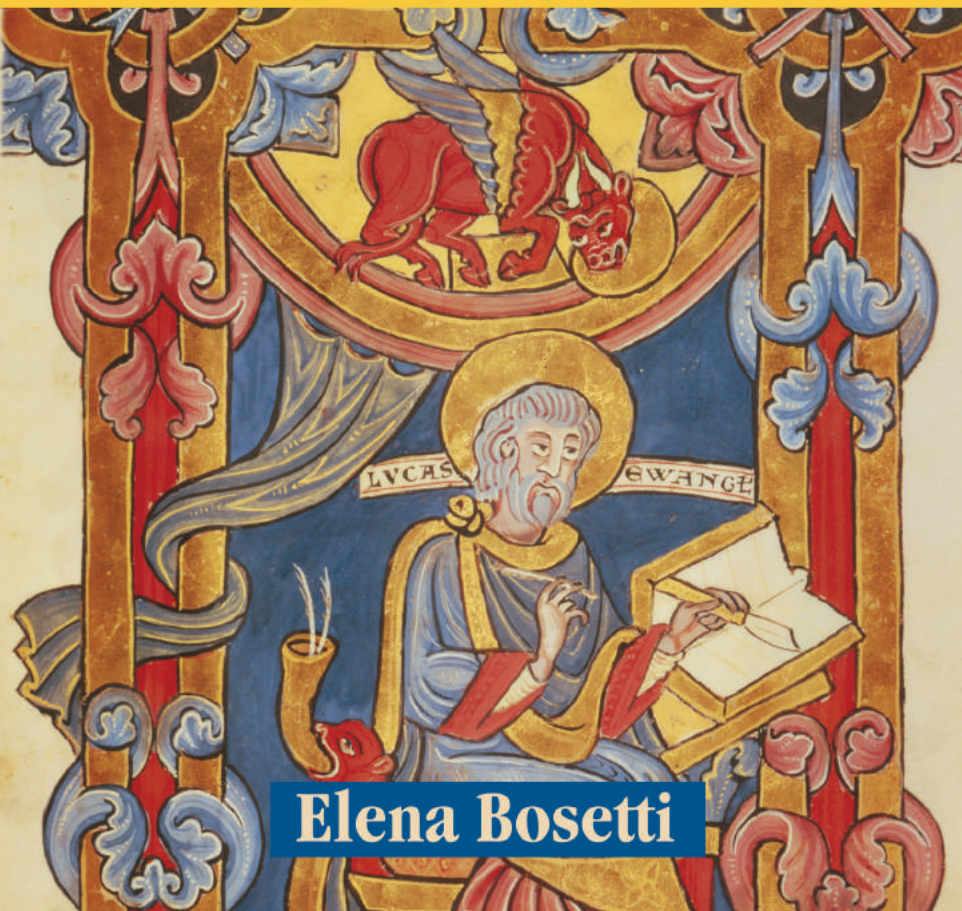


A CONTEMPLATIVE READING

OF THE GOSPEL

Luke

THE SONG OF GOD'S MERCY



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CHAPTER I

Were not our hearts burning within us?

*T*he Church of the third millennium is discovering the urgent necessity of a renewed evangelization. In his encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, which stands in continuity with Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, John Paul II asked Christians to find again the "impetus of the beginnings" with regard to the modern world. Whoever encounters the Risen Lord cannot keep silent and, above all, cannot live as if nothing had happened. It is in this sense that St. Paul proclaims, "Woe to me if I don't proclaim the good news!" (1 Cor 9:16)

Deeply fascinated by the "journey" of the divine Word and by the multiform activity of the Spirit, Luke must have been as impressed with the personality and dedication of the Apostle Paul as he was with Paul's collaborators, both men and women. Faithful companion of the Apostle and his spiritual heir, Luke seems to be the evangelist most suit-

ed to the theme of evangelization. His Gospel describes the journey—or rather, the race—of the Good News: first from heaven to earth, then from Jerusalem to Nazareth, and finally from Nazareth back again to Jerusalem, and reaching to the farthest ends of the earth.

Allowing ourselves to be guided by Luke, we want to understand what evangelization really means—what it implies, what it brings about, and what characteristics make up the preaching of Jesus and his disciples, both men and women.

We begin with the icon of the Risen One, who evangelizes his disciples on the road to Emmaus. Here it is important to note that it is not the “Church” that takes the initiative, but the Lord who does so. It is heaven that evangelizes earth. Not by chance do we find angels at the beginning and at the end of the Gospel of Luke. It is they who announce the incarnation and birth of the Savior, and they are the ones who announce the beautiful news of his resurrection from the dead. The Gospel descends from heaven and makes the earth sing. In fact, throughout Luke’s Gospel songs of exultation burst forth from the mouths of those who receive joyful news. We will explore these aspects later on.

But Luke is also attentive to the historical journeys and human features of the evangelizers. Therefore, we will also look at some passages dealing with John the Baptist, Simon Peter, and the other itinerant disciples who travel with Jesus, such as Mary of Magdala and her companions.

The evangelizing work of Jesus and his followers follows a path that moves from Galilee, passes through Samaria, and resolutely directs itself toward Jerusalem. Jesus evangelizes in the Temple, the heart of the holy city. For Luke, Jesus evangelizes even after his death, right up to his ascent into heaven.

And so we begin this journey starting at the end (which is the true beginning), listening along the way to words that enflame our heart.

Luke closes his Gospel with the touch of an artist, leaving us an unforgettable scene. The Risen One approaches two disciples on the road to Emmaus and walks beside them, explaining the Scriptures to them until he is joyously recognized. It is a story full of feeling, capable of involving the reader more and more, until he or she can only conclude with the two protagonists: “Weren’t our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the road, as he opened up the Scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32)

This story seems particularly suited to helping us approach the Gospel of Luke and begin an itinerary of evangelization in his “school.” The perspective that guides the story is the free and selfless gift of the Lord. Here it really is not the Church that draws near to the Risen Lord; it is he himself who crosses the disciples’ path and accompanies them on their journey. He is in search of those who have distanced themselves from hope.

The encounter is placed along the road (*en tē hodō*) that stretches from Jerusalem to Emmaus; by the story’s end,

the road will be taken just as quickly in the opposite direction, from Emmaus to Jerusalem.

The story is told in two principal scenes introduced with the same stylistic formula: “and it happened while” (*ka egeneto en tô*, followed by the infinitive verb):

24:15—and it happened while they were talking and discussing among themselves (*kai egeneto en tô homilein autous*);

24:30—and it happened while he was seated at table with them (*kai egeneto en tô kataklithenai auton met'autôn*).

Here Luke throws into relief the two essential moments of the Christian liturgy: Word and Sacrament, listening to the Scriptures and the Eucharistic liturgy.

Let us allow ourselves to be caught up in the story, as if we were hearing it for the first time.

From Jerusalem to Emmaus

At the beginning of the account the names of the two protagonists are not mentioned, merely that they are “on the way.” Luke uses the verb *poreuomai* (to go, to walk, to be on the way), the same verb he uses earlier to describe the journey Jesus makes to Jerusalem and his strong desire to proceed along this way: “...he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Lk 9:51).

Luke sees the Christian vocation as a way, a journey (*hodos*) that follows the Lord to Jerusalem. So it is significant that the two disciples are leaving Jerusalem behind

them. In fact, the two men are going a considerable distance away from the city, around seven miles.

Cleopas (as he is later identified) and his companion have distanced themselves from the holy city and from everything it represents of their disappointed hope. There would be no Messiah, no reconstruction of Israel.... Perhaps the Passover pilgrimage had never seemed like it had that year, so full of a particular expectation. Jesus had “gone up” to Jerusalem, and those who were with him eagerly awaited the fulfillment of the ancient hope.

They had gone up to Jerusalem to sing the song of liberation: tomorrow free in Jerusalem! And instead, everything had ended so soon, so abruptly, before the feast had even taken place. What a tragic Passover!

The Risen One draws near

While they were discussing (*homiloun*) all this among themselves, Jesus “drew near and walked along with them.” The Risen One takes the initiative of “drawing near” and of accompanying them on their journey, revealing in this way the gratuitousness of the encounter, together with Luke’s particular understanding of the resurrection. The “closeness of the Risen One” is something typical of Luke’s Gospel and rather foreign to the viewpoints of Mark and Matthew.

But their eyes are prevented from knowing him

For the disciples to recognize him, it is not enough that Jesus draws near. Simply seeing with the eyes is not

enough. Recognizing the Risen One is something that transcends the merely “superficial”; it requires an experience of faith. With the hand of an artist Luke plays with the clearly symbolic contrast between verses 16 and 31:

(at the beginning)	their eyes were prevented from seeing (v. 16)
(at the end)	their eyes were opened (v. 31)

The journey's beginning is marked by eyes that do not see, as the text says literally: “...their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” These eyes will “see” only at the end, after the hearing, the organ of listening, has done all of its work. In fact, the revelation of the Risen One is directed to the ears. Jesus takes the initiative in speaking and introduces himself into the conversation with a question:

“What are these words you are exchanging with each other as you walk?” (v. 17)

This question has a strong effect on the two travelers, who stop short, amazed at the stranger's ignorance of the latest news: “Are you the only person staying in Jerusalem who is unaware of the things that have happened there in these days?” (v. 18) Jesus plays along with them by countering their question with another—“What things?”—thus giving the disciples the chance to explain their thoughts. The result is a resumé of early Christology, as Cleopas and his companion recount the main points of the life of Jesus and the various Passover announcements sprinkled throughout the Gospel of Luke.

First they recall the Master's name and place of origin—"Jesus of Nazareth"—and with that we are taken back to the first two chapters of the Gospel. Then they reminisce about his ministry: "[He] was a prophet mighty in word and deed before God and all the people..." (see Lk 4:32–36; 5:17; 6:19; 7:16; 8:26; 9:19); his death and those responsible for it: "...The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to a sentence of death and had him crucified" (see Lk 23:13–25); the discovery of the empty tomb (see Lk 24:3); and finally the vision of angels and the announcement that Jesus is alive (see Lk 24:4; Ac 25:19).

In the travelers' account are reechoed the various announcements of the resurrection, given respectively by the angels to the women (see Lk 24:6) and by the women to the eleven (see Lk 24:9–10). Also mentioned is the visit of certain disciples to the tomb in order to ascertain the truth of the facts that have been reported (see Lk 24:12–24).

Why are our two travelers not concerned with personally verifying these witnesses of the resurrection? Instead of going on to Emmaus, they should have gone to the tomb to verify what had happened. But Cleopas and his friend were not among those who "lost time" going to the tomb.... Besides, those who went there "did not see him."

We are now at the heart of the story. Jesus listens for some time and eventually takes the floor, going on to reprove the disciples: "How dense you are, and how slow of heart to believe..." the teachings of the Scriptures (vv. 25–27). His question to them is like a refrain

often repeated in the Gospel of Luke: "Did not the Messiah have to suffer all these things...?" (see Lk 24:44–46).

The exegesis of the Risen One

The Risen One, who "was a prophet powerful in word," has nothing to say to the disciples except what Moses and all the prophets had written about him, and more precisely about his journey of suffering (v. 26). The Prophet goes back to the prophets. The Risen One becomes an "exegete," and his teaching is the final and supreme exegesis of the Scriptures.

Luke's image of the Risen One explaining the Scriptures reflects a profound truth experienced by the early Church—and in a particular way by Paul—regarding the understanding of Scripture. Sacred Scripture (Old Testament) does not automatically bring with it the understanding of Jesus as the Christ (neither is it true today of the Jewish reading of it). The fact that we're starting from the same beginning (Moses) does not guarantee that we will arrive at the same end (recognizing Jesus as the Messiah). For the early Church, it is the end that explains the beginning. The Risen One is the decisive key, capable of "opening" the Scriptures (Lk 24:32) and of demonstrating the Christological meaning running throughout.

In this light, and contrary to our two protagonists' way of thinking, the passion and death of Jesus do not stand in contradiction with his being the Messiah; instead they

reveal him as the authentic Messiah, of whom Moses and the prophets wrote. (The same thing can also be seen in Acts 3:18 and 1 Peter 1:11–12).

“Stay with us....” The Risen One is a guest

The story nears its end. The two disciples have arrived at their destination, but “he walked ahead as if he were going on” (v. 28).

The insistent invitation that Cleopas and his companion extend to the mysterious stranger undoubtedly reflects generous Middle-Eastern hospitality, but something more besides. Here the soul of the Church also shines through in what will become the liturgical invocation of the community:

“Stay with us, because it’s near evening....” So he went in to *stay with them* (v. 29).

The Risen One becomes their guest. The hermeneutics of Scripture emphasize the sign of his Passover.

The scene that follows leads us to understand that the two disciples have invited their guest to the place of honor at the table and asked him to pronounce the prayer of blessing over the meal: “..When he reclined at table with them he took the bread and blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them” (v. 30).

Here Jesus performs an ordinary gesture, one that is part of everyday life and custom. To recite the prayer of thanksgiving and to share bread among table companions is in fact the normal function of the head of a family or of a guest. But by now this particular gesture is reminiscent

of the Lord's Supper and of his Passover. It is the sign that takes us back to the passion and, significantly, it is actually the act of "breaking the bread" that causes the disciples' eyes to "open" and allows them to recognize the Lord.

What does this connection mean? One important thing to note is that this sign of the Risen One is not a chance occurrence; instead it is a response to the difficulty that the two disciples face, and, even more, a response that goes to the heart of their problem. To recognize the Lord in the act of his death is to find the answer to the difficulty that made them leave Jerusalem in the first place, the answer to the scandal of the passion. "Didn't the Messiah have to suffer all these things...?" the stranger had asked them along the road, thus showing how Scripture would indicate that such a journey was necessary in order for the Messiah to enter into glory. That word is now confirmed in "the breaking of the bread," the sign that takes us back to the liberating death of the Lord (cf. v. 26).

From Emmaus to Jerusalem

The disciples' eyes have good reason to be open. By now they are able to see the two inseparable aspects of the Passover mystery, that is, how death can be the source of life and of glory. Now it is possible for their eyes to open and to see beyond, because the ear and the heart have understood. Faith comes from hearing. It is no wonder then that at the beginning the two travelers were prevented from seeing. To see in faith, which is what we are speaking of here, presupposes a listening to the Word. The

Risen One takes his disciples back to the importance of listening; while they are walking together, he makes the strength of the Word resound again in their hearts. He, the supreme interpreter of the Scriptures, reveals the meaning that pervades it, unravels the mysterious design of salvation that passes through the cross, and by so doing enflames their hearts once again.

As the well-known saying goes, “One can see well only with the heart.” Luke seems to agree. Because the heart has understood, the eyes of the disciples are no longer kept from seeing.

But, paradoxically, now that their eyes are opened and the two men are capable of seeing, the Risen One “vanishes” from their sight. Once the disciples’ eyes are opened, he disappears. Well, then, was what they experienced simply a vision?

Luke does not actually say that the disciples “saw” Jesus (that is, Luke doesn’t employ the verb typically used of an apparition), but that they “*recognized*” him. The moment their eyes are opened, the Risen One is no longer visible because he is not just that traveler, a third person, an “other.” The disciples have experienced him alive in their very own life. The sacramental sign allows them and us to “recognize him” not simply as someone outside of ourselves, whom we “can see,” but as one who lives in our hearts and warms them, as the living One whom the Church understands as an intimate presence.

Hope is rekindled, along with the strength to get up “that very hour” and return to Jerusalem to recount to the

brothers this extraordinary experience. The two disciples come to know the joy of announcing the Good News in the middle of the night, describing how their hearts were enflamed and how they *recognized* him in the breaking of the bread (v. 35; cf. Acts 2:42–46; 20:7–11).

From Jerusalem to Gaza

In the Acts of the Apostles (the second volume of Luke's writings) there is a passage that in many aspects recalls the one just described: it is the encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian (8:26–40).

Again everything takes place along a road. A carriage is coming down from Jerusalem to Gaza, and in the carriage sits a man who is reading aloud. He is an Ethiopian, a eunuch who is an officer of Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia. In Acts the description of the man is exact, but leaves us suspecting that the narrator wants to say something more, perhaps moving to a symbolic level.

The road is one that goes down from the Mediterranean coast where it crosses the Via Maris, a great thoroughfare of international communication connecting Israel to Egypt on one side, and Lebanon to Syria on the other. It is called "the desert road." The absence of rain renders the land parched.

The encounter with the Ethiopian suggests the fulfillment of prophetic words, the universality of the Good News, and the extension of the Christian mission to the very ends of the earth (where perhaps Ethiopia is located).

The fact that the Good News arrives to an Ethiopian eunuch means that this is the end of every exclusion. Even foreigners and those physically disabled or maimed (whom the ancient Law had marginalized) now have free access to divine worship:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
“The LORD will surely separate me from his people”;
and do not let the eunuch say,
“I am just a dry tree.”

For thus says the LORD:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off (Isa 56:3–5).

From Word to sacrament

On their way to Emmaus the two disciples discuss among themselves events regarding the passion and death of Jesus. On his journey the Ethiopian reads Isaiah 53, that is, the prophecy of the passion of the Servant of the Lord.

What follows in each story is that a “stranger” appears: Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and Philip in Acts. In both accounts the stranger “questions” the person(s) to whom he is speaking and “interprets” the Scriptures from a Christological perspective (see Ac 8:29–35).

In each case we have an extended narrative ending in a sacramental sign: the two disciples ask Jesus to “stay with them”; the eunuch asks to “be baptized” (see Ac 8:36–38). The stories end respectively in the breaking of bread and in baptism, the two fundamental sacraments of Christian initiation.

The conclusion of both stories indicates an “absence” coupled with profound joy. In the Gospel account, Jesus disappears from the sight of the two disciples, and with hearts full of joy they make their return journey to Jerusalem. As for Philip, he is carried off by the Spirit, and the eunuch continues his journey “rejoicing.”

In this we see outlined what evangelization means for Luke's community!