Gospel text

Matthew 3: 1-12

1 At that time John the Baptist stands in a deserted place in Judea and proclaims: 2 "Set a new direction to your lives, for the kingdom of heaven is near you. 3 This refers to what we find in the prophet Isaiah: "This is what a voice in the desert says: Make room for the Lord, make it easy for him to come to you. 4 John wore the typical garment of the prophets, made of camel's hair with a leather belt, and fed on locusts and wild honey. 5 People from Jerusalem, from all Judea, and from around the Jordan came to him. 6 They were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their errors. 7 When he noticed that the Pharisees and Sadducees also came to his baptism, he said to them, "You hypocrites, how can you escape the judgment that awaits you? 8 Display a behavior that reflects a true direction to your life. 9 And do not lean on the pretense of being descendants of Abraham. For I assure you that God can create descendants of Abraham at will, even with these stones that you see. 10 God already has his axe near the root of the trees to cut down. So every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 As for me, I baptize in water as a sign of a change of life, but after me will come one who has the very ability of God, whom I cannot even serve for lack of sufficient quality. He is the one who will confer an effective baptism on you by giving the spirit that will transform you to be the image of God. 12 He is the one who will winnow to separate the wheat from the chaff: in his barn he will gather the wheat, but will get rid of the chaff by throwing it into the dump where there is always a fire."

Gospel commentary - Homily

Everything depends on a decision made

This is the story of a man who wanted to kill his children[1]. His name is Martin. One day, while he was working in the flower beds, his wife came up to him and said: it's over between us, I'm leaving. And she left, leaving him the children. Shaken, Martin nevertheless made a decision without knowing it: I will be a good family man, I will be a solid man, a man who stands up. He understood his wife's decision to leave and even found it courageous to give up a life that made her unhappy, rather than pretending.

In the beginning, he was too busy to feel sorry for himself: bills to pay, a household to run, debts, homework and lunches for the kids. A constant pressure. But the edifice of his life began to crumble when he learned that his ex-wife had started a new life with another man, with trips, parties, restaurants. And even his friends began to wonder why his ex left. That's how Martin started to isolate himself. Anyway, he was no longer called, no longer invited. That's how the sadness seeped in, how the pain grew. Despite the meeting with the doctor or psychologist, resentment and bitterness set in, and above all the feeling of being a "loser", a victim. Then came the question: Why continue? What is the point? The loneliness seemed absolute and suicidal thoughts began to creep in. He imagined things like a car accident that would take him and the children away. Taking them with him, ending the pain. In fact, it would be for their own good, to protect them; he would even be doing them a favor. In Martin's mind, it was pitch black.

How did this story end? At the darkest point in his life, Martin remembered the brief feeling he had when his ex-wife told him she was leaving: I will be a good father, I will be a strong man, a man who stands up. He clung to that decision as if his life depended on it. And he hasn't let go of it since. That's how the idea of continuing to live despite the pitfalls found its place. Eventually the light came back, quietly. And the pain began to fade. Finally, the conviction became very strong that he would remain standing no matter what: probably wounded, tired, in debt, worn out, but standing.

This true story seems to me to be a good introduction to today's gospel, because it speaks of going astray, of making a decision and of returning to one's roots. Matthew presents us with the mission of John the Baptist, the acetic prophet who calls the people to set a new direction to their lives by confessing their wanderings and preparing for God's intervention, all symbolically expressed through an immersion in water.

What is the significance of this scene? Let's remember that the gospel of Matthew was written around the year 80. This Jewish Christian has before his eyes the gospel of Mark, whose outline he follows, and which begins with this story about John the Baptist. But he wants to identify the mission of John the Baptist with that of Jesus, because he puts into the mouth of the Baptist the same call that we find in Jesus: "Set a new direction to your life, for the kingdom of heaven has come near you." Why? Matthew does not want to play historian by giving us a report on the "real" John the Baptist. In the year 80, John the Baptist represents the Christian mission that takes over from Jesus. And as for every good Jew, action is at the center of life. And what he emphasizes is clear: one cannot welcome this mysterious kingdom of which Jesus speaks, without making a decision about the direction one wants to give to one's life. His attack on religious Jews, such as the Pharisees, extremely observant laymen, and the Sadducees, belonging to the priestly family, may seem surprising, but it accentuates the fact that it is an illusion to think that the good position we occupy in society allows us to avoid the fundamental decision on the direction we want to give to our lives. Then follows the threat of God's judgment on those who do not produce fruit. One would look in vain for a definition of what it is to "produce fruit". But, in fact, it is not important, because what is asked is summed up in one thing: you must realize that everything you do will depend on the direction you give to your life. John the Baptist represents the Christian mission, and this mission intends to confront humanity with this decision that affects the direction of its life. Many do not want to hear about such a decision. The Pharisees and Sadducees believed that their life situation would spare them such a decision. It is John the Baptist's role, and ours, to remind us that we all have to make this decision.

But then how do we situate Jesus and John the Baptist in relation to each other? Matthew, following Mark, distinguishes between a baptism of water and a baptism in the Holy Spirit. What does this mean? Water baptism symbolizes the decision to give direction to one's life. Baptism in the Holy Spirit symbolizes that mysterious force that sustains that direction of life and enables it to reach its goal. For the believer, it is the spirit of the risen Jesus at work in our world. Thus, our mission can only lead people to take charge of their lives and decide on this direction; we can only do a water baptism. But for the implementation of this decision, we must rely on a greater reality, a mystery at work in the world that has its source in the risen Jesus; baptism in the holy spirit is beyond our power.

Let us return to Martin. What was fundamental to his life was his initial decision to be a good family man and to be an upright man. It didn't keep him from falling into the abyss, but one day the memory of that decision came back to him. What happened to bring this decision back to his mind from the depths of darkness? A coincidence? An accident in the connections of the synapses of his brain? The believing eye can see in this the mysterious force at work in the world, which has its source in the risen Jesus, and which Matthew and Mark call the baptism in the Holy Spirit. But let us note that there is nothing magical here: this rise from obscurity would not have been possible without Martin's initial decision.

Today's gospel can be dizzying: our life is suspended on our decision, and if we refuse to make this decision that directs our life for its good, then even the mystery of life and love at the origin of this world will be powerless. This is the meaning of the images where what is not productive is throw into the fire. We understand the importance of John the Baptist and of our mission. But there is good news: if we have dared to make life-oriented decisions, they will be so strong that nothing can destroy them, despite all the apparent wrecks and denials, because they will be sustained by the mystery of the resurrection. So why be afraid to face life?

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, October 2022

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[1] This story was published in La Presse (Montreal, Canada) by Patrick Lagacé, October 23, 2022. For the full text (French): https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/chroniques/2022-10-23/fais-pas-ca.php