

**Biblical reflection and Meditation week 1**  
**Lent 2020 – February 24 to 29, 2020**  
**Gospel of Matthew 4: 1 - 11**

Jesus spent 30 years in obscurity. From His birth, to the age of 30, He lived and worked like any one of us. No one was aware, apart for His parents, that He was utterly unique. When He finally felt the inner urge to leave his quiet hidden life of Nazareth and begin the immensely challenging task of revealing the Father's message, His first instinct was to take an extended 40 day retreat in the wilderness. Many prophets before had done the same. Elijah, is one example. But biblically, forty does not mean forty. Forty is a biblical symbolic number for.... "sufficient time to prepare for a new task". For example, biblically, it might be said that a pregnant mother spends "40 days" in gestation waiting for the birth of her child. We all know that gestation is 9 months, but the scriptures are not much interested in mathematical exactitude, as meaningfulness. It takes the necessary "God" time before a child is ready to be born. Jesus took time in the desert, till He was ready for His mission.

The surrounding land around Nazareth is all rock. White rock. Miles of it, with a few scraggly bushes, and no water in sight. All empty, wild, space. We will never know whether Jesus meandered aimlessly, or pilgrimaged to some holy isolated sites? But, He was alone for a long period of time.

The devil was actively at work in this empty wilderness, using his primary weapon: **doubt**. He was planting seeds of doubt in God's goodness and trustworthiness, just as he had done with Adam and Eve (1<sup>st</sup> reading). The devil attempts to shake our confidence about our personal value in the Father's eyes, and doubt about a valued purpose to our lives. The devil posed Jesus 3 questions. Biblically, the number three expresses a certain completeness. Three temptations mean that Jesus was challenged from every angle. "Don't die on a cross! Find a better way. Do magic tricks to impress people, and they will all convert (turn stone into bread)!" In essence, the devil was tempting Jesus to avoid the arduous challenge of living a truly human existence. He was inciting Jesus to find an easy way out! "Avoid pain and suffering". Jump down from the temple mount, and show to everyone that you are a super star, and not truly human! Super heroes, as we all know impress, but they are not in touch with the daily grind of our ordinary lives. Super heroes are fantasy figures. Their life is easy. Finally, the devil invites Jesus to avoid giving God the full glory. This is his real purpose. The devil wants to deflect our attention and glory to another. In the bible, this is called idolatry. The main idolatry, of course, is of "the self".

**Food for Thought:**

We are all subject to temptations. These are generally tailor-made to our personality. Some struggle with eating or drinking too much. Others struggle with paralyzing self-doubt, with depression, with lack of confidence or even the reverse: a secret conviction that they are truly greater than others. Some are tempted to live in the inner world of illusory inner fantasy. **Take a moment to list some of the temptations we struggle with or that we notice around us.**

At the heart of temptation, however, is the fear of loneliness and the inner silence. It is doubting whether my life is really precious to the Lord or not. In this, the devil attempts to convince us that God does not care about us, and that He is not trustworthy. He sows doubt. He infiltrates the deserts of people's loneliness, and pushes them to avoid the silence and aloneness of the daily moments, to fill them with.... other things. We fill our aloneness with "stuff". For many people, the inner desert (of loneliness, and of my inner thoughts) is terrifying. People flee from this empty desert. The paradox is this: It is precisely in this aloneness that we hear the voice of God best. There, we become confident of His all consuming love.

**Spiritual Exercise:**

How does doubt in God's unconditional love sometimes paralyze the life in me? Am I afraid of the inner desert of silence and aloneness? Why? Of what do I need to repent, in order to find deeper inner freedom?

**Biblical reflection and Meditation for week 2**  
**Lent 2020 – March 2 to 7**  
**Gospel of Matthew 17:1 - 9**

Today's text is called *the Transfiguration*. Jesus climbed mount Tabor, a bird's eye view from Mount Carmel. He had with him, three friends. It was an extraordinary moment, and He was utterly transformed so that a glimpse of His inner **Godness**, became evident. The disciples were bewildered!

The old testament makes reference to similar kinds of events: The prophet Moses, after climbing Mount Sinai, was transformed by His encounter with Adonai. When people saw Moses, "his face shone like the sun", scripture tells us. The prophet Elijah, at the end of his life, was swooped up to God in a whirlwind. We call these moments, "epiphany": an intense experience God's majesty.

Why does Jesus speak with Moses and Elijah in this pericope (small passage)?

First of all, Moses represents the father of the Jewish faith. He was the one who inspired the writing of the Torah (the first 5 books of the bible). He is revered as the founder of Judaism. He is, as a result, deeply loved by the Jewish people. His presence, with Jesus, represents God's revelation to His people via the scriptures. The other person, Elijah, represents the prophets of the old testament. Elijah handed on this mission to Elisha (his disciple), and this went on from generation to generation. Therefore, in this encounter with Moses and Elijah, Jesus is, as it were, conversing with the Scriptures and the prophets, the foundations of Messianic expectation. Jesus tells them: He is the fulfillment of all that they had dreamed about. What joy this must have been to these spiritual giants. The disciples who are witnessing this, will become the heralds of the post-messiah, post-Resurrection news. The baton, as it were, is being passed on. Through Moses and Elijah, the Jewish people of old are hearing that their hopes are now fulfilled, and the Lord has unveiled His full purposes. He has been faithful to His promises.

The Gospel of Matthew in chapter 17, verses 1 to 9 is full of old Testament biblical imagery. The bright lights, the voice from heaven, the command coming from that voice, the mysterious (mystic nature) of the encounter, the mountain (always the meeting place of people with God), the invitation NOT to be afraid, and the rapid change from vision, back to ordinariness (the disciples have to go down the mountain. All is back to normal), all speak of mysterious interventions of God into human history. Just as Jesus walked in ordinariness of life, but with a heart full of good news, so the disciples will now return to ordinary living, but their hearts drenched in amazing hope.

**Food for Thought:**

To be a Catholic Christian means that somewhere, somehow and at some time, we have had an experience of God. The experience may not have been as remarkable as the transfiguration, but it was real. Faith requires a spark. Faith is born of an encounter with God. The experience might be subtle, like being with a wonderful grandmother who had a rich faith in the Lord. It could have been an encounter with pain, suffering, or a stupefying beautiful moment in life. God was met.

There are certain indications we have that our experience was really of the divine. Spiritual authors speak of three keys: 1) The experience (which sparked faith) was not planned. It just happened. Further, we could not control this utter joy. It came and went with no control over it by our own means. 2) The fruit of the experience is deep peace, great joy, and the long-term fruit is hope. Lastly, 3) We never forget this event, as long as we live. We draw strength from it. Given these criteria, we can be fairly certain, it was God's intervention. With this, we are able to face difficulties hope-filled hearts.

**Spiritual Exercise:**

Think about what might have sparked your experience of God. What happened? What were the circumstances? Try to remember the details and write it down. How do you draw hope from this event?

**Biblical reflection and Meditation week 3**  
**Lent 2020 – March 9 to 14, 2020**  
**Gospel of John 4, 5-42**

The gospel of this third Sunday of Lent takes place at the well of Jacob, the meeting place according to Jewish tradition where Jacob met his wife, Rachel. The well is located at the entrance of present-day Nablus, in Samaria, near Mount Gerizim. At Solomon's death what David his father had united into one kingdom was redivided in two: to the north the kingdom of Israel or Samaria (capital Samaria) and to the south the kingdom of Judah (capital Jerusalem). Curiously, the Jews of the South hated the Samaritans. Here's why.

In 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered Samaria and the Samaritans were deported. On their return, they were surrounded by many pagan peoples. "The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, *(and other countries)*, and settled them in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites; these took possession of Samaria and lived in its towns." (2 Kings 17, 24) Southern Jews blamed the Samaritans for being unclean. They denied this claiming to be true descendants of the tribes of Israel and rejecting any accusation of paganism. In this account of the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, everything is in opposition between the two: a Samaritan woman and a Jew, a woman and a man. A woman could not be alone with a man unless they were married or parents.

### **Food for Thought**

The Gospel tells us the story of a Samaritan woman who comes to draw water at noon in bright light. Quite curious because of the scorching heat it was at that hour. She probably did not want to meet anyone because she was embarrassed due to her personal situation Jesus is there and he seems to be waiting for her. Isn't Jesus waiting for all of us? He asks to drink. But is it not rather Jesus who wants to give us a drink? Water that alone can quench our thirst. Jesus tells us: "*(...) whoever drinks the water that I shall give them will ever be thirsty again: the water that I shall give will become a spring of water within, welling up for eternal life.*" (Jn 4, 14) What water is Jesus talking about?

Water is mentioned several times in the Bible. It is the one who quenched the people of Israel when crossing the desert. "*(...) All drank the same spiritual drink, since they drank from the spiritual rock which followed them, and that rock was Christ.*" (1 Cor 10:4) Psalm 42 begins with this verse: "*As a deer yearns for running streams, so my soul yearns for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*" This water, God is always ready to give it to us. According to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI: "Only this water can quench our thirst for good, for truth, for justice and beauty! Only this water, which is given to us by the Son, can irrigate the deserts of the worried and dissatisfied soul 'until it rests in you, my God, my Lord', to use the famous expression of Saint Augustine."

The first time we received this water was at our baptism, our first profession of faith. Thus, the water of baptism is the sign of death to sin, and of rebirth in the life of Christ. It is also a symbol of purification, for example each time we live the sacrament of reconciliation.

Only Jesus can fill our thirst for infinity and fill the existential void that inhabits us all. Jesus keeps repeating to us: "*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will not be hungry; whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*" (Jn 6:35)

Likewise, Jesus thirsts for our love. He calls us to believe in Him, to have faith, to make gestures of love towards our neighbour. When we believe and enter into a loving relationship with God, our faith grows and becomes unshakeable. John states that "*God is love: who dwells in love dwells in God, and God dwells in them.*" (1 Jn 4, 16)

### **Spiritual exercise**

This week and throughout Lent, be attentive to the thirst that dwells in me. What am I thirsty for? How can I quench this thirst?

**Biblical reflection and meditation - week 4**  
**Lent 2020 - March 16-21**  
**Gospel of John 9, 1-38**

The fourth Sunday of Lent continues with another episode of the Gospel of John, the story of the blind man. Saint John is known as the mystical evangelist. He offers us stories with signs: the wine at Cana, the water of the Samaritan woman, to name a few. In this episode, Jesus heals a man blind from birth using mud and his saliva. In the time of Jesus, popular belief was that a person was sick or disabled because he or his parents had sinned. Even today how many of us have not cried to the Lord when misfortune strikes: "Why me, Lord? What have I done to the good Lord to deserve this?" What a dilemma for any Catholic! If I lead a good life, if I do acts of charity, if I am good, if I pray and if I go to mass, nothing bad should happen to me. Pope Francis answers this question in an audience pronounced in June 2015:

In the Gospels, many pages tell of Jesus's encounters with the sick and of his commitment to healing them. He presents himself publicly as one who fights against illness and who has come to heal mankind of every evil: evils of the spirit and evils of the body. (...) Jesus sends his disciples to perform the same work and gives them the power to heal, in other words, to draw close to the sick and to heal their deepest wounds (cf. Mt 10:1). We must keep in mind what he says to the disciples in the episode of the man blind from birth (Jn 9:1-5). The disciples – with the blind man there in front of them! – argue about who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind, causing his blindness. The Lord says clearly: neither him nor his parents; he is so in order that the works of God be made manifest in him. And He heals him. This is the glory of God!

### **Food for Thought**

We have done nothing wrong when we are faced with, for example, an illness, the loss of a loved one or a car accident. Pope Francis tells us again: it happens so that through him, his family, his loved ones and those around him can also sanctify themselves. The sick or suffering person united with the cross of Jesus Christ becomes a source of purification for him and those around him. It brings light to a world that wants at all costs not to see suffering or death. Think of the aberration that is assisted suicide. Our life is not ours, it is a gift from God and no one should take it away from us. But we are afraid of suffering and in this expeditious world, we are lured into a supposedly peaceful and suffering-free death, there lies the temptation to end it quickly.

The gospel ends with the blind man recovering his sight. He receives light from the One who is Light. *"The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone. What has come into being in him was life, life that was the light of men; and light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it."* (Jn 1; 9, 4-5) Cured, the once-blind man will bring the good news to his family (the action takes place in Siloé which means sent). What a paradox, he who did not see is in fact the one who sees with the eyes of faith, for Jesus opened his heart. Then the Pharisees, who seemed to see, see nothing and their hearts are closed. The blind man, having received the light from Jesus, in turn becomes a beacon of light.

### **Do you know people around you who are beacons of light?**

Today's news gives us a good example. Dr. Li Wenliang, 34, of China was one of the first to warn the world about a new virus, the coronavirus, which was already wreaking havoc at the end of December. To do this, in a country where individual actions are not tolerated, the Chinese authorities forced him to retract his warnings, to be silent and to stop spreading "false" information. Contaminated by an infected patient, this whistleblower died on February 7, 2020, struck down by the same virus. In a final message to the media, he said, "After I recover, I want to go back to the front lines. The epidemic is still spreading, and I don't want to be a deserter." He really was a beacon of light.

### **Spiritual Exercise**

Name 3 people who have been beacons of light in your life. How have these people helped you grow in faith or as a person? How can I also be a beacon of light?

## Biblical reflection and meditation - week 5

Lent 2020 - March 23-28

Gospel of John 11, 3-45

This other episode of the Gospel of John is often called the resurrection of Lazarus. It would, however, be more appropriate to speak of “resuscitation” or the awakening of Lazarus. Jesus says to us: *“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.”* (Jn 11:11) Do we believe that there is life after our death? We are confronted with these existential questions raised in this gospel. In the time of Jesus, believing in the resurrection was gradually making its way. Martha believed in the resurrection of the dead, but at the end of time. Jesus answers Martha and all of us: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”* (Jn 11:25-26)

Pope Francis in the Angelus of April 6, 2014 explains this verse to us:

With this word of the Lord, we believe that the life of whoever believes in Jesus and follows his Commandment after death will be transformed into new life, full and immortal. As Jesus is resurrected with his own body, though he does not return to an earthly life, so too will we be raised with our bodies which will have been transfigured into glorified bodies. He expects us with the Father, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, who raised him, he will also raise those who are united to him.

This eternal life promised by Jesus begins at our baptism and will continue after our earthly death. *“Now, eternal life is knowing yourself, the only God, the true God, and knowing the one you sent, Jesus Christ.”* (Jn 17:3) Eternal life is to know God not only with our mind, but with our heart. God is the source of life, He is Love. Everything will disappear except love. Whenever we have an experience of God, we will taste eternal life.

### Food for Thought

This gospel also confronts us with our own death, at the end of our earthly life and with all our deaths to self, the mourning, the letting go that we have to do in our daily life. How many of us have not mourned the death of a loved one, a relative, a friend? How many of us have not shouted like Mary: “Lord, if you had been there, my brother would not have died!” How many of us have not cried out in dismay at the death of a child, of a young person? Jesus also mourned the death of his friend.

Pope Francis continues his teaching with these words:

Before the sealed tomb of his friend Lazarus, Jesus “cried with a loud voice: ‘Lazarus, come out!’ And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth” (vv. 43-44). This cry is an imperative to all men, because we are all marked by death, all of us; it is the voice of the One who is master of life and wants that all we all may “have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Christ is not resigned to the tombs that we have built for ourselves with our choice for evil and death, with our errors, without sins. He is not resigned to this! He invites us, almost orders us, to come out of the tomb in which our sins have buried us. He calls us insistently to come out of the darkness of that prison in which we are enclosed, content with a false, selfish and mediocre life. “Come out!”, he says to us, “Come out!”. It is an invitation to true freedom, to allow ourselves to be seized by these words of Jesus who repeats them to each one of us today. It is an invitation to let ourselves be freed from the “bandages”, from the bandages of pride. For pride makes of us slaves, slaves to ourselves, slaves to so many idols, so many things. Our resurrection begins here: when we decide to obey Jesus’ command by coming out into the light, into life; when the mask falls from our face – we are frequently masked by sin, the mask must fall off! – and we find again the courage of our original face, created in the image and likeness of God.

### Spiritual Exercise

What are some of these masks that I myself wear and that I show to the world? How can I get rid of them?

**Biblical reflection and Meditation week 6**  
**Lent 2020 – March 30<sup>th</sup> to April 4<sup>th</sup> 2020**  
**Gospel of Matthew 26:36- 46; 69-75**

We propose that you read two sections of the passion of Jesus, according to Matthew. The whole narrative, otherwise, is far too long. We chose excerpts from Jesus' agony, and Peter's denial.

Across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem (if you visit Jerusalem one day, you will see this), there is an olive grove in the distance, where Jesus spent his time of agony. He went to this place often, to have conversations with his buddies. Kidron is a mount across from the city of Jerusalem which too, is on top of a hill. The Kidron Valley is quite deep and long. Our biblical passage, in Matthew chapter 26, verse 36, speaks of the last time Jesus was in this olive grove. He desperately needed friendship support. Fear and dread were paralyzing him. Where were his friends?

This is a common human experience. We have all visited friends in hospital, or accompanied someone in their sick bed, or journeyed with a companion who had just lost their job or perhaps their marriage recently fell apart. All of this can be terrifying! We need companions! We need friends to lean on! This was no different for Jesus. His chosen buddies were not much help. They were tired. The fear was not theirs'. They did not experience the agony. They were simply tired. They were like us. It is difficult to feel someone else's pain unless we are deeply attuned to their interior suffering. True empathy and compassion is, in its most genuine, a gift from the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can feel our deepest fears and yearnings. As a gift, the Holy Spirit can occasionally let us in on the sufferings of others. Only God truly understands what we go through. Jesus, real man sharing all of our condition, was in terror. The disciples were oblivious to this.

In the second passage, Peter is also dealing with his own terror. His terror was brought on by the fact that he was now involved. His fear, however, was primarily selfish. His was not the fear of facing torture and death, but of being cornered and admitting he was associated with Jesus. He feared ridicule. He was a coward. Three times, Peter unashamedly denied knowing the Lord. And then, the awakening incident took place. The incident that awakened his sleeping conscience: the rooster. The darn rooster.

This incident was a deeply significant and moving experience in Peter's life because it was reported by all the evangelists. He must have spoken about it frequently to the early Christians, his friends. He was scarred with regret all his life. It was a type of tattoo of shame on his heart.

We, likewise, carry tattoos (of inner pain) of past regrets. These events mould our lives if they are significant enough. They form and shape us as people... and hopefully, for the better. "Gosh. I better never do this again!" we exclaim. Grace changes our shame into growth in holiness.

**Food for Thought**

The passion of Jesus is full of details. It is a play by play showing of everything which went on. How strange! However, if we think about it, and we recall a tragic event in our own lives, or those of our family, we also vividly remember details. For instance: Do you remember the details of accompanying a friend, or a parent to their death or through a serious illness? When we think about it, it is extraordinary how much we remember of seemingly insignificant stuff. It all matters, not because the action was important, but because the person we love, whom we cherished, went through this pain. This makes the details important. So it was with the early Christians, thinking about Jesus.

**Spiritual Exercise**

Write out a "passion narrative" which you lived, as you accompanied someone through a very difficult time in their lives. It might be the sickness or death of a friend. It might be watching their marriage fall apart. Write out emotions, events, and details which stick out in your mind. Now compare this with what the early Christian community did with Jesus, the One they loved so deeply.

## Biblical reflection and Meditation week 7

Lent 2020 – April 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>

### Gospel of John 20:19-31

Happy Easter! Christ is risen Hallelujah! We are in the octave of Easter on the last day, the eighth, and we also celebrate the Sunday of Divine Mercy. First a personal devotion especially in Poland, this solemn feast was instituted in the year 2000 by Pope John Paul II when he declared Sister Faustina, a humble Polish mystical nun, holy. Born in 1905 and died in 1938, she had the privilege of having many private revelations from our Lord, recorded in her journal Divine Mercy. You have surely seen this painting representing the Lord dressed in white and from his heart springs two rays. The Lord in a vision explained it to her in these words:

“The two rays denote Blood and Water. The pale ray stands for the water that makes souls righteous. The red ray stands for the Blood which is the life of souls ... These two rays issued forth from the very depths of My tender mercy when my agonized Heart was opened by a lance on the Cross. (Diary, 299)

### Food for Thought

In John's Sunday's Gospel, we see the great mercy of God to his disciples. They are hiding in the upper room, the Cenacle, paralyzed by fear. Jesus appears to them and comforts them. He will show them his wounds and his side. He will give them a precious gift: the Holy Spirit. *'Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.'* (Jn 20:22-23)

The sacrament of reconciliation had just been instituted. God had the power to remit sins by virtue of his divine authority, He gives that power to men to exercise it in his name. This power will be transmitted to the apostles and subsequently to all priests. From that day on, the disciples will no longer be afraid and will be able to go around the world carrying the good news. They will become truly apostles. They will believe just like Thomas who looks a little like all of us with our doubts.

This magnificent gospel will be reread at Pentecost. Let us enter the 50 days of Easter time until Pentecost, with a joyful heart. The Lord knew our weaknesses and knew that we would need the Holy Spirit to help us remain faithful to Him just like the disciples.

**But what does the Holy Spirit represent for us? How do we imagine it?** Pope Francis reveals it to us in an audience delivered on May 8, 2013:

The Easter Season that we are living joyfully, guided by the Church's liturgy, is *par excellence* the season of the Holy Spirit given 'without measure' (cf. Jn 3:34) by Jesus Crucified and Risen. This time of grace closes with the Feast of Pentecost, in which the Church relives the outpouring of the Spirit upon Mary and the Apostles gathered in prayer in the Upper Room.

But who is the Holy Spirit? In the Creed we profess with faith: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life'. The first truth to which we adhere in the Creed is that the Holy Spirit is *Kýrios*, Lord. This signifies that he is truly God just as the Father and the Son; the object, on our part, of the same act of adoration and glorification that we address to the Father and to the Son. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Most Holy Trinity; he is the great gift of Christ Risen who opens our mind and our heart to faith in Jesus as the Son sent by the Father and who leads us to friendship, to communion with God.

However, I would like to focus especially on the fact that *the Holy Spirit is the inexhaustible source of God's life in us*. Man of every time and place desires a full and beautiful life, just and good, a life that is not threatened by death, but can still mature and grow to fullness. Man is like a traveler who, crossing the deserts of life, thirsts for the living water: gushing and fresh, capable of quenching his deep desire for light, love, beauty and peace. We all feel this desire! And Jesus gives us this living water: he is the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and whom Jesus pours out into our hearts. 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly', Jesus tells us (Jn 10:10).

### Spiritual Exercise

What does the Holy Spirit represent to me? Where have you seen the action of the Holy Spirit in your life, during the Lent you have just lived? Has He helped you to do acts of charity, to become a better person, to be reconciled with a person? Write it down in your spiritual notebook.