14. The desolation of Christ

The shepherds saw that the solitude of Jesus was waiting for them. Jesus needs our solitude, to unite it to His own and make it a dwelling of communion, of friendship, of love. When the shepherds arrive, the Baby is not even squeezed to the breast of its mother. It is alone, alone in the manger, as one day he will be alone on the cross, alone in the tomb. He enters into my solitude, makes it all His own, makes it all ours with Him, our most intimate sharing, the holy temple of our encounter. He consoles me and I console Him. He is with me and I am with Him. He is my Emmanuel, I become His. The God-with-us is consoled by the man-with-God.

But this exchange of consoled solitudes is not a closed circle. The solitude of Christ is a bottomless abyss. Jesus is alone, alone without all those who are not yet with Him. He is with us; we are not yet all with Him. He thirsts to console and save the solitude of all mankind. The consolation that he grants us digs out in us then an abyss of compassion that sends us back, like the shepherds, toward the whole human solitude that always and everywhere waits to receive the same announcement: “Unto you is born this day […] a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!” (Lk 2:11).

Desolation is perhaps the word that bust summarizes the drama of the human condition. In the face of all today’s tragedies, what prevails is a feeling of finding oneself before something desolate, a desolation without words, without definitions, like when you encounter an innocent pain, the innocent suffering of the little ones, of the defenseless.
How relevant this feeling is in a moment of history that, like all times, reminds us that each historic fact, like the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, has dimensions at once universal and particular. Desolation is exactly that human feeling, or that feeling of a human being, that embraces the pain of the world in its totality without forgetting that this totality is always a collection of individual persons, of particular family and friendship relations.

It is the desolation of Jesus himself, capable of weeping over Jerusalem and its whole people as also over a single friend who lies in the tomb; capable of feeling compassion for a whole tired and hungry crowd as also for a single widow who accompanies her only son’s corpse to the tomb.

The servant of God Paul Takashi Nagai, a Japanese radiologist who survived the atomic bomb that fell on Nagasaki and then a great witness and prophet of the meaning of that tragedy, describes in his autobiography his collision with the total desolation of Nagasaki and his family. In fact, he found his wife Midori reduced to a little pile of calcinated bones and next to her the chain of her burned rosary which she had been reciting when the bomb fell.
A Dantean scene, but not infernal, because Nagai crosses the atomic wasteland where all is reduced to dust with a heart in which love and faith, by grace, prevail over desperation. But it is really the feeling and experience of desolation that predominate as pain, and as a question, and as begging. Up to the point of

discovering that that same desolation is something that Christ has already made his own, by suffering and dying on the Cross.

The adequacy of Christianity to the universal human experience, to the universal human drama, rests wholly on the fact that Christ embraced all human desolation by suffering it on the Cross. The Cross is the mystery of the desolation of the Son of God who embraces the whole desolation of mankind, both innocent and guilty.

This is a mystery prepared by the whole history of Israel. Especially the prophets speak of the desolation of the people and of Jerusalem, a desolation that is also an abandonment by God because of the people's infidelity.
"Do not be like your fathers and your brothers, who were faithless to the Lord God of their fathers, so that he made them a desolation, as you see." (2 Chron 30:7)
"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: You have seen all the disaster that I brought upon Jerusalem and upon all the cities of Judah. Behold, this day they are a desolation, and no one dwells in them." (Jer 44:2)

But it is precisely this total desolation that Christ experiences and makes his own on the Cross. At the culmination of his life, Jesus is alone, because he is abandoned by men and because he feels abandoned by the Father. Relationships with Him are now all insult, indifference, and derision:
"And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.
And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' And some of the bystanders hearing it said, 'Behold, he is calling Elijah.' And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last." (Mk 15:29–37)

Contemplating Christ in the light of the desolation that he takes on is perhaps the way to grasp best to what point he entered to the very depth of our humanity and to what point he remains present there, truly "Emmanuel," truly God-with-us in the most profound drama of our life that each of us must touch, even if only at the moment of death.