

JESUS AND WOMEN

"Jesus and women"...well, but, what about men?

Trust me and you will see that the topic is of interest not only to women. In the Gospels, in fact, women represent all the people who are marginalized by religion for several reasons.

So, all the people who feel marginalized by religion - for moral, religious, sexual reasons - all those people will find interest in the female characters presented by the evangelists.

Now, let's arrange the setting in which the evangelists write and let's see what is women's world at Jesus' time. Let's read three verses of Luke's Gospel (8-13). He puts them with "nonchalance", it seems they are already obvious, actually they are a real revolution, they're something explosive.

"Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages" (Lk, 8-1)

Now it happened that after this he made his way through towns and villages preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. With him went the twelve.

"Soon afterward" (ἄρ' ἔπειτα) what? It's the episode of the sinner who enters when Jesus is taking part in a banquet and of the scandalous forgiveness that He gave her.

"Proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God".

Well, this is Jesus' peculiarity: He goes around announcing **the good news** of the Kingdom of God

And what is this good news?

Jesus shows a completely new God, a God who is unknown in the religious panorama of the time, because he is not only a good God but an exclusively good one, a God who is love and whose only way to relate to people is by a never ending and ever growing communication of love. This is God. A God who is very distant from the God presented by religion, a frightening God, a God who awards the good and threatens real, authentic punishment for the guilty, a God who always makes you feel unworthy, despicable.

Well then, Jesus announces the good news of the Kingdom of God, that is **God is love**.

There is no one that, because of his/her behaviour, social, religious, or moral condition, could feel left out of the love of God. This is the news brought by Jesus; and this is the news which cost him his life, because you know that any religion teaches, shows and imposes a God who gives a prize to the good and chastises the wicked.

Jesus shows a God who communicates his love to everyone, both to the wicked and the good, apart from their behaviour and response. A God who doesn't look at people's merits but only at people's needs.

If the relationship with God is based on the observance of the law - and this law cannot be respected by everyone - people feel guilty, unworthy, and with no merit to offer to the Lord.

Well, with Jesus, God doesn't love people for their merits - because not everyone has merits to present. **Instead, God loves people because he is attracted by their needs, as everyone can be in need.**

This is the good news of the Kingdom!

Here's the verse 2: "as well as certain women who had been cured of evil spirits and ailments: Mary surnamed the Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out " Something inconceivable and scandalous for the time

- "*And the twelve were with him*" by the number twelve the Evangelist doesn't mean to present twelve single men. According to the Jewish symbology, number twelve stands for Israel, that is the people of Israel who followed Jesus

- "*and also **some women***", some women in Jesus' group?

This is unacceptable, intolerable and scandalous.

Why?

We are going to examine the women's condition in those days.

Keep in mind that in the Jewish language the female term for "disciple" didn't exist. John the Baptist had only male followers, therefore the presence of a woman in a group was unimaginable because women had always been submitted to male authority: their father's first, and then their husband's and maybe their sons' too. In any case, this authority is restricted to the family clan.

A woman living out of the family clan was inconceivable unless she was a prostitute.

The Jewish law provided for the repudiation of one's wife if the husband caught her walking alone in the street or talking to another person.

Well then, among Jesus' followers there were some women. That means that all the group is disreputable because women are considered inferior beings, and, above all, because of menstruation. They are considered always impure, making impure everything that surrounds them.

Therefore, Jesus' group, by the fact that some women were well accepted - this was something never heard before: a group with some women - is an impure group because, according to the Jewish superstitions, the physiologic occurrence of menstruation made

women the cause of God's curse, they were believed to attract troubles...As a consequence, Jesus' group shows itself as an impure one and as a source of calamity.

This might be enough: there are some women in Jesus' group and this cannot be accepted, but...listen to this! Those women had been cured of evil spirits and disease, so they had a past! They had been cut off from God's sphere. One of them was "*Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out*", but the Evangelist does not tell us who these seven demons were. Another one was no less than "*Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager*".

In those days there weren't tabloids, magazines about gossips and all that stuff, but there were lots of rumours all the same!

There is a well-known woman, her name is Giovanna, she is the wife of Herod's administrator and she has left her husband to follow this young prophet. Can you imagine the rumours? Can you imagine the scandal at court and all over Galilee? A woman from high society who has left her husband, a scandal because it is unbelievable that a woman may live outside her family circle.

Then "*Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means*".

These three verses were unheard-of in those days. Actually the evangelist wants to give us some information which is present throughout the Gospels: whereas all male disciples are presented in a negative way, except for one or two cases, women are all presented positively; the only exceptions are two women connected with power

1. *Herodias*, the woman who holds the power,
2. and the mother of *Zebedee's* sons, the woman who longs for power.

Except for these characters, women are presented positively, but that's not all! There's something more sensational: they are not only presented at the same level as men, they are above men. Women, those human beings considered so distant from God, in Jesus' community are superior to men!!

Luke informs us that "*they ministered to him*" (gr. *dikhōnōn*). This is relevant: at that time God resided in a sphere of absolute holiness and the only beings who could stay near him were seven angels called "angels of service" whose task was to serve God.

Well then, in the Gospels women are given the same role as angels. They serve Jesus and announce his message. Even Jesus' Resurrection is announced by women, so, in the Gospels, women, the human beings who were most distant from God are now the closest.

You see how this clashed with the mentality of the time and how, in the space of two hundred years, the importance that Jesus had given to women, the value that the Christian community had acknowledged to them, would be taken off together with their rights. The news brought

by Jesus was too great to be understood by the male chauvinist culture of the time who considered the woman as a man turned out badly.

Now let's consider women's condition according to culture and religion at Jesus' time; two important documents will help us:

- the Bible,
- the Talmud

What is the Talmud? The Jews believed then and still do that God had given to Moses two laws on the Sinai:

1. the first was written on the tables and constitutes the first five books of the Bible;
2. the second was given verbally, in person, and written later.

They both have the same value, they're both word of God.

In order to better understand the women's world we will also consider Jesus' mother as shown by the Evangelists.

What does the Bible say?

The Bible is the word of God, and we believe it, this is unquestionable for us. But, look out, it's the word of God written by men, who certainly put in it something to their own advantage and to the detriment of women.

Well then, in the Bible, which is the word of God written by men, women are the source of all evils. Wherever there is a calamity or a bad situation it's always the women's fault.

The book of Ecclesiasticus, one of the sapiential books of the Bible, by the way written by a great theologian - and this let us understand what the culture of the time was - says: "*From the woman came the beginning of sin, and by her we all die*" (25,33).

Thus the first woman, the one who became known as Eve, is the cause of sin and because of her we all die. And that's why women followed the dead in Jewish funerals, because they were responsible for the death.

Then who's to blame for the biggest punishment of mankind, death? The woman is to blame.

Look, this is not a narrow-minded text, it is not written by an uncultivated person! The book of *Ecclesiasticus* was written by a great theologian, philosopher and man of letters but this was the culture of the time.

The Ecclesiasticus goes on: "*Better is the iniquity of a man, than a woman doing a good turn, and a woman bringing shame and reproach*" (42,14).

Another great theologian was Ecclesiastes, a word standing for "the preacher". He was also a man of great intellectual stature who wrote beautiful pages. Inspired, but certainly desolate as well, he says: *"One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. (7,28).*

"Remember that you owe your birth to them; how can you repay them for what they have done for you?"

These texts are very close to Jesus' time; this was the cultural context of the time; in fact men had the obligation to bless the Lord three times a day and the blessing said: "Thank you Lord for creating me neither a pagan, nor a boor (the boor is the peasant, the land-worker who cannot observe the precepts of the law), nor a woman".

There is also a female version of this blessing, with a variation, of course. "Thank you Lord for making me neither a pagan nor a boor, and thank you because you made me according to your will"

When a child is born, the birth is preceded by a prayer: for forty days, since the conception, the father asks God to give him a son because in those days it was inconceivable that a man could beget a woman. The birth of a daughter meant either that the seed was rotten or that the father was weak, because a vigorous man begets a man. It was inconceivable that a man could beget a woman and this is still true in Eastern culture. I lived in Palestine for many years where I have some of my dearest friends. One of them was waiting for the birth of his first child and he used to say: "When my son is born...when my son is born...", so I said: "Well... but what happens if it's a daughter?". Feeling hurt, he stared at me and answered: "What are you saying? It's impossible, I'm a strong man, you know?"

He had a daughter. He called me, I remember the exact words: "Alberto, she's a daughter, but you could love her all the same". Anyway, he soon made his wife pregnant again because having a daughter is a bit dishonourable until you have a son. So, when a man makes his wife pregnant, he prays for forty days to have a son and then he keeps on praying: "Your will be done".

But what happens if a daughter is born? It's a real social disgrace, a civil disgrace, a religious disgrace because the Bible, which is the word of God written by men, states in the Leviticus that when a woman gives birth to a daughter she will be impure for two weeks (one week if she bears a son).

Just like in her period, she will purify herself from her blood for sixty-six days (thirty-three if she bore a son). (Lv 12, 1-5 passim).

You see that in that culture the birth of a daughter is a real disgrace for a woman! Besides the fact that she knows she has to become pregnant soon to give a son to her husband, she must submit to three months of daily purifications!!

There was no running water in those days, you had to go to the well or to the spring and this was a woman's duty; for three months a woman had to do her ablutions, purify herself as prescribed by the law; I think this is one of the worst crime committed by religion.

The birth of a baby! The word "miracle" can be used for that, because the birth of a baby is a miracle of creation indeed! Well then, religion is capable of sullyng all this, when a child is born the mother is impure, twice as much if she's had a daughter, of course.

Unfortunately, these Jewish beliefs had penetrated into and corrupted Christianity. The people of my age may remember that, before the Second Vatican Council, a woman who had just given birth to a baby had to receive a blessing from her parish priest before entering the church because the delivery had made her impure in some way.

Then the birth of a daughter is a calamity for the mother, who has to purify. As for the father, I think that the best description of his distress at the birth of a daughter can be found in the book of Ecclesiasticus, where the Bible, the word of God teaches: "*The father waketh for the daughter when no man knoweth, and the care for her taketh away his sleep, when she is young, lest she pass away the flower of her age, and when she is married, lest she should be hateful: In her virginity, lest she should be corrupted, and be found with child in her father's house: and having a husband, lest she should misbehave herself, or at the least become barren*". (42,9-10).

"Unknown to her, a daughter keeps her father awake, the worry she gives him drives away his sleep: in her youth, in case she never marries, married, in case she should be disliked,"

Then you see that the birth of a daughter really kept the poor father awake, but...there was a remedy, a rather normal remedy which neither caused a scandal nor was considered a sin: the daughter was exposed (technical word meaning getting rid of the new-born child).

It was an accepted practice to **expose** baby daughters when there were already one or two daughters in a family. What's the meaning of this practice? The new-born child was taken and placed at the crossroads of the village; as an alternative, she was even left at the borders of the village, in the country where she was either torn to pieces by nocturnal animals or picked up by slave traders at dawn and then brought up and trained to prostitution.

Some texts tell us that at the age of five those little girls were already able to prostitute themselves, and at the age of eight had their first sexual intercourse.

A prostitute is not a woman who says: "Now I'm going to prostitute myself". She is a woman who has never known a family as she has been rejected since the day of her birth. This was quite normal and considered neither a crime nor a sin.

In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet speaks of Israel as a rejected baby girl and says: "*Fosti gettata in aperta campagna come oggetto di ripugnanza nel giorno in cui nascesti*".

If necessary, there is another solution: you raise the girl and then you sell her as a slave.

The Bible - word of God - in the book of Exodus, says: when a man sells his daughter as a slave...it's just a matter of tariff. So the little girl is raised and then sold as a slave to make a profit for the trouble.

We said that we're going to consider the women's condition through the life of Jesus' mother. It is certainly strange that Mary's parents had called their daughter by such a name: Mary.

It cannot be proved, but probably by such a name they may have wanted to express all their disgust and discontent at the birth of a baby girl; indeed "Mary" used to be a cursed name never to be given to a child.

Why is this name cursed?

Only once a Mary appears in the Bible, in the Old Testament. She's Moses' sister, an ambitious and intriguing woman who takes advantage of a moment in which her brother's popularity is weakening. He has married a black wife and she, Mary - look out! - she and Aaron, Moses' brother, speak ill of Moses, their brother, because he's married to a black wife.

God the Father hears the mumbling and gets angry; mind you : Aaron and Mary are Moses' brother and sister, their crime is the same, speaking ill of Moses in order to discredit him in some way, but...the Lord heard and his wrath fell on...whom? On Mary, of course, not Aaron, and the Lord cursed her by leprosy, as this disease was considered a curse.

In those days leprosy wasn't considered an infirmity but a curse cast by God. Because of Moses' pleas, God reluctantly consented to restore her to health, at last. Incidentally, before dying Mary will say: please don't cry for an old woman ...

God cures her of leprosy, but from then on the name Mary has disappeared, because that name is cursed. It's a bit like in our Christian culture: who dares give a baby boy the name Judas? Judas is a nice name, one of the apostles', not only the one who betrayed him is named Judas, yet, as Judas reminds us of Jesus' traitor, no boy is named Judas.

Or else, think of another beautiful name that Christians used to bear with so much pride, Lucifer. Lucifer means shining, bringer of light, it was a name coveted by Christians, both men and women.

There was a bishop from Cagliari, Saint Lucifer in 4th century, then the story of the beautiful angel was born - do you know it? - who wanted to be like God and his name was Lucifer; from then on Lucifer has disappeared from the registers of baptism. I don't know if you know someone whose name is Lucifer, yet it's a beautiful name.

Well, alike, the name Mary has disappeared since then. Therefore we wonder why Jesus' mother is called Mary and why all the women in the Gospels bear this name.

Probably this is due to this marginalization, to this disgust felt for women.

If the birth of a baby girl is a disgrace, her life is a real calamity. The little girl is brought up to be a servant, to serve her father and brothers, and then her husband and sons. However, this servitude is explained in the Talmud (the holy book having the same value as the word of God) as follows: "*But it was not good for the first man whom had been taken a rib and in return was given a servant to serve him?*"

This is because Adam, a short time later, begins to complain: why is this woman here? I was better without her, wasn't I? Then the Talmud explains: No, you weren't, she's been made to serve you!

So women's role is to be servants. Servants of their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons.

Another sapiential book, one of the most important and theologically refined, the Book of Proverbs, praises the perfect woman.

Listen, according to such a mentality, who is the perfect woman? "*She gets up while it is yet night, and prepares the food for his family even at night Her lamp works with great energy and its arms are never tired.*"

Then, after enumerating all the works done by such a woman: "*She gets wool and flax and works willingly with her hands, plants a vineyard, stretches out her hand to the distaff and plays the spindle with her fingers, prepares linen covers and packages cloths*".

Listen to the conclusion which is outstanding, after enumerating everything this woman does, she wakes up when it's still dark and goes to bed late in the night, the author benevolently admits that: "*the bread she eats is not is not the result of laziness*". (Cf Pr 31, 15 sqq)

Not bad, uh? The bread she eats is not the result of laziness!

I can't imagine when this wretched woman has the time for being lazy. So this portrait of the perfect housewife is actually the portrait of a slave.

Well, brought up to be a servant, a beast of burden, the woman is left out of education and religious teaching, those things being a privilege only for men.

Mind you, in the Bible, where God is so precise, after enumerating all his laws, what did he say? (This is how rabbis explain the facts) what did the Lord say? He said: you shall teach all these things to your sons. If God the Father, who is so precise, had wanted this teaching to be addressed also to women, he would have added: and to your daughters as well. But he didn't, so religious teaching is only for men and not for women. For this reason in the Talmud it is taught that: "*the words of the Torah should be burned rather than entrusted to women*" (JT **Sotah** 3:4, **19a**). Therefore it's better for the Bible to be burnt than being taught to

women. Once, a woman tried to ask a rabbi to explain to her a passage of the Bible; she was answered in a very disparaging way: a woman has nothing to learn but how to use the spindle.

Women are not considered human beings, they belong to a sub-human category, they're objects, their life does not belong to them, it's their husband's and their sons' property. Indeed, the Talmud says: a girl remains under her father's authority until she enters under her husband's control through marriage. In the list of man's possessions, the woman is treated like the ox and the donkey, she's very often below them and, in any case, always below the house.

Just to have an idea of a woman's worth in the tariff of people: from 5 to 20 years, twenty shekels for a man and ten shekels (10 shekels is a month's wage) for a woman. So a woman's worth is absolutely nothing.

Just to remain within the scope of the Bible I would like to attract your attention to the Book of Deuteronomy, and precisely to the well-known Ten Commandments and to Sabbath as the day of rest.

Now let's pay attention to what the legislator says: *"Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work" - mind the list! - "you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you"*.

Did you notice who's missing from this list and dispensed of rest? Women! So, cows have their rest on Sabbath but it's necessary that someone keep things going...and who's the one who has to work? Not the slave, but the wife!

Well then, brought up to be a servant, at the age of 12 years and 1 day a woman is given in marriage. In order to understand the Jewish marriage you need to consider its terminology which is different from ours, as well as their customs and traditions.

When a girl is 12 years and 1 day old - the Talmud more brutally says *"When the first coat appears"*- and a boy is 18, there is the marriage which occurs in two phases: the first one may be called "wedding", and the second one "nuptials".

How does the wedding occur? The man, attended by his parents, goes to his future bride's home. Normally, this is the moment in which man and woman meet for the first time.

At the time, the concept of a marriage of love didn't exist: the marriage was arranged by parents, very often before their children's birth and it was just a matter of interest: I have

got a field, my neighbour has got a field too and we make an agreement. If we have a daughter or a son we make them marry so that the estate remains between us.

So the bridegroom, attended by his parents goes to his bride's, where she is felt, touched piece by piece in order to assess the firmness of her body, the dowry. This is done because a woman - mind you! - is married only for one reason: to give birth to sons. Therefore she must be tough, able to work and, first of all, give birth to one son after the other, because the more sons there are the more plenty there is in the house.

The negotiation normally lasted 3 days, so imagine this girl being examined inch by inch. At the end of this ritual the price for the woman and the dowry were fixed, then the man put the veil on the woman's head - in Jewish society men wear the veil when praying - and said "you are my wife" and she said "you are my husband": from that moment on they were man and wife.

We already said that a woman is needed to give birth to children, but 12 years old is too early for that; it is necessary to wait for one more year, so the bridegroom comes back to his house. They are going to reunite one year later, when the bride, attended by her family and friends in procession, enters her bridegroom's house and the second part of the marriage takes place (nuptials).

I hope it's all clear.

The Jewish marriage consists of two parts:

1. the wedding (at the age of 12)
2. the nuptials.

You may wonder: why isn't all the matter put off at the age of 13?

There is a reason for this: we said that the law (the word of God) is written by men and that they undoubtedly carve out something at their own advantage; then there is the problem of adultery.

What is adultery according to the Jewish legislation?

- For women, it is any intercourse with a man, therefore women having an intercourse with a man who is not their husband are considered adulteresses, and must be killed off.
- For men, adultery is the intercourse with a married Jewish woman; therefore men were allowed to have sex with all the Canaanite, Phoenician, Babylonian, Egyptian women they wanted and this was not considered adultery.

So we understand why women were given in marriage at such an early age: to make this crime of adultery effective as soon as possible. If a woman became pregnant in the space of one year, and not of her husband, she was considered an adulteress and killed off.

How was she killed off? Do you remember the well-known episode of the adulteress?

That adulteress is taken to Jesus who utters the famous sentence: "*Let him who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*"

Let us not be influenced by movies, by the image of...normally the adulteress is shown as a beautiful and buxom woman, instead she is just a little girl of 12. How do we know this?

From the death penalty proposed to Jesus by the Scribes and Pharisees: "*Moses commanded us to stone such women*". Lapidation was the death penalty established for adulteresses in the space of time between the wedding and the nuptials; after this period, instead, there was strangulation.

Nowadays in the Arab countries, in little towns or villages at least, a woman is still killed off if pregnant outside marriage.

On the day of the village festival, the woman, aware of her lot, surrounded by all her family, is choked by her brother, her corpse is left and nobody is guilty. Let us not be shocked; remember that it was only in 1954 - I think the date is right - that the crime committed to vindicate one's honour was cancelled in Italy.

What sort of crime was that? A man betrayed by his woman had to kill her, he was obliged to do it, otherwise he would lose his reputation. Once he had killed her, he recovered his honour. Italian law provided for only two or three years' imprisonment for such a crime in the 1950s.

Imagine all this at Jesus' time when women who had become pregnant outside marriage were killed off and adultery was frequent. Why was it frequent? Because, as we already know, marriages were not love marriages, they were arranged; but from time immemorial men and women have had a heart and feelings, so adultery was possible, though not easy and the woman who became pregnant was killed off.

This is Mary's case. Mary becomes pregnant in this space of time, the Evangelist says: *from the Holy Spirit*, explain that to Joseph! What does this "from the Holy Spirit" mean? Therefore the woman must be lapidated. We're not dealing with this episode about Mary and her conception. Just an indication: mind you, the Gospels are neither historical books nor biological or gynaecological treatises. When the Evangelist says that Mary became pregnant *from the Holy Spirit* (Mt 1, 18b) it means that the Evangelists see Jesus (this man who was able to receive God's immense love in a new and unique way) as **the outcome of God's new creation**. That is why in Jesus there is not the tradition of the fathers, but only the tradition of God: in the Hebrew language the word "parents" didn't exist, there was only a "father", the one who begets, and a "mother", the one who gives birth.

In giving birth, women don't put anything of their own, they are a sort of incubator that receives the man's seed, lets it grow and then eliminates it, but women don't put anything of their own in that.

So Mary finds herself pregnant and poor Joseph finds himself in a very difficult position, a quite dramatic position already expressed in the Gospels and even more in the apocrypha.

We're going to deal with these apocrypha: they're Gospels not recognized by the Church as inspired. This doesn't mean that they are fake, quite the opposite, in fact they reflect authentic ways of speaking and living at Jesus' time. But, they don't have the same richness, the same theological reliability as the other Evangelists'.

In the Gospels considered canonical, inspired, poor Joseph is having problems: *"And her husband Joseph, being a just man"* - "just" (d...kaioj) does not mean moral righteousness, "just" means member of a brotherhood of men who committed themselves to observe all the 613 precepts of the Law - therefore the husband Joseph is a religious man and the Law prescribes that: you must kill the adulterous woman, you must liquidate her. But Joseph hasn't got the heart to do so and resolves to repudiate her in secret.

Now we're going to see what repudiation is. In the apocrypha, where the cultural traditions of the time are better described, poor Joseph says: suppose someone pretended to be an angel just to deceive her? In fact Mary had told him that an angel had come; so Joseph said: "She' so naïve, an angel came to deceive her.

Why this story of angels? In the first book of the Bible, Genesis chapter 6, there is a curious description: *"When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose"*. So, my dear friends, at the time of Creation, when God made men and women, the Angels saw those female creatures and made raids on earth to make them pregnant of semi-divine children. In this way the book of Genesis tried to explain who the giants were: beings born of a woman and an angel. In those days angels were not those cute, little saints without sex that we imagine today; angels were well-endowed men who sometimes made these raids and when they found a woman...zap! All was settled!

I want to tell you something that may sound like a joke: Saint Justin, a Father of the Church living in the 2nd century, wrote: "angels infringed the divine order and descended on the Earth to couple with women and had children". in the 2nd century!

So, despite Jesus' teaching, in the early Church, angels were supposed to descend on Earth and couple with women.

In the first letter to the Corinthians Saint Paul writes: "for this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels." (1 Cor 11,10)., well, maybe, they had to do so out of respect for angels...No, it wasn't for that! Only prostitutes didn't wear a veil on their head. All the other women did since their puberty. They always used to wear the veil on their head and many of them used to wear it even when they had sex with their husband; only prostitutes didn't wear the veil. Christian women, set free from all this,

had begun to take off the veil. Then Saint Paul says: God forbid! Suppose the angels see you! It's over!

Well then, angels or not, Mary is pregnant and the law of God prescribes that adulterous wives must be exposed and lapidated. The Book of Deuteronomy: *"If the evidence of virginity was not found in the young woman, then they shall bring out the woman to the door of her father's house and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done an outrageous thing in Israel by whoring in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from you midst"*.

The Book of Proverbs: *"For jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge"*. Instead, Joseph decides on repudiation. What was repudiation? Jesus thundered against this practice because it was a very unjust one. Repudiation was a sheet of paper, a certificate on which the following words were written: "from today onwards you are no longer my wife". As a consequence of this the woman was turned out, unable to protest or resist.

For what reasons can women be repudiated?

The Book of Deuteronomy contains an expression which is not very clear. It says: *"If he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house,"*. The problem is that it is not clear what this "indecency" is.

In those days there were two currents of thought:

1. Rabbi Shammai's current, a very stern rabbi who said: the bad thing which allows repudiation is adultery.
2. instead, the other rabbi's current, Rabbi Hillel's, a broad-minded rabbi, but not so much, provided for everything and afterwards his teaching came together in the Talmud, which is considered the word of God; it is written - it's appalling but that's the way it was at the time - : "If a man in the morning, wakes up and looking at his wife's face, doesn't like it any longer, he can divorce and send her away".

Otherwise, a wife could be repudiated if she was found alone in the street talking to another man and - religion is always tragicomic - even if she burnt the food, the dinner, this reason was good enough to repudiate her.

But, mind! How can these comings and goings of women be made up for? Because, you know, a woman who is pregnant at 13, at 25 is already withered and soon replaced by other little girls!!

Well, remember what we said about the dowry. The price of the dowry, the payment, was valued, but in case of repudiation, was left to the wife. So: "I would like to repudiate you, but I keep you not to lose this wealth". In Southern or African countries women had bracelets around their ankles; you may have seen them in pictures or documentaries: those people live

in extremely poor conditions, yet you can see them wearing golden bracelets around their ankles. Why? They start to wear the golden bracelet in their puberty, when they're still growing up; it represents their dowry. As the leg and the ankle grow, the bracelet cannot be slipped off anymore. So, if you want to keep your gold, you have to keep your wife too, unless you cut into her leg and let her go lame.

Now, let's see how the second step of marriage occurred. Mary and Joseph never reached this step. In Luke's Gospel there is so scandalous an expression that the Fathers of the Syriac Church censored it. It says that Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem: *Giuseppe con la sua sposa Maria* (ܐܝܢܐ ܡܚܝܠܐ ܡܪܝܡ) - that is, they are in the first stage of their marriage, they're not yet in the second one; therefore they are an irregular couple, nowadays we would say they were a factual couple. Please, don't tell it to your parish priests that Mary and Joseph were a factual couple!! They're not a regular couple since they haven't regularized their position yet: they're still in the first stage of marriage, they're not yet in the second one. A man and a woman being still in the first stage of marriage could not live together and were not even allowed to travel together; Mary and Joseph are an irregular couple. So much so that the Syriac Church changed the expression "with his spouse" in "with his wife" to have all the necessary requirements.

Let's finish by seeing what is this second part of the marriage: the woman enters her bridegroom's house where the nuptial banquet takes place. The doors are open, everyone is invited.

An important thing occurs: the man takes his bride attended by those whom the Gospels call "the bridegroom's friend"...(I tell you this because some pages in the Gospels are not easily understood unless they are framed in their cultural background). When Jesus is accused of not fasting, he says: "ma possono digiunare gli amici dello sposo?". He isn't referring only to "friends" but to something more, literally he says: sons of the nuptial bed. That is, the man takes his closest friends - the two he trusts more - as witnesses of his first intercourse with his wife. Then the man takes his wife to their bed, their richly adorned couch, he draws the curtains and, while his friends are waiting outside, he has sex with his wife only to prove the girl's virginity. Once he has found that the girl is a virgin, he cries out (the bridegroom's cry is mentioned in the OT and NT as well). Then, the two witnesses soon rush to the banquet room and say: "The bridegroom has cried out" and the people cheer. They come back and the bridegroom gives them the blood-stained linen sheet proving the girl's virginity. The witnesses take the sheet to the banquet room and show it to everybody (one more cheer), it is folded and then given to the girl's parents as an evidence of the occurred deflagration, a proof that the girl was a virgin, in case of second thoughts. And the Talmud scolds those mothers who, on the Nuptials day, put a chicken's heart into their daughters' pocket!

Such was women's condition at Jesus' time. So I think that those few verses that we considered at the beginning are really sensational: Jesus goes around with women in such a background! In such a background all women were considered impure! And Jesus started a

liberation and emancipation process in favour of women that was to have no followers, unfortunately. Already in one of the NT letters, the first letter to Timothy, it is written that women could be saved only by giving birth to children (1 Tm 2, 15). Spinsters and nuns can set their minds at rest: they won't be saved. Women can only be saved by giving birth, women who don't give birth to children are damned. Mind, those were the letters that Christians sent to each other! The news brought by Jesus was too great to be understood.

We will now see how women are presented in the Gospel of Luke. Undoubtedly Luke gives more prominence to women than any other evangelist. He is the only one who introduces women among the followers of Jesus. Let us proceed with an important aspect in the first episode and understand the effect it had on these women in the process of Jesus' liberation.

We will analyse the well-known episode of Martha and Mary, which should be framed in the cultural context of that time and understood likewise. We say that Jesus brought a drastic liberation for both men and women, but it is evident that during the century, men once again reverted to their earlier way of life and took away from women all the dignity and values that Jesus' message had given them. Well, what then is the cultural background? Jesus in fact praises Mary as having chosen the more important thing in listening to Him, sitting at His feet. This was a blatant violation of all rules, taboos, religious and moral precepts, in fact scandalous behaviour on her part. She could see that what Jesus was saying was too important to miss and risked her reputation for it. The tradition created by men was to keep women in confinement described by them as 'voluntary confinement'. It was said, in the past, that those women entering enclosures had chosen the best part. So Jesus who is supposed to be against an active life (like Martha doing what she was brought up to do, spending all her time and energy around the home) yet praises Mary who in His eyes has chosen the best part, that is a life of learning, contemplating, a kind of life that only a few people could choose to live.

In this episode we see that the opposite is true. To better understand let us be guided by the so-called "keys", technical terms set by the Evangelists in their writings to let readers understand how to orientate themselves. How do we get to these interpretations? They are not lucubrations that come to mind in a sleepless night. They're the outcome of the attention to the Evangelists' indications; so what we are going to say may be useful to all as a direction when reading the Gospels. We are considering chapter 10 of Luke's Gospel, verse 38. The Evangelist writes: "*As they went on their way*", he means Jesus and his followers. Notice that there is a change of scene. "*As they went on their way - so Jesus is on his way towards the village with the disciples - he entered a village*". From a grammatical point of view, this may seem a mistake "*As they went on their way, they entered a village*". But the Evangelist leaves the disciples out. What does it mean? We said that the Gospels are neither

journalistic chronicles nor historical accounts. Instead they are deep truths written to be taught.

It is impossible that Jesus is walking with his disciples but suddenly leaves them at the entrance of the village: he enters, has dinner with Martha and Mary but the disciples remain outside waiting! Why? Let's try to understand all this. Jesus is with his followers but he is the only one, writes the Evangelist, who enters the village. The word "village" (kèmh) in the Gospels, without any indication about the name of the village, is a device to warn the reader: "look out, the environment is negative".

This is because the village is the place where tradition established itself, where people are attached to old values and refuse what is new. The village is the place where the principle "we've always done it this way, why change?" is in force. So, the term "village" in the Gospels is always a bad sign. What is the village? It's a little place where the new things, the fashions from the town always come late but when they take root there's no way of changing them. So the village is the place of tradition and we have understood why only Jesus enters while his followers remain outside: because they share this old mentality. In the Gospels the disciples have a lot of difficulties in understanding the news brought by Jesus. They are attached to tradition, to the past, to Moses and are not able to understand the news brought by Jesus.

Luke described all this in a humorous way, and indeed it would be humorous if it wasn't tragic. Consider that Jesus dies, is risen from the dead (the disciples see him risen and understand that Divinity is in him), and, since his own apostles, his followers, don't understand anything, he teaches them a course, a full immersion into catechesis about one topic. In the Acts, the Evangelist writes that Jesus, risen, summoned the disciples, gathered them in a secluded place and spoke to them of only one thing for 40 days: the Kingdom of God. Imagine Jesus himself, the son of God, teaching about the Kingdom of God for 40 days. Well, do you think they understood? On the 40th day one of the disciples asked: "yes, alright, but the Kingdom of God...when are you going to found it?" (At 1, 3b-6). They hadn't understood absolutely anything!

Hence their attachment to tradition, to old values; that is why all of them remain on the outside and only Jesus enters the village. The disciples stay outside because they share the same mentality as the villagers. And if Jesus enters it's just to set them free from the oppression of tradition. "Jesus entered a village, and a woman named Martha". This woman's name, Mar - Ta is an Aramaic term meaning "the lady of the house", we might also say "the queen of the house", "she who lives for the house", *"welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching"*. Remember, we said that almost all the women in the Gospels bear the name Mary and that this name was not normally given to new born babies because it recalled God's curse and, anyway, it meant isolation. Well then, all the female characters in the Gospels bear the name Mary. The Evangelist wants us to know that receiving Jesus' message means being marginalised, cursed by society. "...essa aveva una sorella di nome Maria, la quale, sedutasi ai piedi di Gesù". When

you read the Gospel, you must always frame it the cultural background of the time. It's impossible to interpret it through our values and criteria. The fact that she is sitting at Jesus' feet is neither a sign of Mary's devotion to him nor a sign of adoration and contemplation. In Palestinian houses there are no chairs and tables but only mats and everybody sits on the ground. **Sitting at someone's feet means welcoming him, receiving him.** In the Talmud (the Talmud is so much precious! It helps understand the Gospels as it contains habits and customs of the time) it is written "*Let your house be the meeting place of the wise.. sit gladly at their feet, and drink in their words with avidity.*"

So Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet not to adore him but **to receive him**. She plays the role of men as it was conceived in those days and this is a huge transgression, because women in the house must remain invisible. In fact the way he looked at her and spoke to her told her that He believed that she had as much right to know about the things He was speaking of as any man. When you enter a Palestinian house, you are welcomed by men; women are not seen, they are invisible. Women are in the kitchen, getting the dinner ready, doing their housework, they don't even serve at table. And now the Evangelist describes a huge transgression: this woman, Mary, instead of working in the kitchen, invisible, dares violate the taboo imposed by religion and morality according to which women must be invisible in the house, they must not be seen by the guests. Well then, Mary dares transgress, she plays the man's part, the role of the master of the house who welcomes Jesus.

Why does she do this? To listen to his message. The Evangelist means: this is the effect of Jesus' message! Once people receive the word of God and let it take root in them, inevitably they are led to transgress, in a growing and progressive way, all those rules, laws and precepts imposed by religion, society and morality which prevent them from being really free.

This is the effect of Jesus' message, a real disaster for the culture of the time.

Therefore, evidently, Mary already knew this message, and, once Jesus comes into her house she prefers playing the man's part rather than working with her sister; she sits with Jesus and listens to his message. Of course, in such a male dominated culture, Mary's behaviour causes her sister's reaction. Her sister is the mistress of the house.

The evangelist writes: "*But Martha was distracted with much serving*". Martha is the perfect housewife, in fact the Church proclaimed her patron saint of housewives as consolation prize and her feast is celebrated on 29th July. It's the usual trap, the same old swindle: you are a slave, we let you think you are the queen of the house.

Martha is the queen of the house, but, actually, she is a poor slave, a victim of her own condition. This is the great victory of power: dominate people deceiving them by telling them they are free.

So "Martha was distracted with much serving. *"And she went up to him and said ..."*. Martha protests. She doesn't accept that her sister Mary transgresses the condition that society has imposed on women. She doesn't accept her sister's emancipation. She said: *"Lord, do you not care ..."*

Notice that Martha's narrow horizon is all focused on herself. Notice: "Do you not care *that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.*" Martha doesn't understand her sister Mary who receives Jesus and listens to his message. Why does Mary want to learn? Do you remember what we said? That is, in Jewish culture women are left out of religious teachings. Martha doesn't understand her sister's thirst for knowledge.

We quoted the Talmud, where it is written: *"the words of the Torah should be burned rather than entrusted to women"*; to Martha Mary's transgression is inconceivable. Therefore, Martha, a slave who has voluntarily accepted her slavery believing that this would be the best condition for her, asks Jesus to scold her sister and drive her back again to the place where tradition has always relegated women.

The slaves who are glad of being so do not tolerate other people's freedom and spy on their moves.

Women's custom, said the rabbis, is to stay at home. Men's custom is to go out and learn from other men.

Well, Mary violates all this and behaves as a man. To Martha, this is intolerable. Martha's situation is tragic because she is like those slaves who are happy of being so. Jesus will scold her because this kind of people not only doesn't aspire to liberty but also spy on other people's attempts to freedom in order to drive them back to slavery.

It's the victory of power.

Power has three weapons to dominate people:

1. power may be the dominion of someone over a group or over other people through **fear**: I dominate you because you fear me.
2. it's the power based on **reward**: I dominate you because you know that you can derive some benefit from me so I work on your ambitions, on your greed.
3. this is the kind of power that every man tries to achieve because, you see, if I dominate you out of fear, you may become brave and challenge me; if I dominate you through the perspective of a reward, in a fit of dignity you may give up your ambition/greed; but the perfect dominion is the one based on **persuasion**. I convince you that being my servants, my slaves is the best condition for you and for your life. Those people who have been persuaded that being slaves is desirable for them will never try to free themselves from their slavery and will consider every offer of freedom as an attack on their own security.

Then Martha goes to Jesus and protests: drive Mary back where tradition wants her to be! Let's see Jesus' reaction: *"But the Lord answered her: " Martha, Martha".* In the Gospels, the repetition of a name means lament for the tragedy that the person or the place bearing that name is living. When Jesus sees Jerusalem, what does he say? "Jerusalem, Jerusalem", he is crying over Jerusalem because he already foresees its destruction. So Jesus' reproach to Martha expresses her dramatic situation. "But the Lord answered her: " Martha, Martha, *you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.*" Let's try to understand this important sentence of Jesus' about a woman but not limited to women. Jesus scolds Martha, a victim of religious, social and moral tradition who can't tolerate other people's freedom, and praises Mary saying: " one thing is necessary". And he adds: " *Mary has chosen the one which will not be taken away*".

In the past, when men were the only interpreters of this passage, men of the Church, it was decreed: the best part for women is a cloistered life of contemplation.

What is presented as an invitation to freedom through the violation of social and religious rules and taboos, became an invitation for women to a life imprisonment: cloister yourself, live in seclusion: this is the best part that will never be taken away from you!

Of course Jesus didn't mean that. What cannot be taken away from people? Jesus states: "ha scelto qualcosa, la parte migliore, che non potrà mai essere tolto". Yet everything can be taken away from men and women, everything. Why did Jesus say: "ha scelto qualcosa che non le sarà mai tolto"? **Because Mary's act is a fruit of the inner freedom that she had conquered through transgression.**

So when you reach such a level of freedom brought about by your own choices and inward convictions, no one can take it away from you. Because, you see, everything can be taken away from us, even our life, even our freedom, but this represents only our external freedom, not the inner one. Everything can be taken away from men and women, except inner freedom.

So the **invitation** coming from Luke through this episode, which is addressed not only to women, **is to achieve fullness through inner freedom** since only if freedom is present the Spirit is present as well, and only if the Spirit is present freedom is present as well.

The freedom that you receive from other people is dangerous, because as they give it to you they can take it away from you as well; so people's existence cannot be conditioned by a freedom given by others as it can be reduced or even taken away.

This is not freedom. Freedom, the best part that will never be taken away from women and from all who receive Jesus' message, is the inner freedom, the fruit of a deep conviction. You have to pay a lot for it, through transgression and marginalization. When you reach such a degree of freedom, this freedom cannot be taken away anymore, not even reduced.

Throughout the Gospels a lot of examples of this liberty can be found. Think of Jesus being taken to the High Priest and to Pilate, tied as salami; yet throughout the whole scene of Passion the only person that is really free is Jesus.

It's not an outward freedom, which can be given and taken away, it's an inward freedom. Jesus is very much freer than the High Priest, Jesus is freer than Pilate, slave to his own ambition. Jesus is the only person to be free, even compared to Peter, who does it in his pants because he doesn't want to go the same way as his master.

So, the Evangelist's invitation is not towards a bestowed freedom, but towards **a freedom that should be achieved** through the experience of systematically transgressing all the values, teachings and precepts that religion passes off as God's will.

There is nothing coming from God that goes against people's freedom. Everything that diminishes people's freedom, everything that conditions people's choices, everything that prevents people from fully developing, all this cannot come from God. And when men and women have the spirit to violate all this, they reach a full liberty that no one will ever take away from them.

So this episode of Martha and Mary is an invitation to the fullness of liberty.

Now, we are going to consider another episode, a sensational episode. This episode is so disconcerting for the early Church, so scandalous, that no Christian community had accepted it for centuries.

At the beginning of Christianity there wasn't the New Testament as we know it nowadays, including the 4 Gospels and the letters: there was Mark's community, for instance, it had its Gospel, they sent it to another community, saying: this is our experience; maybe the other community had Luke's Gospel, they sent it to Mark's community and so on...in this way the four main Gospels spread enriching the communities.

So, Mark's community received Luke's Gospel, John's community did the same and so on. Yet there was such a scandalous passage for Christian communities that none of them wanted to accept it. When this passage was read in a community it was soon rejected: "No, this is impossible!"

They hadn't the heart to destroy it because it was nevertheless gospel, word of Jesus, but they didn't want to keep it inside their community. Then they cut it, physically, and returned it to the sender or to another community.

For more than a century no Christian community had accepted these few verses; it took three centuries, it's so much time!!, 300 years for these verses to be published in a Gospel that wasn't even their own. And it took no less than 5 centuries for these verses to be read on Sunday liturgy.

So in the Eucharist, where there was this selection of passages from the Gospel, these verses had not been read for 5 centuries. This passage is about a woman. But what is so

scandalous in this passage that no community accepted? We said that every community cut it out but finally it was published in John's Gospel. Anyway, it is not by John.

The episode is placed at the beginning of chapter 8 of John, but if you take it you'll see that John's Gospel makes much more sense. Instead, if you put it in Luke's Gospel, chapter 21, after verse 38, you'll see that its right place was there.

Indeed grammar, vocabulary and style are of Luke, the evangelist that privileged women's role to a greater extent.

When you have the time, go and read this passage, take it from John's Gospel and see how the Gospel makes more sense; then put it in Luke's Gospel, chapter 21, verse 38. Let's see these scandalous verses.

"At night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet." Pay attention to the chronological indication: it's dawn, the first twilight of the day.

"All the people came to him in the temple to hear him". The temple should be the place where God's love manifests itself.

People are indefatigable, they have been oppressed for many years by religious power, and this religious power has been able to narcotize their conscience but not to extinguish it entirely.

In every human being, in every person there is a wish for a fullness of life. Religion tries to conceal it, to suffocate it, because religion is opposed to people's development. Religion needs childish people who don't use their own heads and always turn to an authority, a chief, a superior to tell them what to do.

So religion will never lead people to their own realization, on the contrary it fears people's realization: if people fulfil themselves, emancipate, they won't follow the dictates of religion any longer.

Religion needs people who always stay in a childish condition. However, it couldn't extinguish this need of a fullness of life and as soon as people listened to Jesus' message they felt this wave of unreserved and growing love coming from God as a surge of oxygen and the flame of life revived: all the people to go to Jesus, they are indefatigable and

" he was sitting and teaching".

So Jesus is teaching them in the temple. We already know His teaching: God is not as He has always been presented. Out of terminological clarity, **by "religion" we mean everything that men and women have to do towards God** that is prayers, love, and sacrifice, anything, towards God.

Well then, in His teaching, Jesus shows something different. He doesn't make a list of what God exacts from men and women, instead he shows what **God does for men and women** and this cannot be classified in the category of religion, this is faith indeed.

Jesus does not show a demanding God, an exacting God, a God who diminishes men. He shows a God who gives and communicates to people the same power as His, a God who dares serve people to raise them to His level, and this was unconceivable.

That is why religion and religious people will always be opposed to Jesus; religion has cleverly managed to make a dramatic step against civilization: putting an insuperable gulf between God and men. The sense of sin was invented by religion to instil into people a guilty feeling, in order to make them feel always unworthy and never aware of God's love.

But Jesus comes to do just the opposite: whereas religion puts a gulf between God and men and makes men feel unworthy, guilty, always in need of forgiveness, Jesus comes to remove this gulf. **Jesus is a God who places himself at people's service, to raise them to God's level.** Jesus gives his divine condition to men and women.

Well, all the people go to him. The Scribes and Pharisees wake up early. It's dawn, but there is something urgent to do, so it doesn't matter.

"A woman, was caught in adultery".

It's dawn; therefore this woman must have been snooped. She has been caught in adultery. We already said that the image of the adulteress is stereotyped by movies and television: a beautiful and tempting woman.

But from the death penalty that the Scribes and Pharisees ask for this woman, we can see that the adulteress is just a girl in the first stage of the marriage. Remember that the Jewish marriage occurred in two steps: the first, called "wedding" when the girl was 12, and the second one called "nuptials", a year later. If the adultery occurred in this year's space, the penalty was the one asked for this woman by the Scribes and Pharisees. Therefore, she is a 12/13 year old girl.

"They brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst. they said to him, "Teacher"! ,What hypocrites! The evangelist Luke is terrible; he exposes religious people's hypocrisy more than anyone else. Beware of religious people! When they speak, they mean just the opposite of what they say! When they speak to Jesus they call him Master. What does "Master" mean? someone whose authority in teaching is recognized and from whom we want to learn. They don't go there to learn from Jesus but to lay him a trap, to kill him. Yet, you see, their language is the oily, courtly, clerical language of religious people. "Master!". It's a lie. Jesus is not a Master to them, He's their enemy!

"Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery".

Before the evangelist had said that this woman had been caught in adultery what did they do? They must have snoopied on her! It's dawn, how could they find her in the act of adultery? We don't know.

"Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women."

That is why we know that she is a 12, 13 year old little girl. Because the death penalty for a girl still at the first stage of her marriage was lapidation; instead, the death penalty for an adulteress after nuptials was strangulation. From all this we know that the girl was still at the first stage of her marriage.

"In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?"

Look out!

They don't really want to know, because they already know what to do. They want to lay a trap for Jesus.

Indeed the evangelist writes: *"This they said to test him"*.

The verb used by the evangelist (πειράζω) is terrible, it's the same word used for the devil, the tempter. Those who seemed to be more in communion with God to people's eyes, the scribes... Who are the scribes? They are the official theologians of religious teaching in Israel. The scribes are laymen who devote all their life to study the Holy Scripture. At the age of 40 they receive, through the imposition of hands, the spirit of Moses and from that moment on they can teach the Law.

They have more authority than the king: when a scribe speaks it's God himself who speaks. So, you see, they're very high-up people. And the Pharisees, who are they? They're laymen, too, who put all the scribes' teaching into practice.

Well then, the evangelist states that they go to Jesus to tempt Him; they act as Satan, the devil; so, despite their profession of high devoutness and their statements of profound observance of God's law, they are diabolic instruments.

"This they said to test him".

It's a perfect trap. They took this adulterous woman to Jesus; they say: *"In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?"*

Whatever he answers, he will condemn himself. If Jesus says: "all right"...we are in the temple, the place where God's law was taught and God's law could not be contradicted.

So Jesus, as a good Jew observing the law, should have said: "stone her, as it is stated by the Law, this is God's will".

But if Jesus had done this way, all his followers - attracted by his different voice, a voice who did not impose laws or burdens of precepts and rules impossible to observe - would have left him: Even Jesus is like everyone else.

On the other hand, if Jesus lets His mercy come out and says: "all right, forgive her, let her go"...we are in the temple, where there is the temple police; then He would have been arrested, tried and condemned for blaspheming the law of God.

The law of God is out of question; it says: "an adulterous woman must be killed". It's the word of God. Therefore, if Jesus says: "Do that way", he will lose all his followers who are listening to him in the temple; instead, if Jesus says: "Forgive her", He will lose His life because He will be arrested as a blasphemer.

"Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground".

Jesus' act is highly symbolic and prophetic and refers to the prophet Jeremiah. The prophet Jeremiah shows God's lament on his people and says: "*They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water*".

Then he goes on, saying: "*Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground*".

Jesus' act of writing on the dust (dust stands for the nether world, this act means death) obviously refers to that passage of the prophet Jeremiah; it means that those who nourish feelings of death within themselves are already dead.

Therefore, Jesus, by writing in the dust, is accusing those Scribes and Pharisees of being already dead. They understand Jesus' act very well. Those who nourish feelings of death are considered already dead by Jesus. "*As they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them*".

Lapidation is not what we have seen in films and serials, where everyone throws a stone at the condemned person. Lapidation had specific rules: the condemned person had to go down into a hole - a pit and then - as Talmud says - two people had to take the stone of lapidation, just one stone, which would be so heavy that it could be hardly held up by two people. Normally it was a fifty kilogram block of stone, so the first stone was the one for killing, after that, all the people who took part in the lapidation threw their stones until the pit was filled and finally covered.

Throwing the first stone does not mean: the woman is condemned woman, let's start throwing to the target. "The first stone" means "the killing stone"; so Jesus says: "*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.*" And stooping down again he writes upon the dust. I say it again: those who nourish feelings of death are already dead. The reaction is sensational: "*But when they heard it, they went away one by one*".

Observe, when it comes to accusing someone they are a united front, scribes and pharisees; but now that Jesus has unveiled their guilty conscience, they all go away, one by one, starting from the elders.

Look out! The evangelist uses the term "presbyter" in Greek, which means old but it does not denote age. Who were the presbyters? They were the members of the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin of Israel was the maximum legal organ: it was made up of scribes, high priests and presbyters, that is the elders and senators. They had the legal power to issue death sentences. Starting from the elders, the presbyters, to the last ones. "*Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him*". So, all the accusers of this woman go away, anyway she has committed a big crime, adultery, and according to God's law, she must die. Jesus is merciful, He saves her from death, but what if He were a religious and pious person? He would say: "Do you repent of your sin? Ask God's forgiveness! Offer sacrifices!". Instead...:

Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord."

Jesus lets the woman awake to the fact that those who wanted her to die are all gone; there was nobody without sin, everyone had one's own fault, they were all afraid of being exposed by Jesus. Moreover, Jesus doesn't say: "You've repented, ask God's forgiveness!". When she answers: "*no one Lord*", Jesus' sentence is "*Neither do I condemn you*" But this is serious!

There is a woman who has committed adultery, not a slight transgression! How come Jesus doesn't condemn an adulteress?! So Jesus is contradicting God's law. The law of God makes it plain: an adulteress must be condemned. But in Jesus, God's fullness manifests itself. Indeed, he says: "*Neither do I condemn you*". He does not say: "Go and do penance, then receive God's forgiveness". There aren't words of forgiveness, just a simple: "*Go, and from now sin no more*".

While for the scribes and Pharisees there was an adulteress to condemn, **Jesus only sees a woman who needs help**: "*Go, and from now sin no more*". She was married and she had committed adultery. Yet Jesus doesn't tell her: "I forgive you". Why? The news brought by Jesus is love! Religion invented sin to instil the sense of guilt and unworthiness into people; it's a constant request for forgiveness to God, "forgive us our sins"; and you are never sure of being forgiven, because this forgiveness is depressed by the slightest thing.

In my generation there was the old concept of being in grace, do you remember? To receive the Holy Eucharist you needed to be in grace but it was such an evanescent thing that you could never be in grace! Even if you applied yourself, - I want to be in grace - removed all your bad thoughts and confessed in the end because in the meantime anything could happen to you...if you strove hard and said: "Ah, I'm in grace!", sin of pride! Go back now!

Do you remember snakes and ladders? When you arrive at the last square there is the snare: you have to start again! That's religion! Religion needs people to feel guilty and unworthy because it wants to dominate them.

So Jesus' scandal is that He **never** in the Gospels invites sinners to ask for God's forgiveness. That's a scandal. That is why all the religious authorities, the spiritual elite, turn against Jesus.

What? all the teachings of law and psalms with their thundering against sins and sinners and their continuous invitation to repent?

Never, never in the Gospels Jesus says to a sinner: "Ask God to forgive you". This is sensational. Why does He never invite sinners to ask for God's forgiveness? Because he showed a completely different God.

He showed a God who is love and has no other way to relate to people but a growing and everlasting communication of his love.

A God who never forgives because he never feels offended. God is never offended, God is love. God, whatever your behaviour may be, is there to offer a fullness of love. It's up to the individual to receive or not receive this fullness of love. But Jesus' God never invites people to ask forgiveness for their sins, as he unceasingly loves them.

But if Jesus **never** invites sinners to ask God's forgiveness, from the first to the last page of the Gospels, there is always the incessant request of forgiving other people's faults. You see: I can't prove that I have been forgiven by God, you have to believe in my words, I can lie to you. Yet, if I forgive someone that has hurt me, this is evident, demonstrable.

So Jesus never invites people to ask for God's forgiveness, because God has already forgiven us, well, God doesn't even forgive us, because God is love. But this love becomes effective and operative only when it is transformed in love towards the others. Hence Jesus' words: "*Neither I condemn you*". Jesus is the only visible manifestation of God.

Any image of God that cannot be found in Jesus' life and teaching should be removed. At the end of his prologue John says: "No one has ever seen God; Jesus was his revelation". When Philip asks: "*Show us the Father*" what is Jesus' answer?: "*Philip, whoever has seen me has seen the Father*". What does this mean? It means that not **Jesus is like God but that**

God is like Jesus. With these words, Jesus belies the image of a God who punishes and condemns.

There is a sinner, a woman caught in the act of adultery, yet Jesus says: "*Neither I condemn you*". **God doesn't condemn because God is love and in love there is no condemnation.** "Go" - he gives her energy to start a new life - "*and sin no more*".

This is a scandalous passage. Saint Augustine, the father of the Church of 4th century, is anxious about how his community would receive this passage. Since, in his own words; "wives may believe in the impunity of their sin". So communities are alarmed, because if this passage of the gospel is considered both acceptable and forgiving, the poor husbands will be in a quandary - how would they face such situations, if their wives are involved in it - what would they do? If Jesus is so indulgent with adulteresses, where are we all going to end? For three centuries no communities had accepted this passage. For five centuries it was never read in liturgy.

How can a man be sure that a woman is an adulteress? Let' s take the Book of Numbers, chapter 5. A woman suspected of adultery has to be taken to the priest. The priest shall then unveil her head - which is a very, very serious affront - pick up the dust that is in the temple, put it in a pot full of a liquid where he will plunge the parchment on which all the husband's suspects and accusations are written. Then the woman must drink this shake made of water, dust and parchment. *Go and read this passage! If the woman has a stomach ache she is guilty and must be killed off. I read only this: "And the priest shall set the woman before the LORD and unbind the hair of the woman's head and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy. And in his hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse. Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, 'If no man has lain with you, and if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while you were under your husband's authority, be free from this water of bitterness that brings the curse. And he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain."*

So, if a husband was a little anxious and more than once a month he suspected his wife to be unfaithful, he sent her to the priest for this rite. Word of God, Book of Numbers, chapter 5, and this practice lasted for centuries. What's the novelty brought by Jesus?

In Hebraism, the relationship between men and God was based on a law which was reckoned to be the expression of God's will. Therefore, God's will has been expressed: these are the words of the Lord, God's own words and it's up to men of all times and social backgrounds to put these teachings into practice. Such a law is unjust in itself because, if we make a law now, it can be good for some of you, not so good for others, and impossible to observe for others. Laws do not consider my life, my sensitivity, my story, my relations; all being equal before the law, the law was unjust since there were some people who couldn't observe it. They felt left out and lived in the terror of transgressing the law; if they did so, some fifty curses followed.

So Jesus' news is that the relationship with God is no more based on the observance of a law but on the reception of his love, of his spirit that acts differently in each person. God's spirit, that is God's love is one, but it has different effects because each person is different. Each of us has one's own Story, one's own sensitivity, one's own psychic structure, the spirit

shall strengthen the person. That's Jesus' news, but, as long as people keep on thinking that they must obey the law, they will be prevented from reaching the spirit.

There is another beautiful page in the Old Testament, chapter 28 of the Deuteronomy: after a series of blessings there is a series of maledictions - fifty or so - that are going to smite those who dare transgress the law.

Deuteronomy 28:22 The LORD will strike you with wasting disease and with fever, inflammation and fiery heat, and with drought and with blight and with mildew. They shall pursue you until you perish.

So, religion created terrorism, the law must be observed even if it costs sacrifice or pain, because if you transgress the law...go and read those maledictions, they are really odd: *"The Lord will strike you with wasting disease and with fever, inflammation and fiery heat, and with drought and with blight and with mildew. They shall pursue you until you perish"*.

Jesus - and that's the reason why he was killed - invites people to transgress the law. Try it out, Be courageous and you will see that, once you've transgressed the law, not only you won't be cursed but you will be blessed with the fullness of life. Yet, transgressing the law is not easy, because some of those taboos are in our blood, in our DNA. Jesus ignores the law, he breaks it and his message is an invitation to do the same, but people are scared.

Luke describes all this in another episode, ch. 8, 43: *"And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years"*. This woman suffers from continuous irregular menstruation and nobody has ever healed her. In those days blood meant life, this woman losing blood loses life as well, so she is moving towards death. This woman has no name. In the gospels, anonymous characters represent situations in which other people can identify. This woman represents people who live hopeless situations.

According to religion, such a woman is impure. Only God may help her, but since she is impure she can't address God so she has no hope, no expectations. If such a woman is married, she can't have any intercourse with her husband, otherwise he would be infected; she has no possibility to be fecundated; if she's not married, no one will ever take a woman with such an infirmity. She has no hope at all.

The Leviticus says: *"Shall be unclean until the evening"*, and *"Qualunque cosa su cui si sdrai durante le sue regole è impura e qualunque cosa su cui si siede è impura; chiunque tocchi il suo giaciglio, sciacqui le sue vesti, si lavi con acqua e resterà impuro fino a sera"*;

A woman in this condition has no right to appear in public, because of superstition.

In the Talmud it is written: *"When a menstruating woman passes between two men, if it is the beginning of the period, she will kill one of them; If it is the end she gives rise to a struggle between the two of them"*.

So menstruating women must be avoided. How do you know if a woman is menstruating? You don't, so you must avoid them all! And this was supposed to be God's will!

The Talmud also says that a woman irregular in her "rules" must not have intercourse and is not entitled either to a dowry or the refund of her goods. Moreover, her husband must repudiate her and never take her back.

So she is a woman with no worth with death as her only hope. Only God can save her, but she is impure and she cannot even get near God unless she dares transgress the law!!

Well however, this woman got near Jesus, touched the hem of his cloak and soon the flow of her blood stopped. If this woman keeps on observing the law, she won't commit any sin, but she will die. If she tries and transgresses it, there will be a hope of life.

Why does the evangelist emphasize that she touched the hem of his cloak?

In the book of the Prophet Zachariah touching the of someone's cloak means recognizing the presence of God in that person. The Prophet writes: *"Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"*

That is why this woman approaches Jesus, she has realized that God is with him, but the god she believes in prevents her from approaching a man. She is infected and if she touches a man her infection will be transmitted to him.

Well then, she transgresses the law and *"And immediately the flow of blood dried up"*. In this instance, Jesus unintentionally, yet not unwittingly, healed the woman. Jesus bring a fullness of life to all those that have even the least contact with him, and brings life to all those who draw near him, with faith.

Jesus said indeed: *"Who touched my garments?"* Everyone denied and one of his disciples had an unbecoming reaction. Peter said: *"You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, 'Who touched me?'"* As dull as ever, he can't feel Jesus' fullness of life. He calls him "chief", he thinks that Jesus is a leader to follow, not a master to learn from. Above all, the Evangelist is saying that Peter accompanies Jesus but he doesn't follow him, he is near him but he doesn't receive his message. He can't feel the richness radiating from Jesus and he treats him as a senseless person: *"You see that the crowd is pressing you and yet you say, 'Who touched me?' But Jesus said: "Someone touched me, in fact I feel a great power flowing from me"*.

The power that came out from Jesus is the Holy Spirit, which is his love, the gratuitousness of his love that he communicates to all those who dare defy the serious obstacle of the law.

Even though Jesus brings in the Spirit if the people keep on living under the observance of the law they won't be able to feel that; yet, at the least transgression, the Spirit can spread.

The woman then, seeing that she couldn't hide (she'd done it!) - There was death penalty for women that intentionally infected someone, and how dared she, with that bad disease, touch this man, this prophet, infecting him? - Trembling, because she knows that Jesus is a man of God yet she is uncertain what his reaction will be. How will he react? *"She came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed."*

If this incident is the truth, then the truth in this Gospel is not reduced to something intellectual but it's the result of a life-giving experience.

The woman however admits before that entire crowd she did touch Jesus and was healed instantly. Jesus' reaction should have been bad: as a good Jew, as a pious man he should have berated her for her boldness and driven her away: May be saying: "How did you dare, with that awful disease of your's, come and infect me, the messenger from God?"

But Jesus, is very tender, understanding and comforting towards this woman, who in the eyes of religion has committed sacrilege.

He says ("qugat"), "baby, my baby", he turns to her with words filled with affection. This is simply scandalous because she has transgressed God's will, the law. Yet he says: "My baby, your faith has saved you". It's sheer insanity!

What is regarded as sacrilege in the eyes of religious people, in the eyes of Jesus' is an act of faith. What happens here is that the one who dared transgress the law doesn't receive the 50 curses listed by Moses, but instead receives the fullness of life: "your faith has saved you!"

Many people are afraid of transgressing the law because they fear the consequences. They are afraid of committing sacrilege. However, if they dared to do so they would hear Jesus' voice encouraging them. In this we understand, that Jesus is inviting us to a radical change of mentality.

We now move to another very important episode.

This is the only episode that Jesus wants to be known to the whole world. Jesus performed so many extraordinary deeds, he delivered wonderful messages, but the only deed where Jesus says: you must tell this to everyone, everywhere, is one done by a woman!

We said that women, in the Gospels, are not only equalized to men, but are even placed at a higher level; in Jesus' community, a woman will act as a prophet and high priest. The Role of the Women therefore is really wonderful!

The episode (Mt 26, 6-13; cf Mk 14, 3-9).

Jesus' life is now nearing its end. He is in Bethany at Simon the leper's house. Jesus is absconding and goes to the only place where Pharisees won't go and find him, to a leprous person's house. By now Jesus has become a fugitive, he's got a price on his head, so he finds

shelter in a leper's house, an outcast, in Bethany. In this house a deed of extraordinary richness occurs. "A woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table". In the Canticle of Canticles, perfume is the symbol of the bride's love for the bridegroom, the king. It is written: "While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance".

The woman's act of pouring perfume on Jesus' head is reminiscent of regal anointment.

When a man was anointed king, a priest or a prophet took a perfumed oil and poured it on the man's head; Here too was a similar occurrence, in Jesus' community women had this prophetic, priestly role; and this woman recognizes the king in Jesus and this perfume means that the community-bride recognizes Jesus-bridegroom.

What is the symbolic meaning of the woman's action? Jesus is going to be sentenced to death: the community represented by this woman supports Jesus and is ready to go the same way as Jesus. "And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste?" (Φπέλεια)?"

His disciples do not accept Jesus' death, they are not on his side like the woman is, they see in Jesus' death the end of everything and they think the oil could have been dearly sold to give money to the poor.

"But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me." (literally kalòn, excellent), "For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."

Jesus says that she anointed him in preparation of his burial.

What is the effect of death? A nasty smell?. The effect of life is perfume. This is the community who adheres to Jesus even in death, because they are sure to find him again in the fullness of life.

So a woman, a figure of Jesus' community, is ready to go the same way as Jesus - a woman!

Near Jesus' cross, you will find only women, even though at a distance, not the men!

Only in the gospel of John it is recorded that there was a disciple by Jesus' cross. But in the other Gospels it is recorded that all those men who, at the last supper, had vowed: "We are ready to die for you", those same men, bolted at the sight of the guards' torches. They simply deserted him!

Only the women followed Jesus up to the cross, and that woman represents them all.

It will be up to women to announce to the whole community the good news, the victory of life upon death that Jesus had brought with his existence.

The following passage is the most ticklish in Luke's Gospel, at chapter 7 verse 36: Jesus, the Pharisee and the sinner. Now let's see what the evangelist says in this passage. People say that Jesus is a great eater and a boozier, friend with publicans and sinners.

This is a denigration of Jesus made by religious people, yet it intervenes in his favour. Jesus didn't show himself as a mystic, as an ascetic, as someone who doesn't eat, doesn't drink, doesn't touch, doesn't take. Jesus is a normal man who eats, drinks, and what is more scandalous, is friend with the dregs of society, with the categories of people that every religious person took good care not to mix with; Jesus, instead, goes to meet them, because in Jesus God's love manifests itself and God wants that not even a single person might be excluded from his love because of his/her moral, religious or sexual condition. So, it's Jesus that goes to meet these sinners, and when he meets them he never invites them to do penance, to mortify themselves. Normally he dines with them. Eating with other people means sharing the same life, and when Jesus dines with sinners everything goes smoothly, but when the invitation to dine comes from religious people everything is different.

In this gospel, Jesus is invited three times by pious, religious people, and each time food goes down the wrong way to those people. This is the first of those three times. "*One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him*", The word "Pharisee" means "separate"; Pharisees are considered pious men because of their peculiar lifestyle to which they have voluntarily committed themselves. No one compels them to observe all the dictates of the law, all the minute prescriptions of Moses - 613 precepts to observe; in those precepts there are 365 things that cannot be done and 248 that must be done! You see that it's an awfully complicated life!

If you read these 613 precepts you will see how mad religion is; it is shown as something magniloquent but it's really insane: it prescribes: "in the morning, as soon as you wake up, open your right eye and say: 'blessed is the Lord who floods the world with light', then put your right foot down, put on your sandal and say: 'Blessed the one who walks...etc...'

These continuous blessings mark the rhythm of Pharisees' life, so in themselves, they seem pious people, but as it always happens with pious, devout people, religion strays into ridiculousness. There is a blessing, which is beautiful in itself; it must be said when you go to the toilet and it says: " Blessed the Creator who made men according to his wisdom: he made in men holes that are closed and holes that are open, because if the holes that are closed were open and the holes that are open were closed men could not live. "Blessed be the Lord... and then you flush the toilet. Those are the Pharisees and that is their life. Moreover, they took great care not to transgress the Sabbath and not to do any of the 39 forbidden jobs on that day (each of these 39 jobs was divided into other 39 secondary jobs to an amount of 1521 forbidden actions on Sabbath). They were the spiritual elite of the time. They had great authority with people, since common people were not able to observe all those rules and prescriptions. So they looked to those Pharisees as a model of holiness.

Jesus is ruthless with them; whenever he meets them he accuses them of being hypocrites, that is, all their showing off of devotion and religiousness is nothing but a means of dominating people. So, one of these Pharisees has invited Jesus to dine with him. Why? How come? Since their first meeting with Jesus, these Pharisees have been hostile to him: they had decreed that Jesus had blasphemed and this meant that he deserved to be condemned to death. Moreover, they are shocked by the fact that he dines with sinners and publicans. The evangelist writes that when Jesus healed on Sabbath they were full of rage and discussed what they could do to Jesus.

So, it is clear that this invitation to dine is not out of hospitality, but it's one of the several traps prepared for Jesus to catch him at fault in his speeches, in his actions, in order to have the chance to accuse or expose him, or, at least, to drag him on to their side.

Jesus accepts. *"And he went into the Pharisee's house"* (This is a very important detail by the evangelist) *and took his place at the table"*

At solemn banquets, in Jewish culture, there was a big round tray at the centre of the room, around which, like rays, there were some very low couches on which the guests were lying. That was the way rich people, those who could be served, used to eat.

So Jesus enters and starts to dine, but...there an incident, a scandal, breaks out and the evangelist stresses it with the expression: *"And behold, a woman of the city"*.

Do you remember Martha and Mary? Women must be invisible, women must never be seen, even in a banquet as this, only male servants serve their masters. Well then, the evangelist writes that a woman makes entry in this dining room and he stresses that she is *"Who was a sinner"*, (imartwÒj), that is, a well known prostitute in the town. In the Pharisee's house, where nothing impure can enter, there comes the greatest emblem of impurity, as rabbis said; Pharisees believed that the kingdom of God was late in coming because of two categories of people: prostitutes and publicans, the tax collectors.

Well, *"When she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought"* this is the height of effrontery, let's try and imagine the scene: there is Jesus, other guests, probably some Pharisees, in the house of this pious man, an observer of all the dictates of the law, and there comes a prostitute holding the tools of her job, indeed it is written: *"Brought an alabaster flask of ointment"*.

A prostitute in the Pharisee's house with the tools of her job!

This woman has no name - remember, anonymous characters in the Gospels represent situations where anyone can identify with - and the conclusion is scandalous because Jesus assures her of forgiveness without asking her to change her job or her life. That was unbearable!

So, little by little, tradition, consolidated by Gregory Magnus in VI century, transformed this woman into Mary of Magdala, Mary Magdalene, because she is the woman standing by Jesus' cross.

That is how the kind of the repented Magdalene came out. She was a prostitute, but then she repented, did you see that? She's standing by Jesus' cross. Well, it has nothing to do with all this! Gregory Magnus fused three different characters of the Gospel: this sinner, who is anonymous, Mary Magdalene, who has nothing to do with this episode and Mary of Bethany, Lazarus' sister, who made the anointment according to John's Gospel; whereas in Mark and Matthew, in the episode considered before, the woman that makes the anointment to Jesus has no name at all.

So, this fusion of three different characters was made by Pope Gregory Magnus and this was very important for moralists because it created the figure of the repented Magdalene, but Mary of Magdala has nothing to do with this prostitute, that is unknown.

Now the evangelist describes this woman's action in a scandalous crescendo. She is a well-known prostitute; she enters the banquet room holding the tools of her job, the perfumed ointment that she used for massages *"And standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment"*. This scene is really unbearable: this woman enters, she goes behind Jesus' couch, by his feet. You should know that in Jewish culture feet were a symbol, a euphemism for sex organs, so, you see that the narration made by the evangelist makes hair stand on end. Why do feet symbolize sex organs?

Jewish culture was very prudish. Words dealing with sex apparatus were carefully avoided and substituted with other words. That is why in the Bible there are some episodes that cannot be understood without considering Jewish mentality.

When king David and Bathsheba,, his lover, had the woman's husband killed, because the husband had discovered the affair between his wife and the king and also that his wife was pregnant. David called Uriah, the husband, back from the front and tried to attribute to him the paternity of the unborn child. David said to Uriah: "go home and wash your feet". Uriah refused and David had him killed.

Can you kill someone because he refuses to wash his feet? The truth is that washing one's own feet was a euphemism: it meant: "have sexual intercourse". Uriah was aware that the king had made his wife pregnant, and he didn't want to accept paternity. For this reason, he lost his life.

Well then, this scene is embarrassing, near his feet, with her tears (for evangelist feet are so important that he mentions them three times - number three means completeness) she began to wet his feet and hair. Remember that women are veiled since their puberty, and the most pious women still keep the veil on while having sexual intercourse; hair was considered a

strong erotic weapon and only prostitutes went around unveiled. Do you remember Judith? When she wants to seduce Holofernes, she takes off her veil and un-braids her hair, and Holofernes literally loses his head, because she bumps him off and cuts his head. A prostitute's hair was irresistibly erotic, so think about the scene: a woman that touches Jesus' feet with her hands and wets them and dries them with her hair and then with her mouth she kisses them and oils them with ointment. That's too much! Why does this woman behave so? As mentioned previously, when there were two or three little girls in a family, the ones who were born later were abandoned, exposed, put at crossroads. If they survived nocturnal animals, the slave trader would pick them up and raise them to the art of prostitution; at the age of five they already practiced prostitution, at eight they already had complete intercourse. A prostitute hasn't chosen to do this job. She's a woman who cannot do anything else in her life. And, above all (and this will explain the woman's behaviour, which is scandalous in itself), since a little child she has been raised to please men. Well then, this is a woman who wants to thank Jesus and she does so in the only way she knows, by doing the only thing she is able to do: using all the devices of her job.

So, in itself this is an offensive scene as the Pharisee's reaction shows: "*The Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself*" please, notice the Pharisee's contempt towards Jesus (we said before that this invitation is not out of affection or friendship, it is meant to lay a trap to Jesus), he does not mention his name, he says with great contempt:

"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." Ouch! Here he uses a Greek verb(ἅπτω), which means "to feel", "to touch", "to fondle"; it's a verb with a strongly erotic connotation, since she's a sinner; so the Pharisee, the pious man, alert to all these minute details about pure and impure, is shocked at the sight of this woman who expresses herself in such a way with Jesus.

And as it always happens with religious people who know everything about God and men, he issues a sentence: Jesus, **this man here**, is not a prophet, because if he really was, he would realize what kind of woman she is, the one who's touching him, because she's a sinner.

Simon the Pharisee, accustomed to religious view, used to distinguishing between sinners and just, pure and impure, considers and reckons everything according to his religious categories: this woman is a sinner. Jesus is not a prophet.

In the episode two views collide:

1. the Pharisee's view, used to judging by religious parameters;
2. Jesus' view. Remember, Jesus is the visible manifestation of the Father's love. He hasn't come to judge, but to look for and save what was lost.

That's why Jesus accepts this woman's acts, because he knows that this is the only way for her to express her gratefulness.

But Jesus reacts against the Pharisee's muttering to himself. *"And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon"* (the protagonist of this episode is the only Pharisee (as well as Nicodemus in John's Gospel) with a name in the Gospels; as Jesus doesn't see a sinner but a woman, so he sees a man and calls him by his name.

The perverted eye of religious people only looks at people through the labels that religion has given them: a sinner, a prostitute, etc... Jesus doesn't recognize those labels, he doesn't see a Pharisee, he sees a man with his own identity and that is why he addresses him by calling him **Simon**, *"I have something to say to you."* (look out, beware of pious, religious people) *"Say it, Teacher."* (their language is always deceitful) "Master" means "someone who can teach me something, from whom I want to learn, instead, he doesn't want to learn from Jesus, but he is teaching Jesus. *"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is"* and Jesus says: **Luke 7:41** *"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii".* (a denarius was the daily pay for a worker, so he owes him a year and a half of work) *"and the other fifty"* (a little more than a month) *When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"* (the verb *car...zomai* used by the evangelist is very important)

Instead of using the verb **"to remit"** (*¢f...hmi*) the evangelist uses the verb **"to cancel"** (*car...zomai*).

The creditor not only **wrote off the debt**, he did more: he **cancelled**, he granted a favour, and he forgave. Forgiveness indeed is a gift (and this is constant in Jesus' teaching) and it's not the result of the sinner's merits; it comes out from the Lord's generosity. This is important because Jesus is talking to a Pharisee, to those people who live in the category of merit. Everything they do, all their prayers and sacrifices, their lifestyle, is only to have merits in the presence of the Lord. Yet, they had seen that Jesus' God is not attracted by people's merits, but by their needs.

In this Gospel there is also the beautiful parable of the Pharisee and the publican in the temple. What does the Pharisee do? He enters the temple, goes towards the altar and standing up he praises the Lord (but he really praises himself): thank you Lord because I'm not like the other people, I fast twice a week and pay the tax for each little herb that I buy...that is, he boasts of merits that are useless. In fact, wherever did the Lord ask him to fast or to pay the tax for herbs?

At the entrance of the temple there is a man who cannot enter and in fact he does not enter: he is a publican. Publicans were tax collectors, collaborationists of the Romans and above all (duty was let out on contract and the one who had the contract was free to put dues and taxes at his own will) they were professional thieves. They represented the category of the damned and for them there was no hope of salvation; even if, at a certain point in life, a publican repented and converted he wouldn't be able to come back to a normal life: he was marked for ever with the damnation mark.

Well then, that man, who leads a life with no turning back, in which he has sunk into impurity, does not even dare to enter the temple and says: Lord, you see what a wretched life I lead, but in spite of this show me your mercy.

What is Jesus' answer? The love of the Father disregards the useless merits of the Pharisee and is irresistibly attracted by the sinner's needs; because this is characteristic of Jesus: God doesn't look at people's merits, but he looks at their needs. Because of our personal or familiar situation, we may think that we have no merits before the lord, instead, each of us has needs, we are all in need.

The Pharisee thinks with the category of merit, Jesus uses the category of need.

"When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, (he answers unwillingly because he already knows where Jesus wants to take him) "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

This Pharisee had claimed to be Jesus' master *"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is"*; the Lord treats him like a pupil to whom he asks questions and even gives him a mark. *"Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon"* the use of verbs by the Evangelist is very important here. *"Do you see this woman?"*,

Jesus tries to correct the perverted eyes of the Pharisee, eyes deformed by religion, because the Pharisee doesn't see a woman, he sees a sinner come to tempt and seduce Jesus. Jesus corrects his eyes: **can you see this woman?** Remember the episode of the temple where Jesus didn't see an adulteress to condemn but a woman in need of help: those are the Lord's eyes. The Lord doesn't judge men by appearances; he looks at their heart. Now Jesus makes a list of the woman's actions setting them up against Simon's slights towards him: *"I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet"*, when someone was invited to dine, he was offered some water to wash his feet, as a sign of hospitality, in fact in those days people used to go practically barefoot, only the rich wearing sandals; you can imagine what were the conditions of roads in those days, so the first sign of welcome was the offering of water, *"but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair"*.

The lack of this indispensable offering of welcome by the Pharisee shows his hostility towards Jesus, who is not welcomed but only accommodated; the sinner, instead, washed his feet not with external water, but with water flowing from the inner fruit of her grateful love. *"You gave me no kiss"*. A kiss is a welcome sign. The Pharisee avoided kissing Jesus; we have already said that this is a hostile invitation. Why didn't he kiss Jesus? He is the pure "par excellence", and he keeps aloof from this controversial Galilean who goes around with a group in which there are also some women, *"but from the time I came in"*, pay attention to the verb, *"she has not ceased to kiss my feet"* so, while Jesus is talking to the Pharisee, this woman keeps on kissing his feet, *"You did not anoint my head with oil"*, the head, it was a sign of honour and gratitude, it was a sign that the guest was important, *"but she has anointed my*

feet with ointment". Notice how insistently the Evangelist mentions feet, which were a symbolically scandalous part of the body. But Jesus knows that this woman is a prostitute, he knows that she has no other way to express her love, her gratitude, except the way she has been taught. Jesus accepts her expression of love, he is not scandalized; what was a sinful temptation to the Pharisee's eyes, is an expression of love to Jesus' eyes. And here is Jesus' sentence: "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven- for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." It's a reproach that Jesus addresses to the Pharisee: even though you, in your perfection, think that you have little to be forgiven of, you could have at least shown a bit of love; instead this woman is showing me all of her love, because she felt in the very depths of her being that she was forgiven of all her faults. The news that Jesus brings is that God is love and this love grants forgiveness which is for free, unconditioned either by a shift in conduct or the sinner's repentance. Jesus says that the woman's sins are condoned: "Your sins are forgiven." **The sinner did not receive forgiveness because of the love she was showing, on the contrary, she was showing love because she knew that she had received forgiveness**, for since the beginning of his preaching, Jesus had announced that all of us have already been forgiven. That's why we said that asking God to forgive us is the most useless thing that we can do, because God has already granted us forgiveness. We only have to show the effects of this forgiveness and our gratitude by forgiving other people in turn.

Well then, Jesus had really gone too far! "Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves", "the Pharisees too, it is expected. As Simon hadn't mentioned Jesus - if this was a prophet - so do the other table companions, who address Jesus in a disparaging term: "Who is this, who even forgives sins?"

The question that the table companions ask themselves is linked to the negative remark already made by scribes and Pharisees in this Gospel: "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus is usurping the role of God, the only one who has the power of remitting sins; so he is a blasphemer and, as such, he deserves death. But he said to the woman (the same thing he had said to the woman with a haemorrhage): *Your faith has made you well; go in peace.*". What is seen as a transgression of morals by religion, as an incitement to sin: that woman, with that mouth, that hair, those hands, massaging Jesus' feet, or, as the Pharisee says, fondling him, touching him, to Jesus' eyes is just a manifestation of faith: "Daughter, your faith has made you well". Jesus sees life where there seems to be only sin, whereas the Pharisee saw sin where there was life. The scandal in this episode (and that's why later the image of the sinner repented was created) is that Jesus forgives her, but does not invite her to change her job.

Jesus should have said to this woman: well, from now on you change your job, you stop being a prostitute, and I will forgive you; instead Jesus says: your sins are pardoned, "Your faith has made you well; go in peace." What will this woman do? A woman like her has no alternative for her life, no hope, who's going to take a prostitute as a wife?

Her family can't accept her again because she has been abandoned since her childhood. Her only chances of survival are linked to her profession. This scandal in Luke's Gospel is announced in advance by John the Baptist: when publicans heard this messiah railing against the sinners who had turned up there, almost trembling, says the Evangelist, they said: **and we?** If Pharisees are treated like this (when John the Baptist sees Scribes and Pharisees he attacks them: "*You brood of vipers! How can you speak good when you are evil?*")

what will happen to sinners and publicans? So, when publicans, trembling, arrive to John the Baptist, they say: **and we?** What shall we do? John the Baptist, in a scandalous way for the time, does not invite them to give up their job, does not invite them to change their life, he says: collect only what is right; this was scandalous because those people had no hope of salvation, yet to John the Baptist they could keep on doing an activity that religion and morals considered sinful and yet be saved, if only they did it with justice. I say it ironically, it's like Jesus had said to this prostitute: "Keep on doing your job, but keep your prices fair, don't exaggerate". It's a scandal that Jesus does not invite this woman to change her job. In Luke's Gospel, chapter 8, Jesus starts his preaching in Galilee with a group of women cured of infirmities and evil spirits; the Evangelist doesn't say so, but it can be supposed that this ex-prostitute is one among those women, this sinner now forgiven by Jesus.

All women in the Gospels are represented in a positive way, except two, and both of them are within the field of power:

1. Herodias, a woman who is in power;
2. and the woman that the Evangelist Matthew is now going to show us, an ambitious woman, a woman longing for power.

Those two women are the only negative ones in the Gospels.

Jesus is walking up to Jerusalem. He has seen that his disciples still don't understand what they are going to do there: they believe they are following a Messiah who's going to Jerusalem to conquer power, because that was a Messiah. The Messiah had to go to Jerusalem to undermine corrupted High Priests' authority, eliminate Roman rule and dominate all pagan nations. That's what a Messiah had to do, and though Jesus had tried to convince his disciples that he was going to do the opposite, they didn't understand because they were blinded by this nationalist religious ideology. So "*And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside*", remember that every time we find the word *aside*, referred to Jesus' disciples, it means that in that passage there will be resistance, dullness, hostility against Jesus.

He said to them (it's the third and last time, number three means completeness): "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged (and for the first time Jesus also announces how he will be killed) and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."

It's the third time, the final time, Jesus couldn't have been clearer: I'm going to Jerusalem, I'm going to suffer because of the Scribes and the High Priest, since they will condemn me to death and crucify me and then I will raise from the dead. It's like he had talked to the deaf, they don't understand a word. Every time Jesus announces his programme in Jerusalem, an incident occurs with his disciples, and this time it is the same. Let's see what happens:

"Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something". From a psychological point of view, this character is portrayed in a unique and negative way.

In Matthew's Gospel there are four mothers, but this is the only unnamed one; it is known that she is Zebedee's wife, yet the evangelist does not introduce her as that, but: the mother of the sons of Zebedee. She is a woman who lives exclusively for her sons, her personality has been crushed.

She is unnamed, she doesn't exist, her husband has no importance to her, she is not Zebedee's wife, she is Zebedee's sons' mother. She has the heart of a mother! She just lives for her sons' future and success.

She gets near Jesus prostrating herself before him. This seems a sign of humility, but, as always in the Gospels, beware of religious people! Beware of signs expressing devotion because they actually hide just the opposite. This woman prostrates herself, it's a sign of humility, but as soon as she opens her mouth she speaks in a commanding tone.

And he said to her, "What do you want?" "She said to him", notice that she has gone there, she's prostrating herself, but she **orders**, commands, she does not ask, she orders! *"Say that these two sons of mine"* please notice two sons of mine, the sons are just her own: they are no more Zebedee's sons. *"Are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."*

Jesus has just said: I'm going to Jerusalem, I'm going to be killed, crucified, this is the most infamous death, the torture reserved to those cursed by God. He hadn't spoken in parables, he couldn't have been clearer: I'm going to Jerusalem and there I'm going to be killed.

Well, this woman gets near with her sons, so they are in accord, it's a recommendation! For her sons she wants the best, and what can be better than seeing her sons, once in Jerusalem, one on the right and the other on the left of the powerful Messiah!

Sitting on the left and on the right meant sharing the same power of the king, and this is what she wants for them: the most important seat, the most solemn seat so as to guarantee their future.

Answering, Jesus said: *"You do not know what you are asking".* only the woman had asked, but Jesus in his answer, associates the two sons to their mother, so they were in accord, *"Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?"* And they say: we can. They don't know what they are saying.

"To drink the cup" is a Jewish expression meaning death by martyrdom, so great is their ambition that they say that they are able to face martyrdom.

Jesus says: "Yes, you will drink my cup, but it's not up to me to decide who is going to sit on my left and on my right", because only the Father knows the fidelity to Jesus.

And then an incident broke out...the other ten got angry, not because of the request, but because the brothers' ambition was the ambition of all. All of them wanted to sit on the right and on the left of Jesus, but that woman and those brothers had ousted them from their post.

The evangelist emphasizes **ten** and **two** to hint at the schism which occurred in Israel after Solomon's death: since **ten** tribes deserted the **two** tribes of the royal house, two kingdoms formed one against the other, a fratricidal struggle which led to Israel's destruction.

The evangelist is saying: beware of ambition! Ambition causes division and where there is division there is destruction. *But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Jesus says: you mustn't imitate the structures of power, in which there are people who dominate, who command and others who obey. I want to make a family: as parents place themselves at their children's service, so each of you should place oneself at other people's service.

Jesus shows a God who doesn't ask to be served, but who is the first to serve. But they do not understand. Zebedeo's sons' mother keeps on following Jesus until Crucifixion, because she still hopes, then she will disappear. As she sees Jesus crucified, dead, she gives up hope; she is the only woman, among those who had followed Jesus from Galilee, who is not present at the moment of Resurrection: the evangelist wants to tell us that those who are animated by the ambition of elevating themselves over the others are not able to experience the power of the Risen Christ in their lives.

Soon after this episode there is another one. Let's mention it in a few words.

"And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!"

Who are these two blind men? According to the literary art of the evangelist, they are the image of two disciples. We saw that Jesus had clearly spoken, "I'm going to Jerusalem, I'm going to be killed", what could be more clearer than that!, but they are deaf and blind because the religious ideology which saw the Messiah as the son of David made them impenetrable to Jesus' announcement. That's why shortly after the previous episode the

evangelist introduces these two blind men who turn to Jesus and call him **son of David**. In the culture of the time, son is someone who is like the father, who behaves like the father; so the Messiah was thought to be the son of David. David had been the first king to unite the twelve tribes and to mark the beginning of the kingdom of Israel, but he did all this through a bloodbath. Incredible!

David was a pitiless, incredibly cruel man: he systematically killed all those who set themselves against his bid for power. So much so, that when he wanted to build the temple to the Lord, the Lord said: "You won't, your hands are too bloodstained to build my temple". Yet, this was the Messiah that people and the disciples were waiting for: **the son of David!** But Jesus is not the son of David, Jesus is the son of the living God, he doesn't take his enemies' life, but he offers his life for them. But those blinded by religious, nationalist ideology cannot see this. And this misunderstanding about his figure would lead to his death.

Remember that a jubilant crowd meets Jesus entering Jerusalem, and within just a few hours the same people who had hailed him shouting: "Hosanna" are now saying: "Crucify him!"

What has happened? They had got the wrong person. When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem the people, who welcome him as the liberating king, shout: "Hosanna to the son of David". (Say that, say that on Palm Sunday: Hosanna to the son of David). Those who have been shouting: "Hosanna to the Son of David" are the same that shortly after will say: "Crucify him!"

Because Jesus is **not** the son of David, he doesn't show himself as the Messiah who will behave as David. As soon as the crowd understands that Jesus is not the son of David, that is he is not a liberator through violence, the reaction is: "Thank you Messiah, we don't need you..." "crucify him, crucify him!"

And that woman, together with Herodias is one of the two negative women in the Gospels, definitively disappears from the Gospel at Jesus' death. Ambitious people, people who abase themselves in the name of ambition, won't be able to experience the Risen Christ.

Let's conclude our roundup on women in the gospel with an extremely beautiful episode. It's beauty is both spiritual-theological and literary; as you know, the evangelists were great theologians and men of letters as well.

So, reading the Gospels allows us to taste their literary art at work. Before reading the episode of the Samaritan woman (John 4), we need to remember that the evangelists don't want to hand down facts about Jesus' life; although the Gospels contain elements regarding facts and history, what the evangelists really want to hand down to us are revealed truths. That is why the word of the Gospel, of the evangelists, is a teaching valid

for all times: times change, different cultures pass, but the word of the Gospel is always valid. So we must keep in mind that this is not a historic anecdote, but a deep teaching that the evangelist wants to give to Christian communities. When we start reading a passage of the Gospel, we must always keep in mind the theological-biblical context in which the

evangelist puts the episode. The episode of the Samaritan woman cannot be understood without a reference to the prophet Hosea. As we will see, **the evangelist reconstructs the episode of the Samaritan woman along the lines of the book of the prophet Hosea.** Who was Hosea? Hosea was the prophet of Samaria, the place where Jesus and the Samaritan woman met, and he is the prophet that, thanks to his dramatic married life, has discovered something incredible. First of all, he is the first prophet to represent the relationship between God and his people like a marriage: God is the bridegroom and the people are the bride, an unfaithful bride. We are going to

see that Hosea discovers that the forgiveness granted by God is not motivated by the people's repentance, but it comes before.

What is the dramatic story of Hosea that is in the background of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman? He is in love with his wife who gave him three children, but she is a woman that every now and then leaves him to run after new lovers. But Hosea is patient, he loves her and accepts her again every time until he loses his patience. At the umpteenth elopement of this adulterous woman with new lovers Hosea traces her and enumerates and brings up all her sins as a wicked woman, unfaithful wife, shameless mother (she's got three children and she always escapes with new lovers and, you know, for adulterous women there is death penalty).

After listing all charges, Hosea pronounces the final sentence; we would expect: I repudiate and condemn you to stoning...well, after listing all the crimes committed by his wife, Hosea then...but Hosea's love for his unfaithful wife is greater than his wounded honour, then...: "I suggest that we should do a new honeymoon trip. Let's go to the desert, you and me alone", and Hosea understands..." *"You will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.'* In Jewish culture, the husband was the woman's master, so Hosea understands why this woman always runs away from him: because she has a relationship with a master, not with a husband. So Hosea understands and says: let's go to the desert, you and me alone, in full intimacy and there...we'll experience something new: I won't be your master anymore, I will be your husband. This is Hosea's tragic experience. And Hosea has forgiven this woman, his wife, although he has no guarantees, she might escape once again...Hosea understood that **forgiveness must precede and not follow repentance.** You know that religion has always taught that if a sinner repents and is converted he can be forgiven, well Hosea forgives his wife without any evidence or warrant of her repentance. It's forgiveness that causes change and conversion.

Conversion is not the condition to obtain forgiveness, but the effect. From his tragic personal experience, Hosea learns that God forgives his people not because of their conversion, but because they could convert.

According to religion, men sin, people sin, then, if they repent they are forgiven, Hosea understands that it is not like that: men sin, God forgives them without any condition, any warrant, and from this forgiveness a change

may come.

So, the evangelist uses the dramatic story of Hosea as the background of his narration. Well, let's start reading chapter 4 of John's Gospel from verse 3: "*He left Judea and departed again for Galilee*". Judea is a region in the South of Israel, Galilee is in the North and in the middle there is Samaria. The evangelist writes: "*And he had to pass through Samaria*". To reach Galilee from Judea and vice versa, passing across Samaria was normally avoided. The path along the Jordan River was preferred, because there were age-long enmities between Samaritans, Judeans and Galileans. Crossing Samaria meant venturing one's own life: there were ambushes to caravans, assaults to people, so it was very dangerous.

There were incurable racial divisions fuelled by religion and nationalism between Samaritans, Judeans and Galileans. But why? Because Samaria, a region formerly belonging to Israel, was conquered and emptied of its inhabitants, or, at least, its intellectuals, the rich people, nowadays we would call them middle-class people, were deported, and in place of them people from other countries were sent. So, within a few years, a hybrid population settled there. The pure blood of Jews was mingled with other people's blood and other divinities were brought.

As a result, there was tension between Judeans, who gave importance to the purity of their faith, and these hybrid people who worshipped Javhè, the God of Israel, together with other divinities.

In 128 b. C. Judeans had destroyed the Samaritans' temple in Samaria. In retaliation, at Jesus' time, about 6 or 9 A. D., Samaritans went in to the temple and threw human bones inside it; as a consequence, the temple became impure and Jews could not celebrate Easter.

From that moment on, Samaritans were refused entrance to the temple. The enmity between them was great, "Samaritan" was the worst insult, if a Jew insulted another, saying: "You are a Samaritan", he would deserve a punishment of 39 lashes.

However, in the Bible, the word of God, the pious author of the Book of Sirach refers to Samaritans as "those stupid people living in Sichem." The words "Samaria" and "Samaritans" were avoided, they were disgusting.

This hatred existed at Jesus' time too: in Luke's gospel (9, 51-56), in the episode where Jesus is rejected by Samaritans, Jacob and John say: "Lord, strike them all with lightning".

John the evangelist writes that Jesus **had to** cross Samaria, but this is not true because he could have walked along the Jordan river, this "**had to**", this verb (*œdei*) is a technical term used by the evangelist to mean **God's will**.

Jesus goes to Samaria on purpose, but why? The evangelist shows Jesus as the bridegroom looking for his adulterous bride, like Hosea. And, like Hosea, Jesus goes to Samaria to offer his bride a new proposal of love, a greater love.

So, Jesus had to cross Samaria for this reason. The evangelist gives us a description of the place: "giunse dunque ad una città della Samaria chiamata Sychar vicina al podere che

The evangelist says that he arrived at a city in Samaria called **Sychar**. Why is this name highlighted? Because, despite the deadly hatred between Jews and Samaritans, in times of drought, when harvesting was not possible and there were no fruits to celebrate the Days of Unleavened Bread and of Pentecost, people could go to Sychar, in detested Samaria, to harvest wheat. It was a very thriving land and you could always be sure to find wheat in Sychar. The evangelist's allusion is clear: Jerusalem and Judea do not yield any fruit, they are barren, whereas heretical Samaria has an abundant crop, as we will see in the course of narration. "*So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.*" (Jacob is the patriarch who gives his name to his people; God changed Jacob's name into Israel, so he represents all these people's history). I think that we all know the story of Joseph. His brothers had betrayed him and tried to kill him, but, in the end, Joseph turned out to be a salvation for all his family. Everybody knows that Joseph was betrayed and sold as a slave, but later he became administrator of the Pharaoh, thus becoming the salvation for all his family and people; the evangelist stresses: "...*Jacob's well was there;*".

The evangelists are very careful with the terms they use in their narration; unfortunately, translators are superficial and do not pay attention to all these niceties of the Greek language, often levelling everything.

In the passage we are going to examine, there is tension between two terms:

1. What the evangelist calls Jacob's **spring**, where there is spurting spring water,
2. And the other term used to indicate that place, that is, **well**.

Through the careful use of these two terms (spring and well), the image of the water source is used by the Evangelist as a symbolic image of something that communicates life.

In those places where water is precious, having a water spring or a well is like having the source of life; it must be kept in mind that water, in Jewish culture, was compared to the divine law; in the Talmud, it was written: "The words of the law are like water" because water is fecund, because it gives life. So, Jesus always speaks of "spring", but, in his meeting with the Samaritan woman, he always speaks of "well".

Well, Jesus is tired because he has made a long walk. The verb **tire** occurs only here and at the end of the narration. According to the literary techniques used at the time, the evangelists link up these two moments: in conclusion Jesus will say to the disciples "*I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.*" (John 4, 38). You see that this term is repeated three times, Jesus' fatigue derives from the sowing he's doing in his walk; the evangelist writes that Jesus was - and this is a strange term - "*was sitting beside the well.*" This image is rather strange: how can

someone sit on a spring? Literally, the translation should be: he had settled on the spring.

The strange expression used by the evangelist - *sitting on the spring* - means that Jesus occupies that place permanently and definitively because he is the new spring, the new water source that is going to replace the old one, the one of Jacob's: law and tradition have been replaced by a person, Jesus.

Jesus is the true new sanctuary from which the power of God's love will spread out. Later, Jesus will say: *Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'*"

The evangelist gives a seemingly superfluous indication; he writes what time it was: "*It was about the sixth hour.*" Why? The sixth hour, that is noon, it's the time of Jesus' condemnation. Remember that blood and water came out of Jesus' chest, when the soldier speared him. **Through his death, Jesus becomes a life giver.** Blood and water are vital elements.

So, the evangelist presents Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman as an anticipation of Jesus' death.

There comes a woman from Samaria to draw water. From a historical point of view, there is an incongruity in the episode: in those places, noon is the least advisable time of day to go and draw water. At noon the sun beats down both in winter and summer, therefore, as much as we know, people used to draw water either at dawn or at sunset. In the texts of the time, there is no trace of people going to draw water at noon, when it was really hot. Past commentators used to explain this thing as that: well, since this woman had been causing some gossip in the village, she used to avoid going to the well when there were other women around, but, actually, it wasn't like that. The theological aim of the evangelist is evident: the Samaritan woman goes to Jacob's well to drink. Jacob's well is the place of people's old tradition. There, an unexpected thing occurs. Remember the cultural context: man's role and woman's role: a man would never speak to a woman, **never**, because women were considered inferior beings. Moreover, a Jew would never speak to a Samaritan. If Samaritans were considered repellent beings, you can imagine how Samaritan women were considered! They were seen as a receptacle of rubbish and impurity, the filthiest being on the face of earth. The Talmud says: Samaritan women are impure from the cradle, since the day they were born.

Remember that, in this Gospel, Jesus is considered the visible manifestation of God; we said that Jesus is not like God but that God is like Jesus; the evangelist wants to show that God acts like Jesus, so, if our idea of God does not correspond to what we see in Jesus, this idea must be eliminated; God doesn't act from the top of his superiority, but from the bottom,

making himself a servant. When Jesus asks to drink, he is asking to be received. He's not speaking from the top of his superiority as a man and a Jew; he's speaking from the bottom, as a person who is in need. He's asking to be received. A Jew would rather die of thirst than ask for water from a woman (and a Samaritan woman at that!).

Here, the evangelist makes an annotation that seems a little strange "*For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.*" It seems strange that all the disciples had left Jesus alone to go all together to town and buy something to eat.

You see that this is a literary device, because, actually, it's not reasonable that all the group of his disciples went to town to buy some food; here the evangelist writes this because he needs to picture Jesus and the Samaritan **alone**, with no other witness.

Do you remember Hosea? He says to his wife: "I'll take you to the desert, you and me **alone**, and there I will make you a new proposal of love".

The evangelist insistently stresses that this woman is from Samaria, even when this annotation is superfluous. We are going to see why.

The woman reacts to Jesus' proposal remembering all the controversies and the racial contrasts between the two peoples and, above all, she is surprised that a man could ask for some water from a woman. So, she says to him: "*How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?*"

What Jesus is doing is unheard-of: this is a despised, deserted, unwanted people...but that's the way God acts.

There is no person that can feel left out of the love of God because of his/her moral, religious, sexual condition. Yet, the Samaritans weren't allowed to go into the temple, where people believed there was the presence, the glory of God. Well, when people are not allowed to go into the temple, God himself goes out to look for them.

If a person cannot go towards God, God himself goes towards him/her. So the woman expresses all her wonder: *chiedi da bere a me che sono una samaritana?*

Then, the evangelist diplomatically writes: "*For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.*) They are at each other's throat when they meet! You know, you never kill your neighbour with so much taste as when you kill him in the name of God. When a people deems itself superior to another because it has God on its side, the other people doesn't exist anymore, so they can be wiped out, slaughtered, because God is on our side; Therefore, Samaritans and Jews killed each other because each of them believed they were right in doing what they did.

Jesus answers: "*If you knew the gift of God*"; well, he acts like Hosea, who takes his prostitute wife to the desert to give her a new offer, a new proposal of love.

When God is before an unfaithful person, a sinner, an adulterous (in this case, adultery means going towards other idols), he doesn't speak words of reproach, doesn't invite to

contrition. He makes a new proposal of love. If you are that way, it's because you don't know how great my love for you is.

Jesus is the bridegroom looking for his bride. She is an adulterous, as we will see, yet, he doesn't blame her, he doesn't threaten her, but he makes her a new proposal of love: "se *"If you knew the gift of God,"* **this is the God of Jesus.**

God is love and his relationship with people is always a continuous, never-ending, ever-growing offer of love. God has no other way of having a relationship with people.

"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

Jesus has come to offer something that overcomes the divisions between these two peoples. God's love does not make differences between deserving and undeserving people; God looks at people's needs, he doesn't care about their merits.

When Jesus meets a sinner, as in this case, he doesn't act as a judge demanding explanation of all the offences done. He is love and the only thing he wants is to give a new and fuller offer of love.

This is Jesus' good news: **the words of God are:** *"If you knew the gift of God";* **whatever your conduct may be.** That is, an even greater offer of love.

Jesus says: *He would have given you living water"*. The evangelist takes this from the prophet Jeremiah when the Lord laments and says: *"For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water"*.

According to the evangelist, the gift of living water is nothing else but Jesus and his spirit. Jesus is God's gift to mankind. So, whoever receives Jesus in one's own life has got living water; those searching some other man's words have got crazed tanks, while the living water, the gospel, yields fullness of life. Other kinds of water are polluted and empty this fullness of life.

And the woman begins to change; she doesn't see a man who treats her with contempt; he asks to be received, he is a man who makes her a proposal of love and she - do you remember ? - before she had said: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?"; now notice how she changes, she says: "Sir - she now addresses Jesus in a new tone, she recognises something different in him, the man that before was only a Jew to her now respectfully becomes "Sir" - you have nothing to draw water with, and the **well** is deep. Where do you get that living water?" Notice that the woman speaks of a well, while Jesus always refers to a spring.

In Jewish symbology, the **well**, represented law, because it was something that gave life. The Samaritan thinks that water should be drawn with her strength; she can't imagine the

possibility of drinking water without effort because, in religion, the idea of a God that gives everything for free is completely unknown. Everything people get has to be paid with all their efforts, merits, hard work, nothing in religion is for free, and everything has its price. That is why this woman wonders: *"you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"* So, that question belongs to a religious mentality according to which everything God accords is the result of people's efforts and merits. An unconditioned, free love is absent in religion, it's unconceivable. Yet, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus clearly says to his disciples: *"you received without paying; give without pay"*; God's love cannot be conditioned, cannot be taxed, but maybe there is a psychological need in people; they aren't sure of being loved by God unless they deserve or pay for this love. So, I want to make offerings to secure myself that this love is mine, in some way.

This is what the Samaritan woman thinks, so she says: *"Are you greater than our father Jacob? - a doubt starts creeping into her mind - He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."* She is still speaking of a "well". The woman knows Jacob's gift, - the well - it requires an effort, but she doesn't know God's gift, the spring, where water gushes from for free. She thinks that water must be taken with an effort, by working: by letting down the pail into the well and pulling it up.

The well - it's a sort of skyscraper this well of Samaria, it still exists and it's about thirty metres deep, so it required quite an effort from women, because it was women that had to draw water - but a **spring** whose water gushes for free, that's unconceivable!

This is the difference between religion and the faith shown by the evangelists.

As for religion, people have to deserve God's love, as for faith they only have to accept it. God's love doesn't need to be deserved by people's efforts; it has only to be accepted as a free, generous, unconditioned gift.

But the woman still can't understand all this. Jesus answers her: *"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again"*. The evangelist applies to Jesus a text of the Bible, of the Old Testament, the Book of Sirach in which it is written (about the law) that everyone who drinks of me will be thirsty again. The observance of the law can never quench one's thirst or fill up completely because however much you try to observe everything, to be always in order, there will still be something else beyond your control; so, if our relationship with God is based on the observance of the law, people will never feel appeased because there will always be something more to do. Then Jesus reveals the insufficiency of the gift of the well, of Jacob's well: its water doesn't quench thirst once and for all, the observance of the law will never be able to satisfy the fullness of life that everyone has inside oneself. Because the law is made for everyone and can't know each individual reality, that's why Jesus says: *"everyone who drinks of this water..."* - and water means law, that is, if your relationship with God is based upon law you will never be satisfied, you will never be appeased, you'll never reach the fullness of your life - *"but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty"*

again". Jesus offers his water to everyone and this water is the Spirit that can fulfil any human aspiration to fullness, because, as love, God's Spirit orientates people towards love to others and this is what lets people grow and mature; fullness is not given by a relationship with God based on the law, on more religious, devotional practices, more sacrifices... **the fullness of life is only given by orientating one's own life towards other people's good: this is what makes you grow.** Religion centres man on himself: my prayers, my devotions and everything else is directed towards my own interest, my spiritual interest; sometimes you can hear in some prayers: "for my spiritual needs". Very pious, spiritual people are all centred upon themselves, they don't care about the others, "the only thing that matters to me is my sanctity" and they always remain unfulfilled, they are never satisfied, whereas, to Jesus, growth and maturity are determined by orienting one's own life towards other people's good. Love is what makes you grow and mature. So, the Spirit (the Spirit that is Love) orientates people towards the others.

Nay, "*the water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life*". Up to now, they had been referring to an external spring, well Jesus says: No, the water that I will give him, (that is the Spirit that he communicates **into** people, **inside of** them), becomes a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

Jesus is saying something extraordinary: this spring is no more external to men and women, but there is more: the people that receive his Spirit are imbued with his love, with his very life and they are detached from evil.

The term "baptise" in Greek means "to immerse, impregnate, drench"; **spirit** means strength, the strength of God, the love of God; **holy** is not only a quality of this spirit but it also refers to **the action of the spirit inside the person that receives it**. The person is to be sanctified, that is, detached from the domain of evil, of darkness, and pushed towards the domain of life and light. So, the action of Jesus consists in imbuing, impregnating, drenching each person into God's love and if this love is received they will be detached from evil.

The moment in which this baptism/immersion in the Holy Spirit happens is the important moment of the celebration of the Eucharist, when Jesus offers himself as bread, as body and as wine, as blood, that is no more something external to people, but something inward that makes us become akin to God.

Jesus, Son of God, gives us this transfusion, this effusion of blood and his blood becomes our blood, and we share the same divine life. This is what Jesus is saying in this gospel in a different way. It's the third time that a water source is identified as spring by the evangelist.

So it is not a **well** where to go to weary, but it's a spring of living water gurgling inside of those who receive it and leading to fullness and eternal life. Whereas law creates a division between observers and non-observers, the Spirit gives the same water to all. The Spirit unites people to Jesus and makes them brothers and sisters.

The Spirit of Jesus, that is the life of God, the love of God, the Spirit that Jesus communicates, changes into an ever-gushing spring that continuously communicates life to people making them able to overcome death: this is the meaning of eternal life.

The experience of being loved by God for free makes people love as generously as they feel that God loves them. The more people feel loved the more they feel this spring of love gushing into them for eternal life.

John's is the gospel where the expression "eternal life" appears most.

What is **eternal life**? It is eternal not so much as for its duration but for its quality. A life of such a divine quality that is indestructible. So, those who have such a quality of life will not experience death.

Jesus sets free from the greatest fear of mankind, the fear of death, those who receive him. Death does not exist anymore. You see, Jews believed that there was life, death and then resurrection. Well, Jesus says: no, the life here on earth is already the life of the risen; being divine, it has such a quality that it will be able to overcome death. If you are used to reading the New Testament you may have come across some strange expressions used by Paul. Paul writes: we, who have already risen. But, doesn't someone rise again only after death? No, Christians, the early Christians didn't believe that they would rise again after death; if you don't rise again while you're still living you will never rise. That's why in the Gospels Jesus himself speaks of God as the God of the living and not of the dead, but what does it all mean? **The God of Jesus does not raise people from the dead; instead, he communicates to the living a life of such a quality that allows them to overcome death.** So, Jesus assures us that those who follow him as a model, a rule of behaviour, will receive a life of such a quality that they won't experience death. In chapter 11, Lazarus' resurrection, Jesus gives a precious indication: everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. It's clear that the biological part, the flesh part, is bound to die, we express ourselves through our physical part, but we are not only that; so Jesus assures that those who receive this ever-growing, guttering spring have such a quality of life that they won't even realize the moment of their death. The woman says: *"Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water"*. Remember: at the beginning it was Jesus that had asked for some water from the Samaritan woman, now it's the woman that asks for some water from Jesus. The Samaritan woman understands what Jesus is going to offer and states that she is willing to leave the well, to abandon the law.

In chapter 3 of this Gospel there had been the encounter with Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees (we already know who the Pharisees are), a doctor of the law; yet, facing this proposal: Leave the old things because you must be born again, the old Nicodemus can say nothing but *"How can these things be? How can these things be?"*. Well, the Samaritans, represented by this woman, heretics that are distant from God, are the first to understand the will of God manifested in Jesus.

There is something constant in all the Gospels on which we must reflect because it is a warning for us: the more you are far from religion the more it's easy for you to perceive God's presence and understand and receive his will; the more you are immersed in religion, in a sacred world, the more you are refractory and even hostile towards Jesus.

In this Gospel the verb "kill" is repeated 12 times, half of the times this word is used in the temple, against Jesus. The most sacred place on earth, the temple of Jerusalem, is a mortal trap when God actually manifests himself. Jesus' enemies are pious, religious people and the Gospels give us this warning: beware! Beware of religious people and places because they make you totally refractory to God's action. The more you keep yourself distant from religion, the more easily you will perceive the presence of God in your life. Remember the episode of the woman sinner: in Matthew's Gospel there is a polemic between Jesus and the Pharisees: the Pharisees say that the kingdom of God delays in coming, why? Because of the tax collectors and the prostitutes! And Jesus says: wake up all you people, see that the tax collectors and the prostitutes have already taken your seat and they are feasting in the Kingdom of God and you are left out! So, the more you keep yourself distant from religion, from this mummified way of intending God, the more easily you will find the presence of the Lord in your life.

The Samaritan woman says: *"Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water"*. So, unlike Nicodemus, she is ready to break with her past and to be born again. And now there is a complete change of topic. So far, all is on a theological level. Jesus says: *"go, call your husband and come here"*, but what does the husband have to do with this? He has nothing to do with this, the rapid change from the water to the husband seems difficult to grasp on a historical level; yet, Jesus' request is meant to put the woman in the right condition to receive this water. Remember the scandalous episode of Jesus forgiving the adulteress with the words: *"Go, and from now on sin no more"*, and it had remained like this in the church. Well, let's now see what Jesus says to the Samaritan woman. This passage has always been approached with a certain tension: in seminars, as old priests have told me, when the professors, the exegetes, had to teach this episode about Jesus **alone** with the Samaritan, this lively, boor woman, they used to underline: yes, but, between Jesus and the Samaritan there was the well, there was a safe distance. Jesus says: *"go, call your husband and come here"*. This request sounds very strange, they are talking about totally different things, the well, the spring, the water...

The woman answered him, *"I have no husband"*. Jesus said to her, *"You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true"*. And at last, the moralists exult: Jesus reproaches her: you have had five husbands!!! This would seem the first and only time in which Jesus acts as a moralist, reproaching the woman for her behaviour, but Jesus had never done such a thing before, how can this be?

When we read the Gospels we must always put them in their cultural, historical and biblical context. The Gospels do not express concepts, but images, figures, and we must always try to see what the evangelist wants to convey. Here, is it possible that Jesus is in the company of a lively woman, (well, it's a good number: she had had five, and the one who she lives with is not even her husband)? This would be the only time in the Gospels that Jesus acts as a moralist... or might the evangelist be telling us something more profound about each of us?

We said before that, for a better comprehension of this passage, we should consider the book of Hosea, the prophet from Samaria. This is the first text in which an author imagines the relationship between God and his people like that of a bridegroom with his bride and adultery is transfigured in the act of going towards other gods, other divinities.

Well then, in the Bible we see that when the author describes the origin of these people of Samaria, he reproaches them because each of them had taken their own divinity with them (we saw that Samaria was a region made up of Jews, who were later deported in a foreign land, and settlers from other countries had taken their place); so, when those settlers arrived to Samaria they welcomed and accepted the God of Israel, Yahweh, who was worshipped on the mount Gerizim, but each of those peoples had also maintained their local divinity, therefore, each of the five hills that were there had its own temple, built for its own pagan divinity.

Since the Jewish term *Baal* has two different meanings - it can mean *husband* but also *master, lord*, in the sense of divinity - well, it's now clear that the reproach about the five husbands that Jesus makes to the Samaritan is not much meant to blame a too lively woman; instead Jesus reproaches Samaria and reveals to those people (remember that the woman has no name, and when characters are anonymous they always represent a larger situation) the impediment, the difficulty they have in welcoming and receiving Jesus because they live in idolatry. If she wants to receive the gift of love that God bestows for free, the woman (and Samaria) is invited by Jesus to break up with other divinities because idols promise happiness that they cannot really give.

Idols destroy people who worship them, they do not strengthen their life; so Jesus invites to break the relationship with the divinities that take life away instead of transmitting it.

Whereas the Father is a God that communicates life, false divinities and idols take life away. So, you see that this is true also for us, nowadays. Whereas the adhesion to the Father gives us life, if we worship other idols in our existence, they take our life away (other idols means: ideologies, things that absorb our life since we devote to them all our life, so, everything that mutilates people's life is an idol). In the past they had other names, nowadays we can call them differently; anyway, according to the Gospels, until the light of the real God doesn't shine within the person, there will always be false divinities sacrificing and mutilating people's lives. Beware, because among those idols there may also be religion. If religion is an impediment to the person's development, if religion negatively affects the person's growth, if

religion makes people unhappy, even religion becomes an idol to get rid of when we want to welcome and receive Jesus' free gift. When the woman understands that what Jesus is saying has little to do with her private life and that he is referring to the relationship with God, she goes straight to the point; otherwise, it will be difficult to understand how the following images are linked.

The woman says: "*Sir* - it's the third time, remember - *how is it that you, a Jew*", then she starts calling him **Sir** and there is a crescendo and now she says - Sir, I perceive that you are a **prophet**". Little by little, the woman, a Samaritan, an impure heretic and, above all, a woman, begins to recognize the identity of the mysterious interlocutor in front of her and has an intuition: he comes from God!

Before she had called him "Sir", a respectful term, now she says: "*you are a prophet*" and approaches him to solve the problem of the proper place of worship; so, you see, the woman understands the accusation that she had had five husbands: it has nothing to do with her private life, it's about the worship practiced in Samaria where God is worshipped on a mountain together with other divinities on other five mountains. In fact, the woman, realizing that this man comes from God, wonders: "*Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship*". You see how the topics are mixed: from conjugal life, as it seemed, to theological things, that is what the evangelist really wants to say. "Our fathers worshipped on this mountain (Gerizim) - it is just near the place where there is the well, - but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship". Remember that the verb "ought to" "ought", always stands for God's will. The woman thinks that worshipping God means acts of worship in a temple and wants to know: ok, you have highlighted my idolatry, well then I want to know where do I have to go and worship the real God: on this mount or, as you say, in Jerusalem? But for Jesus the time for the sanctuaries is over. And what he states and announces to this woman is of an incredible historic importance. Jesus tells her: "**Woman, believe me**". In John's gospel Jesus approaches only **three** female characters with the appellative **woman** which means *wife*. This term was used for married women and in this gospel they represent the three brides of the Covenant.

1. The first time Jesus refers to a female characters calling her *woman* is to his mother during the wedding at Cana. It seems strange that Jesus approaches his mother by calling her *woman*, which means wife, but Jesus' mother represents the faithful bride of the old covenant. Indeed, during the wedding at Cana (you know that in the Jewish wedding rite the climax was when the bride and the bridegroom drank at the same chalice of wine, wine is the symbol of the love between the grooms, then the chalice was thrown on the ground, broken into pieces so that nobody could ever break into pieces that love), what does the mother say? She doesn't say: we have no wine, she says, "**They have no wine**": it's a wedding without love. It's a wedding without wine; **she doesn't say**: we have no **more** wine - look at the translations - **she does say**: they have no wine, they've never had it. Why have the people of God never

had this love? Because the law that hangs over people making them always feel guilty has become the layer that makes people unable to understand the love of God. So, the mother represents the people who are faithful to the old covenant, suffering for the people who do not experience this love. And Jesus approaches her by calling her *woman*. So the mother is the faithful spouse of the old covenant.

2. The second female character that Jesus calls "woman", "wife", is the Samaritan. She represents the adulterous bride that the bridegroom re-conquers not by threats but with an even greater offer of love, "If you knew the gift of God..."

3. Finally, the last female character that Jesus calls "woman" is Mary of Magdala; the evangelist portrays Jesus and Mary like the new couple in the terrestrial garden: they represent the community that is the bride in the new covenant, at an unilateral level, of course.

Three women, then:

1. Mary, the faithful bride in the old covenant;
2. The Samaritan, an adulteress re-conquered by love;
3. And Mary of Magdala, representing the bride, the new community.

"*Woman, believe me, the hour is coming*", he doesn't say: "*the hour is now*", he says: "the hour is coming" the hour is the moment of Jesus' death, because until Jesus is still alive, he won't effuse his Spirit.

None of the evangelists writes that Jesus died on the cross, of course Jesus is dead, but the evangelists are not journalists doing a historical report. None of the evangelists uses the term "died", "burst", but, all of them, in a different way, John in particular, use the expression "gave up his spirit", that never before the Gospels, in Greek literature, had been used to mean the death of a person.

Nowadays, yes, we say that a person has expired, but expire means **to blow**, to effuse something, to breathe, well; **Jesus' last act on the cross is not an act of a dead man but of a living man**. Jesus, taking to the limit his capacity to love, gives up his Spirit, the Spirit of God that had descended upon him and that Jesus had enriched, strengthened with his own existence, and effuses it on those who receive him and follow him as a model and as a rule of conduct.

The hour is coming when all this will happen. "*The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father*", pay attention, the woman thinks that there is a place where to worship God. If the God of religion needs a temple and worship, the Father needs sons and daughters that are like him. So God needs a temple and worship, but why does a father need to be called Father? He needs children that, according to the Jewish concept, are like him; the God of religion asks for people who obey to his law. This is what we have seen so many times: **no more obedience to God, but resemblance to the Father, in**

his love. Obedience is typical of religion: it needs someone who commands and someone who obeys and between them there is always a gulf. With Jesus, all this is over, no more obedience to God, but resemblance to the Father, and the **resemblance is in the practice of love.** The more a person practices love, the more he/she grows in resemblance and the distance between him/her and the Father gradually lessens until it becomes nothing and that person and the Father become one. That is why Jesus never uses in the gospels the word that religion and religious organizations love so much: to obey, obedience. Never! Never does Jesus invite people to obey him, imagine if he asks obedience to one of his disciples, never. In the gospels the term *obey* or *obedience* appears five times but it always refers to elements that are hostile to people: the wind, the sea, the storm, obey!, but never does Jesus invite to obey God **because God doesn't want obedience from people but resemblance.** I repeat, obedience keeps distance, resemblance takes it away.

Jesus states the end of the temples and continues: "*you worship what you do not know; we worship what we know*". Jesus exposes Samaritans' idolatry: "*you don't know because you worship a god together with many other divinities, you have done a sort of hotchpotch*". Moreover, the Samaritans chose to separate from the rest of the Jews, they didn't receive the prophets' message, therefore, in their relationship with God, they only observed the first five books of the Bible, the books of the law supposed to be written by Moses. So, they refused the prophets' message, **but it's in the prophets indeed that the real face of God gradually begins to show itself in a more incisive way.**

And Jesus goes on: "for salvation is from the Jews (the salvation from the Jews is Jesus himself, coming from Judea), but the hour is coming, and is now here, (and Jesus already anticipates the outcome of his death) when the true worshipers will worship the Father - always the Father and not God - in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."

It's a paradox: in religious life there are people who are always seeking God but never find him. The more a person seeks God the more he isolates himself from other people and ends up drawing who knows what conclusions.

With Jesus, it's not the person that has to seek God; if I'm seeking God it means that I already have an idea of God and who knows where this search can lead me and, in any case, it will isolate me from the others. **It's the Father who seeks people** and wants to be received; Jesus says: the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, **spirit is love and truth is what makes this love true,** this could be translated in a more understandable way: in a faithful love. The only worship that God wants is the acceptance of his love and the extension of it to others. To the woman who wanted to know where to go to worship God, Jesus answers that it's the Father who offers himself to her and gives her the same capacity to love as his. The Lord doesn't expect to receive gifts from people, but he offers himself to them, it's the Father who seeks people, it's the Father that is seeking such people to worship

him. With Jesus a radical change occurs. The age of temples, of sanctuaries, is over. The Father, with Jesus, went out of the temple once and for all and won't come back anymore; so, those who keep on going there may not find him. **To worship God means to cooperate to his life-making action.**

The old worship diminished the person; it was all focused on the offerings of people to God, an exacting God!

You can just read the prescriptions in the Old Testament: take your son and offer him, take the firstborn of your livestock and offer it, this day is for me only, give me this and give me that; it even says: They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed.

The old worship diminished the person, people had to take bread out of their mouth to offer it to God. The god of the temple had become a bloodsucker fed by the blood of his own lives. Do you remember the episode of the widow that gives everything she has to the treasury of the temple, not to the temple, but to the treasury of the temple? The law prescribed that widows should be sustained with the proceeds of the temple; widows are the symbol of all the people who do not have a man that sustains them, well religion had distorted all this: it wasn't the temple that had to sustain the widows, but the widows almost ruined themselves to sustain that vampire of the temple.

With Jesus, all this is over. The age of what people have to do for God is over, the age of what people have to do no more **for** God, but **with** God and **like** God has started. The horizon, with Jesus, isn't God anymore, at the horizon of one's own existence there is the person; whereas in religion people must do everything for God, with Jesus, people live **with** God, in full community with Him and **like** Him, that is with a totally new potential. So, the God of Jesus doesn't decrease people, but strengthen them. This is extremely important, because, you know, the Council exposed that, if so many are atheists, if so many don't believe, the responsibility is just of the God that we, the believers, have showed them: a God that in no way, the Council says, is the one of the Gospels. And Jesus goes on: God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. God is spirit, that is a dynamism of life and love that aches for communicating itself to people. The feature of the God of Jesus is that he is a spirit, a vital force that wants to communicate itself, that yearns to be welcomed and received, accepted by people; the worship to God, therefore, is the extension of the love force that he himself is and communicates. And this is his will! Indeed Jesus says "must (the verb must [de<] indicates God's will) worship in spirit and truth. It's the experience of this love that engenders in each person the capacity to love generously as you feel loved for free. And love lived as a practice in one's own existence makes people more and more similar to God. And since love is the only line of development, growth and maturity of the person, the practice of love makes the Creator's project real within the person. What is the Creator's project? A man (or a woman) with a divine condition. What for religion is a horrible oath (a man who dares become God! Remember the book of Genesis, God chases them away because they dared become like God) is instead God's plan on manhood. In the prologue to the Gospel,

the evangelist says: *"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, - Jesus as a project of God on his creation - he gave the right to become children of God"*, that is, to have the same life as God and to be ourselves God. This is Jesus' plan for the whole manhood. God (the God of Jesus is not the God of religion always disgusted by manhood and unhappy) is so in love with men and women, so enthusiast about his creation that he says: this life they have is too short, this life with a beginning and an end is too short, I want to give them my own life, an eternal life, an indestructible life; human condition on earth is too low, I want to raise them up and give them a divine condition; so God wants to communicate all his divinity (he is not jealous) to each person. A God who asks to be received. So, people needn't make offerings to God anymore, but it's God who offers himself to men and women and only asks to be received. The woman says: Jew, sir, prophet; she's a Samaritan, a heretic, the most distant person to God, listen to what she is able to say, *"I know that a Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things."* The woman has already understood, she's got the message, she has understood that the man in front of her is the expected Messiah and, indeed, the only time in which Jesus manifests himself as the expected messiah is to a woman. Remember, women are not credible, they are not allowed to testimony, and here we have a Samaritan woman, too. The only time in which Jesus admits of being the messiah is not with the High Priest, but with a Samaritan woman. Jesus answers: *"I who speak to you am he"*; *"I am"* is God's name. When Moses, in the episode of the burning bush, asked God: give me your name, God didn't answer because God has no name; a name limits his identity. God answered with these words: *"I am who I am"*, that is an activity of God that makes him recognizable. Then *"I am"* has become the classical term for the name of God. Well, Jesus manifests himself to this woman showing himself in the fullness of his divinity. He answers *"I am"*, that is, I have the divine condition, I who speak to you am he. Then the episode comes to an end; the evangelist took us in a sort of crescendo: Jesus that manifests himself like a man who has in himself the fullness of divinity; a man who reveals himself as the messiah to the woman...but there comes something that spoils almost everything...

Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman. God has never talked with a woman, so they are surprised that Jesus is talking with a woman, but, pay attention, notice how shrewd they are: but no one said, *"What do you seek?"* or, *"Why are you talking with her?"* They are afraid of hearing what they don't want to hear because they aren't fools at all, they understand that if Jesus is talking with a woman, a Samaritan too, this means that for him there aren't racial, religious and moral barriers anymore, barriers that Israel, on the contrary, wanted to keep.

That's why they don't ask any questions; they don't ask because they don't want to hear what they've already perceived by intuition. If Jesus is talking with this woman this means that there are no more differences between men and women; if Jesus talks even with a Samaritan woman, won't this weird messiah say that even Samaritans are our brothers? So they keep silent, silent because they don't want to hear what they've already perceived by intuition. So

the woman left her water jar, the same term (ὄδρ...α) *jar* had been used for the wedding at Cana. Now that the woman has received Jesus' message, she doesn't need the jar anymore. The jar, the symbol of the effort of picking up water, is now useless, and she leaves it behind her. ...and went away into town and said to the people, "*Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be Christ?*"

Why does the woman say: come, see a man who told me all that I ever did? Because in the book of Hosea it was written exactly like this: When I would heal Israel, the iniquity of Ephraim is revealed, and the evil deeds of Samaria. It was God that made the error of Samaria come out.

"*They went out of the town and were coming to him*", and here we find a beautiful pun made by the evangelist, "Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, '*He told me all that I ever did*'. The term "testimony" in Greek is *lògos*, which means word, message, and content. When the woman gets to announce her experience, the Samaritans define the woman's announcement with the term *logos*, meaning message, content; but, notice what happens: "and many more believed because of his word", once again the term *logos*, that is, at first they believe because of the announcement brought by the woman, then they go to Jesus and believe because of the announcement brought by Jesus...and the evangelist uses the same term; but now listen to the difference and what's the change. What do they say to the woman? "*It is no longer because of what you said that we believe*", and instead of using the term *logos*, they use the term (*lal...α*), which means chattering, jabbering. What does the evangelist mean with this pun? He means that when you haven't experienced Jesus yet, the announcement that you hear (in this case by the Samaritan) seems the *lògos*, but when you listen to and experience the message of Jesus' *logos*, what you had first defined *lògos* becomes blah blah blah.

You can't compare the announcement made by a person bringing Jesus' message to the experience that you personally do of that. Therefore, it's no longer because we heard you say blah blah blah that we believe, because we've heard the message ourselves and we know that he is really... - and that's the final shot: the Jews were following Jesus because they thought he was the saviour of Israel, the Samaritans, heretic and impure people, the most distant from God, well, they understand that Jesus is not the saviour of just one people at the expense of other peoples. What do they say? "*That this is indeed the Saviour of the world*". God's project doesn't involve only one nation, one religion but it wants to reach all manhood because, and we conclude, there is no person, whatever his/her behaviour is, that can consider himself/herself excluded from the love of God.