

Gospel text

Matthew 3: 13-17

13 At that time Jesus went to John in the Jordan, arriving from Galilee, to be baptized by him. 14 But John vigorously opposed him with these words, "But it is I who need to be baptized by you, why do you come so to me?" 15 Then Jesus retorted, "Let it go for the moment. For this is how we take the right action that is asked of us". John then let him do it. 16. After his baptism, Jesus immediately came up from the water. Now, behold, the heavens opened and Jesus saw the Spirit of God come down like a dove upon him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "Here is my beloved son, whom I saw fit to choose."

Gospel commentary - Homily

Take the right action in the middle of injustice

Her name is Caroline. Her story may resemble that of some retirees. For several decades, her life was demanding. She and her husband worked hard to build their small business. They took risks, they experienced moments of anxiety. They also had three children whom they supported very strongly both humanely and financially. But all these efforts were worth it, because first they loved their children and wanted to assure them a future, and then they could one day rest and enjoy the fruit of their labor, surrounded by their children and their grandchildren. And luckily, they discover one day this magnificent summer cottage for sale, a little isolated, which overlooks the bay of a vast lake with a thousand tentacles. A little corner of paradise. This is where we will retire, says Caroline.

The time for retirement arrived. They sell their house and move into their summer cottage, which they renovate and expand with great effort, to the point that it is even more spacious than what they have left. There will be room for all children and grandchildren, Caroline thought. Finally, the paradise! But then, after a visit to the doctor and a whole gamut of tests, she was diagnosed: diabetes. A little dismayed, she informed her whole family. But she is a fighter, she will be able to face it. She's always eaten healthy, and depriving herself of a few things is not very difficult. She now controls her diabetes, and her body size is that of a model. Unfortunately, during another visit to the doctor and another series of tests, the diagnosis fell: right breast cancer. It is the horror! Several visits to specialists and radiotherapy and chemotherapy treatments followed. The outlook is changing. The fight she has to lead makes her forget her little paradise. It is now one day at a time. And finally, after more than a year, she seems to be in remission, until another diagnosis occurs: the left breast is now affected. Caroline is totally devastated, she can't take it anymore. Why me? What have I done wrong? She can no longer hold back her anger. To a friend she dares to throw him in the face, "You, you are fat, you do not make half of my efforts to eat well, and here you are in good health, and I have cancer. It is simply unfair!"

I stop here my story from a real event, because I do not know what will happen next. But it is in this context that I want to reread the episode of the baptism of Jesus in Matthew in the hope of finding a bit of light.

I do not want to repeat all the biblical analysis here. But two points must be remembered. First we tend to forget that the primary meaning of the Greek verb "to baptize" (*baptizō*) is: to plunge into water, to immerse, to sink, to drown. Baptism therefore implies giving up or leaving something, or even dying to something. Of course, we leave to be reborn to a new reality. But one cannot go without the other. To be baptized, Jesus leaves his native Galilee, and if you read the text of Matthew further on, you will learn that he will leave the family home of Nazareth, and therefore his job, to go to Capernaum, where unknown awaits him.

Second, the text of Matthew is identical to that of Mark, except on one point: John the Baptist almost violently opposes the plan of Jesus asking for baptism, because it is the world upside down: it is rather him the Baptist who needs to be baptized by Jesus, the only one capable of giving the Holy Spirit. Obviously, this scene does not go back to the historical Jesus, because John does not really know Jesus, and it is only after Easter that we will know that Jesus is the one who sends the Holy Spirit. But Matthew probably echoes Christians in his community who are a little scandalized or shocked that Jesus, the one who is considered the Messiah, Savior of the world, is baptized by someone who is inferior to him, whereas normally the baptized is a disciple of him who gives baptism, the master; how could God, master of the universe, allow this? We may not understand the reaction of the early Christians, but think of all the anomalies in life that follow no logic: a student, with his doctorate in his pocket, ready for a brilliant career, is killed during a health walk in the evening by thugs who drive around and who want some fun; someone who trains, eats well, takes good care of her health, suddenly finds herself with cancer. And that, of course, brings me back to Caroline.

What response does Matthew offer us through the mouth of Jesus? "Let it go for the moment. For this is how we take the right action that is asked of us". Isn't that a little disappointing as an answer? What Jesus basically says: It's a mystery, all we can do is accept the situation as it is and God will help us find what to do. The expression "right action" translates the Greek *dikaiosynē* which is usually translated by justice. But the justice in question here is not this distributive justice which gives everyone what he deserves. The Greek root of the word is *dik*, which means direction; it is the direction of an action, like this arrow that is launched and that seeks its target. Right action is like an arrow hitting the center of the target. This target is not established in advance; we find it by opening up to life's events and by listening in silence to the deepest voice of our consciousness. This is why it is wrong to think that our lives are based on a script written in advance, just as it is wrong to think that the life of Jesus followed a path traced in advance. At all times, we must look for the right action to take.

With all that, what can we say to Caroline? Yes, it's true, there is nothing to understand, it's a crazy world. There is something wrong with your situation. Take the time to live your revolt. But don't forget those around you who love you. Don't forget the person you are and the life that was given to you. Take the time to be silent and listen to the bottom of your heart. Open your hands, agree to lose control of your situation, abandon yourself to silence, even accept being even a little drowned and half dead. So maybe you will hear that voice which desires your good, which will push you to seek the right action in such a difficult situation, which will bring you back to the surface.

Many years ago you were baptized. One symbolically drowned you in the water so that you could come back to the light. Today, you are asked to live this baptism in all truth. In a way, there is nothing religious about it, it is the very essence of all life in the world. Listen to what Matthew says about Jesus: when he came up from the water, he felt the power of the Spirit in him, the Spirit who said how dearly he was loved, and now capable of lovingly reaching out to others. This is what awaits you, too. It is not an easy path. But it opens onto a life you don't even suspect. The most human of us, Jesus of Nazareth, extended his baptism to all his life, especially on the night of April 6 to 7 of the year 30, when he was 36 years old, by doing the right action in an unfair trial. He entered into an infinite life and opened to all the doors of life, to you, to your spouse, to your children, to your grandchildren. Is this the path you want to take?

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, December 2013