

## 14) “Rise, take your mat, and walk”

Our misery is real and we need help, love, and attention. But first of all and above all, we need God, and we risk forgetting it. We risk losing sight of the fact that, if God took the initiative in creating us, loving us, redeeming us, he will unfailingly bring about our healing, our salvation.

St. Benedict promises us this at the end of the Rule: “With the protection of God you will finally reach these greatest heights of knowledge and virtue” (RB 73:9). The path of our life will reach its fulness on the one condition that we walk “with the protection of God.” It is God’s help that accomplishes our healing and our life. And if others are necessary for us, if they are given us as travel companions, it is not to assure us of salvation but to search for it together, to ask for it together, and to receive it together. When you recognize that salvation comes from God alone, your personal salvation is not in competition with that of the others. God willed all of us and created us, he called all of us, he looks upon each and every one of us with the compassion of Christ. Healing, therefore, is also for all of us and for each of us. I need not fear that another’s healing will impede mine. And by helping the other, I do not delay my own healing—to the contrary!

“Do you want to get better?”. “Who is he who longs for life?”.

We never know how to respond to these questions in a totally pure and free way. But the episode of the sick man of Betzatha shows us that the compassion of Jesus, fortunately for us, looks more to our need than to our desire. For him, the need objectively expressed by the long sickness this man has suffered is enough to grant him the miracle that he no longer has the strength and the will to request. “Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat, and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk” (Jn 5:8-9).

Jesus knows that without his grace, without his gratuitous initiative, our path of healing will never arrive to its fulfillment. To grant it to us, it is enough for him that we feel and express, in some way, our need for healing.

But he tells us to take our mat with us. It is a bit like when he says: “If someone wants to follow after me ..., let him take up his cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34). Why? Perhaps to encourage us never to forget that our need for healing and salvation remains, even when we have been healed. We should not forget the reality of our weakness, of our incapacity to walk on our own strength.

It is always the awareness of God’s Mercy, united to awareness of our misery, that allows us to walk on the path of Salvation in truth. And it is in this sense that Jesus, when he meets the healed paralytic again, says to him: “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you” (Jn 5:14). The “worse” thing that could happen to him is to forget that what allows him to walk is not his own strength but the grace of the Lord, who looked upon him with love and answered the deep desire of his heart.

Another passage of the Gospel puts us in front of a decisive question that Christ addresses to all his disciples. It comes in the discourse on the bread of life in chapter 6 of the Gospel of St. John. When he announces to the Jews that He Himself is the true bread come down from heaven, that to have eternal life one

needs to eat his body and drink his blood, Jesus clashes with the incredulity of his hearers, who turn their backs on him and stop following him. It is in that moment that Jesus asks his disciples the crucial question: "Do you also wish to go away?" (Jn 6:67).

Why is it a crucial question? Because it regards the decision contrary to that of the *sequela Christi*. The decision to go away from Him is the opposite of the decision to put oneself among his following, to go with Him in order to remain with Him. The disciples of Jesus are called upon by Him here to say "yes" once again to his call, to bring life back to the decision that, one day, got them following after him. Jesus renews his call, as when he said "Follow me!" to Simon and Andrew, James and John, Matthew, etc.

But this time the call is, as it were, loaded up with the path they have travelled together, with the words they have heard, the deeds and miracles they have seen, and also with the awareness of the fact that following Jesus means also suffering with Him the hostility of his enemies.

Jesus asks a true decision of the Twelve. When he told them "Follow me!" in the beginning, they could not really reflect. They were fascinated by Him; they were drawn by his presence, by his love, by his gaze. They had seen a miracle, had heard a discourse. They were certainly all good reasons to follow him, to dedicate one's whole life to him.

But now, Jesus seems to ask of them an act of true freedom, a true decision. And in order for their freedom to be even more free, he suggests to them the opposite of what he wants from them. He does not say to them, "Do you want to remain with me?", but, "Do you also wish to go away?". He is not joking, not faking it. He knows that they can go away; he also knows that one day, at one certain moment, they will go away and they will leave him by himself. But at that time it will be fear that defines their act, and fear is not so grave, it is in the end fairly innocent, because it is not an act of true freedom. But now is the truly decisive moment, the true test of the disciples' freedom, because they see the gravity of the situation, without there being a real danger to threaten them. Therefore, they can wish or not wish to remain with Him. They can truly decide before Him, regarding Him and regarding what He is and what He says. There is no one but Jesus in front of them, especially now that all the others have abandoned Him.

I think that all of us, sooner or later, one or more times in our life in the monastery, must find ourselves in this situation. It is necessary, because otherwise we remain on this path only because of a kind of force of inertia, or because we are afraid of leaving behind a security that we have found or have made for ourselves. But sooner or later, God leads us all to crucial points when our freedom must choose to remain in the monastery for Jesus, only for Jesus, and for a Jesus who seems despoiled of every possibility of ensuring us anything other than Himself.