

Fr **Alberto Maggi** OSM

THE INSTIGATOR

The murder of Jesus according to John

Padua

14 -16 March 2008

Organised by the "*Blessed are the Peacemakers*"

*Transcript from audio tape **not revised by the author***

Note: This is a literal transcription. Errors of composition are due to the difference between the written language and the spoken language. Punctuation is applied by ear.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Part One: The Arrest of Jesus, a Dangerous Man (Jn 18:1-14).....	4
Part Two: The Two Betrayals of Peter (Jn 18, 15-27).....	19
Part Three: Jesus and Pilate, the Judge and the Accused. (Jn 18:28-40).....	30
Fourth Part: the Sin that Takes Away the Lamb from the World. (Jn 19, 1-12).....	38
Part Five: the Trophy of the Cross. (Jn 19, 13-22).....	47
Part Six: the Funeral and the Wedding. (Jn 19, 23-42).....	53

Introduction

A very warm welcome to all and let us congratulate ourselves because so many of us have willingly come here and this is great! We came here this evening not only to meet Alberto, to whom we are very grateful for being with us, but also with the desire to study and deepen our understanding of the Word that he shares and transmits to us.

Most of you know Fr Alberto: you are not here by chance. Today, when I went to the station to fetch him I said hello and then he said to me: “But how beautiful it is! But how beautiful it is”. “What?”, I said. “John's text, how great!” he replied excitedly. And even this evening he ate only a little dinner, because he was very excited. And then I thought for a moment. I think that the things that we remember are those that have excited us. In our life the memories that remain are those that are to do with our emotions. And therefore remembering, bringing up out of our hearts the Word of the Lord means first of all letting us be overwhelmed by it. I believe that, on the whole, this is the most beautiful gift that Fr Alberto can give us this evening: sharing in his excitement.

You've seen the title of this meeting. It seems we've stumbled upon one that gives us this intriguing image, an atmosphere of a thriller around Jesus Christ: “The Instigator”. I believe that we all need to get thrilled by the Word of the Lord. And I thank Alberto again for being here. You know that we have already missed a meeting because of the poor state of his knee, but now he can walk again.

Part One: The Arrest of Jesus, a Dangerous Man (Jn 18:1-14)

Thank you all for being here this evening. Thanks to Albino for his words, always so fraternal. And it is truly moving. This evening we approach a text which is a literary and theological marvel. I'm referring to the chapters that John dedicates to Jesus' Passion, chapters that the Evangelist has particularly cared for and that, if understood, can leave their mark. Above all, as always, the effect of the Word of the Lord can change our relationship with God and, consequently, our relationship with others.

These pages are pretty difficult, so it will take some time to get through them. Before we begin, I need to introduce some basic notions. Most of you who come regularly to these meetings do not need it. But perhaps there are some people that are here for the first time. The first notion to keep in mind in order to understand the Gospels is that, despite containing some accounts of events, they are not chronicle but theology; that is, the Gospels do not concern themselves with history but with faith. You will know that up to forty years ago it was thought that the Gospels were a kind of biography of Jesus. Not so. The Evangelists undoubtedly report some historical events of Jesus' life, but they transfigure them, because they are not interested in transmitting facts that happened 2000 years ago but truths that are always valid for all times. Therefore the Gospels are not chronicles but theology, do not concern history but faith and they are not about facts but truths.

A second notion to keep in mind when we read the Gospels is that we must always distinguish between what the Evangelists want to say from how the Evangelists say it. What the Evangelists want to say is always valid as it is the word of God, valid forever. How they say it is part of the Evangelists' artistic, cultural and theological make up.

Finally, last warning: already from the first lines you will ask yourself this question: is it possible that the Gospels were written in such a complicated way, so difficult to understand? Were they not written to be read by ordinary people? The answer is: "No". The Gospels were not written to be read by ordinary people, for the simple reason that people, in the vast majority of Christian communities, were illiterate. The Gospels were written by the theologian, by the writer of a community in a condensed way and then were sent to another community where they were not read by ordinary people but by the learned and well educated person of that community. The theologian would interpret it for the members of the community. He was called "the reader". Who was the reader? He wasn't simply a person who could read. He was a theologian who was able to 'decode' these texts, letting himself be guided by some special words or phrases that the Evangelists had used for this purpose. This evening we will do the same. If the Evangelists had wanted to write a text that could be read by everyone they would have written them in quite a different style.

We now begin the reading of these magnificent pages of Jesus' Passion according to John, to which we have given the title "The Instigator". Among other things the poster advertising this meeting truly gives the impression of a 'whodunnit' mystery. It almost looks like the cover of a thriller: who is the moral perpetrator of Jesus' assassination? I say this because up until not long ago, up until a few decades ago, a theology was still in vogue according to which Jesus had died because this was the will of God. We shall see, guided by the Evangelist, if this is true.

Then, let's get started. For those who have the text and want to follow, we start at the beginning of chapter 18. We will read and comment verse by verse and often word for word, because the Evangelist has loaded every word.

After he had said all this, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron valley where there was a garden into which he went with his disciples (Jn 18:1).

After he had said all this: the Evangelist begins the Passion of Jesus by linking it to what Jesus had said previously. We then need to go and see what it was that Jesus had said and that the Evangelist had placed at the end of Chapter 17. He had said this: *'I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them'* (Jn 17:26). Jesus says that he has already made his name known. "Name", in the Jewish culture, indicates the deepest reality of a person and here he means the name of God, the name of the Father. Jesus says not only that he has already made his name known, and we will see how, but also that he will continue to make it known. Why? Because the same love that the Father has bestowed on his Son might also be poured on his disciples. Let us see then why the Evangelist thinks it is very important to link Jesus' Passion to what Jesus had said previously, and try to understand what this sentence means.

Jesus says: *'I have made your name known to them'*. Chapter 13 started in a very solemn way. The Evangelist writes: *'Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end'* (Jn 13:1). That is, Jesus expanded to the maximum his capacity to love. It is a solemn moment: shortly Jesus will be captured and killed. Jesus, who is with his disciples, knowing that he is about to be killed, makes a supreme effort to display his love. We could imagine goodness knows what speech, what extraordinary gestures! Jesus instead starts to wash the feet of his disciples. He washes the feet of his disciples to make God's name known.

In this Gospel the Evangelist declares at the end of his prologue: *'No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known'* (Jn 1:18). The Evangelist disagrees with the Jewish tradition that stated that Moses had seen God. It is not true. Moses might have had a partial experience of God. Therefore God's will that Moses seeks to express does not correspond to the true will of God, because Moses has not seen God. No one has ever seen God. He is only revealed in his Son. Here is what the Evangelist means: "From now on concentrate on what Jesus says and especially on what Jesus does. Compare everything you think you know about God with what you see in Jesus and keep all that is the same, but get rid of anything that is different. This is because it isn't Jesus that is the same as God, but God that is the same as Jesus". John's declaration is very important. It will be reiterated in chapter 14, when Philip asked Jesus: *'Lord, show us the Father and then we shall be satisfied'* (Jn 14:8). And Jesus will reply: *'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father, so how can you say, "Show us the Father"?'* (Jn 14:9) Jesus is not the same as God. If we say that Jesus is the same as God we mean that we already know God, we already have an idea of God. Instead the Evangelist says: No, no one has ever seen God. It isn't that Jesus is the same as God but that God is the same as Jesus. So we should reject every idea, every image, every theology that we have of God that does not correspond with what Jesus says or does.

Therefore Jesus shows us what God looks like, the Father's face. But how? By washing the feet of

his disciples. This is not an exercise in humility, but Jesus reveals the true face of the Father. Religion - in these meetings we will always use the word "religion" in a negative way, as it appears in the Gospels, while we will use "faith" as its positive match - religion had projected in God men's fears, frustrations, desires and ambitions and had portrayed God as distant and inaccessible and especially a figure to be feared. This was a God that could be approached only by people that were worthy, fully pure; a God who demanded a rigid ritual to approach him. The impure person could not get close to the Lord. Jesus demonstrates the falsity of this religious belief that excludes from God most human beings. Imagine what must feet have looked like in those days: people walked barefoot and trampled over muck, excrement, spit, dust. The feet were the dirtiest part of a person. Well, Jesus who is God, takes the initiative and does not expect that his disciples clean themselves before he could accepted them to his presence, but it is he who gets down on his knees at their service, starting with what was the most unclean part of them.

This is the face of the Father, a God that for love wants to merge with people, a God who is not put off even by man's dirtiest parts. Religion taught us that unclean people had to purify themselves to be worthy of meeting the Lord. Jesus demonstrates the contrary: welcome the Lord and he will purify you.

As we have seen, Jesus says, *'I have made your name known to them'*: what is God's name? The name of God that Jesus made known is a God who for love puts himself at the service of men. It is not true that men must serve God, because God has no need of anything. It is God who puts himself at the service of men. Our Lord becomes a servant so that those who are considered servants may become lords. However this isn't enough. Jesus says *'I have made your name known to them'*, so the name is Love in the form of service, but he adds: *'and will continue to make it known'*. He will make it known now with his Passion. What does the face/name of God that Jesus will make known with his Passion looks like? A love that is faithful to man and that until the end will always be an incessant proposal of love. We will see that Jesus, who is the full manifestation of God, will always, constantly, and in an increasing manner make an offer of love. Jesus will be betrayed, will be flogged, will be beaten up, will be insulted; Jesus' reaction will always be a renewed offer of love. Therefore, the God of Jesus, the God that Jesus makes known with his Passion is that of a love that is service, but, above anything else, a faithful love that does not stop even in the face of man's wickedness and infidelity.

'Jesus left'. Jesus leaves Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the holy city, is no longer the seat of God but is the seat of God's adversary: Mammon. This is because profit and self interest had become the true God of the temple. Therefore Jesus went out, and with Jesus the glory of God exits. Jesus is the only true Temple which clearly reveals the love of God. People were required to go to the old temple, but not everyone could enter it. The Law stipulated that certain people for their particular physical, moral or religious condition could not access the temple and in fact some people thought to be permanently rejected by God. Religion in its perversion had said to some people: "You are in sin". "And who can save us from sin". "You can be saved from sin only by God". "Let's go to God then". "No, since you are in sin you are not allowed to turn to God". It is the perversion of religion: it states that certain people are in sin; it says that it is only God that can save people from sin; but precisely because they are in sin they cannot turn to God. Religion throws people into despair! Not so for Jesus! Jesus who is the true image of God, Jesus who is God's true temple doesn't stay in the temple waiting for people to go to him because so many people cannot get to him. It is him who goes and

meet those people who were not allowed access to the temple. That is why, in chapter 9, when Jesus leaves the temple the first person he meets is a man born blind. Because of his handicap he was considered cursed by God. The man who could not get close to the lord of the temple is approached by the Lord himself, that is Jesus.

'Jesus left with his disciples'. Going forward we will find many small details that constitute those reading keys, those literary techniques that the Evangelist uses; it is up to us to discover them to appreciate richness of his text. Jesus and his disciples. Abandoning the religious institution and the temple is an act that Jesus does with his disciples. *"And crossed the Kidron valley"*. This is the only time that the Kidron Valley is mentioned in the New Testament. It was a stream that flowed from the slopes of the mountain on top of which there was the temple, near the Garden of Olives or the Mount of Olives.

"Kidron" means "dark", because it was low on the slopes, a rather gloomy place. Why does the Evangelist tell us about the Kidron stream, which, I repeat, is the only time that it appears in the New Testament? Going forward we will often have the opportunity to appreciate that all details in the Gospels, even those that do not seem important or necessary for the understanding of the text, in reality are of great theological importance and it is up to us to try to understand them. To us that Jesus had crossed a torrent, and that this torrent was called Kidron doesn't seem relevant, but the Evangelist took note of it. Why the brook Kidron? Because the Kidron stream in the Old Testament reminds us of Absalom's betrayal of his father, King David, who had to flee and abandon Jerusalem, crossing the brook Kidron (see 2S 15:23). Therefore, the fact that the Evangelist has mentioned this brook suggests that here we are in an atmosphere of treason: a son betraying his father or, as we shall see shortly, a disciple betraying his Teacher. But there is more: the Kidron brook was located in a valley called the "Valley of Josaphat". Josaphat is a Hebrew name that means "Judgement of God". It was believed that in this valley God would sit in judgement; here there would be the universal judgement (see Jl 4:12). This valley and brook are still here today. The Valley of Josaphat is still the preferred place to be buried for Jews, Muslims and Christians alike: they believe resurrection and judgement will happen in there. Therefore, by citing this location, the Evangelist suggests that here is the place where the judgement of Israel will be, that Israel which the Evangelist has already judged by writing in his prologue: *'He came to his own and his own people did not accept him'* (Jn 1:11).

Later on we will come back to this theme. Be careful: what we will read now is not a violent polemic with the Jewish world which the Christian community had already completely abandoned at the time of writing. On the contrary, it is a severe warning addressed to the Christian community, so that it does not replicate the same errors. *'He came to his own and his own people did not accept him'*. There is the risk, even for the Christian community, that instead of being a dynamic community, animated by the Spirit, it degrades to a rigid institution, governed by the Law; law that prevents people from recognising the Lord when he comes. Therefore, since there will be expressions of great violence in these two chapters, I remind you, it is not a polemic with the Jewish world but a warning to the Christian communities to avoid falling into the same errors.

'Where there was a garden into which he went with his disciples'. Here the theme of the garden appears for the first time. This is important because this theme appears here at the place where Jesus was captured, but it will also reoccur at the place of his crucifixion and in the end at the place of his

burial. We have said that the Gospels are not about chronicling events, but about truths, not history but theology. Why does the Evangelist insist on the theme of the garden? The garden is the place of life, the garden here echoes the garden of Eden where God had placed man. The garden is the divine space where there is man created in the image and likeness of God; but especially this garden is a place that is incompatible with death.

The garden is the place where the grain of wheat falls, explodes all the potential that it has inside and sprouts into an extraordinary ear. That is why we will find the theme of the garden at the place of the crucifixion. It is impossible and absurd to think that in a place of executions there was a garden. I repeat this is not a historical fact but theological one. The place where Jesus stands is the place of life, outside is death. But please note this: when Jesus came out of Jerusalem, the Evangelist wrote that '*Jesus left with his disciples*': Jesus and his disciples are one unit. Here the literal translation would be '*where there was a garden, which he entered and his disciples*'. We would have expected: "he entered with his disciples"! This is because his disciples are not yet able to stay fully in the place of life; they will need to undergo a progressive process to reach maturity. And maturity will be attained when finally, freed from fear of death, they will be capable of giving their lives. For now they are not there yet. We shall see that they would be capable of giving their lives for Jesus, but they are not capable of giving their lives like Jesus. They can turn their backs on the religious institution, but they aren't yet fully ready for the garden, the place of life. They will enter it in a gradual manner. Jesus is fully in the garden, his disciples are approaching it progressively.

Judas the traitor knew the place also, since Jesus had often met his disciples there (Jn 18:2). This is where Judas appears in this Gospel for the last time. Judas had already been defined as a devil. Jesus had said: '*Did I not choose the Twelve of you? Yet one of you is a devil*' (Jn 6:70). Why did Jesus declare that Judas was a devil? And why is it that later on during supper he says that Satan had entered into him? Jesus is the Son of God because he gives to others all that he has and all that he is. The ones who communicate life to others not only don't lose their own but enrich it. This is why Jesus has inside himself a life of such quality that it is indestructible. The one who gives life to others, who commits his existence to others does not weaken but enhances himself. Therefore, Jesus by giving himself completely has not lost but enriched his life, to the point that it became indestructible. Judas, who is the son of the devil, is on a reverse process. The Evangelist denounced this disciple: "He was a thief", i.e. withheld for himself what was meant for others. While Jesus gives what he is and what he has and communicates life, Judas takes for himself what belongs to others. Those who live for themselves, who take life away from others, who suck life out of others, take away not only other people's lives, but their own as well. This is why Judas is considered to be the devil. While God is the one who gives life, the devil is the one that takes it away: he is the image of death.

Jesus, during the last supper, tried unsuccessfully to win over this disciple. We all know the story: Jesus in chapter 13 takes a morsel of bread, dips it in the plate and offers it to Judas. It was customary, during a dinner, for the owner of the house to begin the dinner by dipping a piece of bread, and offer it to the most important guest. For Jesus, Judas is the most important among the disciples. Why? He is the only one who is in danger of being lost completely. Jesus offers his preferential love to this disciple by offering the first piece of bread. If Judas had eaten it he would have assimilated this love. Judas did not eat it. And Judas took it and went out. The Evangelist

noted: *'It was night'* (Jn 13:30). This was not just a chronological detail: this was the darkness inside him. He has not assimilated Jesus to become like him but took hold of Jesus to give him death, to betray him. This is why Judas is considered to be the devil in this Gospel.

John says that *'Judas the traitor knew the place also'*. This is a reading key which the Evangelist gives us. "The place" is a technical term, with which they referred to the temple in Jerusalem, the holy place. Well, for John, the holy place where God is worshipped will no longer be the one built by human hands. The temple is where Jesus is. Already we have touched on this idea: it is no longer the man who must go to God, because not all men can go to God. Many do not consider that they are worthy of having access to God. But it is God that goes toward the men, a God who does not stop in the face of any human situation. The God of Jesus does not tolerate that there be even a single person that can feel removed from him because of the Law, morality or religion. Peter after his disturbing encounter with a pagan – Cornelius - in which he sees the same divine action that had befallen him, puts it beautifully: *'God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean'* (Ac 10:28). It is religion that divides between pure and impure, between sinners or otherwise, between righteous and unjust. Not so God. There is not a single person who could feel excluded from the love of God. Therefore the holy place is where God's love becomes manifested, that is in Jesus. This is not a place to go to, but it is a place which comes and meets us.

So Judas brought the cohort to this place together with guards sent by the chief priests and the Pharisees ... (Jn 18:3). John's description is deliberately exaggerated. Jesus, from the first moment in which he appears in this Gospel, had only expressions and words of love, and went about communicating life to those who did not have life. He never used violence toward anyone, always and only expressed the love of God and yet it is precisely for this that Jesus is very dangerous indeed. To capture Jesus he organises a police expedition that has no precedent in history. To capture an individual who has never done any harm to anyone and who is not dangerous, the Evangelist writes that *'Judas brought the cohort'*.

In Jerusalem there were two police forces: one was in charge of policing the city and was under the orders of the Roman Pilate; the other was in charge of policing the temple and was made up of Jews, because the Romans, the rulers, were gentiles and could not enter the temple of Jerusalem. Between the two forces there was great rivalry, each loathed the other. However there is now a common hazard and therefore they unite. The term "cohort" indicates a group of 600 Roman soldiers. But it is not enough: Jesus is not a danger only to the Romans, Jesus is especially a danger to the religious institution! Therefore the Evangelist writes that also *'the chief priests and Pharisees'* got in on the act. John is the only Evangelist who mentions the Pharisees during the Passion of Jesus: they were the spiritual leaders of the people. They also provided their guards. We know that there were two hundred guards in service at the temple. Eight hundred policemen to capture a single individual. This figure, deliberately exaggerated, makes us understand the enormous danger posed by Jesus. And we will discover little by little how dangerous Jesus was.

You see, we have arrived at to the Passion but what surprises early in the Gospel is not that Jesus is captured and killed but how he managed to survive for so long! Jesus managed to live for so long because he was quick to go on the run and abscond. When he saw that there was danger in an area he moved on to another. For as long as he took to set up a community capable of transmitting his message, even if in a raw way, Jesus was always on the run. Then, when he decided it was the right

time, he gave himself up. Jesus was perceived as a very dangerous man, which is demonstrated by the fact that 800 policemen are sent to capture him.

What is the danger posed by Jesus? John states in his prologue that no one has ever seen God, only the Son is the full revelation of God. Jesus came to show us a new way to relate to God and has shown us that God was completely different. Jesus shows us a God who is love, who wants to merge with man. The whole message of Jesus is this: God is so in love with man that he wants to merge with him and become one with him. But do you realise what this means? That all those institutions that religion had set up to allow a relationship between God and men have not only become unnecessary but have become an obstacle.

Religion had created a chasm between God and men, between the holiness of God, and the ignominy of sinful man. This abyss then was filled by religious institutions, through a sacred place where man could go and meet God, a law that man had to observe to be sure to fulfil God's will, precise rituals, a cult to follow in order to please God, priests that were mediators between God and men. These mediations not only did not allow communion with God but prevented it. Jesus said that God has no need for all these mediations because God wants to merge with man, whatever his condition, to give him his divine condition. Therefore, there is no longer any need for a temple, Law, religion and priests. If men realised this, it would have been the end of the religious institution and the cast of priests. We then understand how extremely dangerous Jesus was. It is not surprising that Jesus' most bitter enemies were the religious people. We will return to this topic again because the Evangelist alludes to it continuously throughout his Gospel.

Going back to Judas, the Evangelist writes that he took a detachment of police and '*cometh there*' (literal translation from Greek). The Evangelist had used this expression when Jesus spoke of the prince of the world, the devil: '*Cometh the prince of this world*' (see Jn 14:30). Judas here represents the power of the satanic world. Note well how the Evangelist writes (from Literal Greek translation): ***with lanterns and torches and weapons*** (Jn 18:3). It is not possible that Judas alone had carried lanterns and torches and weapons on his own. The syntax is deliberately forced in order for us to understand that Judas is the man of darkness. He is the devil who brings death and therefore carries the symbols of death, the weapons; above all, being in darkness, he needs artificial light. For the Evangelist Judas is the image of darkness. It is now the clash between the devil that Jesus had defined '*murderer from the start*' (Jn 8:44) and Jesus who is the one who brings life.

Knowing everything that was to happen to him, Jesus came forward and said, 'Who are you looking for?' (Jn 18:4). When we read the Gospels we have a great difficulty: we are conditioned by traditions, devotions and images that we already have. There is the risk that while we read the Gospel we substitute what we read for what we think we know, thus missing the richness of what the Evangelist wants to tell us. Why do I say this? Because in this Gospel Jesus is not presented as a sacrificial victim that is led to the slaughter, but he is a Jesus that, having decided that the time had arrived to surrender and give himself up, is fully aware of what is happening and always in charge of the situation. I say this because devotions are beautiful things, but we must not confuse our devotions with the Gospel! Sometimes, after commenting this Gospel, I ask the audience: while carrying the cross to his execution place, how many times did Jesus fall? Believe it or not, there is always someone who says: three times.

Go and see if Jesus had fallen! Once in a meeting a priest contested what I was saying: “Father, maybe not three times, but certainly at least once”. He is probably still browsing through his Gospel to try and find Jesus' fall. Jesus never fell while carrying his cross! That is derived from a devotion, the Via Crucis, not from the Gospels. They make Jesus fall to project on him our sufferings, our weaknesses, and, in so doing, they debase the meaning of the cross that has nothing to do with suffering. Jesus never falls! In Jesus' hands, the cross becomes a trophy that Jesus, the son of God, is looking forward to carry so that people understand how great his love is. Therefore, the Evangelist presents a man always fully in charge of the situation.

Jesus therefore '*knowing* – being perfectly aware of - *everything that was going to happen came forward*'. The original text says: Jesus came out [of the garden]. Judas does not enter the garden. The garden, as we have seen, is the sanctuary of God's love, and the place of life. Judas cannot enter there: he is the man of darkness, the agent of the devil and a man of death. Therefore Jesus comes out, because darkness cannot enter the place of light. Jesus said: '*Who are you looking for?*'. This is similar to the question Jesus asked his first disciples: '*What are you looking for? If you look for life then come*'.

We said from the outset that during the whole passion Jesus, even when facing his traitors, or his jailers, or his executioners, will always try and convey an offer of love. Remember what he said? '*I made your name known*'. And this name is a God who is a love that serves, a God who does not ask man to purify himself to be worthy of him but a God who says: “Accept me and I will make you worthy of me”. But Jesus not only said, '*I made your name known*', but also '*I will make his face known*'. The face of God is that of faithful love for man, whatever his or her behaviour, a love that incessantly shows his fidelity. And, in fact, Jesus offers all that to Judas! '*Who are you looking for*'. Are you looking for life, like the first disciples, to whom he had said "*Come and see*"?

Jesus therefore asked: “*Who are you looking for?*” ***They answered, 'Jesus the Nazarene'*** (Jn 18:5). Please note that the original Greek text has *nazoraios* not “Nazarene”. I would like to emphasise this because, unfortunately, translators translate a little hastily with Nazarene. "Nazarene" means the one who comes from Nazareth. However, the Evangelist does not write "the Nazarene", but *nazoraios*. This word has been coined by the Evangelist, because he wants to include three distinct terms in this word: the first and obvious one is Nazareth, the place of Jesus' origin. Why Nazareth? At the beginning of the Gospel, when the first disciples say to Nathaniel: '*We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth*' (Jn 1:45) he replied sceptically: '*From Nazareth? Can anything good come from that place?*'. Nazareth was a mountain village in Galilee, it was the haunt of revolutionaries. The Galileans were known as hotheads and troublemakers. At the time of Jesus, when people said: “He is a Galilean” they did not mean the region one was from, but that he was a hothead.

The second term is "Nezer" which means "new shoot" in Hebrew. The Evangelist echoes Isaiah's prophecy that referred to the Messiah: '*A shoot will spring from the stock of Jesse, a new shoot - "nezer" – will grow from his roots*' (Is 11:1). Therefore "nezer" means the long awaited Messiah. Finally, the third term is "nazir" which means “God's anointed one”. Therefore *nazoraios* means the Messiah who comes from Nazareth and is anointed by God. This is the dangerous man! In fact on the board that will be put above the cross according to John Gospel there will be precisely this expression: '*Jesus the nazoraios the King of the Jews*' (Jn 19:19). Dangerous

indeed: Jesus the Messiah, the one anointed by God.

To Judas and his accomplices who were looking for him, Jesus replied: '**I am he**' (Jn 18:5). This expression is not simply the answer to the guards, but it is a statement claiming full divine status. We all know the episode in which Moses in the desert asks the divine entity in the burning bush to say who he is. The Lord did not respond by giving his identity because an identity is what defines and delimits something. God cannot be defined or delimited. So Lord responds with an activity that makes him recognisable: "I am who I am." And "I am" has become the name of God in the Old Testament. Therefore, Jesus claims the fullness of divine status by responding "I am." The fullness of the divine condition is manifested in Jesus. "I am" is the name of the God who freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and who commanded to celebrate the Passover in remembrance of this liberation. Now it is the religious leaders who, as it happened that time with the Pharaoh, attempt to prevent the liberation of the people.

The Evangelist noted: ***Now Judas the traitor was standing among them*** (Jn 18:5). Well, what a discovery: we knew it! The Evangelist had already mentioned Judas twice! Why is the Evangelist here emphasising that among them there was Judas as well? He already had said it! Indeed it is Judas who leads this squad of soldiers, and Judas who had weapons and torches. Why is the Evangelist at this point, not necessarily for the understanding of the text, writing '*Now Judas the traitor was standing among them*'? One of the literary techniques the Evangelists use and we need to know to discover the richness of their writings, is the rule of three. The number three in the Hebrew symbolism meant "what is complete, the totality". Then the Evangelist to indicate the full membership of Judas at this time of darkness and betrayal repeats his name three times.

When we are given the number three, e.g. a character that appears three times it indicates something that is complete. For example, we are now on the eve of Easter and most times we'll hear in these days the proclamation given by Jesus when announcing his Passion: "I will be put to death but after three days I will rise up." Jesus is not giving directions for the Easter triduum!

Have you ever tried to count these three days? Even if we stretch them out we do not arrive at three days! Jesus was killed, it seems, on a Friday afternoon and they realized that he had arisen on a Sunday morning. They went to the tomb the following Sunday morning! If they had gone on Saturday they would have realised before! As they complied with the law, still victims of the Law, they never went to the tomb on a Saturday.

If they had gone to the tomb they would have realised that Jesus was risen. When Jesus says that he would arise after three days he is not giving directions for the Easter triduum but he is saying: "I will be killed but I will come back to life completely." Here, in this case, however, Judas appears in the Gospel for the third time as the one who betrays Jesus and then disappears from the Gospel. The other Evangelists, Matthew and Luke in the Acts, will report two different ways Judas ended his life. Here, in this Gospel, Judas disappears swallowed by darkness and death. He is the man of arms and the man of torches in the night. He is the man who is deeply tied up with Jesus' betrayal.

In Matthew's Gospel Judas repents, returns the reward for his betrayal and then hangs himself. In the Acts of the apostles Judas will not repent and will not return anything. The Evangelist writes that '*He fell headlong and burst open*' (Ac 1:18). You know that in popular tradition they have put together the two elements. They say: he hanged himself, then fell to the ground and burst open. Not

so! Why does the Evangelist use this macabre term "burst open"? It was the sentence reserved for traitors. A traitor in the eastern world was sentenced to a terrible death: he had his legs bound to two horses, then they whipped the horses and the body was split. Therefore the author of the Acts, Luke, tells us that Judas ended his life like a traitor.

When Jesus said to them, 'I am he,' - and for the second time his divine status is confirmed, - **they moved back and fell on the ground** (Jn 18:6). As we said earlier and we repeat now, John's account is not a historical reconstruction of the events, but a theological interpretation of it. The Evangelist does not tell us the facts but testifies to the truth. *'They moved back and fell on the ground'*, which in the Old Testament are images of defeat. For example, Psalm 27 says: *'When the wicked advance against me to eat me up, they, my opponents, my enemies, are the ones who stumble and fall'* (Ps 27:2). Or Psalm 56 says: *'Then my enemies will turn back on the day when I call'* (Ps 56:9). The Evangelist here combines these two psalms. "Turn back and fall" means defeat. Jesus is the one who has declared: *'I have conquered the world'* (Jn 16:33) and *'The light shines in darkness and darkness could not overpower it'* (Jn 1:5); here then the Evangelist indicates that Jesus has fully won. It will not be darkness that wins over him.

Jesus now is in a position of strength and asks again: **He asked them a second time, 'Who are you looking for?'** (Jn 18:7). Jesus renews his offer of life. Let us remind ourselves: to the first disciples he said: *'What are you looking for'* and to their response has replied: *'Come and see'*. By doing so he placed them in the sphere of life, in the sphere of God's love. Jesus once again offers to his persecutors who want to arrest him the possibility to enter the sphere of life, like to the first disciples. **They said, 'Jesus the nazoraios'** (Jn 18:7). The repetition *nazoraios* shows that this was indeed what prompted Jesus' arrest warrant, the dangerous title: Jesus the Messiah, the anointed of God.

Jesus replied, 'I have told you that I am he' (Jn 18:8). For the third time, Jesus claims divine status. In Jesus the fullness of the divine condition is manifested. In Judas the traitor, the man of darkness, the instrument of the devil was fully manifested. In Jesus, the fullness of the divine condition is manifested: *'I have told you that I am he'*.

Jesus is in a position of strength. **If I am the one you are looking for, let these others go.** (Jn 18:8) When Jesus from afar had seen the approaching of this platoon of 800 soldiers with torches, he had time to run away and save his life. The Evangelist stages the narration on the other side of the stream Kidron. Above the Kidron valley there is the mount of Olives. Jesus had time to climb over the Mount of Olives. On the other side the desert of Judea begins, which has a myriad of tunnels, caves, and places to hide. Jesus could have saved his life. He could have said to his disciples: "Cover my back" and they would have been willing.

During the last supper Peter had said: *'I will lay down my life for you'* (Jn 13:37). If Jesus had wanted, his disciples would have given their lives for him and he would have been safe. It was the duty of disciples to give their lives for their Teacher! Not so for Jesus. Jesus knows that the disciples are ready to die for him but not like him. Jesus does not ask us to die for him but with him and like him to go toward others. Therefore Jesus, although he is in a position of strength, does not save his

life at the expenses of his disciples but, on the contrary, he loses his life to save his disciples. I remind you of what was said at the beginning: with all this narrative, the Evangelist wants to make us understand who God is, what he looks like. Therefore Jesus says, *'If I am the one you are looking for, let these others go'*.

Why does Jesus say this? The arrest warrant was for the whole group, not just for Jesus! When tomorrow morning we will examine the questioning of Jesus by the high priest, he has only two questions: "I want to know where your disciples are and what your doctrine is". Not only Jesus is dangerous. It is his doctrine that is dangerous. "While there is a group or even a single person that spreads this blasphemy of a God who wants to communicate with men, of a God who does not need religious institutions, we are in danger". Therefore the order was to arrest the group as a whole, but Jesus was in a position of strength. The guards had moved back and stumbled. He bartered: *'If I am the one you are looking for, let these others go'*.

The Evangelist sees in this the fulfilment of what Jesus had said: ***This was to fulfil the words he had spoken, 'Not one of those you gave me have I lost'*** (Jn 18:9). In fact, Jesus speaking of his mission had said: *'Now the will of him who sent me is that I should lose nothing of all that he has given to me, but that I should raise it up on the last day'* (Jn 6:39). Jesus not to lose those the Father has given him accepts to lose his own life. He is the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus (Jn 18:10). The Evangelist now changes scene and presents us with an event that is really embarrassing, as well as preposterous. Simon Peter is a disciple among those who follow Jesus, that Jesus has never invited to follow him. In John's Gospel there is a disciple that Jesus has never invited to follow him. It was on his own initiative that he followed Jesus. His name was Simon. For his stubbornness he was nicknamed Stone. We call him Peter. Jesus will invite him to become his follower only after his resurrection when he will finally understand. This disciple called Simon has the negative nickname of Peter (stone) that indicates his stubbornness, his obstinacy. When in the Gospels, not only in John's, he is presented only as Simon it means that he is in harmony with Jesus: almost never. When he is presented with his name and his negative nickname, it means he is about to get into trouble. When he is presented only with his negative nickname, Peter, it means that he is in complete opposition or contrary to Jesus. Jesus never addresses him as Peter, never.

When Jesus addresses this disciple he always calls him Simon. Peter is a literary technique of the Evangelists, to indicate the attitude of this disciple. Do you remember earlier on when we said that there was a reader who was able to detect the reading keys provided by the Evangelists to help with the understanding of these texts? Well, that's what we are trying to do.

Then there is Simon Peter who had ... eh! A sword. A sword! He had come from the scene of the last supper, after he had his feet washed by Jesus, a sign of a love that is service, after Jesus had proclaimed the only commandment in force in his community *"Love one another; you must love one another just as I have loved you. It is by your love for one another, that everyone will recognise you as my disciples"* (Jn 13:34-35), Peter produces a sword! You never know, it might come in handy! In another context, since the Eucharist is re-enacting of the last supper, Peter has just made his first communion! As a memento, he carries a sword - you never know. You can see that Jesus

was correct when he told him: *'Now you cannot follow me where I am going'* (Jn 13:36).

Peter not only had a sword, he *'drew it and ...'*. Here there are a whole series of details so small, yet so significant that it is clear what was said at the beginning: the Gospels are not chronicle but theology, not history but truth, because listen to what the Evangelist tells us. Peter who had the sword, *'drew it and struck the high priest's servant'* - see what a sharpshooter he was!- *'and cut the lobe of his right ear'* (literal translation). Boy, what a surgeon! He pulled out the sword, but he did not remove the servant's ear: but only the lobe of his right ear. And the Evangelist noted: *"The servant's name was Malchus"*.

Well, the Evangelist here is giving us a whole series of indications that we need to consider. First of all, Peter did not hit *'a servant of the high priest'* but *'the servant'*. So, we ask, if Peter wants to hit someone why doesn't he hit the soldiers and instead he strikes the servant of the high priest? Peter does not hit *a servant*, but *the servant*. In the oriental world all officials, all employees of a king, even his own sons were called servants. Therefore, the son of the king was the servant of the King; the prime minister of a king was the servant of the king. Servant had a different meaning in those days. Furthermore, the Evangelist does not say *'a servant'*, any one, but he uses the definite article *'the servant'*, i.e. the representative of the high priest. The high priest has not participated in the capture of Jesus but sent his trustee, his representative and it is this person that Peter takes aim at and cuts the lobe of his right ear.

Why did Peter pick on the lobe of the right ear of this official who represents the high priest? In the consecration of the high priest, according to the directions found in the Book of Exodus, a ram was killed and the lobe of his right ear was anointed with its blood. If the candidate for high priest had a defect in the ear he could not be anointed. Josephus – a historian of the period – tells us that once there were two people aspiring to become high priest. One, feeling that the other had an advantage, bit his ear off so that the other could not be anointed. Then it is clear what the Evangelist wants to tell us and Peter's intention.

Also the Evangelist says that this servant's name was Malchus. Malchus comes from the Aramaic Melec and means "King". So Peter's intention is clear: with this gesture he wants to dismiss the high priest from his job, he wants to make him unfit for office. This will be the cause of Peter's betrayal. He still had not understood that Jesus had not come to reform the institutions but to eliminate them. All the disagreements that Jesus had with his disciples, the conflicts he had with the religious authorities were precisely about this. They expected the Messiah to be a reformer of the institutions. The temple had become a market: the Messiah will come and cleanse it. The Law had become impossible to understand: the Messiah will clarify it. The priesthood was corrupt: the Messiah will cleanse it. The cult had become a means to make money: the Messiah will reform it. No! Jesus did not come to purify the institutions; Jesus came to eliminate them! Here is Peter's problem: Peter, by making the high priest unfit for that position, wants Jesus to replace him with one more worthy, more holy. For Jesus instead, the era of chief priests was over, the era of the temple and worshipping was finished, as well as the Law.

Because of this Jesus does not agree with the gesture of the disciple. ***Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword back in its scabbard'*** (Jn 18:11). Peter thinks he is following the reformer of religious institutions, Jesus instead wants to eliminate them. The alternative to violence is not more violence

but is love, which is what Jesus will do. For this, during the last supper Jesus had said to Simon, 'Now you cannot follow me where I am going' (Jn 13:36). This disciple, always stubborn, always obstinate, tries to follow Jesus and it will be a disaster.

Jesus continues: ***Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?*** (Jn 18:11). Jesus' mission is not intended to bring death but to bear witness to the love of the Father in the world and it is for his fidelity that Jesus also accepted the chalice - the chalice was an image of death as martyrdom. Jesus did not choose to die, Jesus chose to be faithful to his mission to show that God, his Father, is love; a love that does not let itself be conditioned by man's behaviour. And it was to be faithful to this God, to this love that he wanted people to experience, that Jesus faced death. Therefore, Jesus does not flinch. He says: 'Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?'

The cohort and its tribune and the Jewish guards seized Jesus and bound him (Jn 18:12) . The Greek word for “tribune” literally means “commander of a thousand men”. The Evangelist emphasizes again how big the number of soldiers that went to arrest Jesus was. In addition, there were the guards of the Jews. When, in John's Gospel, we find the expression "Jews" he does not mean the Jewish population but always the religious leaders, the authorities. All these people went and arrested Jesus. However, note here a detail that seems superfluous!

We have 800 policemen sent to capture a person who not only has never exercised any violence but who, on the contrary, when one of his disciples starts to be violent, rebukes him. This person is not dangerous, yet note the superfluous detail: there would have been no need to bind him because he had not tried to escape. What is the need to bind Jesus? For the Evangelist there are two reasons: on one hand, the Evangelist sees the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy: 'Let us bind the just man, for he is unbearable to us' (Is 3:10 – Septuagint version), but, on the other hand, the Evangelist emphasises the danger posed by Jesus. Jesus is a terribly dangerous man, so much so that, when he is conducted to the high priest, the high priest will understand the danger of Jesus and he will bind him even tighter.

Let us see then why Jesus is dangerous. ***They took him first to Annas, because Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year*** (Jn 18:13). For the death of Jesus, the Evangelist presents two chief priests: Annas was high priest during the first years of Jesus' life, and Caiaphas during his latter years. The arc of Jesus' life takes place between these two chief priests and both will be responsible for his death. High priest and God are incompatible: the one requires the destruction of the other.

Why does the Evangelist present us Annas? Openly pro Rome, Annas was appointed high priest in the year 6 AD, a few years after Jesus' birth and he remained in office for a few years until he was dismissed. However, through political nepotism and family clout he practically kept the high priesthood in his hands all the time. He managed to get his five children in turn appointed to the office of high priest. By the time of Jesus' death the office is in the hands of his son-in-law and eventually it will go to one of his grandchildren. Here you see the family as a structure of power.

Therefore, Annas represents power and not only priestly power but also economic power. He was the owner of the sheepfold located on the Mount of Olives, where people had to buy animals for sacrifices.

You know that in those days the forgiveness of sins was not given for a prayer but animal sacrifices were needed. And a person would not start off from home with the sacrificial animal because they were special animals that had to have particular attributes. Therefore, once in Jerusalem, where could you go to get an animal for a sacrifice? To the Mount of Olives, in Annas' pens. The pilgrim therefore buys the sacrificial animal, takes it to the temple to the high priest, the animal is slain, a sprinkling of blood and "Your sins are forgiven". Furthermore, when a pilgrim went to Jerusalem he did not return home immediately, but stayed for a minimum of three days, or often a week. If he wanted to eat a thigh of the animal he had sacrificed he had to purchase it from butchers. The butchers of Jerusalem were all franchised by whom? By the family of the high priest and his sons. So Annas in this Gospel represents the dark power: the priestly power and economic power, which are the enemy of God.

The Evangelist tells us that Annas was Caiaphas's father in law and ***It was Caiaphas who had counselled the Jews, 'It is better for one man to die for the people'*** [Literally: '*It is advantageous for one man to die for the people*'] (Jn 18:14). The high priest in reality was called Joseph but the Evangelist introduces him to us with only his nickname of Caiaphas. He will do the same with Pontius whom he calls with the nickname of Pilate. Caiaphas was a negative nickname. In fact, Cayaffa in Hebrew means "the oppressor". As crafty as he was, he beats all records in holding office for 18 years. If you think that in a century there had been 19 chief priests, Caiaphas has beaten all the records. He was as well a man of great wealth and political expediency.

When, after the episode of the resurrection of Lazarus, the religious authorities became panic-stricken, they went to him, and said: '*Here is this man working all these signs, and what action are we taking? If we let him go on in this way everybody will believe in him*' (Jn 11:47-48), Caiaphas, who was quite a rude person and belonged to the party of the Sadducees, insulted them and said: '*You do not seem to have grasped the situation at all; you fail to see that it is to your advantage that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish*' (Jn 11:49-50). Jesus' death should not be attributed to the will of God but to the convenience of the priestly caste in power. Caiaphas was 'The Instigator' (the title given to this meeting). "It is convenient for you that he dies, because if we let him carry on, for us it is all over."

They had understood that in Jesus there was a divine action, they understood that only a man that came from God could do the deeds that Jesus had done, but they could not acknowledge it, because, if they did, it would be the end of their power. They had presented a God in their own image and likeness, a despot God, a leech-like God who was continually demanding of men. The prophet Hosea, in the fourth chapter, made a tremendous denunciation towards the priest: '*They feed on the sin of my people, they are greedy for their iniquity*' (Ho 4:8). What does that mean? We have said that sins were not forgiven with a prayer; offerings and animal sacrifices were needed! The chief priests, the priests had made the Law impossible to observe so to ... ensure a steady stream of offerings to the temple.

With their mouths they preached against sin but in their heart they hoped, not only that the people sinned, but that they sinned more and more. Hosea says, and it is the Lord who speaks: "You are greedy of their iniquities". The more you sin the fatter we get. If, God forbid, someone comes along and starts forgiving sins in alternative ways or, perish the thought, someone starts saying: "There is

no need to go to the temple and offer an animal for the forgiveness of sins, just forgive and you shall be forgiven”, then it is the end for us. What do you mean “Forgive, and you shall be forgiven?” Don't I need to go to the temple and offer an animal?” “No! Forgive those who have done evil to you and the Father will forgive all your sins”. Try to imagine a priest at the temple: “Oh, Ezekiel, Zechariah, today we pulled in fewer goats! Have you seen any pigeons today?” “No, not even one!” “Why?” “There is someone that goes around saying that God does not forgive through animal sacrifices but through the granting of a pardon.” This is a very dangerous situation.

Then the religious institution really saw Jesus as a danger that needed to be completely eliminated. Therefore: *'It was Caiaphas who had counselled the Jews, “It is advantageous for one man to die for the people”'*. The death of Jesus was not decreed by the will of God but by the convenience of the priestly caste in power.

Part Two: The Two Betrayals of Peter (Jn 18, 15-27)

Hello, good morning to all. We continue our reading of the Passion of Jesus according to the Gospel of John. I will briefly remind you of some indications that I provided you with yesterday evening that are useful in understanding what we do. The first was that the Gospels are not chronicle but theology, i.e. do not concern history but are matters of faith. Therefore the Evangelists did not pass on to us facts but truths. There is no doubt that the Gospels contain some historical events and facts but they are not what the Evangelist wants to tell us about.

The second thing to remember is that the Gospels were not written to be read, because people in a large part of the Christian community were illiterate, and therefore they were written by theologians, by great writers, who sent their writings to other communities where the writer or the learned and wise person of the community explained it. For this the Evangelists add to their writings some reading keys, and use some literary techniques known at that time. It is up to us to discover them in order to enjoy the beauty of this text, as we already began to do yesterday evening.

Yesterday evening we were with Jesus being taken to Annas who, despite not being the high priest, was the one who held the strings of power. For more than fifty years Annas, who had been high priest for only a few years, was actually the one who held power. Remember we said that he was able to get his five children and his grandson to hold the office of high priest. Now he ruled through Caiaphas who was his son-in-law, having married his daughter. And Annas in this Gospel, represents evil, darkness, because he is also the holder of the economic power. We ended yesterday evening meeting with a quote from Caiaphas. The Evangelist was keen to emphasise that it was Caiaphas who gave the advice to the Jews - remember that for Jews he does not mean the people of Israel, but their leaders - *'It is advantageous for one man to die for the people'*.

After the resurrection of Lazarus the Sanhedrin was panic stricken. Its members went to Caiaphas and say: *'If we let him go on in this way everybody will believe in him'* (Jn 11:48). Therefore Jesus represented a threat to the institution. And Caiaphas at that meeting replied: *'You fail to see that it is to your advantage that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish'* (Jn 11:50). From this it is clear that the death of Jesus, as we concluded yesterday evening, is not due to the will of the Father: Jesus did not die, as it was taught by a theology of a century ago, to satisfy the wrath of God. He did not die because it was God's will, but because it was the convenience of the priestly caste who was in power. The Evangelist shows the absolute incompatibility between Jesus and the high priest, between Jesus and the priestly caste in power. One requires the destruction, the elimination of the other, as we will see better going forward.

After this brief summary of what we said yesterday, let us resume our reading of chapter 18 of John's Gospel. We've reached verse 15 and, as we did yesterday evening, we continue reading verse by verse, focusing on all of those words that have a particularly rich meaning, both theological and literary. ***Simon Peter, with another disciple, followed Jesus. This disciple, who was known to the high priest, went with Jesus into the high priest's palace*** (Jn 18:15). We have said that the Evangelists load every single word with a rich theological meaning and we will try to discover it, even if it is not possible to have a thorough examination of each word, otherwise we could spend the whole morning on this verse alone.

Simon Peter followed Jesus. This disciple is called Simon, but has a pejorative nickname, Peter, that means as hard as a rock for his stubbornness and obstinacy: he always does the opposite of what Jesus says. Jesus had said to him: "*Now you cannot follow me where I am going*" (Jn 13:36), but he follows him. This disciple called Simon, when his actions are contrary to Jesus' thinking, is also presented with his negative nickname, Simon Peter; when his action is in total conflict with Jesus or against his teaching he is presented only with the nickname Peter, which means "stubborn". Jesus himself will never address this disciple by his nickname but always as Simon. It is the Evangelists who, as a literary technique, use the nickname Peter to indicate a conflict with Jesus.

'Simon Peter, with another disciple, followed Jesus'. Simon Peter is not called a disciple, because he does not wear the 'badge' of the disciple. Jesus at the supper had said: *'It is by your love for one another, that everyone will recognise you as my disciples'* (Jn 13:35). This is the only 'badge' distinguishing Jesus' disciples. There are no external signs, there are no uniforms, there are no titles indicating that one is a follower of Jesus. The only 'badge' is: *'by your love for one another'*. Simon does not have this 'badge'. We have seen yesterday evening that he is the only one who is armed, the only one who reacts with violence. On the contrary, the Evangelist writes, the other disciple was known as such by the high priest.

Who is this disciple? The Evangelist introduces a disciple who remains anonymous throughout his Gospel. All anonymous characters in the Gospels are meant to be emblematic. An emblematic character, besides his historical consistency, is an individual in which every reader of the Gospel can identify with. Therefore we cannot give a name to this disciple: he is the first, together with Andrew, who follows Jesus, goes and live with him and he is the one who is closest to Jesus during the last supper.

When the Evangelist tells us that this disciple *'was leaning back close to Jesus' chest'* (Jn 13:25) he does not mean, as painters have represented, Jesus' favourite disciple that grimaces while lying on his chest: *'close to Jesus' chest'* means full intimacy. As Jesus was *'close to the Father's heart'* (Jn 1:18), that is, he was one with the Father, so this disciple has been identified as at one with Jesus: he was closest during the last supper, we will see shortly that he is on the cross with Jesus and will be the first one to experience him arisen. This disciple has no name and it is therefore inappropriate to 'baptise' him. This disciple is also described in the Gospels as *'the disciple whom Jesus loved'* (Jn 20:2). This does not mean: "the beloved disciple". The only time the term "beloved" appears in the Gospels is with reference to Jesus, who is the beloved son of the Father.

Jesus has no favourite disciples; do not be misled when you read in the Gospels by the expression *'the disciple whom Jesus loved'*. This love is the normal relationship that Jesus has with his disciples, and in fact the same expression is used when referring to Lazarus, Martha and Mary. This disciple is described like this because he has the 'badge' of the disciple, which is of love. The Greek verb used here, *connentō*, is impossible to translate literally into English. It means that he identified himself so closely with Jesus during the last supper, he was so intimate with him that, in the positive sense, he was Jesus' shadow.

This disciple, who was known to the high priest, went with Jesus into the high priest's palace. A literal translation would be: *'He entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest'*. Luckily

we know the 13 rules of writing used at the time because Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus and the Evangelists, listed them in one of his works. This gives us the ability to discover the richness of this text. According to one of these 13 rules of writing, if you want to link two episodes or two themes you use the same word or the same verb only in these two episodes. Well, here for the second and last time appears the term "courtyard", which had already appeared in chapter ten, when Jesus says he is "not the good shepherd" but "the shepherd par excellence".

There is a difference: Jesus does not appear as the good shepherd, the Evangelist does not underline the goodness of Jesus but emphasizes his uniqueness, the excellence of Jesus as a shepherd. Sometimes when we read the Gospel we are surprised: how could Jesus' contemporaries be so obtuse? For us the expressions Jesus uses are so beautiful: "Jesus the good shepherd", the image of Jesus with a lamb ... this image is so endearing, so romantic? How could those who were listening to him say "he is crazy, he is besides himself" and at the end of the episode even try and kill him? Either they are the ones who did not understand anything or are we the ones who are missing the point? Could it possibly be that they understood correctly what Jesus said and we don't? Jesus does not present himself as the "good shepherd" but as the "a shepherd better than any other shepherd", which indicates his excellence, ultimately the shepherd-God, who takes the flock away from all the other shepherds, and take full possession of it.

Well, Jesus, speaking of himself as a shepherd, says: '*he who does not enter into the sheepfold*' (Jn 10:1). The original Greek text has 'aulē' for 'sheepfold'. In the Old Testament 'aulē' has never indicated the sheepfold, the sheep pen, but always the courtyard of the presence of God in the temple. Therefore Jesus is speaking figuratively – the sheep are the people - the sheep are enclosed within a religious institution, which exploits them in the name of God. Jesus came to free them, to get them out, but not to bring them into another sheepfold.

You can see how important the exact translation of the Gospel is. Another error in translation has had a devastating effect on the theology of the Church, with tragic effects. St Jerome made an error when translating verse 16 of Chapter ten. Jesus says that he has come to free these sheep from the sheepfold of Judaism and there will be one flock, one shepherd. St Jerome's translation was that there will be one sheepfold, one shepherd. The Church took it upon itself to be the only 'sheepfold' and, therefore, that outside of it there would be no salvation. Instead, all those who hear Jesus' message hear in his voice nothing else but their own desire for a fullness of life. Well, all those people who hear this message follow Jesus and form one flock with one shepherd. Probably, St Jerome confused the term "fold" in the same verse and his translation meant the opposite of what Jesus intended. Jesus has freed us from sheepfolds, however sacred they might be. He wanted to assemble one flock. For a translation error we ended up with one sheepfold. Hence the Church's century old pretence to be the only sheepfold of the Lord.

This translation error had devastating effects and brought the Church to affirm that outside of the Church - it meant the Catholic Church - there is no salvation. All for a translation error. So much so that in 1442 the Council of Florence stated that all Jews, Muslims and schismatic Christians would go to hell for ever after death because outside of the single sheepfold which is the Church. Outside of this fold there is no salvation. Five centuries later, examining the original Greek text and leaving the Latin translation aside, the error was spotted; the second Vatican Council stated that all Jews, Muslims, Christians of other denominations and non-believers who followed their consciences

achieve salvation. Then all those who had been roasting in hell for five centuries were transported to heaven: "sorry, it was a mistake of translation". It is reported that they are still chasing St Jerome to give him a thump!

Going back to our text, Jesus was brought to the courtyard of the high priest. This shows that it is the high priest who has imprisoned the people of Israel; it is the high priest who, in the name of God, keeps people in slavery. Jesus is God, the liberator, the son of the one who free the people from slavery in Egypt. Now instead of the Pharaoh it is the high priest who is trying at all costs to stop the action of the Son of God, an action that leads to freedom.

But Peter stayed outside the door (Jn 18:16). Here we have only the negative nickname. This indicates that he is going to do something contrary to what Jesus said. This is only a literary technique used by the Evangelists. He is unable to follow Jesus. While the other disciple went in with Jesus, since he was intimate with him, Peter stayed outside the door: he does not have the disciple badge. **So the other disciple, the one known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the door-keeper and brought Peter in** (Jn 18:16). The Evangelist noted that this disciple was known to the high priest ... this is because he was wearing the disciple badge. Peter is again given the chance to become a disciple. It is the true disciple who offers the disciple who is unable to follow Jesus the chance to go in.

The girl on duty at the door said to Peter, 'Aren't you another of that man's disciples?' (Jn 18:17). Here the Evangelist introduces a person who, by her nature and her role, was very low-class. This is a woman, and, in the culture of that time, women are considered outside of humanity, a sub-human species. On top of that, she is young and a maid. The Evangelist introduces a character of the lowest possible status. Well, this third-rate person said to Peter: *'Aren't you another of that man's disciples?'* With her question the young maid offers Peter the opportunity to declare that he is a disciple of Jesus.

He answered, 'I am not' (Jn 18:17). Remember yesterday evening? Jesus presented himself with the divine name "I am" which indicated his divine status. Jesus has the divine status because he is fully human. When a person becomes fully human he attains the fullness of the divine status. This is not an exclusive prerogative of Jesus, but a possibility for all those who accept him. This expression, "I am", that indicates the fullness of divinity, in this Gospel will be placed in the mouth of the man born blind. Once he received the action of Jesus, he also will be able to say: "I am".

Therefore "I am" means the man who has attained the divine condition. Peter is not capable of that. Peter, who responds with violence to violence, who is unable to declare he is a follower of Jesus in front of a young maid, replies: "I am not". Jesus had claimed his divine condition when he said "I am"; Peter's response was the opposite "I am not". It is the first of Peter's betrayal, not only does he betray the Messiah, but he also betrays himself: "I am not". Not being a disciple of Jesus, not being able to be in the sphere of love and life, he says: "I am not". I am nothing.

Now it was cold, and the servants and guards had lit a charcoal fire and were standing there warming themselves; so Peter stood there too, warming himself with the others (Jn 18:18). The Evangelist lists the categories of people who are in the high priest's courtyard. The high priest has servants, that is, people he dominates, and he has guards, people who help him to dominate. In the high priest's courtyard, representing the religious institution, there is the most all embracing power

that there can be. It is exercised in the name of God and in the name of God some people are reduced to servitude. The others are the guards who exercise power in order to keep people in a state of servitude.

'And were standing there warming themselves'. In the same way darkness contrasts with light and death is the opposite of life, so the cold is an image of death which is opposed to the warmth of life. Not having the true light, they light a fire to produce artificial light. *'So Peter stood there too'.* Unable to declare himself a disciple, unable to stand side by side with Jesus, he is with his enemies. He had been called to be totally free, he mixes with servants. He was called to follow the one who said: "I am the light of the world", instead he stands in the darkness. He had been called to be a disciple of Jesus and found himself with his enemies.

The high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching (Jn 18:19). Jesus was captured and brought to the high priest, but the high priest is not interested in the slightest on the person he is facing. He does not ask anything about God, he is only concerned about his own institution. In fact, *'The high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching'.*

Yesterday evening we have said that the arrest warrant was issued for the entire group led by Jesus, not for Jesus only. The arrest warrant was for the group as a whole, because it is not only Jesus who is dangerous, but also his disciples for following his teachings. If there is even only one person who feels free enough to go around spreading his doctrine, as the Sanhedrin noted with alarm, "for us it is the end, because people sense that this doctrine is coming from God". This demonstrates the deceitfulness of the religious institution. It was Jesus who in a position of strength had traded his capture in exchange for letting his disciples go. *'If I am the one you are looking for, let these others go'* (John 18:8). Jesus is the shepherd, the true one, the one who gives his life for his flock. According to the culture of the time, the disciples were required to give their lives for their teacher; here it is the teacher who gave his life for his disciples.

Therefore, the high priest asked him about his disciples. He wants to know where they are. In fact we will see later that his disciples were hiding, in a locked place. They were afraid of the Jews because, I repeat, the arrest warrant was for the whole group. Furthermore, the high priest asks Jesus about his doctrine. It is the doctrine of Jesus, the son of God, that worries the high priest because if people listen to the voice of God they do not listen any longer to the religious institution. They would realise it is a lie. What is it that the high priest fears most? What is it that is so frightening about this doctrine? Jesus came to offer a new relationship between mankind and God, a completely different relationship, utterly unprecedented, that had never been heard before in the sphere of religion and that will be considered a blasphemy. The God of Jesus is a God who is love, only love, that wishes to communicate himself to every man, blend with him and share with him his own divine status. It was something unprecedented, a genuine blasphemy. Not a God who asks to be served but a God who puts himself at the service of people. Not a God who demands offerings and sacrifices, but a God who asks to be accepted. If all this is true, our relationship with God is changed completely.

With religion there is a need for a temple, a particular place where man must go to worship of God. With Jesus the relationship between man and God becomes that of children with their father. And children do not need to go to a particular place, a particular room to relate with their Father. This relationship can happen anywhere. Therefore, there is no need any longer for a place and there is no

longer any need for rites, or a cult because all that is needed is the spontaneity of intimacy. There is no need for special days, what used to be the Sabbath, but any time is good. But especially there is no longer any need of mediators, the priests, because the relationship between God and his people is immediate and personal.

When we talk about priests we must be careful how we use the language. I'm talking about Old Testament priests; let us not confuse them with Christian priests. Unfortunately both are called priests. The priest, in the Old Testament culture, was an individual who was meant to be a mediator between man and God. People could not turn directly to God. They needed a particular intermediary: this was the priest. He was the only one who could make offerings to God. With Jesus the relationship between man and God is direct and immediate. There is no longer any need to have priests because we are all priests. This is the meaning of 'a priestly people'. We are all priests. Unfortunately we confuse this with the specific role of a priest in Christian communities. A priest, from the Greek *presbyter*, indicates a mature person (elder), who has a role of service to the community and facilitates people's relationship with God.

After this clarification let us go back to the arrest warrant. As we said earlier, it was for everyone belonging to Jesus' group because his doctrine was dangerous. Why was it dangerous? Because if it is true that God wants to merge with man, all those structures that religion had created to allow a relationship between God and man not only become unnecessary but are positively harmful.

Jesus' answer does not mention his disciples but it is only about his doctrine. ***Jesus answered, I have spoken openly for all the world to hear; I have always taught in the synagogue and in the Temple where all the Jews meet together*** (Jn 18:19). What Jesus says is an indictment. He had spoken in the temple and twice the religious authorities tried to stone him in there. When Jesus, the word of God, manifested himself, those who had the role of bringing the word of God to the world believed that Jesus was a blasphemer and as such worthy of the death penalty. Jesus says: *'I have spoken openly for all the world to hear'*. What is the characteristic that distinguishes Jesus' message? As we said yesterday, the Gospels are not about events but truths, truths that have reached us through the centuries.

How do we distinguish Jesus' voice from other voices? According to the Gospels it is very simple: the religious authorities, since they know that they are not able to convince, must compel; Jesus, because he has a convincing offer, does not compel. The religious authorities, in order to enforce the laws that they themselves have created and have smuggled in as the will of God must impose them through terror and fear. People don't understand why they must observe those laws. Some laws are irrational. However, people comply with them. Why? Because they were imposed through religious terrorism. If you transgress, this is what you get. Jesus instead does not impose, but he offers. Therefore, even today the criterion to understand whether a proposal comes from God or otherwise is this: if someone is forced to do something then it doesn't come from God. If it is an order, it doesn't come from God, because God never compels: God makes an offer. The religious authorities compel precisely because they know that they cannot convince and for this reason they must threaten with fear. Jesus, on the contrary, because he convinces, he does not compel.

When you have time, read a page of the Old Testament that we do not know whether it is more tragic than comical. This is mainly useful for people who are afraid of transgressing the law, for those of us who still live under the scruples of the fear of God. This page has been created by the

priestly caste to impose their laws. The God of Jesus does not need fear! It is the God of the priestly caste that put fear on people. Because they know that their laws are against intelligence they need to force it on people with religious terrorism.

When you have time read chapter 28 of the Book of Deuteronomy. You will find a list of 52 curses that strike those who violate the law. The author says that "if you do not obey God you will be hit by all these misfortunes" - and there is an incredible list: "Fear, plague, impairment, fever, inflammation, drought, aridity instead of rain, the Lord will send sand and dust, ulcer, scabies, ringworm"... and - I call it "fantasy of the Eternal Father"- "haemorrhoids from which you cannot be cured". The Lord will strike you with madness, blindness, mental confusion; he will strike you on your knees and thighs with a malignant ulcer! - In the end the author is taken by doubts, fearing he had forgotten something. Let's hear him: "*Yahweh will afflict you with all the plagues and all the diseases not mentioned in the book of this Law, until you have been destroyed*" (Dt 28:61). But the ending is the best! You do not know whether to cry or laugh. After all these misfortunes he says: '*Yahweh will send you back to Egypt, either by ship or by a road which I promised you would never see again. And there you will want to offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as serving men and women, but no one will buy you*' (Dt 28:68). It is the worst that can happen! After I've been hit by all these misfortunes I go to Egypt and try to sell myself as a slave but no one will buy me.

Religion uses religious terrorism to frighten people. We might easily laugh about this language but we cannot forget certain catechisms which terrorised people with the pains of hell. Just read some sermons by 18th century preachers or even in more recent times which aimed to terrorise people with fears. Why do we need fear? Because the message is not convincing. When we are offered something good, something nice, something that helps us to be happy there is no need to impose it through fear, there is no need to compel. Simply offer it and there is no need to impose it with fear. Jesus' message is not an obligation but an offer. Jesus' message is not mandatory but it is a proposal. But especially, Jesus' message makes people fully free and carries no threat.

Therefore Jesus says: '*I have spoken openly for all the world to hear; I have always taught in the synagogue and in the Temple where all the Jews meet together*'. We know what was their reaction: they tried to stone him. And Jesus continued: '***I have said nothing in secret***' (Jn18:20). Here Jesus identifies himself with God who said through the prophet Isaiah: '*I have not spoken in secret*' (Is 45:19). The high priest was the holder of the Law, the one who was supposed to observe it faithfully. Jesus is accusing him of not obeying the Law, because the law said that no person could be accused and condemned in the absence of two witnesses. Therefore Jesus said: ***Why ask me? Ask my hearers what I taught; they know what I said*** (Jn 18:21). Jesus invites the high priest to ask witnesses what he said to them. Therefore, Jesus rebukes the high priest because the law in the hands of the priestly caste is an instrument of domination and oppression used to cover their interests.

Already Jesus had said in chapter seven. '*Did not Moses give you the Law? And yet not one of you keeps the Law! 'Why do you want to kill me?'*' (Jn 7:19). The religious authorities are happy to invoke God's Law when it is in their own interest and in support of their prestige. Strangely, God's law is never invoked by the religious authorities when it is in favour of human beings. Is it possible that this law of God is never in favour of people, but always in support of the priestly caste in power? The reality is that the law of God does not exist. God is love and love cannot be expressed

through laws. The law of God is an invention of the caste of priests, as a means of domination and oppression over people. In fact, it appears from the Gospels that all the times that the authorities take cover behind the law of God it is always for the defence of their own prestige or their own doctrines. The law of God is never invoked in favour of man.

At these words, one of the guards standing by gave Jesus a slap in the face, saying, 'Is that the way you answer the high priest?' (Jn 18:22). Powerful people cannot be contradicted; a guard who is subordinate to the high priest identified himself with him. The reaction of the guard is identical to that of Peter: Peter, to defend Jesus, attacks the servant of the high priest; the guard, to defend the high priest, that he feels in difficulty, uses violence. He gave up his own individuality, he did not think with his own head any longer, but thought with his superior's mind and slapped Jesus, because Jesus was taking an attitude that was inappropriate for a person who stood accused.

There were at that time some precise rules: advice was given to defendants, according to Josephus Flavius, a historian of the time, that “the accused had to appear in humble attitude, with the fearful aspect of one who asks for mercy, with long hair and dishevelled”. Well, Jesus is not like this: Jesus answers the high priest without being intimidated by his status. Jesus is the visible expression of God. *'No one has ever seen God'* (Jn 1:18), only Jesus revealed him. Well, God is love that offers himself continuously. Remember how we started? *'After he had said all this'* (Jn 18:1) and the Evangelist was referring to Jesus' words: *'I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known'* (Jn 17:26). The name of God, that is God himself, is a God who puts himself at the service of man. All the passion in John's Gospel, is under the banner of the face of God: a ceaseless and growing offer of love, regardless of people's behaviour.

Jesus has received a slap. ***Jesus replied, 'If there is some offence in what I said, point it out; but if not, why do you strike me?' (Jn 18:23).*** Jesus is trying to make the guard reason, he tries to make him understand the significance of his action, he tries to make him grow up, to judge an action for himself. “If what I said was offensive then show it to me, if not why this act of violence?” Jesus is becoming more dangerous because he is trying the impossible: making a military man think for himself. A guard is accustomed only to obey and to identify himself with those in power. Therefore Jesus is dangerous. If Jesus is able to make even a soldier reason with his own head then he is extremely dangerous. Jesus did not respond to the high priest who quizzed him about his doctrine and his disciples, but the high priest understood the danger represented by Jesus considering that he was trying to make a guard think for himself.

Then Annas sent him, bound, to Caiaphas the high priest (Jn 18:24). Jesus was already bound! The Greek verb means that he was bound even tighter, because they wanted to underline how dangerous he was. Someone who tries to make a military person, who must only obey, think for himself, is extremely dangerous. And there was a precedent, which showed the danger that Jesus represented: the chief priests and the Pharisees had already sent guards to arrest Jesus and the guards had returned empty-handed, saying: *'No one has ever spoken like this man'* (Jn 7:46). Here is the strength of Jesus' message. Religious authorities must impose and force their message through; Jesus, instead, makes an offer and people accept it because a message of fullness of life that every person carries within is inherent in Jesus' word.

This desire may have been narcotised by religion, this desire may have been buried under wrong

experiences in the course of life, this desire for fullness of life can be wasting away, but as soon as one hears the word of Jesus it regains its strength. This is because in the word of Jesus there is the echo of the Creator and we are created in his image and likeness. His message had also overwhelmed the guards. *'No one has ever spoken like this man'.* The Pharisees' reaction was furious. They replied: *'You, too, have been led astray. Have any of the authorities come to believe in him? Any of the Pharisees? This rabble knows nothing about the Law -- they are damned.'* (Jn 7:47-49). Jesus is dangerous indeed!

What the Evangelist writes is really disturbing. The Pharisees say: "Has any of us believed? No. Then you must not believe either!" Religion maintains people in an infant-like condition. Those who are subjugated by religion are not permitted to have their own opinion or thoughts. They must always think in the same way as the religious authority. It is the religious authority that tells you how to think. "Has any of us believed? If none of us believed, why did you? You are cursed". See how contemptuous they are! The religious authority prevents people becoming adult. While the word of Jesus awakens the desire for fullness of life and makes a person grow up, become adult and capable of thinking with his own head and walk with his own legs, religious authorities do the opposite. The religious authorities are terrorised at the thought that people might grow up. People must always remain in an infantile condition and be dependant on what they say. They must believe in what they believe and, if they don't, they attract their contempt.

The religious institution does not fear anti-establishment activities because this strengthens its position of power. What the religious institution fears most is a free-thinking person. All the power of the high priest Annas crumbles in the face of a wholly free Jesus. He dominates the stage. Jesus does not criticise the high priest. He instead claims his freedom. The religious institution, I repeat, does not fear disputes, because disputes do nothing but strengthen their power. What frightens the religious institution is a free person, a person that cannot be manipulated, a person who thinks with his own head. This is dangerous and Jesus must be eliminated.

'Then Annas sent him, bound, to Caiaphas the high priest'. As Simon Peter stood there warming himself, someone said to him, 'Aren't you another of his disciples?' He denied it saying, 'I am not' (Jn 18:25). There is almost a pitiful irony here: while Jesus towers over the stage demonstrating his gentility and freedom, Peter is still warming up with servants and guards. If earlier he had denied to be a disciple in the front of the least of all people, a woman, a young maid, now he is in front of everyone, in public. Again, he is offered the opportunity to declare himself a disciple of Jesus.

'He denied it saying, 'I am not'. For the second time Peter denies being a disciple and says "I am not". With this he also denies his true nature, his humanity. "I am not." Remember yesterday evening we talked about the technique of the number three? The number three indicates a reality that is complete, definitive, total. Judas had appeared three times; three times Jesus declared "I am", now here Peter is pushing to the limits. For the second time he says, "I am not." If he repeats this sentence once more it would be the end for him, like it was for Judas. Let's see how this ends.

One of the high priest's servants, a relation of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, said, 'Didn't I see you in the garden with him?' (Jn 18:26). Note, the theme of the garden is back. Remember at the beginning? Jesus left Jerusalem, crossed the brook Kidron and went into a garden. This is the

symbolic place that indicates the place of life, paradise and the sanctuary where God reveals himself. The garden appears as a backdrop during the capture of Jesus, at the place of the execution of Jesus and as the place of his burial. It indicates that life is stronger than death.

Well, here, a relative of the one to which Peter had cut the lobe of his right ear to make him unsuitable for the function as high priest turned to Peter and said: '*Didn't I see you in the garden with him?*' This was the third opportunity that was offered to Peter: twice before he had been offered the chance to declare himself a disciple and here for the third time he is offered the possibility to enter the garden, to be with Jesus in the sphere of life and to leave servants and guards in the sphere of death.

Again Peter denied it (Jn 18:27). It is the third denial but the Evangelist omits the phrase "I am not". Three times Peter denies Jesus but the expression "I am not" does not appear for the third time. If Peter had said it again it would have meant it was the end for him, he would have been completely out of the narrative. Peter will be left with a chance and Jesus will regain and get this disciple back as we shall see.

And at once a cock crowed (Jn 18:27). Why did the cock crow? In Israel, people believed in the existence of thousands and myriads of demons, each with its own specialisation and since the cock crowed during the night, it was believed that the rooster was a demonic animal, that it was the herald of Satan. Each time that the devil gained a victory the cock crowed. Then the cock-a-doodle-doo meant the triumph of the devil, the triumph of Satan. For this it was prohibited to keep cockerels in Jerusalem. The Talmud says that "those who wanted to see their footprints, should spread sifted ashes around their own bed. In the morning they will see something similar to a cockerel footprints" precisely because the cockerel was a demonic animal.

We have said that for three times Peter denies Jesus, but he did not repeat for the third time "I am not". This indicates that for Peter there is still hope. We will see at the end of the Gospel, in chapter 21, Jesus will get this disciple back. We will end now with this beautiful scene of Jesus quizzing Peter.

When Peter was introduced to Jesus, Jesus did not say to him: "Follow me". It was Peter on his own initiative who, according to this Gospel, decided to follow Jesus. Peter was not invited by Jesus to follow him, because the Evangelist writes: "*Jesus knew all people*" (Jn 2:24). Only now, after his death and resurrection, Jesus will ask Peter to follow him, but first ... he settles the scores. Jesus turns to Simon Peter and says to him: '*Simon son of John, - reference to John the Baptist, Peter has the same mentality of John the Baptist - do you love me more than these others do?*' (Jn 21:15). That is: "On what ground do you want to be the leader of a group? Is your love greater than that of all the others?" How could Simon answer that he loved him more than all the others considering that he was the only one who betrayed him, a part from Judas? He could not; but, always playing with his stubbornness and his cunning he replied: '*Yes, Lord, you know that I am fond of you*'. (Jn 21:15) The Evangelist in the Greek text plays with two verbs: Jesus uses the word 'love' which in Greek is *agapao*, from which the word *agape*, and it means unconditional love. Peter cannot respond that he loved Jesus after he had betrayed him! Therefore he says: "Yes, Lord, you know that I am fond of you" and the Evangelist uses the word *fileo* (to be fond of), from which we have words such as philosophy, philanthropy, etc, which means 'to like

something/somebody'. And Jesus is satisfied for now and says: '*Feed my lambs*' Jn (21:15).

But Jesus returns to the attack. And the second time Jesus asked him, '*Simon son of John, do you love me?*' (Jn 21:16). This time Jesus doesn't ask him to compare himself with the others, but still uses the word *agapao*. Peter replies again: '*Yes, Lord, you know I am fond of you*' (Jn 21:16). Then Jesus says: '*Look after my sheep*' (Jn 21:16). For the third time Jesus asked Peter: '*Simon son of John, are you fond of me?*' (Jn 21:17). Poor Peter goes into fibrillation when he hears that question for the third time. Jesus twice asked him "Do you love me" and twice Peter replied "I am fond of you". The third time Jesus got him in a corner like a boxer and says to him "Simon, are you fond of me?" This time finally Peter collapses and gives in: '*Lord, you know everything; you know I am fond of you*'. (Jn 21:17). Only now Jesus says to him: "Now come and follow me". Will he follow Jesus? It was not for nothing that Simon is nicknamed Peter the stubborn. Jesus finally says: "Follow me", but the Evangelist writes, *Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved* (Jn 21:20). Peter is not capable of following Jesus; he prefers to follow the other disciple as he always did, to be sure not to be mistaken again.

Part Three: Jesus and Pilate, the Judge and the Accused. (Jn 18:28-40)

After Peter's third and final denial, which, however, as we have pointed out, leaves a way back for this disciple, the Evangelist writes: ***They then led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the Praetorium. It was now morning*** (Jn 19:28). - The Praetorium was the residence of the Roman procurator and the Evangelist gives us a chronological indication: '*It was now morning*'. John structure his Gospel according to two templates: the first, that of the creation according to the book of Genesis; the second, that of liberation according to the book of Exodus. These are the two lines, the two structures that guide his Gospel. Following the action of the Creator, the Evangelist structures all of his Gospel in six days. At the beginning of his Gospel we find he marks the days: "and the day after; and the day after." Now we are in day six. The sixth day is the day of the creation of man. The Passion of Jesus is therefore the culmination of the creative activity of the Father, who sees in Jesus the true son created in his image and likeness. It was the dawn of the last day of Jesus, which is the day of creation.

They did not go into the Praetorium themselves to avoid becoming defiled and unable to eat the Passover (Jn 18:28). The Evangelist is denouncing the extreme hypocrisy of the religious authorities. They are about to murder an innocent person just to preserve their grip on power and prestige, but they are careful not to put their foot in the house of a pagan. All religions are xenophobic, because religions divide people between the pure and the impure. In the Jewish world, the gentiles were unclean and therefore their houses were also unclean. If you set foot over the threshold of a pagan's house you also become unclean.

To be unclean means that your relationship with God has ceased. Well, as Matthew says in his Gospel: '*You blind guides, straining out gnats and swallowing camels!*' (Mt 23:24). Gnats, and camels were respectively the smallest and largest unclean animals known at the time. They observe rules that they invented and smuggled in as God's law while ignoring divine commandments, such as: '*You must not kill*' (Dt 5:17), or: '*You must not give false evidence against your fellow*' (Dt 5:20). Well, they, the official representatives of God, lie knowing to be lying, give false evidence to get rid of and kill the son of God.

So Pilate came outside to them and said, 'What charge do you bring against this man?' (Jn 18:29). This first coming out of Pilate is presented as the beginning of Pilate's yielding to the religious authorities. It is the first of the three times he comes out. Eventually Pilate will completely give in to the demands of the religious authorities. This coming out is an indication that Pilate yields to their demands.

Here the Evangelist brings to the stage this character, Pilate. He introduces him only with his negative nickname as he had done with the high priest. The high priest was called Joseph, and was nicknamed "The Oppressor". Caiaphas means "The Oppressor". The Roman procurator is called Pontius. However the Evangelist does not introduce him with his name, but with the negative nickname of Pilate. Pilate derives from the Latin *pilum*, which is the javelin used to punish soldiers.

Some historical details about Pilate: his name was Pontius and he had married the stepdaughter of

the Emperor Tiberius, Claudia Procula. His career stalled and he became frustrated. For ten years he remained an official of the Equestrian Order governing such desolate regions as Syria and Palestine. He never succeeded in becoming an Emperor Representative, i.e. Roman Ligate. The only hope he had was derived from the fact that he managed to be named “Friend of Caesar” with the help of his friend Seiano who was one of the Emperor's most trusted people. I say this to let you understand how the religious authorities will manage to blackmail him.

Tiberius was a very suspicious emperor, very touchy but had a close circle of friends, to whom he had granted the title of “Friend of Caesar”, that could have been useful to make a career. Therefore the only hope Pilate had was this one. Pilate was an inhumane man. He was the first of the Roman procurators that imposed the Roman standard, the coat of arms with the insignia of the Emperor in Jerusalem, provoking the ire of the priests and Pharisees. He took possession of the temple treasury to build an aqueduct. In Luke's Gospel he is spoken of as a bloodthirsty person who shed the blood of Galileans. He was a man of intolerable and boundless cruelty who supported violence, robberies, oppression, humiliations and continuous executions without trial. This is a brief portrait of Pilate.

However Pilate asks the authorities: ***'What charge do you bring against this man?'*** (Jn 18:29). The authorities got offended and considered this question about Jesus as an insult. They answered angrily: ***'If he were not a criminal, we should not have handed him over to you.'*** (Jn 18:30). The religious authorities in this Gospel painstakingly avoid to refer to Jesus by name. So much is their hatred and contempt for Jesus that they never refer to him by name but always use derogatory terms such as “this man”, “this one”. For the leaders of the people, the religious authorities, the actions with which Jesus had given life back to people were evil deeds. Jesus is a malefactor. They had already said to Jesus: *'For How long are you going to suffocate us?'* (Jn 10:24). Restoring life to the oppressed means removing it from the oppressors. Therefore the authorities accuse Jesus of being a criminal.

Let us see what evil Jesus has done: the evil done by Jesus is found in two important episodes. The first one, by Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem Jesus saw a sick man and healed him. *'One man there had an illness which had lasted thirty-eight years'* (Jn 5:5). Thirty-eight was the number of years that Israel had spent in the wilderness before entering the promised land. This man represented all the people of Israel. What did Jesus do? I say this, and I would like to emphasize it, because we often shorten the biblical expressions we learn, and in doing so we eliminate the 'reading key'. When I ask, during a meeting, what Jesus said to the invalid, the answer normally is: “Get up and walk”.

Not so. Jesus does not say: “Get up and walk”, but: *'Get up, pick up your sleeping-mat and walk'* (Jn 5:9). From a historical point of view one asks: what is the point of picking up the sleeping-mat? He has been lying on it for 38 years! Why does he have to pick up his sleeping-mat? But Jesus puts it as a condition of being able to walk. The encounter with Jesus allows the man to stand up. This man receives from Jesus vital power that allows him to stand up. However walking does not depend on Jesus; walking depends on the man and the condition is that he picks up his sleeping-mat. Therefore Jesus makes this man stand up, but the walking is not dependent on Jesus but it dependant upon this person: he must pick up his sleeping-mat. If he doesn't pick up his sleeping-mat he will not be able walk. However this person is afraid of picking up his sleeping-mat. Why? Do you remember the 52 curses we read yesterday? It is true that he probably cannot be more unfortunate than this after 38

years of being paralysed, still... the Law taught him that whoever did not obey the commandments would be punished with a series of misfortunes. This man had to make a choice: pick up his sleeping-mat or do not pick up his sleeping-mat.

If he picked up his sleeping-mat he would not just infringe one commandment, but all the commandments. A standard question asked by Rabbis was: “Which is the most important commandment?” The answer was: “The most important commandment is the commandment that also God observed”. “And which is the commandment that also God observed?”, “Observance of the Sabbath”. Compliance with this single commandment equated to the compliance with all the Law. The transgression of this single commandment was punished with the death penalty, because it was tantamount to breach of the whole Law. The paralysed man got up and picked up his sleeping-mat. In so doing he broke the law. However he was not hit by a curse but by a blessing: he was able to walk! From that moment on the Jews decided to kill Jesus, because if this man convinced people that they can break the law not only without incurring a curse, but on the contrary, receiving a blessing, then for them it would have been the end! They were able, through religious terrorism, to impose their will, but if people who transgressed the law escaped punishment, for them it would have been the end. According to the Evangelist from that moment they decided to kill Jesus. This is Jesus' first criminal deed.

The second criminal deed is with regard of the man born blind. Here the Evangelist presents Jesus that opens the eyes of a man born blind. The authorities are able to dominate people who are kept in a blind state, but if people open their eyes for them it is the end. Jesus makes the man born blind see again, but it is again on a Sabbath. Then the religious leaders, for whom there can not be any crack in their doctrine, want to convince the blind man that it would have been better for him to stay blind, rather than regain his sight through the work of a sinner. And the Evangelist puts in the mouth of the blind man a statement that is of the utmost importance. The heads of people say to him: *'Give glory to God! We are satisfied that this man is a sinner.'* The man answered, *'Whether he is a sinner I don't know; all I know is that I was blind and now I can see.'* (Jn 9:24-25). This is important: the well being of man is more important than any truth or revealed doctrine. Whenever there is a conflict between a doctrine or a revealed truth and the man's well being, it is the latter that must have priority.

We can now understand why Jesus is regarded as a criminal. He is eroding the ground from under the religious authorities' feet. Jesus invites people to infringe the law. People were afraid of infringing the law because they thought that God would have cursed them. In fact now they see that when they transgress the Law, they receive not a curse but a blessing. But, more than this, Jesus makes people discover how great God's love is because this is a God who wants man's happiness, not his unhappiness; a God for whom the well being of man and his happiness is more important than any commandment. You understand that this is dangerous. That is why they consider Jesus a criminal.

Pilate said, 'Take him yourselves, and try him by your own Law.' The Jews answered, 'We are not allowed to put anyone to death.' (Jn18:31). By referring to the Law, Pilate indirectly accused the Jewish authorities, because, as we have seen, their law did not allow to accuse or condemn anyone without two witnesses. The Jews unmask themselves with their answer. They have not brought Jesus to Pilate to have him put on trial, but to have him killed. They had already decided to

assassinate Jesus a long time before, since Chapter five in fact. And then in Chapter ten: *'The Jews fetched stones to stone him, so Jesus said to them, 'I have shown you many good works from my Father; for which of these are you stoning me?' The Jews answered him, 'We are stoning you, not for doing a good work, but for blasphemy; though you are only a man, you claim to be God.'*' (Jn 10:31-33).

This is Jesus' crime: he presented as God's will that man acquires the divine status. In John's prologue we read: *'He came to his own and his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God'* (Jn 1:11-12). That is those who accept him acquire a life of a divine quality and therefore indestructible. God's plan for humanity is a blasphemy for the religious authorities, a crime that should be punished with death. Yet they were the ones who should have made God's will known to people. It is therefore clear that, when the religious authorities spoke, they did not express God's will but only their own interest. Then why do they want to kill Jesus? Because while he is just a human being he makes himself God. But this is exactly God's plan for humanity: he wants all men to become his children.

Therefore they unmask themselves: *'We are not allowed to put anyone to death'*. The Evangelist adds: ***This was to fulfil the words Jesus had spoken indicating the way he was going to die*** (Jn 18:32). Why did John makes this statement? Jesus had said that he had to be lifted up from the earth: *'As Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up'* (Jn 3:14). If Jesus had been killed by the Jewish authorities he would have been stoned. How was stoning carried out? Not as we see in films or in paintings. The person sentenced to stoning was brought to a trench, thrown down backwards and then the two men that provided the evidence for the prosecution had to throw the first stone at him/her.

When Jesus in the episode of the adulteress says, *'Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her'* (Jn 8:7), he does not mean any stone, but a stone that the Talmud says, "must be so heavy that the two witnesses can barely lift". Therefore a boulder of at least fifty kilos. This would be thrown over the one sentenced to death. Normally this would kill the person outright. The corpse would then be covered with other stones. Well, if Jesus had been killed by the Jews he would have been pushed downward. However Jesus had said: *'The son of man will be lifted up'*. That is why the Evangelist is already pointing to a death on the cross.

So Pilate went back into the Praetorium and called Jesus to him and asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' (Jn 10:33). Pilate is surprised. He already knew the charge against Jesus. After all he had provided 600 soldiers for his arrest. So he knew the charge, but was surprised, because in Jesus there was nothing that suggested an alleged Messiah, an alleged King of the Jews. For King of the Jews it was intended a man who, with the use of violence, would overthrow the Romans and would inaugurate the kingdom of Israel. In Jesus there is nothing that alludes to this.

Jesus, exactly as he did with the guard, offers his love to Pilate, and tries to free him from the pressures of the Jews, and to think with his head. ***Jesus replied, 'Do you ask this of your own accord, or have others said it to you about me?'*** (Jn 18:34). Jesus does not reply to Pilate's question of whether he is the king of the Jews. Maintaining his composure, he tries to make Pilate think with his own head, as he previously did with the guard. Jesus' answer draws an irate reaction from Pilate who bares all his anger against Jesus: ***Pilate answered, 'Am I a Jew? It is your own people and the***

chief priests who have handed you over to me: what have you done?' (Jn 18:35). Pilate contempt for the Jews is clear: *'Am I a Jew?'*

However Pilate's following statement is an atrocious indictment against not only the high priests who wielded power, but all people who kowtow to their power. The Evangelist's accusation is tragic: Jesus is more dangerous than the Roman rulers. They take Jesus to their rulers to be freed from the one who could make them free. The Evangelist is explaining here what he had written in his prologue: *'He came to his own and his own people did not accept him'* (Jn 1:11) Why? All those who live in the sphere of power are unwilling to accept Jesus' message and are hostile to him. Those who hold power are hostile to Jesus and his message because Jesus demolishes power.

Those who aspire to power see Jesus as a threat to their own ambitions. However the most tragic group is made up of those who are submissive to power. Those who are submissive to power see Jesus as a threat to their security, because power, especially religious power, while it takes freedom away from you, gives you a feeling of safety. From the moment that you enter into a religious system you are no longer free to do what you want, not even to think as you want, but there you have a feeling of security. There will be a person in charge that will tell you at any time what you need to do and how you need to do it. You only need to obey. And history teaches us that the greatest criminals were people that obeyed.

Great damage has not been caused by people who disobeyed but by those who obeyed, because the ones who obey are not led by their own conscience but only carry out the orders they receive. That's why these big-time criminals when they are brought to justice defend themselves by saying, "I have carried out orders". No one is more criminal than the one who blindly carries out orders. That is why Jesus never uses the word "obedience". Jesus never tells us to obey. The term "obey" appears in the Gospels five times, but never with reference to people, only to harmful natural phenomenon or elements: the wind in a storm, the sea, the mulberry tree. Jesus does not ask to be obedient, because obedience does not let people grow and prevents people from acting in accordance with their own conscience.

In religion the believer is the one who obeys God by keeping his laws. Jesus instead suggests that believers are those who resemble the Father by practising a love like his; not obedient to him, but in his likeness. Therefore the whole nation is against Jesus, not only those who wield or aspire to power, but also those who allow themselves to be subjugated by it.

Jesus replied, 'Mine is not a kingdom of this world' (Jn18:36) Note that Jesus is not saying that his kingdom is not *in* this world. He says that his kingdom is not *of* this world. That is, his kingdom is totally different from the kingdoms that we know, based on a totally different system. A normal kingdom is based on an individual who wields power and imposes his will through violence, weapons and fear. Jesus' kingdom is in this world – not in the after life- but is not of this world and in fact Jesus says: ***'If my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews. As it is, my kingdom does not belong here'*** (Jn 18:36). Jesus did not have guards, because his kingdom is not sustained through violence. Jesus did not have servants because he is the King who put himself at the service of people. Therefore they are two completely different worlds: the kingdoms of this world are based on domination, lies and darkness; the kingdom of Jesus is based on service, truth and love.

Pilate said, 'So, then you are a king?' (Jn 18:37). Pilate is intrigued by what Jesus says, because he could not see in Jesus any of the characteristics of kingship. But Jesus cut off this discussion. He is not interested in discussing kingship, he is interested in something else. **Jesus answered, 'It is you who say that I am a king' (Jn18:37).** Full stop, and then he changes subject. Jesus does not want to linger on a useless conversation about kingship. Furthermore it is a dialogue of the deaf. Jesus is not of this world; even if he is in this world, he does not belong to this system. Therefore talking to Pilate is a dialogue of the deaf. Jesus continues: “Lest stop talking about kingdoms” and offers him the possibility of life: **'I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice'** (Jn 18:37). It is an offer of life that Jesus makes to Pilate. However let's look at what Jesus says here and why it is important.

Jesus said that he has come to bear witness to the truth. In John's Gospel truth is twofold: truth about God on one hand and truth about man on the other. What is the truth about God? God is love, who wants to communicate his love to man and for this reason he is called Father - the Father is the origin of life. Therefore who is God? He is a Father that wants to communicate his own life to his children, to elevate them to his own condition. On the other hand, what is the truth about man? Man is not a servant of God, but man is a son of God, the object of the Father's love, and therefore has a great dignity. But Jesus says: “Anyone who is of the truth hears my voice”. It is strange this expression! We would expect the opposite. Jesus says: *'all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice'*. Why doesn't Jesus say: “He who hears my voice is on the side of truth”? Because to listen to Jesus voice we must make a choice in our lives first. What is this choice?

To orient our lives towards man's well-being; this as the absolute value. The goal of man's life is the well-being of others. If above man's well-being we put a truth or a doctrine, even a revealed doctrine, sooner or later in the name of this doctrine, in the name of this truth we will cause harm to man. Therefore Jesus asks for a pre-requisite: we must first orient our lives toward man's well-being. Only those who have made this choice are able to listen to his voice. Others might hear the sound of his voice, but are not able to understand.

That is why deafness affects his disciples . In Chapter ten Jesus had some terrible words for the Pharisees and the Evangelist comments: *'They failed to understand what he was saying to them'* (Jn 10:6). In Mark's Gospel, on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus says to his disciples: “Do you get it? I'm going to Jerusalem to be killed! KILLED! Is this clear?” Soon afterwards James and John approached him and pleaded: “When in Jerusalem give us the most important seats, one on the right and one on the left of you”. It is clear: we might hear Jesus' voice, but we are not able to understand him if we do not elevate man's well-being to our highest priority.

That is why Jesus says that *'All who are on the side of truth listen to my voice'*. John had already said this in his prologue: *'Life was the light of men'* (Jn 1:4). In the Jewish world they used to say that light (light being the image of God's word, of the Law) was the life of men. The Evangelist does not agree: *'Life was the light of men'*. It is the response to the desire for fullness of life that leads man's footstep. Therefore Jesus suggests to Pilate to change his life and orient it towards man's well-being: *'All who are on the side of truth listen to my voice'*.

As Jesus had moved from the subject of kingship, because he was not interested in it, and instead

had suggested to talk about truth, so Pilate, who is not interested in the subject of truth, answered: **'Truth?' said Pilate. 'What is that?'** (John 18:38) . He is not interested. He is a man of power, a man of lies and belonging to the world of darkness. He does not understand what truth is. Jesus in Chapter eight, during a controversy with the leaders of Jews, had words so harsh, so terrible against the religious authorities the Church itself has censured them. Verse 44 of chapter eight is never heard by the faithful during liturgical readings. This is puzzling and worrying. Jesus, turning to the Leaders of the people, says: *'You are from your father, the devil, and you prefer to do what your father wants. He was a murderer from the start; he was never grounded in the truth; there is no truth in him at all. When he lies he is speaking true to his nature, because he is a liar, and the father of lies'* (Jn 8:44).

Those who install themselves on a structure of power are outside truth. It is not that they tell lies, they themselves are lies. Those who hold power do not have any truth in them and I think that experience and history prove it. Those who hold any power, not only religious power, can never tell the truth, because they themselves live in a structure of falsehood and lies. When sometime in an unguarded moment one of these people let out the truth, he promptly denies it saying: "I was misunderstood. The newspapers have misunderstood me". We can never extract the truth, but only lies from people who wield power. Therefore Pilate cannot continue a conversation about truth because he is the son of the father of all lies who, as Jesus says: *'When he lies he is speaking true to his nature'*. When the powerful speak they always lie, because they speak only to cover their own interests and not those of the people whom they are not interested in.

As we have seen, Pilate cut off the subject about truth: **'Truth?' said Pilate. 'What is that?' And so saying he went out again to the Jews and said, 'I find no case against him'** (Jn 18:38). Pilate went out again for a second time towards the Jews, demonstrating that he is yielding to their pressure again. He says to them: *'I find no case against him'*. Pilate declares for the first times that he finds no fault in Jesus. Pilate therefore contradicts Caiaphas. Caiaphas had said: "We must kill this man because this is a danger to the Romans and the Romans will come and we will all be destroyed". But when they bring this man to the representative of the emperor, Pilate says: "It's not true. He is no danger. I find no fault in him". So what Caiaphas had said was not true; Jesus was not a danger to the nation. Jesus was a danger to them, to the religious institution, because his teaching undermined their supremacy.

Pilate then tried a card: **'But according to a custom of yours I should release one prisoner at the Passover; would you like me, then, to release for you the king of the Jews?'** (Jn 18:39) The Passover was the feast of the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. There was a tradition that the Roman procurator would free a prisoner for this feast, to continue this liberation of the Lord. So Pilate tries this card: *'Would you like me, then, to release for you the king of the Jews?'* **At this they shouted, 'Not this man,' they said, 'but Barabbas.' Barabbas was a bandit** (Jn 18:49). Note again their contempt: 'This man!' They never pronounce the name of Jesus. So much is the religious authorities' venom, so much their resentment, so much their hatred against Jesus that they never pronounce his name. This time they cried: *'Not this man'*.

Therefore faced with the choice of freeing the King of the Jews or Barabbas they do not choose the King of the Jews. They chose Barabbas instead. And the Evangelist noted: *'Barabbas was a bandit'*. Barabbas is made up with two Aramaic words: *bar* (means son), *abba* (means father), the son of

the father. Already Jesus, as we have seen, has reminded us that the devil is the father of lies. And of the religious authorities he had said “You are not the children of Abraham, you are the children of the devil”. Here is the son of the devil, Bar-Abba. The authorities must choose between Jesus, the son of the Father who is the God of Life, and Bar-Abba, son of the father who is the devil that brings death. They will make a tragic choice and it will also be a disaster.

The Evangelist stresses that the authorities 'shouted'. Why do they shout? Jesus shouted to make Lazarus come out of the tomb and back from the kingdom of death (see Jn 11:43). Jesus shouted to restore to life a dead person. Here the religious authorities shout to force death on a living person. The chief priests choice will lead to disaster for the entire nation. It is not true that Jesus was a danger to the nation. It is the religious authorities who are a danger to the nation. They pretend to rise up against Rome through the use of violence.

Barabbas, says the Evangelist, was a bandit. The term "bandit" was used for the Zealots. Who were these Zealots? They sprouted from the Pharisaic group and were the terrorists of the time, those who through violence wanted to free the nation from Rome. Therefore the authorities are asked to make a choice between Jesus who wants them freed and the bandit who wants to free them through violence. They will choose violence and will end up as victims of violence.

Fourth Part: the Sin that Takes Away the Lamb from the World. (Jn 19, 1-12)

We finished Chapter 18, and this afternoon we will start Chapter 19, which is characterized by a growing effusion of light. At a certain point this light will become intolerable and unbearable to those who live in darkness. In his Gospel John had said that the light shines in the darkness and Jesus will be defined as the light of the world. Note though, light does not fight darkness. Light only shines.

To the extent that the intensity of light increases, darkness fades and people are called to judge themselves. Those who love goodness will feel attracted to light; those who do evil will fall into darkness.

We left this morning with Pilate making the umpteenth attempt to free Jesus as he is convinced he is innocent. However the leaders of the people faced with the opportunity to release Jesus, chose a calamitous, dramatic alternative: *'Not this man,' they said, 'but Barabbas.'* Remember the contempt with which they increasingly look at Jesus. I also briefly reminded you that the name Barabbas was composed of *bar*, which means “son”, and “*abba*”, which means father: the son of the father. Jesus is the son of the Father of life, the one who gives life. Barabbas instead, a bandit who uses violence, is the son of the devil *'who is a liar and murderer from the beginning'*. Barabbas in fact is presented as a bandit: he was one of the terrorists that wanted to re-establish the kingdom of Israel and get rid of the Romans through violence.

Pilate then had Jesus taken away and scourged (Jn 19:1). A more literal and accurate translation would be: *'Then therefore Pilate took Jesus and scourged him'*. Here the Evangelist forces the historical reconstruction. It is not Pilate that flogged Jesus. It is not possible that the Roman procurator started doing the work reserved for the executioner and torturers. Here, through this formulation, he intended to emphasize Pilate's responsibility. Although he realised that Jesus was innocent, he nonetheless persisted in punishing him harshly with the torture of the scourge.

The scourge was a terrible torture which was reserved for guilty slaves or soldiers. Roman citizens, however, were excluded from this form of torture. The scourge was similar to a whip, except that it ended with hooks made of bone or metal. With every whiplash a piece of skin or flesh was ripped off the victim. It was a terrible punishment. Normally people died during flagellation. Their number of lashes was left to the mood of the executioner. Josephus tells us in his memoirs that once he captured some people and had them scourged until their bowels were exposed. At this view his enemies were so terrified that they fled.

Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged, ***And after this, the soldiers twisted some thorns into a crown and put it on his head and dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him and saying, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' and slapping him in the face*** (Jn 19:2-3). The soldiers staged a parody, a farcical royal enthronement of an emperor. There were three elements of the enthronement of the emperor: the imposition of the crown, the imposition of the regal purple robe and the greeting with which he was addressed as emperor. The soldiers, coming face to face with this person who claimed to be the King of the Jews, put on a mock enthronement and take turn in deriding his pretences.

They greeted him: ' *Hail, king of the Jews!* ' and *slapping him in the face* '. Strangely enough Jesus does not react. Why? After all when earlier he had received a slap from a guard he said: "Listen, if I said something wrong show me. If not why this slap?". Here Jesus is passive, Jesus seems to almost accept what the soldiers do. The reason is they are not deriding Jesus, they are deriding the hopes of the Jewish people who were waiting for a King that would lead them in an uprising against Rome. Therefore it is not his kingship that is derided and despised by the soldiers. This instead will shortly be revealed in all its splendour on the cross.

Pilate came outside again (Jn 19:4). Strangely enough the Evangelist had not said that he had gone back in. Why does the Evangelist write that "Pilate came outside again", but did not tell us that he had gone in? This is the third time Pilate has come out. Remember the meaning of the number 3: it means what is complete, definitive. Pilate had begun to come out to meet the demands of the Jews. Now he fully gives in. Therefore the Evangelist, through this technique of number three, makes us understand that now Pilate is drifting and will do everything that the religious leaders will ask of him. ***Pilate came outside again and said to them, 'Look, I am going to bring him out to you to let you see that I find no case against him.'*** (Jn 19:4). Pilate declares for the second time that he cannot find Jesus guilty of anything.

For Pilate Jesus is innocent, and therefore there is no reason to condemn him. Pilate is exposing the lies of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. They had said that Jesus was dangerous because he would cause the Romans to come and destroy the entire nation. Remember what Caiaphas said? "It is to your advantage that one man should die for the people". The death of Jesus, as we have said before and we will repeat again, is to be attributed to the convenience of the priestly caste in power. To leave Jesus free would have meant the end of their domination over people and their prestige.

Now there is a crescendo of light that, as we have already anticipated, will be so intense that it is impossible to bear. The Evangelist builds the sentence with growing solemnity: ***Jesus then came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe*** (Jn 19:5). Pilate had said: ' *I am going to bring him out to you* '. No, Pilate does not lead anybody out. It Jesus himself that, on his own initiative, comes out. We have already said that in this Gospel Jesus is not a victim led to be sacrificed, but Jesus is the champion of love who on his own initiative gives his life. Jesus had said: " *No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as I have power to lay it down, so I have power to take it up again* " (Jn 10:18). Jesus in this Gospel is always in control and always aware of his actions. He is not led out by Pilate but it is he who comes out wearing the symbols of derision and contempt with great solemnity.

In fact the Evangelist writes: " *Wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe* ". Then Jesus comes out majestically. ***Pilate said, 'Here is the man'*** (Jn 19:5). In the original text the Evangelist omits the subject of the sentence: Pilate. So who says: ' *Here is the man* '? The Evangelist, as we will notice several more times, plays on two levels: the historical one and the theological one. However the Evangelist is not interested in history but in theology, not in the event but in the truth born by the event. Historically it is clearly Pilate that presents Jesus to the chief priests and to the crowd saying: " *Here is the man* ". However the Evangelist, by omitting the subject of the sentence, does away with Pilate.

Since the last name that appeared in the text was that of Jesus and not Pilate, it can be interpreted that it is Jesus who says to the crowd *“Here is the man”*, while majestically wearing the insignia of his kingship, and presenting himself to his people. This expression *“Here is the man”* appears only once in the Old Testament and it was with reference to the first king of Israel, King Saul. In this way the Evangelist prepares the scene in which Jesus declares himself King. During the climax of this trial Jesus is not led out, but comes forward. At the time in which his human glory is completely destroyed, Jesus was reduced to a blood clot after he had been scourged, at the time that Jesus was stripped of every attribute of human glory, at this time more than ever shines the greatness of the glory of God. Jesus presents himself: *“Here is the man”*.

As we have said, John structures his whole Gospel along two main lines. One is the line of the Exodus: Jesus performs the true liberation toward freedom. The other is the line of creation: the Evangelist sees in Jesus the full completion of creation. For this, the Evangelist begins his Gospel with the same words with which the book of Genesis begins: *“In the beginning”*. Well, the Evangelist structures his Gospel in six days. We are now on the sixth day, the day of the creation of man. Jesus presents himself to his people saying: *“Here is the man”*. Here is the man created according to the will of God. That is, a man who only offers love, in spite of the violence that surrounds him.

A man who is capable of always having only proposals of love in any situation, is a man who has obtained divine status because God is love. God is not just good, he is exclusively good. God's only way of interacting with people, of establishing a relationship with people, is that of an ever growing offer of love. Just like Jesus. From the beginning of his Passion in every situation Jesus offers life. They will respond with hatred. Jesus doesn't care; he will continue to offer his life. That is why Jesus in the full majesty of his person, now that he has been stripped of any human glory, shines more than ever as a man, the man-God, the man who is capable of giving his life for love. And Jesus, I repeat, is the one who says: *“Here is the man”*, here is God's plan for creation. A man who is capable of loving in the same way as God has divine condition.

Therefore, in his prologue the Evangelist tells us: *“But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God”* (Jn 1:12). How do we become children of God? One is not born, but becomes a son of God. The condition of “son of God” is not static but dynamic. It is a challenge that accompanies us during the whole of our life. Every time that we are capable of answering with love, whatever the situation we find ourselves in, the plan of our Creator is fulfilled and we become more and more children of God, like Jesus.

When they saw him, the chief priests and the guards shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' (Jn 19:6). The chief priests and the guards see The Man, i.e. they see God's plan for mankind, a man who has divine status. Well, this unleashes all their deadly hatred. It was not true that Jesus was dangerous because he said he was king. He was dangerous because in Jesus there was God manifesting himself to man, wanting to blend with man, a God that put an end to the privileges and interests of the priestly caste in power.

This is a tremendous denunciation. The whole of this Gospel is not written as a polemic against the Jewish world which, at the time of writing, the Christian community had radically and definitively separated from. It is a warning to the Christian communities that they do not replicate the same

perverse mechanisms of power within them. We have already seen in the course of previous meetings that a dynamic community, animated by the Spirit was born from Jesus. The risk was that it degraded into a rigid institution, regulated by the Law.

“When they saw him, the chief priests and the guards shouted”. The Evangelist groups together those who dominate with those who are dominated. Jesus is a danger for both. All people who live in the context of power, both those who have it and those who aspire to it, see Jesus as a danger to their own power or aspirations. But the saddest group are those who are dominated: somehow they accept their status as necessary to their own safety. This is why the chief priests and the guards are grouped together. They *'shouted'* all their spite and anger. They cannot bear the sight of God's plan for men: that they become his children. And for the first time the theme of the cross appears in this Gospel.

Why do the chief priests ask specifically that Jesus be crucified? The crucifixion was not a way of carrying out capital punishment. It was instead a slow and agonizing torture that in the end would lead to death. If the Jews themselves had carried out capital punishment, they would have stoned him. However they deliver him to the Romans and the Romans carried out capital punishment by decapitation. Why do the chief priests incite all the people, in this case the guards, to ask the crucifixion for Jesus?

Crucifixion was a torture invented by the Persians. It was a horrific torture. The person was placed on a pole or, when there was no pole, on a door. The use of nails is not always documented. Normally the person was bound to the pole. At about half height there was a peg used by the condemned to support himself and so lengthening his agony. The condemned would die of hunger, thirst, and possibly asphyxiation. They say that the cries of those sentenced to the cross were unbearable to hear. It was such an awful torture that it was reserved for the outcast, the dregs of society. However the chief priests need to ask for Jesus such a shameful death so that it would remove any doubt in people's mind that this man was in some way sent by God. And in fact what did they choose? They choose from the Book of Deuteronomy - they know the Scriptures, but for them the Scriptures are not a life giving gift but is a tool to oppress and inflict death. Therefore they find in the Book of Deuteronomy that those who end up on a cross are cursed by God (see Dt 21:22-23).

This is why they ask death by crucifixion for Jesus: the death of those cursed by God. No one would have any longer any shadow of a doubt. The Bible, God's word is absolute truth. “Did you see how Jesus ended his life? He ended crucified. And what does the word of God say? That the man hung from the wood is cursed. The word of God cannot lie. How could you have believed that this man had been sent by God? How could you have believed that he was the son of God? He was a blasphemer! And, in fact, you see how God punished him. Look at what death he met”. And the Bible cannot be wrong. For Jesus they chose the most ignominious of deaths, the one reserved for those who had been cursed by God.

The chief priests could not tolerate God's plan for humanity. This is because if God carried out his plan they would have to give up their own plan to dominate people through the use of the Law and God.

Pilate said, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him: I find no case against him.' (Jn 19:6). For the third time Pilate came out to say he found no case against Jesus. In fact for the third time he is yielding to the demands of the religious leaders. If the Evangelist stresses this, it is not to exonerate him but to aggravate the responsibility. Pilate says: *'I find no case against him'*. The Evangelist, by repeating this three times, is aggravating Pilate's responsibilities. While he was fully convinced that Jesus was innocent, nonetheless, as we will see shortly, he will send him to his death.

The religious leaders tried different cards. They first tried the political card, 'He claims to be king', but they got nowhere. Now they try the religious card 'He claimed to be the son of God'. **The Jews replied, 'We have a Law, and according to that Law he ought to be put to death, because he has claimed to be Son of God'** (Jn 19:7). The Law in the hands of the authorities is not used to give life but to take it away. We have said this morning that the law, what they smuggled as God's Law, is instead an instrument of repression and domination over people, and is always used to defend their own interests. Not once the religious authorities invoke God's law in favour of people. Is it possible that God's Law is never in favour of men? If so this Law is the enemy of people. God's Law is used by the religious authorities as an instrument of power to defend or extend their privileges and prestige. Jesus had already said that they were the first ones not to believe in this Law: "You are the first ones to transgress it, when it is against your interests". And we have seen it earlier: the law demanded that there would be two witnesses in a trial. They ignore it here. The Law in the hands of the religious authorities was an instrument of domination. They were behind the Law in order to protect their power and to defend themselves from their questionable doctrines. This law was never in favour of men, and here it is exposed: *'We have a Law, and according to that Law he ought to be put to death'*. The Law is an instrument of death.

And why should he be put to death? *'Because he has claimed to be Son of God'*. We have already seen it and the Evangelist comes back to it because he wants us to understand: "Beware the religious authorities" - says the Evangelist - "because what is God's plan for man, for the religious authorities is an intolerable crime that deserves the death sentence". God and religion do not mix: one requires the elimination of the other. God and the high priests are incompatible: the one requires the elimination of the other. The chief priests here demanded the elimination of God because God's plan for humanity, that all people become his children, is an intolerable crime for them. Already when Jesus had healed the invalid at the pool of Bethesda the Evangelist wrote that this is precisely why the Jews sought even more to kill him: because he not only abolished the Sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal to God (see Jn 5). It was they who dug an unbridgeable chasm between God and man through the invention of sin. Sin is an invention of religion. Those who live outside of religion do not know what sin is.

Sin is the invention of religion. It is a tool used to dominate over people and impress upon them a sense of guilt that makes them more willing to be dominated. Therefore, through the invention of sin, they were able to dig an abyss between God and man. They have so toughen up the Law as to make you feel always in sin, always unworthy of God. To obtain forgiveness from God you must go through them, the only representatives. We have to be careful when we hear that it is religion that invents sin because Jesus speaks of sin. Jesus does not diminish the meaning of sin but brings it back to its true significance. For Jesus sin is not in relation to God, it is not in relation to a law. Sin is the evil that we voluntarily and knowingly perpetrate against each other. According to the Gospels nothing that is categorised as impure, nothing affecting the cult, nothing concerning God is

sin, but only harmful behaviour toward others.

What does it mean that it is the religion and the Law that invented sin? The law proscribes certain normal actions saying: "This cannot be done". "Why?" "We do not know. There is no logical reason. It's like this and that's it". That is why we said this morning that the law has to compel. It has to do it because it is unable to persuade. When we are being offered something good we do not need to be compelled or threatened. When we are offered something that makes us happy, something that makes our existence more beautiful there is no need to impose, let alone to threaten. Just offer it. If it is a beautiful thing, it is welcomed. However religious leaders know that their message is unpleasant and therefore they need to impose and threaten. Religion treats some normal behaviour as sin. If you ask for a rational explanation you are told: "Because it is sin". There is no debate: "You don't know why it is sin. It's like this and that's it".

Let's have some examples, so we may understand better what religion fancifully claims is sinful. In the Book of Numbers we read the following episode that happened in the desert during the Exodus. *"While the Israelites were in the desert, a man was caught gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who caught him gathering wood brought him before Moses, Aaron and the whole community. He was kept in custody, because the penalty he should undergo had not yet been fixed. Yahweh said to Moses, 'This man must be put to death. The whole community will stone him outside the camp.' The whole community took him outside the camp and stoned him till he was dead, as Yahweh had ordered Moses"* (Nb 15:32-36). Can a person be killed just because he had collected wood in the desert? No person who uses his own head would think so! Instead yes, because it happened on a Sabbath. Ah well, if it is a Sabbath then you can kill.

Why is it that on a Sabbath we cannot do any work or carry any weight. This is the observance of the Sabbath, the commandment that God himself observed. This was equivalent to the observance of the whole Law. A breach of the law of the Sabbath was punished with the death penalty, because it was not only the transgression of a commandment but the transgression of the whole law. Then you can kill because the Sabbath was violated. And so on. Another example from the book of Leviticus. In chapter 11 you will find a whole list of animals that make man unclean if eaten. But in this list we will find animals that we normally eat. Why shouldn't we eat pork? If there were a logical explanation, fair enough. But there isn't. On the other hand there is a list of animals that when eaten make you pure, i.e. help your communion with God. In this list you will find grasshoppers and crickets, that personally I do not find all that appealing ... perhaps in a different culture they are perceived a treat. Therefore if you eat grasshoppers and crickets you're okay with the Lord. But not if you eat the pork. Just a few examples of how religion invents sin and engenders a sense of guilt.

All this to keep the people in a condition of total subjugation and unable to experience the love of God. God's love makes one completely free. We can now smile at these past cultural traditions, but the Catholic Church imposed similar rules until the second Vatican Council. Those of my generation will remember the concept of being in a state of grace. This was a condition which is impossible to attain. In fact we went to confession just before going to communion to make it more likely to still be in a state of grace. It vaporized so quickly that you could lose it for something trivial. This condition of being in a state of grace, that is in full communion with God, was so difficult to obtain and keep! The more you strived for it the more likely it was that you would break some rules or

precepts. You couldn't shut down your brain and therefore if you only had a fleeting thought, that was the end. And if by any chance you could think: "Ah, I finally made it: I'm in a state of grace now", damn it! I've just committed a sin of pride. I've lost that state of grace and I have to start all over from scratch.

It is religion that haunts people's life and makes them incapable of discovering the fullness of God's love. In its perversity religion may use death in the name of God. Jesus said in this Gospel: "*The time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is doing a holy service to God*" (Jn 16:2)". We never kill with so much enthusiasm as when we kill in the name of God. History shows us that the most terrible massacres have been committed in the name of God. This is why Jesus avoids the term 'God', but prefers the term 'Father'. If in the name of God one can take a life, in the name of the Father one can only communicate life.

When Pilate heard them say this his fears increased (Jn 19:8). The Evangelist had never notified us before that Pilate was afraid. Now instead he tells us that Pilate's fears had increased. It signifies that Pilate was afraid of Jesus. It is a paradox: the judge is afraid of the accused. The freedom with which Jesus acts, the fact that Jesus has been proclaimed the King of the Jews, the fact that Jesus is moving with full freedom intimidates Pilate. But why is he even more afraid now? In the culture of the time it was normal for people to believe that the gods sometimes descended from their Olympus, coupled with humans and generated beings who had a semi divine condition. These beings were sons of the gods.

When the Jews had played the political card (King of the Jews) Pilate said: "But this is not a problem for Rome". Now, when they play the religious card, Pilate is overwhelmed: "Oh, could it be that I am facing the son of a god, and if I sentence him to death then this god might take the defence of his son and kill or punishing me?" Therefore Pilate is terrorized by the idea of having a semi god in front of him. Already the freedom, the absence of fear in Jesus' behaviour had an off-putting effect on him. Now however he had a proof: This is the son of a god. And Pilate became even more afraid.

Re-entering the Praetorium, he said to Jesus, 'Where do you come from?' But Jesus made no answer (Jn 19:9). He wants to know where he was from, just in case he came from the heavens, the son of a goddess or a god! But Jesus remained silent because Pilate had to issue a judgement against a man, not against a god. In this scene we have the whole theology that underpins the Gospels. One is judged on how he relates with people, not on his behaviour towards the divinity. It is not the relationship that you have with God that counts but the one you have with people. In Jesus, God became incarnate, God became man, deeply human.

Jesus is God who becomes a human through and through, a man who is deeply and intensely human, attentive to the needs and sufferings of the people, a God who has put himself below people to be at their service. Religion instead is godless. Religion is atheistic and makes people atheistic, because in religion men must distance themselves from their fellow creatures through prayers, devotions and lifestyle in order to reach a hypothetical God who is in the highest of heavens. You know that the term Pharisee means "separate". The Pharisees separated themselves from the rest of people. Normal people could not observe all those laws and precepts, those pernicky little rules on purity and impurity that the Pharisee observed. Therefore the Pharisee, through prayers, devotions,

lifestyles separated themselves from men to reach God. However the more they rose above other people, the more they distanced themselves from God. The Gospels tell us of two movements in opposite directions: men are rising to meet God, God descending to meet man. While one goes up, the other comes down and they never meet. Religion makes people atheistic because it makes them deeply inhuman. A religious person who has to choose between honouring God and the need of man has no doubt: the more important is honouring God.

Therefore beware of religion. Religion makes people inhuman. The caricature of the religious person is that of a deeply inhumane person, a person so bewitched by his God that he does not realize the needs and sufferings of people around him. We have a caricature like this in the parable of the Samaritan. Why doesn't the priest help the wounded unfortunate man? You know the parable: an individual was assaulted by robbers in a gorge in the desert of Judas. For him death is certain, unless someone providentially helps him. And in fact Jesus says: '*Now a priest happened - i.e. providentially: can you imagine such luck? - to be travelling down the same road*' (Lk 10:31). He was travelling down, not up. Jericho was a priestly city, from which the priests had to go up to go to the temple for their liturgical service. However, here we have a priest that is not going up from Jericho to Jerusalem but he is coming down from Jerusalem. This priest had just finished a week of service in the temple, face to face with God's holiness. He is in a condition of virtual purity.

The wounded man could not have been luckier! It could not have happened any better for him! Think what luck: a priest coming his way! Jesus says: '*When he saw the man*'. You've got it: help is at hand. '*When he saw the man he passed by on the other side*' (Lk 10:31). In greek this expression "*passed by on the other side*" is a single word, *antiparelthen*, and this could be written on the tombstone of religion, a religion that makes people inhuman. Why did the priest pass by on the other side? Was it because he was insensitive? No. He is a priest and therefore an observant of the law. Now the law prohibits a priest to touch a corpse be it even that of one of his parents; the law prohibits a priest to touch blood, because blood makes him unclean. Now what is more important: love for God, or love for your neighbour? Most important is love for God. Therefore to honour God it is possible to dishonour man. This only word, *antiparelthen*, is the most thorough denunciation of religion in the Gospels.

Going back to Pilate now. Pilate must not judge a god. Pilate must judge the man in front of him. His judgement on the man will also be a judgement on himself. Jesus, seeing that Pilate was afraid, could have turned the situation in his favour. He could have declared himself to be God's son and Pilate would have freed him. Jesus, however, gave him no answer. Pilate had to judge a man, not a god, and this judgement would also be a judgement on himself as well.

Pilate is furious, he is raging at Jesus' silence. He asks him angrily: '***Are you refusing to speak to me? Surely you know I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?***' (Jn 19:10). Pilate went berserk. When he had no answer from Jesus he said: '*Are you refusing to speak to me?*' Note the cynicism of those who hold power. Pilate does not judge Jesus on the basis of him being innocent or guilty. For Pilate Jesus is innocent. He had repeated this three times. Whether Jesus is condemned does not depends on his innocence or guilt, but on the convenience of the judge. '*I have power to release you – because you are innocent - and I have power to crucify you*'. This sentence is similar to that which Jesus had said that he had the power to lay down his life and then take it back. While Jesus, being the Son of God, has the power to give his life and then take it back, Pilate, who

is a son of the devil, has the power to give death. Therefore Pilate's verdict on Jesus does not depend on his being innocent or guilty, but only on his own interest.

'Jesus replied, 'You would have no power over me at all if it had not been given you from above'. (Jn 19: 11). Here the translation is a bit difficult. In Greek power can be of masculine or neutral gender. When it is of masculine gender it means "power"; when instead it is of neutral gender it means "authority". Here it is of neutral gender and therefore it means 'authority' or 'capacity'. God doesn't bestow any power on anybody because God is not power, but he is love that puts himself at the service of man. Here Jesus is saying to Pilate: "You would not have any capacity on me at all if this had not been given to you from above". The expression "from above" is derived from the Hebrew and means God. This capacity is the freedom that every person has. God always respects man's freedom and he doesn't throttle or restrict it in any way. Man's freedom is sacred and God respects Pilate's freedom even when Pilate uses his freedom to kill his son. So it is not power in general that is given by God to Pilate, but authority over Jesus.

Jesus continues: **'That is why the man who handed me over to you has the greater guilt'** (Jn 19:12). Pilate was a Roman, and a pagan and as such he was deemed to be the most distant from God and excluded from his divine action. Caiaphas instead was the high priest and therefore he was considered to be the closest person to God, a person that was more similar to God. Because of this his sin is greater. **From that moment Pilate was anxious to set him free** (Jn 19:12). Pilate, after his outburst, is convinced of Jesus' innocence, and decides to release Jesus. But the religious leaders, truly as wily as Satan, pull out the winning card. First they played the political card, "He makes himself King of the Jews", but Pilate replied: "What King! This is not a problem for Rome". Then they played the religious card "He calls himself son of God", but this was not a problem for Pilate. Finally they pull out the winning card, the one they set aside knowing who they were dealing with.

But the Jews shouted, 'If you set him – note how they never call Jesus by name - free you are no friend of Caesar's; anyone who makes himself king is defying Caesar' (Jn 19:12). This is the trump card. In our brief portrait of Pontius, nicknamed Pilate, we said that he was a frustrated man: he had never managed to get a higher title than that of an official of the Equestrian Order although he aspired to become a Roman legate, that is a representative of the emperor for a region. His only hope was that, through his friendship with Sejanus, one of Tiberius's favourite people, he succeeded in being included in the narrow circle of friends of Caesar's. Tiberius was a suspicious, touchy and cruel emperor. He set up a circle of loyal supporters to whom he had granted the title of "Friend of Caesar's". It was a good step towards progressing with one's career, because when there was a vacant post Tiberius would choose one of his most trusted men. Pilate, having managed to obtain this title for himself, now sees his career in danger. The religious leaders, who knew about the ambitions of this frustrated man, play the career card. "If you free this man your career is finished because anyone who makes himself king sets himself against Caesar".

Pilate then must choose between two loyalties: loyalty to the man who he knows is innocent or to his career. And Pilate has no doubts: he chooses his career. His situation will be dramatic: he sacrificed Jesus, an innocent person, for his career. However a few years later he will be deposed and his career will end tragically.

Part Five: the Trophy of the Cross. (Jn 19, 13-22)

Having failed with both political and religious indictments the high priests played the last card: Pilate's career. Pilate, who had dismissed the political (Jesus King of the Jews) and religious (Jesus the son of God) accusations, gave way at the prospect of losing his own career.

Hearing these words (Jn 19:13). What Pilate heard *'If you set him free you are no friend of Caesar's'* was tantamount to blackmail: his career was in danger! Therefore Pilate who cared more about his own career than the well-being of this man; Pilate who cared more about himself than freeing a man he considered innocent, caved in to the demands of the religious authorities. **Pilate had Jesus brought out, and seated him on the chair of judgement** (Jn 19:13). In the original Greek text it is not clear who sat on the chair of judgement leaving open to interpretation whether it was Pilate or Jesus. Here again the Evangelist plays on two levels: historically it is Pilate who sat on the chair reserved to the judge, but from the syntax it could be interpreted that it was Jesus who sat on the rostrum. For the Evangelist it was not Pilate who judged Jesus, but it was Jesus who sat on the rostrum and judged Pilate and his people.

At a place called the Pavement, in Hebrew Gabbatha (Jn 19:13). Here the Evangelist uses a rare word, that appears only twice in the Old Testament for 'Pavement': *lithostrotos*. It is made up of two words: *litho* which means 'stone' and *strotos* which means 'floor'. Therefore it is a 'stone floor' and we will see why. However, *gabbatha* is not the exact translation of *lithostrotos*. There are three Hebrew names of places that the Evangelist mentions in his Gospel and all three are in relation to the death of Jesus. The Evangelist wants to emphasise people's responsibility towards Jesus' death. The first one is the Pool of Bethesda, when Jesus healed the invalid. He told him: *'Get up, pick up your sleeping-mat and walk'* (Jn 5:8). It was on that occasion that the decision was taken to kill Jesus. Here at *gabbatha*, the Court, Jesus is sentenced to death. Finally, the last term is *golgotha* which it will be the place of the execution. Three names: according to the symbolic value of the number three means what is complete, definitive. Three names in Hebrew, all in relation to the death of Jesus, because the Evangelist expands on what he had anticipated in his prologue: *'He came to his own and his own people did not accept him'* (Jn 1:11).

Therefore, what are *lithostrotos* and *gabbatha*? The very rare *lithostrotos* appears only twice in the Old Testament. The first is in the second book of Chronicles and it indicates the glory of God that has invaded the temple. The second, in the Song of Songs, means the place of the Kings. The Evangelist, through this literary technique, with the use of this very rare word, indicates that in Jesus, although stripped of his flesh through scourging and mocked by the soldiers, God manifested his glory and kingship. *gabbatha* literally means 'hump' or 'hill'. The Evangelist uses this word because Jesus had said that the Son of Man was to be lifted up and exalted.

Here, although there is a crescendo in tension, the Evangelist briefly interrupts his story to give us an indication that would seem superfluous. **It was the Day of Preparation, about the sixth hour** (Jn 19:14). Three times the Evangelist emphasises that it was the preparation for the Passover, a Passover that will never be celebrated. You remember that the chief priests did not want to set foot

in the Praetorium so as not to become impure so that they could eat the Passover. In the end, they will never eat it because the true Passover is Jesus who has sacrificed himself.

'About the sixth hour'. The preparation of the Passover begun in the Temple at the sixth hour, that is our noon, with the slaughter of lambs destined for the sacrifice. From the beginning, John the Baptist had presented Jesus as the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world: *'Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world'* (Jn 1:29). Please note that the Baptist says 'the sin' not 'the sins' as we say during our Liturgy.

There is a sin that precedes the coming of Jesus and that is the rejection of the fullness of life that God offers to humanity. The lamb of God takes away this sin: he does not atone for it, but he removes it. John's phrase is in parallel with: *'He is the one who is to baptise with the Holy Spirit'* (Jn1:33). However, what do we intend for 'lamb of God'? The lamb was not a sacrificial animal for the sins of men but it is the Easter lamb, the lamb that Moses commanded the Israeli families to eat to gather the necessary strength to begin their journey toward freedom. The lamb's blood sprinkled on the door posts was a signal for the Angel of death to spare those families from the last curse God launched against the Egyptians. Therefore, Jesus is the lamb whose flesh, when assimilated, allows us to begin our journey toward freedom and whose blood is shed not to free us from earthly death, but free us from perpetual death.

'Here is your king,' he said to the Jews (Jn 19:14). Who is 'he'? Historically, it is Pilate. However, as before, when Jesus came out and said: *'Here is the man'*, or when Jesus sat on the judge's rostrum, so now it is Jesus who says: *'Here is your King'*, although historically it was Pilate. The *lithostrotos* reminded us of the manifestation of God's glory and his kingship. Jesus, who was presented to us with: *'Here is the man'*, by now stripped of all power and human attributes, manifests himself as the King in which shines the fullness of God's love.

The high priests' reaction is tragic: ***But they shouted, 'Away with him, away with him, crucify him'*** (Jn 19:15). John the Baptist had presented Jesus as: *'Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world'*, now the word 'take away' returns. Jesus was the lamb who took away the sin of the world; now, it is the chief priests who scream: 'take him away'. The chief priests, who are the instruments of sin, cannot bear the sight of Jesus. We have said that such an intense light emanates from Jesus that the chief priests cannot bear the sight of it and scream: 'Take him away, take him away'. They can't bear the sight of their God. This is a dramatic denunciation of the religious institution by the Evangelist. God's representatives on earth, when they are face to face with their God cannot bear his sight and request him to be removed and eliminated: *'Crucify him'*.

Summing up, Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; now, those who are the instruments of the sin of the world cannot bear his sight and scream: 'Take him away, take him away'. Sin is the refusal to accept the offer of fullness of life which God wants to give to man. It was indeed the priestly caste that prevented men from knowing God's plan.

Pilate said, 'Shall I crucify your king?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king except Caesar' (Jn 19:15). The Evangelist's denunciation is devastating. Remember when the chief priests had said: "We need to kill Jesus, because there is the danger that his actions will incite the Romans against our nation". Now, they say that they have no other King except Caesar. Technically this is

called the sin of "apostasy": the total and definitive betrayal of God perpetrated not by ordinary people but by the highest religious authorities. They are capable of anything in order to keep their position of power. They prefer to be dominated by the Roman as long as they can continue to dominate over their own people. They do not want to be freed if this entails losing their power. Therefore, the Evangelist is making a really tremendous denunciation of the religious institution: God's representatives are the ones who betray him. They prefer to be dominated by the Romans as long as they can continue to exert their power and maintain their privileges, rather than being freed by Jesus, the King of the Jews, and lose their prestige and privileges.

By choosing the Emperor they choose the usual god: power. It is not a new apostasy. For a long time they have been betraying the Lord because in place of Jesus' God they have chosen profit, self-interest and power. It is a confirmation that the religious system is atheistic. However, what is even more serious is that it is not ordinary people, but their highest representatives that have no hesitation when they suspect that their own status is in danger: they are ready to get rid of their God to retain power. The priestly caste that is in charge is dangerous, because they are ready to commit any crime, they are ready for any falsehood, in order to continue and stay in charge. They are capable of joining forces with anyone as long as they can retain power and privileges. By behaving like this, they issue their sentence on themselves: *'We have no king except Caesar'*

So at that Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified (Jn 19:16). Something is missing. There is no sentence. There are the court proceedings but no sentence is issued. Pilate does not emit a sentence. He only delivers Jesus to the Jews. This is because it was not Pilate that judged Jesus but Jesus that judged the Roman Governor and his own people.

They then took charge of Jesus (Jn 19:16). This particular verb "to take" in this particular form (Greek: *paralabon*) appears only twice in John's Gospel: in the prologue and here. This is a literary technique used at the time to imply a close relationship between two parts of a book. In the prologue the Evangelist writes: *'But to those who did accept (literally: take) him he gave power to become children of God* (Jn1:12). Here instead, when they take Jesus, they take him to kill him. The Evangelist is radical: either we take Jesus as part of our own existence or we take him to put him to death. There is no middle way. Either we orient our existence towards life or we remain oriented toward death. Therefore, those who do not take Jesus, those who do not accept him as a factor in their own life to develop their full potential and abilities, take Jesus to kill him.

And carrying his own cross (Jn 19:17) We have already said that Jesus is not presented as a victim led out to be sacrificed but he is the champion of love. The cross was composed of two elements, one, the vertical axis, always remained in the place of the executions. At the time, the sentence was issued, the condemned man had to lift up the horizontal axis and he had to load it on his shoulders. The chronicles of the times tell us that this was the worst moment, even worse than death itself. This was because, from the moment that the condemned man lifted the wooden pole over his shoulders, he would have to walk through the city streets and through the gate that led to the place of executions amid two wings of people, for whom it was a religious obligation to insult, ridicule and beat up the condemned man. The Talmud justified it with: "It doesn't matter, he is already half dead". Members of his own family, his friends and even people he had helped, had the religious obligation to spit at him and insult him along the way.

This morning we have anticipated that when we read about the cross in the Gospels it never refers the suffering that life brings us, accidents and misfortunes that befall on us. The cross appears five times on Jesus' lips and always when speaking to his disciples. Furthermore, it is always presented as a proposition, never as an imposition. Jesus knew that his disciples did not understand. They followed him because, like James and John, they thought in terms of sharing power. When Jesus says: *'No one who does not carry his cross and come after me can be my disciple'* (Lk 14:27) he does not mean death on the cross, but he is talking about this moment, the moment of utter infamy, the moment that all contempt is hurled at you, i.e. the moment in which one completely loses one's own reputation.

Therefore, the cross is not bestowed on us by God. We may be asked to pick it up as a consequence of being faithful to Jesus' message. If Jesus, the son of God, has been accused of being a blasphemer, a madman, a heretic and a man possessed by demons “just imagine what they will say of you” (see Jn 15:20). Therefore, those who are attached to their good reputation or their career cannot be thinking of following Jesus, because to follow Jesus implies to be met with solitude and society's contempt.

However, this gives you full freedom. We are always conditioned by what people think about us as we are attached to our good reputation and to our good name. The day that we are able to give up our good name we will be invaded by the exhilaration of total freedom. Try and think about it: we can finally be ourselves, say what we think without worrying about what people will say about us; behave and be seen to behave exactly as we are, without the masks that we always wear in order to be accepted by others. This would be exhilarating because where there is freedom there is the fullness of the Spirit. This is the meaning of the cross. Then in Jesus' hands the cross is transformed into a victorious trophy, because Jesus is eager to demonstrate through the cross the yet unknown magnitude of God's love for humanity.

He went out to the Place of the Skull or, as it is called in Hebrew, Golgotha (Jn 19:17). If the archaeological remains of Jerusalem are confirmed, the place of Jesus' execution was a stone quarry, which had been damaged by an earthquake. Since it was no longer suitable to obtain construction stones and since it was outside the Jerusalem walls, it started to be used as a place of execution. The name given to it was *golgotha*, the third location name in Hebrew, which means “the skull”, probably due to its shape. It was less than ten meters high. In Latin “Skull” is *calvaria* whence we get “Calvary” and subsequently Mount Calvary. However, it is not a mountain, it is just a hump.

Where they crucified him with two others, one on either side, Jesus being in the middle (Jn 19:18) We have said that the Evangelists do not intend to hand on facts but truths, not history but theology. In the other Gospels the Evangelists tell us that Jesus was crucified between two criminals (Luke), or two bandits (Matthew and Mark). John instead omits to say who they were. He simply says *'with two others'*. Who are these people? They are the two disciples who have followed Jesus from the outset; they are the disciples of the first hour who have always been able follow Jesus and now they follow him on the cross.

Of course we are talking at the theological, not at the historical level. They are the two disciples who followed Jesus, went to live with him and, at the end of Jesus' life, they accompany him and

die with him and like him. For this, we will see later that the Evangelist talks about bodies - plural - on the cross, but of a single cross. According to the Evangelist, there is the single cross where three people have been crucified, Jesus and his disciples: one on one side and one on the other side and Jesus in the middle. Jesus is King, he has the central position denoting kingship.

Pilate wrote out a notice and had it fixed to the cross; it ran: 'Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews' (Jn 19:19). A more literal translation for 'it ran' would be 'having written': this is the classical term indicating the Sacred Scriptures. The crucified Jesus is the only true, universal and sacred scripture that all people can read. In crucified Jesus we read God's love for humanity and love is the universal language that everyone can understand. The Old Testament was made of codes, commandments, prohibitions and was reserved for one people. The new writing is a man nailed on the cross for love, a man in whom the love for all humanity is fully manifested, a faithful love.

I repeat: 'having written' is the technical term which indicates the texts of the Old Testament. This instead is the new, definitive writing for all humanity: a language of love, because the language of love can be understood by all. '*Jesus the Nazarene* (literally *nazoraïos* ... remember? The arrest warrant was for Jesus the Nazoraïos, i.e. the Messiah, the anointed by God, the one they were waiting for) *the King of the Jews*'. John is the only Evangelist that has 'Nazoraïos' written on the board at the top of the cross.

This notice was read by many of the Jews, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the writing was in Hebrew, Latin and Greek (Jn 19:20). And here I hope that we are not too tired, because the Evangelist requires special attention. It is he who complicates things, not I; but, to enjoy this text, we have to understand it. A literal translation is: "Many of the Jews read this inscription because the place was near the city where Jesus was crucified and was written in Hebrew, in Latin and Greek". But John should have written "because the place where Jesus was crucified was near to the city." Instead John writes, I repeat, "the place was near the city where he was crucified." The Evangelist does not write as we would have expected: "the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city". After all, Jesus came out of the walls of the city, and therefore the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city. The Evangelist instead writes: "because the place was near the city, where he was crucified."

It is the city which is the place where Jesus was crucified. The Evangelist blames his death completely on the city of Jerusalem, the headquarters of the religious institution. He changes the syntax, the grammar and even the logic of the sentence, to help us understand the grave situation of the religious institution. Jerusalem is a murderous city that will never welcome or even recognise those sent by God, but will always kill them.

The Evangelist underlines that '*the writing was in Hebrew, Latin and Greek*'. The temple of Jerusalem was the largest sacred space of antiquity. Everyone could enter the first courtyard, the Courtyard of the Gentiles. Then, at a certain point along a line, every fifteen meters, there was a marble stone with an inscription in Hebrew, the sacred language of the people of Israel, in Latin the language of the rulers and in Greek the commercial language of the time. The writing said: "Every pagan who goes past this stone is responsible for his own death". Pagans were allowed in up to this point; if they ventured past it they were liable to be captured and killed.

John sees in Jesus' cross the elimination of what St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians calls, "the middle wall of partition". The gentiles could not enter the Temple proper; they risked the death penalty if they did. By having this inscription in these three languages on top of the cross, Jesus, God's true temple, is accessible by all. The marble stones in the temple prevented the pagans approaching the Lord; the inscription on the cross, on the other hand, is what attracts the pagans, because Jesus did not die only for Israel, Jesus did not die for a single nation. Jesus died for a universal love that is radiated to all humanity. This is the wall that Jesus abolished.

So the Jewish chief priests said to Pilate, 'You should not write "King of the Jews", but that the man said, "I am King of the Jews"' (Jn19:21). With his inscription Pilate contradicts what the chief priests had said: *'We have no king except Caesar'*. Pilate rebuts what they said: "Here is your King and you have murdered him".

Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written' (Jn 19:22). Now through the Roman empire's representative it is the pagans who recognise Jesus' kingship, kingship that was challenged and rejected by the Jews. Jesus in another Gospel says: *'The Kingdom of Heaven will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruits' (Mt 21:43)*. Pilate's inscription is now final and cannot absolutely be changed. The crucified Jesus is the ultimate writing that every man can read and understand because it is the universal language of love.

We can break here this evening. Tomorrow when we shall be rested and fresher we shall witness an ever growing light: we shall look at Jesus' death. However, I anticipate that the Evangelist does not present a scene of death, but a scene of the fullness of life. On Golgotha Jesus did not die but the Church was born. Furthermore, when Jesus is buried the Evangelist does not use the funereal language of the burial of a corpse, but employs words that describe the preparation of the bridal bed. In Jesus there is no death, because life cannot be destroyed.

Part Six: the Funeral and the Wedding. (Jn 19, 23-42)

Thank you all for being here. Let's get started, because this morning we have a lot to go through. Let us continue with verse 23 of Chapter 19, Jesus' crucifixion. I repeat for the people who are here for the first time, the criteria of the interpretation of these text. The Gospels are not chronicles but truth, i.e. the Evangelist does not presents us with facts but theology. We will soon see the proof of this. The Evangelist is presenting us the crucifixion, the most dramatic event of the Gospel, the death of the Son of God and is wasting time, at least from our point of view, to give us his thoughts about dressmaking techniques! Is it possible?

When the soldiers had finished crucifying Jesus – this is a dramatic moment, yet look what the Evangelist cares to tell us - ***they took his clothing and divided it into four shares, one for each soldier.*** Not happy with this description, he continues - ***His undergarment was seamless, woven in one piece from neck to hem*** (Jn 19:23). Is it possible that at this dramatic time, during which Jesus is on the cross, the Evangelist concerns himself with giving us a lesson in dressmaking? Why do we need to learn that this tunic is sewn in a particular way?

If we take the Gospel literally we find these sorts of discrepancies. In reality, as we have already discovered earlier on, they are not discrepancies. Every detail that we find in the Gospels, that in itself seems unnecessary, in reality it is a theological detail of invaluable importance. To us that this undergarment were made in two pieces or woven as a single piece, does not seem important at all ... Jesus is dying: why should we be interested in a garment!

' *They took his clothing (literally cloak).* The cloak, in the symbolism of the Old Testament, has two meanings: either the person himself, or a kingdom. In the first book of the Kings the prophet took his cloak and he cut it into twelve pieces. Ten pieces represented one kingdom and the other two represented a second kingdom. It signified the division of Israel into two kingdoms: ten tribes belonged to the Kingdom of the North and the other two to the Kingdom of the South (see 1K 11:30-37). The cloak then is a symbol of kingdom. Therefore, the Evangelist starts from a historical detail: the soldiers, the executioners, had the right to share the little belongings of the person that had been executed. However, he transfigures this detail.

The cloak is the symbol of a kingdom; that kingdom that was offered to Israel but Israel rejected which will be given to the Gentiles. It will be a universal kingdom. In Matthew we find the same expression, when Jesus says: *'The Kingdom of Heaven will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruits'* (Mt 21:43). Israel rejected the offer because they were not interested in the kingdom of God but only in the kingdom of Israel. They wanted to restore the deceased kingdom of Israel, a kingdom that was supposed to have supremacy over all other peoples. The kingdom of God that they refused will be given to the Gentiles, to the rest of mankind. That is why the cloak is torn into four parts.

The number four - we have often said that the numbers in the Bible do not have arithmetic value, but a symbolic meaning - always indicates the four cardinal points. This kingdom therefore will include the whole mankind. In the same way that the cross is a universal writing that all people can understand, so this kingdom will be universal and a kingdom for all the peoples. Thus the kingdom

rejected by the people of Israel is now a heritage for all humanity. While the cloak was the garment worn on the outside, the undergarment or tunic was in contact with the skin.

The Evangelist now draws our attention to the tunic by repeating this term twice (here is a literal translation of the Greek text: *'and also the tunic: now the tunic was without seam, woven from above throughout'*). *'From above'* is a technical expression. We have already met this expression in this Gospel when Jesus speaking to Pilate said: *'You would have no power over me at all if it had not been given you from above'*. And in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus had spoken of the need to be born from above. This expression means God.

The tunic therefore - I repeat this is not a lesson in dressmaking - was woven without seams from above. This is the intimate garment worn directly over the skin and comes from God (*from above*). What is it that comes from God and that Jesus has shown? It is God's faithful love, a love that does not let itself be influenced by man's answers or behaviour. Then this tunic is the symbol of God's love for mankind and therefore, unlike the cloak, it cannot be torn.

So they said to one another, 'Instead of tearing it, let's throw dice to decide who is to have it.' In this way the words of scripture were fulfilled: They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothes. That is what the soldiers did (Jn 19:24). The Greek verb for 'tearing' has the same root as 'schism'. *'The words of the scriptures were fulfilled'* is a reference to Psalm 22. What is the meaning of the gestures carried out by the soldiers, gestures that the Evangelist theologically transfigures? The kingdom of God is universal and covers the four corners of the world, his love though cannot be divided. When love is divided, when there is a schism, it is no longer visible.

Therefore, the message is that God's love cannot be divided because we are all the same in front of him. Any division spoils this message. The message, represented by the tunic, must be taken to the whole of mankind as it is, and it represents an interior unity. The ways this message is expressed, symbolised by the cloak, can be varied. Already the Evangelists show a wide breath of ideas: there is a single message, which is that of God's love for men; the concrete forms to express and live this message will be different, according to cultures, needs, and the spiritual growth of people. A book where already all is written, and which man must subject to, does not exist. There is only the reality of love, but this can be experienced in different forms, according to differences in culture. The Gospels already offer us this enormous universal openness. Christianity cannot be the imposition of a particular culture, it is not even the imposition of a theology. There is this offer of love from God, but the ways of living this love will be different, according to different peoples. Therefore, what apparently looked like an action of disrobing turns into a scene of universal expansion: the message of God which is given for all humanity.

In verse 25 we have a problem: how many people are present at the foot of the cross? We said yesterday that John is the only Evangelist who does not report Jesus inviting us to bear our cross but he is the only one who shows some people by the cross. We said that the arrest warrant was for Jesus and all his disciples. It was Jesus that had traded his life for that of the disciples ... but not all.

There is a small part of his group that has decided to follow Jesus and appear at the place of the execution with him: that is, they are ready to suffer the same fate as him. They are those like Thomas: Thomas in the Gospel is called Didymus, which means twin. Who is he twinned with?

He is the twin of Jesus, because he is the one who is more like Jesus and understands him. In fact he says: *'Let us also go to die with him'* (Jn 11:16). So there is a small number of disciples who are ready and mature enough to give up their lives with their teacher and like their teacher. The problem is knowing how many there are by the cross.

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala (Jn 19:25). 'Stood' from the word 'stand' means 'stand upright on their own feet', i.e. these people have not been dragged by events or forced. These are people who freely and voluntarily chose to stand by the person being executed, ready and willing to die with him. Forever there has been the problem of knowing who these people are and how many: it varies from a maximum of four to a minimum of two.

Briefly, if we accept that there are four people then we have the mother, her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. However, this is not possible because there is no conjunction between the sister of his mother and Mary of Clopas in the Greek text. Then it is possible that are three people: his mother, the sister of his mother, who is called "of Clopas", and Mary Magdalene. However, even this assumption is doubtful because, according to the Evangelist's technique, there is never a character mentioned in his Gospel who does not do or say something. Each of John's character named in his Gospel say or do something. Here we would have Mary's sister, Mary of Clopas, who is silent and does nothing. Then on the base of the Evangelist's technique we should discard this hypothesis.

Then we are left with the last solution, i.e. there are only two people by the cross. This is a bit confusing and difficult to understand because these two characters are first introduced by their degree of kinship: Jesus' mother and her sister. Then they are given their names: Mary of Clopas (Jesus' mother) and Mary Magdalene (sister of Jesus' mother). In fact Mary, Jesus' mother, was known as 'that of Clopas' in the ancient world, in the apocryphal books and by the Church Fathers, because it seems that Clopas was the name of Mary's father, hence Mary of Clopas.

There is still a little difficult of accepting that Jesus' mother was Mary Magdalene's sister. However, it is not intended as blood sisters, i.e. born from the same parents, but, as was the language of the early Christian communities, brothers and sisters in Christ. Then Mary is the sister of Mary Magdalene, and the mother, as we will be seen later, of the disciple. Then the Evangelist uses words that indicate kinship (mother, sister, son), but by transfiguring these words, he makes us understand that within Jesus' community the relationships are not hierarchical (as between a superior and an inferior) but similar to those within a family.

Then, as an hypothesis, I suggest seeing in these two characters the faithful part of Israel (symbolised by Mary of Clopas, mother of Jesus) and Jesus' new community (symbolised by Mary Magdalene). There are three female characters in this Gospel that Jesus addresses as "woman", a word also meaning "wife" or "bride". The first is his mother at the wedding of Cana when Jesus says: *'Woman, what do you want from me?'* (Jn 2:4): this woman represents God's bride, the faithful part of Israel, always faithful to her husband. Jesus uses this word for the Samaritan woman, the adulterous bride that the bridegroom wins back with his love. And lastly, he will call Mary Magdalene with the same word. They symbolise God's three 'wives': the faithful Israel, the adulterous Israel that the bridegroom wins back and the new community of God.

Poetic compositions are great, but they are also a risk because, as we have seen earlier, they distort our understanding of the Gospels. We are all familiar with the wonderful and sublime “Stabat Mater” by Jacopone da Todi: “At the Cross her station keeping, stood the mournful Mother weeping, close to her Son to the last”. However, this poetic scene threatens to undermine the understanding of the Gospels. The mother in this Gospel is neither mournful, nor weeping. The Evangelist does not describe feelings but meanings. Jesus' mother standing by her son's cross is not presented as a woman who suffers for her son, but as the perfect disciple, who is ready to accept the same fate as her Teacher. This is the greatness of Jesus' mother: from being Jesus' Mother she was able to become Christ's disciple. Therefore we must suspend all the feelings that literature and a certain spirituality have added to this text. This is not what the Evangelist wants to give us. The Evangelist does not describe an emotive scene, but a scene rich in meanings: this is where true discipleship leads.

Seeing his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother, 'Woman, this is your son' (Jn 19:26). A more literal and attentive translation of the Greek text would be: 'Jesus then perceiving the mother and the disciple standing by ... ' The Evangelist does not say 'his mother', as we would have expected, but 'the mother'. This is because Jesus does not see his mother. He sees the mother who symbolises God's faithful bride, Israel, from which came the Christ. Therefore she is the mother of the new community. After this there is a new surprise: standing next to the mother there is a disciple. In the previous verse the Evangelist wrote that there were some people by the cross ... we might be unsure how many ... but they were all women. There was the mother, her sister and Mary Magdalene, whatever it may be. Now, suddenly, we have another character.

As we have seen earlier on, the Evangelist is not giving us a historical account but a theological lesson. Next to the mother stood *'the disciple whom he loved'*. We have already seen this anonymous disciple: he represents the ideal disciple. He is the one who has always been intimate with Jesus, followed him from the outset, was close to him during the last supper and now is the one who is ready to die with Jesus. The expression *'the disciple whom Jesus loved'* does not mean a preference: love is the normal relationship that Jesus has with all his disciples.

Jesus then addresses the mother as 'woman'. This is strange because this word meant 'wife' or 'bride'. This is because she represented Israel, who the prophets saw as the bride of God, but from now she is the mother of Jesus' new community. In fact the Greek text has the definitive article: 'the son of yours'. However, the son of Mary is Jesus! Jesus sees the disciple that most looked like him as the continuation of himself. This is why Jesus says to the mother: *'this is your son'*, i.e. , “Here's the one who will continue your generation and have a progeny”.

Then to the disciple he said, 'This is your mother' (Jn 19:27). This is important. There is no break between Israel, from which Jesus came, and the new community that Jesus started, but a continuity. It is life that continues in a new form. And new forms are always unpredictable and a source of surprises. Jesus invites the nation of Israel, from which he originates, to accept the new community that is now emerging from him. Therefore not a break but a continuity, not rivalry but communion, not separation but closeness.

And from that hour the disciple took her into his home (Jn 19:27). In the prologue the Evangelist had said: *'He came to his own and his own people did not accept him'* (Jn 1:11). The expression *'to his own'* is the same which here is translated as *'into his home'*. The people of Israel had not been able to accept Jesus but the new people that is born from Jesus is able to accept the old people. This stresses the continuity between the new community and that part of Israel that remained faithful.

After this, Jesus knew that everything had now been completed and, so that the scripture should be completely fulfilled, he said: I am thirsty (Jn 19:28). Please remember that in this Gospel Jesus is not presented as a victim led to his death, but as the champion of love, who is perfectly aware of everything that is happening around him and therefore it is he who takes the initiative. Jesus had already said in this Gospel: *'No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will'* (Jn 10:18). We have already said that the Evangelist structures his Gospel along the lines of Genesis' six days of creation. Here we are in the sixth day. In the book of Genesis this is the day of the creation of man. The Evangelist sees in Jesus the fulfilment of creation, the embodiment of a man created according to God's will, a man who, like the Father, is always and only able to offer love, in spite of the circumstances. Jesus has done this during all his Passion. But Jesus makes a final attempt of offering love. Jesus, the image of the invisible God, is the expression of a God-love, who has no other way of interacting with people other than that of an incessant and growing offer of love. Then Jesus, by now dying on the cross, makes a last attempt of an offer of love.

'Jesus knew that everything had now been completed' is a reference to a psalm: *'Unprovoked they laid their snare for me, unprovoked dug a trap to kill me'* (Ps 35:7). *He said: 'I am thirst'*. As always the Evangelist transfigures the historical event to give it a theological content. From a historical point of view, thirst was one of the torments afflicting a person on the cross. It is therefore natural that Jesus felt thirsty. From a theological point of view, Jesus did not reject the chalice of martyrdom that was given to him by his Father. He had said: *'Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?'* (Jn 18:11). For Jesus, carrying out the Father's will was his food, and now he is willing to drink the cup. Jesus is looking forward to demonstrate the fullness of the Father's love for all humanity.

Jesus says: *'I am thirsty'*. Jesus asks for a minimum of compassion so that he then can give back his gift. This is reminiscent of the encounter with the Samaritan woman where Jesus says: *'Give me something to drink'* (Jn 4:7). It was not Jesus who was thirsty; he was asking for a minimum of welcoming so that he could then offer an even greater gift. In fact, he then says to the Samaritan woman: *'If you only knew what God is offering'* (Jn 4:10). And what was it? It is no longer water that comes from a well, which has to be carried with your own efforts, but a source that comes from inside you. The gift that God was about to give to the Samaritan woman was immensely bigger than the one he asked for. Love can never be imposed, love can only be offered. When love is imposed it is no longer love but violence. Jesus cannot impose his love. He calls for a minimum of welcoming, and then he explodes with all his love for those who grant it to him. Jesus, facing the executioners, asks: *'I am thirsty'*, i.e. "show me a minimum of understanding, and then it will not be you who quenches my thirst but I who will infuse you with my love".

Therefore, Jesus says: *'I am thirsty'*. Here is the meticulous description of the event by the Evangelist: ***A jar full of sour wine stood there*** (Jn 19:29). There was an important moment in a Jewish wedding which was when the two newly weds drank wine from the same cup. The wine was

a symbol of love. Do you remember at the wedding feast of Cana what the mother says? *'They have no wine'* (Jn 2:3). Sometimes this is translated as "They have run out of wine". This would mean that they had some wine to start with. However, the Evangelist does not say that they had run out of wine, but there was never any wine there. *They have no wine'*, i.e. between God and the people of Israel there was no love and the mother, who was concerned about the situation, says: *They have no wine'*. Those who do not have wine, those who do not love, have the opposite of wine, i.e. vinegar. In Jewish symbolism wine was a symbol of love and vinegar was a symbol of hatred.

So, putting a sponge soaked in the wine on a hyssop stick, they held it up to his mouth (Jn 19:29). The importance of vinegar will be underlined by the fact that the term will be repeated three times. By now we have learned some of the Evangelist's literary techniques: repeating three times means what is complete or full. Therefore, a sponge was full of vinegar: the sponge was placed in the jar that contained the vinegar and has sucked up all the vinegar. Therefore, this sponge has soaked up all of the vinegar, which is a symbol of hatred, that was contained in this vase.

This sponge, according to the Evangelist, was put at the top of a hyssop stick. This is so absurd that many copyists thought well of replacing hyssop with javelin. Hyssop is our marjoram, also called oregano. It is impossible to put a sponge on top of a sprig of marjoram. If this sponge is weighed down and soaked in a liquid then it is even more impossible. Therefore many copyists, thinking that this must be a transcription error by a previous copyist, changed this term. In Greek the word for hyssop is *issopoi*. They changed it to *issoi*, which means javelin.

Therefore, in many older translations we find that this sponge, much more logically, was put at the top of a javelin. This is the traditional image we see in paintings. However, the Evangelist is not chronicling an event but giving us some truths. Why is the Evangelist putting a sponge on a sprig of hyssop, which is so implausible and rather impossible? Earlier on the Evangelist interrupted the tension of the drama of the Passion to give us an apparently negligible detail: *'It was about the sixth hour'*. The sixth hour, midday, was the time when in the temple they begun the slaughtering of the lambs for Passover. The Evangelist from the first pages presented Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

On the night before the Exodus, the liberation from slavery in Egypt, the Israelite were told by Moses to kill and eat a lamb so that its meat would give them the necessary strength to begin their journey. And: *'Then take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and with the blood from the basin touch the lintel and both door-posts'* (Ex 12:22). Then the Evangelist's intention is clear: Jesus is the lamb whose flesh, when assimilated, will give people the ability to walk toward the fullness of freedom and whose blood delivers them from the final death. That is why the Evangelist uses the term 'hyssop', apparently so incongruously.

And Jesus accepts it. Jesus has made an offer of love. How can one refuse a dying man suffering the atrocious agony of crucifixion, a drink if he says: 'I am thirsty'? He had asked for a sign of love, they responded with the maximum of hatred. And Jesus accepts it. ***After Jesus had taken the vinegar he said, 'It is fulfilled'*** (Jn 19:30). Jesus paradoxically sucks all the vinegar from the sponge. Jesus accepts all the hatred people are capable of. Having taken the vinegar Jesus said: 'It is finished'. What is it that is finished? The creation of man.

Earlier on, Jesus presented himself: *'Here is the man'*. The man created in the image and likeness of God, the man who is son of God, here he is. It is the man who is always capable of offering and giving love, in whatever situation he is. But, as we said, this love can only be offered, never imposed, because when love is imposed it is no longer love but violence.

Jesus throughout his Passion gives life to those who look for it. Remember that at the beginning he had said: 'Who are you looking for?' Jesus, throughout his Passion, had only incessant offers of love, until the last offer of love when he got back all the hatred. Jesus, having assimilated it all, says: 'It is fulfilled'. The creation is completed. The sixth day, the day of creation of man, is now coming to an end. The man created according to God's will, that is the man that looks like and resembles God, is only capable of offering love, even when surrounded by a world that rejected him, this man says: *'It is fulfilled'*. Here is the prototype for the whole creation and the whole of mankind.

No Evangelist writes that Jesus died. The Evangelists do not have a scene of death, but a scene brimming with life. It is clear that Jesus died on the cross but the Evangelists are not journalists who chronicle events but theologians who passed on to Christian communities of all times some truths. None of the Gospel says that Jesus died, but, as we will see here and in the other Gospels, Jesus acts as a living person.

And bowing his head he gave up his spirit (Jn 19:30). "Bowing the head" was a technical expression indicating going to sleep. For Jesus there is no death but only sleep. He had already said when speaking about Lazarus: *'Our friend Lazarus is at rest'* (Jn 11:11). Resting is an important moment in the cycle of a person's day, a moment of pause. This allows a person to recover and start the following day with renewed and greater energy. Then for Jesus death is a pause that makes it possible to return even more energised. The Evangelist does not show us the death of Jesus but the action of a living person that goes to sleep. We will see later the theological significance of this sleep.

'He gave up his spirit'. A literal Greek translation would be: "He delivered the Spirit". 'The Spirit' with the definitive article "the". This is the force of the love of God, which Jesus had received at the time of his baptism and then enriched during his life with acts of love that gave back life to people. Jesus delivers this Spirit. To whom? To those who take him as a model of man. Therefore those who receive Jesus as a model of behaviour, those who orient their lives toward the good of others and those who undertake to have in their lives always and only love as an answer, are the ones who receive his Spirit.

All the Evangelists have similar expressions to ensure the same theological meaning. They say that Jesus breathed out or sent forth his spirit. Breathing out is not the action of a dead person but the action of a live one. They say this because in Jesus there is fullness of life to such an extent that allows him to immediately bypass death.

But "Jesus delivered the Spirit". The last act of Jesus is an act of love. This word "deliver" is the one that appears rhythmically throughout the whole Passion. Judas delivers Jesus to the guards, the guards deliver Jesus to Caiaphas, Caiaphas delivers Jesus to Pilate, Pilate delivers Jesus to the torturers. This word has clocked an itinerary of growing hatred and death. The only time that is

attributed to Jesus is an offer of fullness of life. Jesus responds to hatred with his Spirit, his love.

It was the Day of Preparation, and to avoid the bodies' remaining on the cross during the Sabbath -- since that Sabbath was a day of special solemnity -- the Jews asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken away (Jn 19:31). This is the second time that the word “preparation” appears. The Evangelist here is highly ironic. They do everything to prepare for the Passover, but they will not celebrate it because the real Passover is Jesus sacrificed on the cross. They have done all they can to prepare for it but will not manage to celebrate it. *'To avoid the bodies' remaining on the cross'*: here, there is another grammatical inconsistency. Up to about 40 years ago it was thought that the Evangelists were fishermen or people of no great culture who managed somehow to put together a biography of Jesus, but it was full of grammatical errors.

What once seemed grammatical errors have later been shown to be great theological insights. Here there is a grammatical error because the Evangelist writes about *'bodies remaining on the cross'*: there are three bodies, Jesus and the other two men crucified with him. Hence, since “bodies” is plural, the Evangelist should have written “on the crosses”: there should be three crosses. Instead the Evangelist transfigures the historical fact and writes: *'to avoid the bodies' remaining on the cross'*. There is just a single cross. For the Evangelist there is a single cross: a single cross where Jesus and his two disciples are nailed on. These are the disciples who followed him up to the end. There is a single cross, which is the cross of Jesus and on this cross there are also his disciples.

'Since that Sabbath was a day of special solemnity'. It was a solemn day because it is the last day of creation, the creation of man. *'The Jews asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken away'*. We have said that the crucifixion was not a form of carrying out death sentences, but an atrocious torture, which eventually led to death, sometimes after several days. Just to ensure that the agony lasted for as long as possible, a support was placed on the vertical axis of the cross, so that the condemned could rest between spasms. This was to make the agony last longer. The Jews now must prepare the liturgical feast and cannot keep the dying people on the cross. Therefore, they ask Pilate to resort to the common practice of breaking the knees of the condemned, so that they could no longer lift themselves up. No longer able to breathe, they would die asphyxiated soon afterwards.

Consequently the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with him and then of the other (Jn 19:32). We have said that Jesus was between two other people. However, the soldiers follow a strange path. The soldiers came and broke the legs of the first man - the one on the right or left - and then they should have gone to Jesus. Instead they go around to the other side. Soon after there is a verb that is impossible to translate into English. It is something like “cum-crucified”. The Evangelist emphasises once again that those crucified with him were his disciples, those who had chosen to die with Jesus and like Jesus. The Evangelist uses this grammatical construction to emphasise the centrality of Jesus.

When they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead, and so instead of breaking his legs (Jn 19:33). Life is not taken away from Jesus. Jesus had said several times in this Gospel: *'The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as I have power to lay it down, so I have power to take it up again'* (Jn 10:17-18). Then life is not taken away from Jesus. Here the Evangelist transfigures another historical event, to make a theological reflection. ***One of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance;***

and immediately there came out blood and water (Jn 19:34). This is another gesture of hatred against Jesus that was totally unnecessary.

They had already realised he was dead. However, the hatred against him is so great, that as a sign of contempt toward him, as yet another outrageous gesture, totally unnecessarily, one of the soldiers grabs a spear and throws it against his rib cage. Well, in the face of yet another gesture of hatred by humanity, Jesus oozed life even after he was already dead. What is it that comes out from this wound? Blood and water. Blood is a sign of the love that Jesus showed; love that gets to the point of giving his life as a gift. Water is the symbol of the Spirit that is passed on to humanity. The umpteenth gesture of hatred on the part of humanity against the son of God, a spear thrown at his rib cage, brings again an offer of love.

However, here the Evangelist, by having Jesus going to sleep and mentioning his rib, also reminds us of the creation of woman. We have said that with Jesus was created new man, a man created in the image and likeness of God, a man who is God himself. Here is also the creation of woman. In the book of Genesis we read that the Lord made Adam fall asleep and from a rib taken from him he created his companion. And Adam said: *'This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'* (Gn 2:23). In the death of Jesus the Evangelist presents the same scene to us. He writes about Jesus going to sleep, about his rib cage being pierced. In Genesis the first woman was born, here the new community of Christ, the Church, was born. The Church of Jesus will not be like Adam's companion, flesh of my flesh, bone of my bones, but Spirit of my Spirit. Thus, the community of Jesus was born from the death of Jesus. Therefore, the Evangelist does not show us a scene of death, but a scene of life. The cross is not Jesus' death bed, but the birth cradle of his community, the Church.

Now the Evangelist interrupts the description, for a theological reflection: ***This is the evidence of one who saw it -- true evidence, and he knows that what he says is true -- and he gives it so that you may believe as well*** (Jn 19:35). This is a solemn testimony given so that we may believe. The Evangelist in the Greek text for the verb "to see" uses a verb that does not indicate physical sight, but a verb that means perceive, such as making a deep inner experience. Therefore the Evangelist is aware that his presentation of the death of Jesus is a theological reading of the events, not a chronicle of such event. Afterwards, the Evangelist goes back to a theme that is dear to him: ***Because all this happened to fulfil the words of scripture: Not one bone of his will be broken*** (Jn 19:36).

When Moses asked the Jews to kill the paschal lamb he said to his people: *'Nor may you brake any of its bones'* (Ex 12:42). This is why Jesus on the cross had none of his bones broken. The Evangelist sees Jesus as the paschal lamb, the lamb whose meat gives life and whose blood rescues us from death. But this is also a citation from Psalm 34 verse 20: *'Yahweh takes care of all their bones, not one of them will be broken'*. Then in that tortured man that, according to the Bible, the word of God, suffered the death reserved to those who had been cursed by God, in that man shone the fullness of divinity of the Son of God.

And again, in another place scripture says: They will look to the one whom they have pierced (Jn 19:37). This citation comes from the prophet Zechariah: *'And they will look to the one whom they have pierced'* (Zc 12:10, Theodotion version). In this passage Zechariah speaks of the profusion of

the Spirit from Jesus symbolised by the blood that came out from his wound. Another passage says that on that day, the day of the Lord, water will spring from Jerusalem and this water will reach all humanity (see Ez 47:1:12). Water is another image of the Spirit and in any culture it is seen as source of life. The water that came out from Jesus' wounded side will reach all humanity. This water that springs out from Jerusalem will not be for Israel only, but will flow toward everyone.

After this (Jn 19:38). Here the Evangelist subverts the artistic creations of painters and sculptors depicting Jesus' deposition from the cross. They may be beautiful such as the splendid Michelangelo's Pietà, with Mary receiving Jesus' corpse, but do not correspond to the Gospel's accounts. We have said that at the foot of the cross there were Jesus' mother, her sister Mary of Magdala and one of his disciples. Why do they not take the body of Jesus? Why are they not who receive his body? It is clear: those disciples who were able of following Jesus on the cross are already experiencing him as living again. They do not follow a corpse, they follow a living person. That is why the Evangelist makes them disappear from the scene. In the scene of the deposition of the body of Jesus there is neither his mother nor his disciple or Mary Magdalene. They are already experiencing him living again. They do not mourn a dead person, they follow a person that is alive and life-giving. They have already understood in advance what others will not understand. In Luke's Gospel when the pious women get to the tomb they find their way barred by the angels who say: *'Why look among the dead for someone who is alive?'* (Lk 24:5).

The Evangelist invites you to make a choice: either you mourn him as a dead person, in which case please visit the cemetery, or experience him as alive. It is not possible to have both; this is also important for us, for our loved ones. We need to decide: either we mourn them as dead, in which case we make our way to the cemetery, the place of the dead, or we experience them as alive. You cannot mourn a person as dead and experience him/her as alive at the same time.

It is a bit like what will happen in Luke's Gospel that Mary of Magdala weeps with her eyes toward the tomb. While she is mourning a dead person, she does not realise that Jesus, alive, was behind her and waiting patiently: "Let's see when she stops crying". Only when Mary Magdalene stops watching the tomb and turns back she realises that Jesus is there. She mourned him as dead while instead he was alive. That is why Jesus' mother and his disciple are not there at the deposition of his body from the cross. They follow a living person. They do not honour a dead person. Therefore, who are those honouring a dead person? Those who were unable to follow him while alive now pretend to pay their respects while he is dead.

After this, Joseph of Arimathaea, who was a disciple of Jesus -- though a secret one because he was afraid of the Jews (Jn19:38). In chapter 9, after the healing the man born blind, the Jews – The term 'Jews' does not indicate the people of Israel, but always the leaders of the people - had commanded that "If someone recognizes Jesus as the Christ, he will be expelled from the synagogue" (see Jn 9:22). To be expelled from the synagogue did not just mean being not allowed to enter a place of worship, which would not have been so bad, but it meant civil death. People who had been expelled from the synagogue could not mix or deal with other people. It was necessary to keep a distance of two meters from them, people were not allowed to buy from or sell to them: this meant civil death. Here we have a member of the Sanhedrin - he also appears in Luke's Gospels – who 'followed' Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews. He preferred people's honour to God's. Therefore, he was a secret disciple; unable to openly follow Jesus while alive, he resolved to

honour him when dead.

Asked Pilate to let him remove the body of Jesus. Pilate gave permission, so they came and took it away (Jn 19:38). It is strange: Joseph of Arimathea is more afraid of the people with whom he share the same religion, the Jews, than of the pagan ruler. He is a secret disciple because he is afraid of his own colleagues, the Jews, but he is not afraid of Pilate. From here we see how tremendous the religious oppression was.

Nicodemus came as well (Jn 19:39). What a surprise to see him again! The Evangelist reminds us he is **The same one who had first come to Jesus at night-time** (Jn 19:39). The night is not so much a chronological, but a theological, indication. The night is the world of darkness and incomprehension. The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus was a dialogue of the deaf. Jesus invited him to open up to the new, but the poor Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, was attached to his old traditions, and didn't understand.

For each of Jesus' offers he said: "How is it possible". Nicodemus was a good man but a man of tradition and the man of tradition always believes that the beautiful and the good is in the past, not in the present and certainly not in the future. Faced with the prospect of changing and be born again, the poor guy says: "How is it possible". Now, he as well, unable of understanding Jesus' novelty, volunteers to honour him as dead.

And he brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about one hundred pounds (Jn 19:39). This is exaggerated! One hundred pounds of ointment to embalm a corpse? Why is this indication disproportionate? One hundred pounds is a lot! Just a few ounces would have been enough. Just try to carry one hundred pounds. One hundred pounds of ointment to embalm Jesus. Why carrying all this weight? Because they had forgotten the perfume that Jesus had asked to keep for his death. At the resurrection of Lazarus, his sister Martha protested: *'Lord, by now he smells; this is the fourth day since he died'* (Jn11:39). The effect of death is stench. When Lazarus comes back to life the effect of life is a perfume that floods the whole house.

On that occasion, Mary, Lazarus's sister, had poured some perfume. It represented a life capable of overcoming death. Jesus had said: *'Let her keep it for the day of my burial'* (Jn 12:7). "This life that is capable of overcoming death, this life that now you have experienced in Lazarus, will also be my life. I will not die, I will continue to live. Keep this perfume". They did not keep it; they had forgotten. Having forgotten the perfume of a life capable of overcoming death, they bring ointments to embalm a corpse.

Now the Evangelist prepares for us a dramatic turn of events. All the preparations for the funeral are described with the language of the preparations for a wedding. Nicodemus carries myrrh and aloes. These are fragrances that in the Song of Songs are used in a nuptial context: they were the scents used to perfume the first night's alcove of the newly wed. Therefore, the Evangelist does not mention ointments used to anoint a dead body, but perfumes that were used to perfume the bridegroom and his bed on the day of his wedding. Therefore, while the Evangelist describes a funeral from the historical point of view, he transfigures it theologically into a wedding. In Jesus it is not death that ends up winning, but it is life that transcends death. This is why he introduces perfumes that are images of a wedding.

They took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, following the Jewish burial custom (Jn 19:40). This is strange: they bound Jesus' corpse in linen clothes! They should have used, as we have seen with Lazarus, bandages. The Evangelist does not use the term "bandage", but uses a term that means "linen". Linen sheets were used for the wedding day. Bed sheets were rarely used and only on great occasions. On the day of the wedding, the wedding bed was prepared with linen sheets. There you see how the Evangelist is transfiguring the event. It is no longer a funeral but a wedding.

However, why did they bind Jesus' corpse? When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the first command was: *'Unbind him and let him go free'* (Jn 11:44). "You are the ones who have bound him". It was not a Jewish custom to bind corpses. When a person died, his/her body was washed with water and vinegar, was sprinkled with perfumes and then covered with a cloth, but not bound. Why then Jesus, after raising Lazarus, says: *'Unbind him'*? This is because in Jewish symbolism death was seen as a bond. The Psalms speak of death as "The ropes of death kept me prisoner ... the ties of the kingdom of death" (e.g. see Ps 18:4). Therefore, it was they who had relegated Lazarus to the kingdom of the dead. And now, not having understood the meaning of the resurrection of Lazarus, they bind Jesus as well. For them death is the end of everything. It is true that there is a resurrection at the end of time, but ... death is the end of everything.

They then bury Jesus *'with the spices, following the Jewish burial custom'*. It was customary for the Jews but not for the community of Jesus. They buried Jesus as they had buried Lazarus for whom death was the end of everything. When Jesus goes to raise Lazarus he is confronted by Martha, who rebukes him: *'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died'* (Jn 11:21). Jesus replied: *'Your brother will rise again'* (Jn 11:23). Martha retorted drily: "Surely; I know he will rise up. On the last day". If, when a person we love dearly dies, we are told, as a way of comforting, that he/she will rise again, not only we do not derive any comfort, but our despair will deepen. "Surely he/she will rise. When? This evening?, Tomorrow?, Next week?" "No, at the end of time". "Oh well! By then I will be dead and risen as well!"

Jesus then changes the perspective of resurrection and says to Martha: *'I am the resurrection'* - therefore the resurrection will not be in the future but in the present with Jesus - *anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die'* (Jn 11:25). Therefore, you mourn a component of the community, e.g. Lazarus, who believed in me. Even if you now see him as a corpse, you must know that he continues to live. And then the second part of Jesus' answer is addressed to his community: *'and whoever lives and believes in me will never die'*. Therefore, those who are still alive but have oriented their lives to the well-being of others have a life of such quality that it is called eternal, because it is indestructible. Eternal life is a life of such a quality that is capable of overcoming death. But his community has not understood this yet. The community buries Jesus according to their ancient custom: for them death was the end of everything, while waiting for this resurrection at the end of time.

At the place where he had been crucified there was a garden (Jn 19:41) – As we have said before "the place" is a technical term that always indicates "the temple of God". The temple of God is no longer the temple of Jerusalem, but where Jesus is, the place where he was crucified. Also the theme of the garden reappears. We started the story of Jesus' Passion in a garden: Jesus went into a garden. The garden is the place of life and the sanctuary where God's love becomes manifested. Here, at the

end of the entire story, a garden paradoxically reappears. It is impossible that in the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden.

It is impossible that there might have been a garden in the place where executions were carried out. We said it was a stone quarry, abandoned as a result of an earthquake and was used as the site of executions. There was no garden there. In Jerusalem there were only two gardens: one in the grounds of the royal palace and one in that of the high priest. In a city that from April to the end of October does not see a drop of water, just imagine if people could have the luxury of wasting any water for a garden in the place of executions. The rain that fell during winter was stored in tanks, for domestic use, but could not be wasted on a garden. Thus, it is impossible that there was a garden in a place of executions.

However, for the Evangelist it is different: where there is Jesus there is a garden full of life. Jesus, speaking of his death, had said: *'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest'* (Jn 12:24). When a grain of wheat is thrown into the ground and dies, all the energy stored in it, that could not be seen, explodes, is freed and produces a beautiful ear. Death does not destroy a person but boost his/her potential. We, in the short arc of our existence, sometimes have found ourselves in circumstances in which we drew out energies and capacities we did not know we had. At the time of our death, whenever it will happen, all the energies that we have not yet been able to utilise will explode and the person will be transfigured into something completely new.

Therefore *'At the place where he had been crucified there was a garden'* because it was not a place of death but a place of life. And the Evangelist repeats : ***'And in this garden a new tomb'*** (Jn 19:41). In Greek there are two terms that mean “new”: *neos* means something added to what was there already. The other term is *kainós* : it means something of such an excellent quality that it supplants what was there before. This last term is also used by Jesus when he said: *'I give you a new commandment'* (Jn 13:34), i.e. a commandment better than all the others.

Here is a tomb of a new level of quality, completely new and in fact the Evangelist says: ***'In which no one had yet been buried'*** (Jn 19:41). It is in contrast with the old tomb where they had buried Lazarus: his death was supposed to be the end of everything. With Jesus, death contains in itself already the shoots of new life, and therefore Jesus inaugurates a type of death *'in which no one had yet been buried'*. This will also be the tomb in which eventually all his followers will be buried; it is a death that contains in itself the seeds of life. Then for the Evangelist there is no life, death and resurrection, but there is a life of such a quality that it is already that of the risen ones. We do not rise after death: either we are arisen while still alive or we will not rise at all.

The God of Jesus is not the God who raises the dead but he is the God who gifts the living a quality of life capable of overcoming death. That is why Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians: *'and he raised us up with him'* (Ep1:6), or to the Colossians: *'You have been raised up with him'* (Col 2:12). These expressions may seem foolish to us. What do you mean by: “we who have already been raised”. Don't we first live, then die and subsequently be raised? No! No! We are raised here, during this life. Those who orientate their lives towards the well-being of others are already risen. Jesus assures us that they will not experience death. *'Whoever keeps my word will never sees death'* (Jn 8:51). Therefore, there is not a resurrection to look forward to after death but a resurrection to

implement during life.

And we arrived at the conclusion. ***Since it was the Jewish Day of Preparation and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there*** (Jn 19:42). This is the third and final time that the Evangelist writes about the day of preparation. There is some irony here: they have done everything they could to prepare for the Passover, but the Passover has already been eaten. It is similar to what Jesus says in the other Gospels in his polemic with the Pharisees: “You Pharisees think that publicans and prostitutes are those who prevent the coming of the kingdom of God. Open your eyes people! See: they are already at the table, they have taken your place and you are left out” (see Mt 21:31). From the beginning in all their actions they've been very careful not to become contaminated, e.g. they did not want to set foot in the Praetorium for fear of becoming impure, in which case they would not have been able to eat the Passover. All that was a fiasco: the Passover has already been celebrated. Jesus has already been sacrificed, and, therefore, they will never eat this Passover.

The burial of Jesus is not the end of the Gospel, but it is the beginning of the Good News and this is that, with Jesus, death has been completely and definitively destroyed. In the same way he died a death that had in itself fullness of life, so will be our destiny.

This is the end of our reading of Jesus' Passion. I thank you.