

Reflections on the Pool of Bethesda

At the International College in July 2010, Carlo and Maria-Carla Volpini presented two meditations on the gospel passage where Jesus visits the Pool at Bethesda in Jerusalem.

John 5, 2-19

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, which has five porticos, and under these were crowds of sick people, blind, lame, and paralysed. One man there had an illness which had lasted thirty-eight years, and when Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been in that condition for a long time, he said, 'Do you want to be well again?' 'Sir', replied the sick man, 'I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is disturbed; and while I am still on the way, someone else gets down there before me.' Jesus said, 'Get up, pick up your sleeping-mat and walk around.' The man was cured at once, and he picked up his mat and started to walk around. Now that day happened to be the Sabbath, so the Jews said to the man who had been cured, 'It is the Sabbath; you are not allowed to carry your sleeping-mat.'

1. Waiting for the movement of the Water

Why did we choose this gospel? Because it speaks of a public place in a busy town with a society that isolates, does not want to see, does not want to offer help and solidarity but only judges and marginalises. But the paralytic meets Jesus, who is going to bring him health, salvation, life. This gospel contains many symbolic elements but let us first consider the first verse :- *Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, which has five porticos, and under these were crowds of sick people, blind, lame, and paralysed.*

Our thoughts focus on those porticos, on that crowded place full of people who certainly did not present a nice spectacle: they were the invalids, paralytics, blind and lame . . . Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the second time, during a Jewish festivity. But the feast was for the chiefs of the city, the powerful people, the priests from the temple; it certainly wasn't for those poor people lying on the floor, like cannon fodder, in the same way as the animals ready to be sacrificed. And indeed the link is clear: next to the Temple, near the Sheep Gate, there was a pool with five porticos or corridors: a place reserved for the lambs that were destined to be Temple sacrifices. In that time, indeed, the Temple cult required a lot of water because of the many animal sacrifices, especially during festivities. For this reason there were several water tanks next to the Temple; that collected the rain water, and some of them had a capacity of more than a thousand litres of water. Over there, because of the abundance of water, there were public thermal baths too, where sick people gathered and waited for help or healing. The pool of Bethesda preserved traces from a pagan cult of healing gods. In this place there are clear signs of the cult of the Greek god of medicine, Asklepios, and the Hellenistic-Egyptian god, Serapis, and waiting for an angel to stir up the water is likely to have come from a popular legend.

Archaeological studies inform us that inside the Temple enclosure there was a place where scribes taught the law to students. On one hand then, is the teaching of God's law, on the other is the poor people's abandon. A law of God limited to words and not becoming tangible in action, next to the reality of this crowd abandoned to itself is a stark contradiction. Indeed, Jesus doesn't enter the Temple, but remains outside, near the porticos, on the edge of the pool, with the poor and sick people. This realization is the first thing that has to challenge us about our concept of God and the Law.

We can reflect together on a second matter: the Gospel says "a large *number of invalids lay down*", let us focus on this verb: to lay, that is laying down... So, people can't stand up, since they are a crowd of invalids who aren't able to move, go anywhere, take a direction, orient themselves... Indeed, isn't this considered by many people to be the human condition? Being an invalid, living without knowing where to go, what kind of orientation to give to one's life. Being blind: not being able to see the way; whoever can't see is necessarily disoriented, doesn't know where to go, walks badly, fumbles, becomes a lame person... That's what happens to people when they don't know their way, can't see the truth, don't choose Life. The symbolism is clear: everybody can be an invalid and lay down, with no clear orientation. Our life can be

blocked if we don't learn to walk and see.

But Jesus is there with them, among this human shambles who has been expelled from the temple; because this is his temple, this is the house of his Father. Jesus is among this crowd, that is waiting for the water movement and hoping for healing.

This observation can help us to think from a symbolic point of view: these poor and disabled people waiting for the movement of the water, in the same way as people in the past have waited for an external solution when there is a stagnant, blocked situation. We wait for the water to be stirred up, that is for a movement that can bring a change, a transformation. When we feel stuck, we desire something new to happen in order to renew hope and keep us moving on. But it won't be the pool water that gives healing, hope and life: instead, it'll be a meeting, the birth of a relationship, the one with Jesus.

It is around these five porticos that we want to particularly focus our thoughts in this College. Some scholars see in the five porticos of the pool a depiction of the five books of the law of Moses, while the sick who have been waiting for thirty-eight years to be healed, would represent those who look in vain to the law for salvation. Braun writes: *"The number thirty-eight years is probably symbolic. We have a good reason to equate it to the thirty-eight years during which, according to Deuteronomy 2, 14-15, the Israelites wandered in the desert, before getting to the promised land"*. Therefore, here we see a clear bringing together of the Old and New Testaments; the passage from the wait and promise to the actual meeting with Jesus, who is the God of mercy, love and relationship with all.

In these five porticos around the pool, we can locate five real, symbolic places that are part of our life:

- family
- the young
- work
- church
- society – as this a social place, open to all people passing by whom we could meet.

Only meeting people and establishing a relationship with them, as Jesus witnessed during his earthly life, will we be able to live our faith and hope in eternal salvation. That Lord might help us to understand and live in that service.

Questions for study and reflection throughout the month and for deeper discussion at the Team Meeting.

- *what communities do we live in and how do we live in them ?*
- *what kind of realities and needs are present in these places ?*
- *what people live in these places and what kind of relationship do we have with them ?*
- *who are today's paralytics, blind and lame people, and what is our response to their needs ?*

2. THE SQUARE- a meeting place for all

*No man or woman is an island, we are all peninsulas, half attached to the mainland and half facing the ocean*¹

What is the relationship between the above statement and our first meditation? We imagined being in Jesus' time, being with Him and with the crowd under the colonnades; on the edge of a pool that was thought miraculous. Now imagine the colonnades being, not only around the pool but, near a square, and now imagine one of the squares of our towns, full of people.

The square has always been a place where it is possible *"to be peninsulas"*, that is, half attached to one's roots, to one's origin, to one's individual family and, for the other half, being eager, and indeed "forced", to open oneself to the world, to the stranger, to a meeting that can bring something new into one's life. In the square, more than in any other place, people have always met, communicated, learnt about new things, seen their social life change and become the history of a small or large community.

The square as a meeting place, can evolve and be at one time the Greek agora; next the Roman forum; and on over the centuries as the Italian Renaissance square, celebrating the power of lordships; the theatre square of 18th-century life; the square of military parades, with the ostentation of power or the illusion of war; the Plaza de

¹ Amos Oz. Contro il fanatismo, Feltrinelli:2004

Mayo in Buenos Aires where mothers continue to congregate with signs and pictures of the *desaparecidos*, their children, whose disappearance was linked to the Argentine military; the square in front of the church in a village anywhere in the world, where people stop to talk and to meet each other. The square is the place for social life: the convergence and meeting of a thousand streets and lanes, where communities build their political and social history and where one can look "at the ocean of the world" without forgetting the attachment to the "mainland of their own individuality".

What pushes us to "mix" with others or, on the contrary, what keeps us cautiously tied to our safe, personal focal point? What do we love more: the protecting assurance of our home or the world that, even if confused and noisy, can only be found outside, in the square? The events of life sometimes require that we go outdoors, take sides, participate in the growing process of the human community, forget our certainties, in order to be one among others. We still remember the magic of an October afternoon in Rome, in 2002 - a million people gathered together to ask for peace, thousands of flags with the symbol of peace waving towards the sky, and thousands more at windows, while the procession was passing; all together: men, women, children, old people, families; all united in asking for peace.

As believers, we wonder whether our faith can really grow if it is only tied to our private dimension. In the chapel of Coventry cathedral and the church of Don Bosco in Brasilia, the walls are made entirely of glass: the world is there, always in front of us and should not be left out, we have to internalise it and take it into our communities with all its worries and contradictions. Also Father Caffarel reminds us that "God, in His large workshop, that is the universe, leads us by the hand and shows us His works, lists them, helps us to discover their deep meaning, takes us, through them, into His thoughts and feelings"²

If the meeting with others is crucial for my "becoming" an adult and a believer, for reaching God, it is nevertheless true that often the crowded square and its multiplicity of meetings can make us feel even more lonely and confused. Sometimes we fear the stranger, who is felt as a threatening presence and not as an opportunity for contact. Too often in fact, squares become places where the masses gather and the crowd throngs, instead of communities where one can feel, express and live this need for a more authentic relationship with others. The masses undo all personal identities just as the crowd suppresses all free choices: neither the masses nor the crowd are used to sharing, to talking and comparing; neither the masses nor the crowd reveal human potential; on the contrary, they tend to cancel individual values. Then the fear of losing our own identity makes us mistrustful and suspicious of the other. Loneliness, in the crowd, increases the lack of confidence in a reality to be shared; confusion makes us withdraw in our choices, instead of opening ways to new experiences.

But the crowd becomes the face of humanity if, with the Gospel in our hand, we go back over the many meetings that Christ had with crowds. Then it is easy to understand the need to leave our home and go towards our neighbour.

Verse 3 of our gospel says :- *In these colonnades there lay a crowd of sick people, blind, lame and paralysed.* (John 5,3).

We must admit: when we pass by a man or a woman who is stretched out on the ground, dirty, stinking, crippled and sick, in any event desperate, we often feel uneasy, we don't know what to do, their need makes us feel uncomfortable. Sometimes we just give our alms, sometimes we quicken our pace.. Jesus, on the contrary, does not fear these desperate brothers, He doesn't avoid them, He knows where they live and where they spend their days and He goes towards them; He goes towards their need as a friend would do; He has a look, a gesture, a word for each one of them.

The Gospels are rich in episodes where Jesus meets the crowd, but what we wish to meditate on, understand and learn is Jesus' feeling when approaching the crowd. On several occasions the Gospels speak of this feeling. It is clearly expressed in the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes. Mark tells us (Mark 6,34): "When He came ashore, He saw a great crowd; and His heart went out to them" and Matthew says the same: "The sight of the people moved Him to compassion: they were like sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless" (Mt 9,36). The phrase "moved Him to compassion" is repeated many times in the New Testament. The original word is really uncommon. It doesn't exist in the classical Greek language; and it was not found in the Old Testament Translation of the Seventy. Perhaps the word "compassion" was invented by the evangelists themselves, as they could not find a suitable word in the Greek language. *Splanchna* corresponds to the Jewish word *rehamim*, that means "innards", the seat of feelings in ancient thought: it

² Henri Caffarel, *Presence a Dieu. Cent lettres sur la priere*, ed. Parole et Silence, Les Plans-sur-Bex, 2000

expresses indulgence, mercy, love, tenderness... It can be compared to the attachment of parents to their child. Prophets express themselves in this way to show the attachment of God to His people. It is a heartfelt tie that goes beyond the idea of justice, merit and remuneration. It is the expression of the deepest emotion; it is a movement that comes from the body's deepest intimacy, it's an ardent desire: *"Ex intimis visceribus misericordia commoveor"* (I shall be moved with mercy from my inner most being). When our Saviour saw certain situations, those who were near Him perceived His very deep seated emotion; perhaps the expression of His face betrayed Him: His eyes seemed open wounds and His great heart was ready to burst with pity for all the suffering He saw. If a synthesis could be made of Christ's reaction to humanity, it would perhaps be this one sentence: *"He was prompted by compassion"*³

Jesus' compassion for the whole crowd is an inclusive feeling, because Christ does not leave anybody out of His love, of His mercy, of His compassion. This new feeling, mentioned so many times in the New Testament, is at the origin of the new life style taught by Jesus: it has nothing to do with simply "feeling pity" or "commiserating". It is to feel for the other as if he were yourself, it is to love to the depth of your being. For this reason, if there is no compassion, there is no love. To feel compassion is to bring to life, just as the maternal organs protect and bring to life. And there are innumerable gestures, words and actions, that each one of us is invited to make in order to bring life to those who are near us, to those who come towards us.

But it is necessary for us that the crowd loses its indeterminate form and that we are able, like Jesus, to discover the person, the individual, the brother, in the crowd; and look at them with compassion, that is with love. It is necessary that we listen to and understand the need that waits for our answer. Then, there will no longer be the indeterminate crowd of poor people, but "the person" who asks for help; there will no longer be the indeterminate crowd of homeless tramps, but "the tramp" whose name is Leonardo and can become our friend; there will no longer be the indeterminate crowd of sick people but "the sick person" who waits for comforting; there will no longer be the indeterminate crowd of irregular couples, but "the wounded couple" who asks for help, support, prayer and friendship; there will no longer be the indeterminate crowd of children with nothing to eat, who can't grow up, study, play, live, but "the child" with a name and a little life entrusted to our hands.

We were in Recife, Brazil, in 2004. With a couple of friends, we were visiting the favela where Denise, the girl we have been sponsoring for years, lives. Meeting her and her mother in their house was an intense and exciting moment: the little girl we had met and seen growing only through the pictures coming from Brazil, was now there beside us... a beautiful girl about to start university

However, we don't want to tell you about her, we want to tell you about her little sister, a girl of six, who had watched astonished at this strange meeting where people did not speak the same language but embraced one another laughing and crying... At a certain point, this girl took us by hand: "follow me, I want you to meet my friends..." We were doubtful, we had to go as we had other engagements... the usual western hurry... but the little girl's smile was too trustful and we could not disappoint her. So we went with her and she took us, not to the main road, a wide white road that passed between two rows of homes made of mud and tin, but through small alleys that couldn't even be defined as streets. We passed between huts and shelters made of cardboard, through rills of putrid water and open air sewers. Children and adults were seated under the shelters; she told us the name of each of her friends, who curiously approached us; their "neighbours", old people who were sitting there waiting for nothing... It was not in our schedule to spend so much time in the favela; furthermore, we had been warned to pay attention and not to stay too long, just a quick visit. But that girl's smile and that little hand held out to invite us to go with her changed our programme and allowed us to meet people, to shake hands, to exchange smiles... We owe it to her, to that little girl of six years, with her persuasive invitation, that today our memory is not of the indeterminate crowd of the favela, but rather the faces of Antonio, Francisco, Dorinha, Patrizia and Adriana... of the men, women and children, on whom we gazed.

How many times, while walking through an unknown town, we suddenly stopped, attracted by the mysterious fascination of a square. But we should not look at the whole scene, but meet the individuals within it. By the Bethesda pool, Jesus went among that crowd to approach each person in a unique way, to contact each one of them, to fix his loving and compassionate eyes on each of them. Let us enter the squares where our service takes us and let us live our everyday life remembering that *"Every one of us is responsible for actions and dynamics of love and hate that, sometimes unintentionally, can bring about a constructive*

³ Words taken from the Sermon preached on Thursday, 24 December 1914. Delivered by C.H. Spurgeon to the Newington Metropolitan Tabernacle.

*or destructive pattern. The Evil and/or Good forces are brought about by the actions of individuals, and each action can produce consequences. These forces make history. Nobody can say: 'I live my life, I don't hurt anyone', because there is always a reaction following somebody's action. To love is the fundamental mission. We are on the earth to love, to bring about a trend of good in history, to love life, the world, others, mankind."*⁴

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Everyone waits for Christ's look of compassion, everyone waits for our look of compassion; and we will be able to answer them if we understand that, as the Abbe Pierre says, *"life is only a little time given to us for learning to love ."*

Questions for study and reflection throughout the month and for deeper discussion at the Team Meeting.

On a personal level

How do we live the relationship between "the mainland and the ocean", between the wish to stick to our individual reality and the need to feel part of a larger community ?

What pushes us to "mix with others" and, on the contrary, what keep us cautiously tied to our safe, personal focal points? What do we love more: the protecting assurance of our house, or the world that, even if in a confused and noisy way, we can only find outside?

On a service level

Father Caffarel reminds us that *"God, in His large workshop, that is the universe, leads us by the hand and shows us His works, lists them, helps us to discover their deep meaning, takes us, through them into His thoughts and feelings"*.

Looking at the events in the world today, does our service in Teams require us to look farther, towards the larger horizon of humanity, towards a social place where history develops. And how can our Movement answer the needs of our time?

On a faith level

"We are on the earth to love, to introduce a trend of good in history, because it is necessary to love life, the-world, others, mankind. We are on the earth to introduce seeds of love".

How does our Christian formation and our time in Teams help us to introduce seeds of love in the four pillars on which our daily life is based - family, young people, job, church?

⁴ Arturo Paoli, monk of the Congregation "Piceoli fratelli del Vangelo"