

“To See” and “To Follow” the Christ of the Cross
Icon of a love shown and refused
Lectio divina: Jn 12: 20-33

Giorgio Zevini, sdb

1. The coming of the Greeks and the last public discourse of Jesus (12: 20-33)

(Mk 8:34-35; 10:45; 14:34-35; Mt 10:39; 16:24-25; 17:5; 20:28; 26:38-39; Lk 9:23-24,35; 10:18; 17:33; 22:41-49)

With the pericope 12:20-36, the reader is led to contemplate the highest point of the final section of Jesus' public life: the inauguration of the *hour* of glorification of the Son of Man. This passage, of an intensely dramatic value, contains various themes. The fundamental theme is Christological and is centered on:

- the *necessity of death on the cross* in order to bear fruit (12:10-26),
- the *exaltation* and the *glorification* of Jesus-Messiah, and the drawing of all the children of God (12: 24, 27-33),
- the *journeying with faith* in the light of Christ (12:35-36).

1.1. The announcement of glorification by means of death (12:20-33)

(20) Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast. (21) They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, saying, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." (22) Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. (23) Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. (24) Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. (25) Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. (26) Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me. (27) I am troubled now. Yet, what should I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour! (28) Father, glorify Your name! ". Then a voice came out of heaven: "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." (29) The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, "An angel has spoken to Him." (30) Jesus answered and said, "This voice did not come for my sake, but for yours. (31) Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. (32) And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself." (33) He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.

After having narrated the triumphal entry of Jesus into the city of David, John introduces the episode of the Greeks who ask to see Jesus. The coming of the Nazarene into the city does not pass unobserved by anyone. Also a group of Greek pilgrims (it is not a group of Jews of Greek language, but Hellenists sympathetic to the Jewish religion), who came to the holy City to celebrate the Passover rites, hear people talk about Jesus and are struck by the people's interest, to the point of seeking the Nazarene. Moved by curiosity to see him, they go to the apostle Philip and ask: "*Sir, we want to see Jesus!*" (v. 21). But for the evangelist a deeper reason is added: it is not simple curiosity, but a desire *to know* and *to believe*. These Greeks desire to know the *identity* of Jesus, not only to encounter him. The pagans by now are close to salvation and seek real adoration "*in spirit*

and truth" (4:33). Philip consults with Andrew, and together they go to the Teacher to present the request to him.

The encounter with the Greeks offers Jesus the possibility for a brief discourse (12:23-28a), which is not a response for them, but, from a theological viewpoint, relates to the *hour*, in which he will be glorified through the cross. In this episode John is not so much interested in the Greeks as such, but rather in what their gesture signifies: affirming beforetime the universality of salvation and the gospel. The perspective is missionary.

To respond to the desire to know who he is, Jesus narrates the event of the cross. He recounts it four times in this passage:

- with the parable of the grain of wheat (12:24),
- with the teaching on discipleship and service addressed to the disciples (12:25-26),
- with the description of the debate that is happening in his soul (12:27-28),
- with the solemn concluding proclamation (12: 32-33).

1.1.1. The small **parable of the seed** which falls on the ground and dies has Christological value and is very expressive and simple: "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.*" (v.24) The seed is Jesus himself, who, like a grain of wheat, must die in order to become a source of life for many. Without death there is no fecundity, new life and abundance of fruit. The new life that Jesus gives is a logical consequence of his availability and his death. The theme of the parable of the seed is present also in the synoptic gospels with the mustard seed (Mk 4:30-32), the seed that grows by itself (Mk 4:26-29), and the seed that falls in different types of soil (Mk 4:1-9; Mt 13:3-8 and par.), but with the difference that here the seed indicates the Word of God or the Reign, while in John the seed is Jesus himself, who will die very soon to give fruits of eternal life to everyone.

1.1.2. The theme of the parable is developed in the following verse with the Instruction for the disciples in the form of the "**teaching about discipleship**": "*Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life*" (v. 25). The road traveled by the Teacher becomes the same one the disciple must travel, even though this leads to the cross, because it is in participating in his death that one reaches the glory of life. Only one who loses himself is one who will be fulfilled. The biggest obstacle to full donation and, consequently, the fulfillment of self is in the fear of being lost and being sacrificed in this world. Jesus clearly warns each disciple: attachment to oneself leads to compromise; complete maturity, on the other hand, resides in the activity of love, in donation which has been transformed into service to every brother and sister.

After having revealed that the journey of a disciple's full realization is in the gift of self for the sake of love, Jesus invites his listeners to follow him on the road of generous service: "*Whoever serves me **must follow me**; and where I am, there will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me*" (v. 26). This **teaching on service** implies not only a following in discipleship, but also an identity of views and ideals, collaboration in the same mission, imitation to the point of suffering and death. At this point, the disciples of the Prophet, including the Greeks, are able to see and experience Jesus. The Greeks -- states Bultmann -- "were asking to meet the historical Christ and they were indicated the way to the Risen One (the one raised on high). But the Risen One is not directly accessible, as though in moments of ecstasy or mystical contemplation which interrupt the historical existence of man. Instead, the way that leads to him is that of service, which has as consequence the acceptance of death".

This life orientation, which conditions faith in the person of Jesus, is connected to an assured recompense: the certainty of being united with him, of dwelling in the love of the Father (cf 14:3; 17:24) and to receiving a "glory" similar to that of the Son. If the world despises the disciples of the

Nazarene, the Father himself will honor them and treat them as sons and daughters (cf 5:44), revealing his love to them (17:24-26).

1.1.3. After vv. 25-26, dedicated to a precise teaching of the disciples, the Evangelist inserts a *monolog of Jesus*, which takes place in his soul. He is aware of being at a decisive turning point in his life, and this causes him some interior disturbance: *"I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour!"* (v. 27) These words bring us to Gethsemane of the fourth gospel, anticipating the scene narrated by the synoptic evangelists (cf Mk 14:33-36 and par). Jesus, like every human being, notices the dramatic and imminent hour of his death and experiences an interior struggle between the spontaneous attempt to avoid it: *"Father save me from this hour?"* (v. 27; cfr Heb 5:7) and the firm will to remain faithful to the plan prepared for him by the Father: *"But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour!"*(v. 27b). Here the Johannine Jesus appears strong in face of his painful events, in control of the situation, even though humanly disturbed, consciously protagonist of the will of the Father, to whom he addresses only this prayer: *"Father, glorify your name!"* (v. 28a). Jesus asked that the Father himself be glorified. Jesus' acceptance of the *hour* of his death and the will of the Father, result in the Son's bringing the work of the Father to completion in obedience. This will reveal his love to everyone.

Jesus' immediately receives confirmation of his prayer having been heard: *"Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it and will glorify it again.'" (v. 28b)*. It is the first time that the fourth gospel has us hear "the voice" of the Father directly (cf 1:33). And, in reality, the Father affirms in this declaration, using in the past and the future, acceptance of the Son's obedience and accomplishment of the mission through his glorification. "The voice from heaven", states Mateos-Barreto, "is the second divine message that appears in the gospel The first was addressed to John the Baptist, to let him know Jesus and to announce to him what his mission was (1:33). Now, at the beginning of the final arena, there is another divine message which announces the intention of the Father, confirming the mission of Jesus. That message described his investiture, preparing his activity. This is given when, having finished his activity, Jesus' hour arrives, in which his work will reach its climax". The voice from heaven, therefore, is not only the Father's confirmation about the mission and work of the Son, but expresses well what the Greeks were hoping to obtain in seeing Jesus: that he be sign and hope of salvation not only for Israel, but also for all the rest of humanity.

The theophany and response of the Father about the mission of Jesus were not understood by the crowd who listened to the words of the Rabbi and participated in the divine revelation. Only Jesus captured its meaning and message. Before the heavenly revelation the people react differently: some confuse the voice of the Father who ratifies the plan of the Son with a clap of thunder (cf Ex 9:28; 19:16; 2 Sam 22:14; Ps 29:3; 77:18); others think it is an angelic intervention (cf Acts 23:9). Jesus, then, corrects for his interlocutors that the heavenly voice is not calling so much to him, as to them, so that they will understand that he is a divine person, sent by God to reveal his plan of love and salvation for everyone. It's a question of understanding that voice. But what is its significance?

It is in light of the judgment between Christ and the world, decided at the final hour of Jesus' death and renewed personally in the life of every person until the *parousia*, that "the judgment of this world" is signaled, the defeat of the "*prince of this world*". Thus, Satan is ousted from the life of believers, and his power condemned and destroyed; and Jesus, in spite of appearances to the contrary, is the victor (cf 16:33). V. Mannucci states: "At this point the ancient creation has reached its end, and a new creation has begun: the passage from one to the other is not a simple physical process but a moral and spiritual process. Every person's destiny is decided by this event and by one's accepting it or not, through faith." If Satan is about to be thrown down and defeated, it is a sign that his empire is dethroned and reduced to powerlessness. On the contrary, if Christ is raised up, it means that his Reign begins.

1.1.4. Finally, the last words of the text about *the lifting up of the Son of*

Man, which John announces various times in his gospel (cf 3:14; 8:28; 12:23, 33-34). We are before a very profound **theological reflection**; it is fulfilled in the sign of the defeat of Satan, whose power is taken from him to be transferred totally under the regal, salvific and universal power of Christ. “*And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.*” (v. 32) Bruno Maggioni comments: “To the rising, victorious movement of Jesus, there is a corresponding descending movement, of defeat of the prince of this world (v. 31). Christ is raised up and Satan thrown down. On the cross the judgment comes to pass, which is both condemnation and salvation. *Condemnation*: the cross is the definitive refusal that men oppose to the manifestation of God. *Salvation*: the cross is the manifestation of God’s love and of his victorious power, his capacity for attraction (v. 32). In this sense the cross becomes the demonstration that the logic of the world is defeated, fallen and proved wrong. The cross is the builder of community.”

But what is the sense of the word “lifting up” which the evangelist uses in vv. 32, 34? The Greek verb “to lift up” (= *hypsóō*) hides a double significance according to the usual usage of John. It refers in the *literal sense* to the external raising up on the cross and the modality of his death; and in the *spiritual sense*, to the exaltation to glory with his consequent return to the Father. This way of thinking, typical of John, makes us understand how Jesus, lifted up and glorified, is a reference point for the salvation of humanity; and this, by reason of his death experienced in radical obedience to the Father. That is, when the Teacher speaks of his approaching end on the cross, he also states that in that apparent humiliation-defeat he will be ruler; and that that *hour* will also be a moment of light, of victory: the Crucified One is already the Risen One. “Men will not even suspect,” Bultmann will say, “that in ‘lifting up’ the Christ, they make him their judge. The dual meaning of “to lift up” is clear: they lift up Jesus in crucifying him; but at the same time he is also lifted up, in that he is the Son of Man, to his heavenly glory; precisely while they think they are judging him, he becomes their judge”.

Only the true disciples of Jesus understand the deep significance of this death, because they know that the Son always lives in unity, obedient to the Father, and the very crucifixion is for Jesus the beginning of his glorious exodus toward the Father and for themselves a redemption event. The last words of the revelation discourse of Jesus explain the actual way of this lifting up/exaltation. If the cross will be the place of universal salvation and the source of humanity’s true life, all of this will produce the effect of drawing all to him. The Christ-crucified, that is, not only will draw to himself all those who believe in him, Jews and pagans, but will also provide that these find his glory traveling the same path of *kenosis* and glorification. Jesus will draw them not only to glory, but also to the hatred and persecution of the world, because of their faith. Then, they will form the universal-messianic community of children of God under the sovereignty of Jesus, king and Messiah who, revealing the mystery of his Person and the Father’s love, will arouse acceptance in faith toward “*him whom they have pierced*” (19:37; cf Zac 12:10).

This look at the text is enough to assure oneself that the cross – in its aspect of death and life, failure and victory -- is what is important to understand and speak. It is thus that Jesus responds to the question: “*Who are you?*”. There is no other way to speak of him again and truly understand who he is. There is no other way to follow the Christ of the cross and be his disciples.

1.2. Rendering the Christ of the cross visible in the life of each disciple

From the *lectio* we now move on to the *meditatio*. That is, we move from “what the Johannine text says in itself” to “what the Word says to me, to us”. We have seen that from the text it turns out that the protagonist, object and method of Jesus’ mission can be only the Christ lifted up. So, the task of the Christian community in the world, of each of us, is to lift up the Crucified one, making him visible and publicly transparent, explained. **But how?** Of course, the Crucified one lifted up must be recounted, celebrated and explained the way Jesus himself did. But it is also necessary *to show him*, repeating the ways of his life and his action.

How does one show him? To answer this question I'll offer three suggestions of the gospel of John, in which the adverb "like" or "as" is present.

1.2.1. The Logic of service and gift

In the Cenacle, Jesus does an upsetting gesture: he washes the feet of his disciples (Jn 13:1-20). It is a gesture that reveals the sense of his imminent passion, and, at the same time, traces the way of the Church in the world: "*I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do*" (Jn 13:15). It is not an easy gesture to understand. Not even the disciple, like Peter, understands it. It would be more logical that the disciples washed the feet of the Teacher. Instead no, the image of God that Jesus intends to reveal -- and which every disciple must announce -- is an upside-down gesture: not man serves God, but God serves man. With this gesture Jesus renders visible the logic of love, service, and gift that has guided his entire existence, which expresses his dignity and nature as Son of God: it is in serving and giving himself that Jesus makes himself available in the hands of the Father, becoming the Father's image and transparency. God is love. If the Church wants to announce the true God to the world, she (the Church) has no other way than the one indicated by Jesus: to serve.

1.2.2. The Logic of love lived according to the model of Jesus

Again, in the Cenacle, Jesus gives his disciples the new commandment, which expresses a Christian newness: "*I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (Jn 13:34-35) Surely, here we are dealing with an internal, community love, among brothers in faith. But this internal love moves within a "transparent" house, without walls, so as to be visible and public: *all* must be able to see it. The newness lies in the "*as I have loved you*". The love of Christ is the model and measure, the depth and breadth ("root and horizon") of reciprocal love. This Christian reciprocity is unique, gratuitous and universal; it upsets and expands every reciprocity. The Church must be a community that loves itself and that loves: a community able to show God's love *for all*, not only an example of God's love *for us*.

1.2.3. The Logic of being different from the world

Jesus offers us also a third important indication: "*They do not belong to the world, as I do not belong to the world*" (Jn17:16). The Christian community, if it wants to announce the Lord Jesus must be different from the world. But what kind of difference or dissimilarity? Once again, the model is Jesus: "*As I...*", therefore it cannot be a difference/diversity that drives away and causes absence and creates strangers. On the contrary, the world is at the center of Jesus' interests: "*As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world*" (17:18). The world is not only the place to which Jesus came, but is also the reason for which Jesus came; and the reason for which he came is *to love it and save it*. We know well that the world knows only self-interested and partial love. Completely the opposite of God's love. To be a "sign of contradiction" like Jesus and therefore proclaimers of his gospel -- it is necessary to have the courage to show the gratuitousness and universality of love. It is the unmistakable way of God.

1.3. How to live and follow the Christ of the cross in daily life

Let us look at the cross with the penetrating gaze of the early disciples of the Lord and especially of the evangelist John. We will recall only two statements:

- "They will look upon him whom they have pierced." (Jn 19:37)

- “When I am lifted up...I will draw everyone to myself.” (Jn 12:32).

In light of these statements we understand immediately that the cross is the great icon, the stable memory of the believer, the *display/spectacle* from which we must never remove our eyes. It is above all a public display that takes place before everyone, before the Church and before the world.

The spectacle of the cross is a drama that *surprises* because it recounts a “defeated man” who is instead a “victorious man”. It surprises because it is a sight/spectacle in which all the wickedness of the human person appears, but at the same time, also all the depth and power of Jesus’ forgiveness appears. The cross teaches that evil exists, that wickedness exists, but the cross is also a *display* in which the pardon of God is perceived. A Jewish story recounts that when God decided to create the world he was not able to make it stand up. Then alongside the world, God created pardon and the world stood upright. If the world continues, it is because God always pardons us, day and night.

The spectacle of the cross is a drama that *converts*. The crowds gather, they look, they understand and strike their breast. The spectacle of the cross upsets life. Observing the cross, our life must resemble that of the Crucified One; only then can we understand that the road of life can only be gift.

1.3.1. How live the spectacle of the cross?

The cross is a spectacle/display to be looked at together, within a community, within a Church. It is a spectacle to be lived, because the cross is to be “reproposed” in my life. It isn’t enough to show the world my experience or that of the community: it must always narrate the story of Jesus Christ; that is, *the cross must become life and word*, testimony and proclamation. How can all this be made real in our daily life? The road to travel is the one indicated in the evangelical beatitudes (cf Mt 5: 3-11).

“Blessed the pure of heart.” These are promised the vision of God. Purity of heart is the totality of the search for God. The pure of heart is the person who seeks God with the whole self, with an undivided heart. The difference between the saint and the mediocre one lies in this: the saint is totally intent on seeking God, is committed, fixed on God: the mediocre one, instead, is a person divided, fragmented, scattered, incapable of gospel choices (something to God and something for himself). The pure of heart is totally open to God and totally open to others.

“Blessed the merciful.” Mercy is precisely that strong love that remains solid also when refused; it is a love lived with deeds and not with words. It is a love which excludes no one, even though it remains true that the most needy are at the center; that is, the poor, the sick, foreigners, but also sinners and guilty people. Placed at the center of life, mercy becomes the measure of one’s life.

“Blessed those who hunger and thirst for justice.” With this beatitude, Jesus addresses not so much the rich, but the hungry so that they will find the strength to get up on their feet and become protagonists of their journey. And Jesus offers hope to the hungry: “*you will be satisfied*”. A hope that is supported and guaranteed by Jesus’ cross, and is indispensable for leaving resignation and despair behind. But this beatitude is also addressed to us, the satiated, engaging us in a discourse that requires profound conversion. Being hungry and thirsty for justice means having a passion for justice: not only respect for rights among peoples, but even more so, respect for God’s rights.

“Blessed the peacemakers.” There is peace and peace: that of the world and that of Jesus. The peace of Christ seizes the whole person and demands a high price. Peace demands that one always responds with love. Peace is not possible without gratuitousness and forgiveness. The style of a

disciple of Jesus always refuses violence; knows how to pay the price of persecution and never has recourse to non-evangelical means, but believes in the power of love and truth.

“Blessed the poor in spirit.” The poor in spirit is the person who has confidence in God, counts on God and not on him/herself. The poor person lives simply in order to be free to share. This poor person understands him/herself wholly in terms of gratuitousness and not of possession; knows how to make him/herself gift and service. Gratuitous love is a force that unites two things: identity and dialog. Charity is the heart of the Christian identity; but charity is also an experience that each disciple can in some way share, Charity must imitate the love of the Crucified One, which is universal, gratuitous love, without measure and without self-interest. This spectacle is to be proclaimed to everyone because it is beauty, truth and love all together.

1.3.2. Conclusion

To conclude, I will recall three meaningful expressions of Jesus.

1. To the disciples who are following him, Jesus says: *“What are you looking for?”* (Jn 1:38). This is a big question. We, what are we looking for? Are we truly looking for Christ? At times, a search for ourselves is hidden in our search for God.
2. The first word that Jesus addresses to his disciples in Mark’s gospel is: *“Why are you so frightened?”* (Mk 4:40). Seriousness and commitment, yes; but never fear. The spectacle of the cross is a display of love and forgiveness; it enlarges the heart and sets people journeying.
3. Jesus, sending his disciples on mission, *“...rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart...and said to them: ‘Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature’”* (Mk 16:14-15). There is nothing more beautiful than this *“Go and preach!”*. Every disciple can be hard-hearted, but he is sent; and let’s remember: sin cannot slow down the power of mission and the proclamation of the gospel.