God, who never was unfaithful to his Lord. She is the one who worries about the lack of wine, *"They have no more wine"*. In Hebraic weddings the most important moment is when husband and wife drink both from the same glass of wine, because wine is the symbol of conjugal love. Mary doesn't say "We have no more wine", because she has it, but she seems worried about Israel's unfaithfulness by saying "They have no more wine", that is in this marriage love is not present anymore. Jesus addresses to her by calling her 'woman', that is 'faithful spouse'.
- The other woman is the Samaritan; an adulterous woman, who was repeatedly unfaithful to his husband. This is the one that God recovers with his love.
- The last one is Mary Magdalene, the last female character to whom Jesus addresses by saying 'woman', who represents the spouse of the new community.

In summary, the three female characters are: the faithful spouse, the adulterous wife and the spouse of the new community.

*"Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water".*

Should Jesus be a pious person he would have run away because she was a woman, and women were always supposed to be impure. According to religion (religion turns expressions of life into negative situations), a woman was almost always impure, due to her period and because of giving birth. Every month she was impure for at least a week and she had to be purified; she was allowed to have sexual intercourse with her husband only at the end of her period, but, poor her, the sexual intercourse with the husband made her impure again.

One more thing, this woman was a Samaritan, so she was the most awful human being in the earth, according to Jews mentality. Well, Jesus addresses to her *"Will you give me a drink?"*

Jesus doesn't recognize interracial barriers, differences among nations, among genders; he addresses to her as a man in need of a favor "give me something to drink". This is a typical action performed by Jesus: he never addresses to others from the top of his divinity. This concept will be better explained in chapt. 13 in the episode of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, where Jesus starts serving others from the most dirty part of man's body.

*The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?"*

That was something unbelievable... you are superior, you are part of an elected race and you ask me for a drink? The evangelist, in order to allow a better comprehension, explains: *For Jews do not associate with Samaritans*. It's a very diplomatic statement, the truth is that they kill each other. And there's no exciting situation as when someone kills the other in the name of God.

Jesus didn't take it up and replied: *"If you knew the gift of God"*, it's the husband that tries to recover his spouse, the adulterous one, without reproaching her, only offering her a gift. That's why this episode is so important. Jesus addresses to those who were unfaithful, to the sinners, not asking them to repent, but offering them a gift: you sinned, you failed, you were unfaithful, I don't need you to do penance but I tell you "see how much I love you, maybe you didn't realize how great my love was".

*"...and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."*

There's something quite mysterious; we are next to a well a Jesus says "if you accept this gift I will give you gushing water, not the one of the well".

The woman replies: *Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"*

Jesus made a loving proposal, a new offer, because God doesn't distinguish heretical and orthodox, pagans and Jews, sinners and righteous. He incessantly communicates his love to all of them. The woman only knows the gift of Jacob, the well and doesn't recognize or either imagine a free gift by God.

And Jesus answered: *"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again"*, that is everyone who seeks to gain the love of God through his human efforts will need to start it over again, times ad times.

*"... but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst"*. There's a kind of water that is able to definitely satisfy one's thirst.

*Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."* Here is again the comparison between faith and religion. The one who tries to achieve the fullness of life through his own efforts, will always fail; the one who simply welcomes the free gift of God's love, will feel that something inside him is gushing out and will do so for ever.

Jesus says to the woman who has to go every day and hardly draw water from the well: "look, if you want I can give you my gift, a spring of water that will be always gushing, throughout your life, eternally". You need to make a choice! This gift, represented by the water, is the gift of the Spirit. Remember, God doesn't rule by issuing laws that people has to observe and respect; he rules by communicating them his Spirit, his same loving ability. **Here is the great difference, we don't have to obey laws, but to look like our Father.**

What is exactly this gushing eternal water? It's God's free gift to mankind! Once we welcome this gift and translate it in free love to others, this water will be gushing with a even greater power! **The more we turn God's love into a love, freely and voluntarily, served to others, the more this fountain will be able to gush.**

Other evangelists expressed the same concept in other episodes; the message of Gospels is identical, different symbols or images have been used. In Mark's Gospel, for example, we find: "*With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more*".

The grown up maybe remember that in foodstuff shops no product was packed and if you needed 1 Kg of flour there was a "measure", a special one that corresponded exactly to 1 Kg.

So Jesus is teaching that with the measure we use, it will be measured to us, that is the love that we give, it is soon given us back by the Father, but as God is unbeatable as per generosity, some more will be added.

If I give 50 to another, I'll get back my 50, but with another 25 added; and if I give this 75 to another, I'll gain my 75 plus something else. This means that love is the only rule for a real growth. **An individual who feels freely loved by the Father, and turns this love in free service to others, he will start a never-ending growth process.**

In John's Gospel, Jesus states: "*for God gives the Spirit without limit*"; we put the limit. This limit is in our existence. All the space we put by for interest, selfishness and rancor, will not be fruitful and becomes a death zone; but if we gradually allow this love to spread throughout us, loving others, we will discover unknown energies inside us.

I think there's a kind of experience that all of us made for sure. For example, when a relative or a friend is ill, we find lots of energies inside that we never suspected we had. Those are loving emergency situations that provide unknown endurance, power and a loving ability, because the moment of love is the one that develops man.

**The development line of an individual, according to Jesus, is love, no others exist!**

So the Samaritan woman says: *"Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."*

Jesus seems to jump from one subject to another and replies: *"Go, call your husband and come back."*

What has her husband to do with this? The woman answers: *"I have no husband"*.

It seems that Jesus wants to act as a puritan, a moralist and says: *"You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."*

This is the first time in Gospels that Jesus acts as a puritan; he never did before. I want to remind you that evangelists are not giving an account of something, they are telling theological truths.

Number five is a very important detail. She had five husbands plus the man that she has now who is not her husband. Total of six men. Samaritans were born when Syria invaded this region and deported most of inhabitants replacing them with colonists coming from different geographic areas. Five different stocks entered Samaria, each of them carrying its own 'god'. On the five hills they built five temples, plus the one for the God of Israel, Yhavè on Garizim mountain.

Therefore Jesus is reproaching idolatry! Not adultery.

In the Bible adultery is never meant as being unfaithful to one's partner, but as idolatry. If God is people's spouse, adoring other divinities is idolatry. What is thus Jesus saying to this woman? If she is ready to receive the gift from God, she has to be free from idols, because they produce death. And death is incompatible with God. Why do other divinities produce death? Because they steal something from men; they want men to sacrifice something for them, even human sacrifice. God is, on the contrary, the one that communicates life; idols are the one who steal it.

Who can these idols be, then? According to the Bible, idols are the one who are always demanding sacrifices, either human ones.

Jesus is not reproaching the woman for her "exuberant" love life, but he mentions the sin of idolatry to Samaria's people.

The woman will not be able to receive this water until the other five divinities will be abandoned. She immediately understands: *Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.*"

She thinks that the relationship with God is favored by a worship, but she asks where she can find this true God. The answer that follows is very solemn and is a everlasting one. *"Believe me, woman (that is spouse - wife), a time is coming when you will worship the Father (note Father and not God), neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.*

**By saying these words Jesus proclaims the end of sanctuaries and pilgrimages, there's no need to go to a certain place in order to experience God!** Jesus declares the end of pilgrimages, and of sacred doors... There's no need to go on top of Garizim mountain, or Gerusalem; this time is out! God needs temples or worships, the Father doesn't. He just needs that his sons become able to love like he does.

*"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth".*

The Greek expression 'spirit and truth' is the translation from the Hebrew 'faithful love'. This is the characteristic of God, his love is faithful.

*"God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."*

**God is love and his worshipers must worship him with a faithful love, not for him, but for men.** The only thing he really looks forward is a lengthening of his "loving energy", the one that he communicates to his sons. The woman wanted to know which one was the right temple, which sanctuary was the best worship place. Jesus answers that she hasn't got to go to a specific place to worship God, by offering something to him, because God is offering everything to her. This is the extraordinary change. **In religion men make offerings to God, in faith God offers himself to men, by giving them his same loving ability.**

**A loving experience, which is the only worship that God is asking for, is not to be addressed to him, but to others, after having welcome his faithful love.** The more we are able to love, the more we resemble to God! This new worship doesn't humble men, but strengthens them. **Men are no longer asked to deprive themselves of their bread, for a divine offering; God turns himself into bread to offer himself to men.**

The Samaritan Woman, really amazed by this gift, says: *"I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming.*

And then Jesus does something really unheard-of. Remember that women were not considered as credible to testify in trials and Jesus, for the first time, reveals himself to a woman. She goes back to the town and says to the people: *Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"* Samaritan men listen to her, come out of town, live with him for two days and then say: *"We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."*

Religious and orthodox Jews didn't realize what these men immediately understood. The more you are far from religion, the more you are able to experience God!