

JESUS' HEART WAS FORMED DURING HIS 'HIDDEN LIFE' IN NAZARETH

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IN THE GOSPELS, Jesus presents himself as the Son of God, namely the revelation of God's graciousness and compassion. For example, in John's gospel Jesus says: 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). Yet, at the same time, Jesus reveals what it means to be human in a meaningful way. In that sense we may understand his words, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (John. 14:6). In fact, Jesus is saying: 'I am the way towards a truly meaningful life.'

One way of better understanding the desires of Jesus' Heart and our own deepest desires as well, is by going back to the time Jesus' Heart was shaped, namely during his 'hidden life' as a child and a young man in Nazareth.

Growing Wisdom

After, at the age of twelve Jesus had stayed behind in Jerusalem, Luke summarizes Jesus' life-journey from childhood until the age of thirty in one sentence: 'Jesus went back to Nazareth with his parents and obeyed them... [He] became wise, and he grew strong. God was pleased with him and so were the people' (Luke 2:51-52). Luke emphasizes Jesus' wisdom and obedience. Among the Israelites, wisdom was regarded to be one of the highest virtues. Wisdom was connected with being rooted in obedience to God's word. Through his obedience to Mary and Joseph, Jesus was obedient to his Heavenly Father, and so grew in wisdom.

Apparently, Jesus himself fully accepted to be a human person, in every aspect be-

coming 'one of us' (Hebrews 2:17). However, he did not accept his 'being human' as a fate to be endured, but as a vocation to be carried out in accordance with God's will. Jesus immersed himself fully in daily life with his parents and relatives; he shared the life of his fellow villagers: as a child, he played with his friends, as a young man, he worked with Joseph, his dad. And the way Luke describes Jesus' performance in Jerusalem at the age of twelve shows us that Jesus also engaged himself in studying Holy Scripture. Luke's comment that Jesus grew in wisdom, indicates that he had learned to live ordinary life in a personal relationship with his Father. In the light of God's word in the Bible, he reflected upon what happened around him.

Jesus in Nazareth

As James Martin notes in his book *Jesus, a Pilgrimage*¹ today many biblical, archeological and historical studies tell us a good deal about daily family life in Nazareth and first-century Jewish religious practices. Nazareth was a small agrarian society, with a population of about three to five hundred people. People lived in homes clustered together around an open courtyard, forming an extended family. In the common courtyard, the cooking was done, grain was ground, water jars stored, and animals kept. The same small rooms were used for shelter, sleeping, giving birth and dying. So, we can imagine, there was almost no privacy, but the relationships were very close, certainly creat-

ing tensions and quarreling, but also joy and laughter.

Most of the ordinary people were not able to read or write in those days. But the fact that Jesus was able to read from the Scriptures, as Luke notes (4:16-17), shows us that his religious education was well taken care of by his family. This education certainly also included instructions regarding proper observance of the Jewish laws, keeping the Sabbath, observing the purification rituals before eating, keeping religious fasting, abstaining from impure food and avoiding people deemed to be 'unclean'. Later on, Jesus would challenge some of these customs.

We may assume that already in Nazareth, through prayer and meditation on Scripture readings, he began to realize that too much focus on external rituals could make people blind to the real designs of his Heavenly Father regarding humankind. Particularly, he learned that staying away from some people who were regarded as sinners for the reason of observing religious rules, was totally contrary to the practice of love and compassion demanded by his Heavenly Father, who let his sun shine for everyone.

Poverty and Injustice

The Gospels call Jesus a 'tekton', usually translated as 'carpenter'. In fact, it might have included all the work needed to build simple houses, with wooden beams as well as walls and roofs of straw and dirt. Justin Martyr, a second century theologian, calls Jesus a maker of yokes. In those days, making a good yoke to fit the team of oxen demanded a fair level of technical skill.² Yet, Jesus would have known what it meant to be poor, to work hard, in difficult circumstances, at the whims of overlords, the weather and diseases. From firsthand experience he knew the lives of those on the edges of society. His compassion for the poor and the handicapped shown during his public ministry had certainly been fostered by his experience of living so many



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years in the lower class society of Nazareth and Galilee.

Jesus experienced how the men and women of his village were overloaded by the burden of daily life. In addition, he also saw how ordinary people were being exploited. Most of them were small farmers, who rented land from rich landowners usually living in Jerusalem or nearby Sepphoris. These landlords often demanded a great part of the harvest of the tenants. Besides, all residents were forced to pay three kinds of taxes: one tax to the Roman rulers, another tax to Herod's palace and his building projects, and a third tax to the Priests of the temple in Jerusalem. So, there existed a great disparity between the indebted poor in the countryside and the wealthy people in the cities. In Jerusalem some families of priests belonged to the richest families in the country. They collected the taxes to maintain the Temple cult, and received substantial parts of the offerings of the numerous pilgrims.

The Desires of his Heavenly Father

Every Sabbath and on special feast days Jesus attended the services in the synagogue together with the village community. In these services, parts of Holy Scriptures were read and Psalms sung. There, Jesus also reflected on the suffering of his fellow citizens. Through observation, Scripture readings and prayer, he became aware of the fact that so much suffering of his neighbors was unnecessary and inhumane. Moreover, the shameful inequality be-

tween the social classes was totally contrary to the plan of his Heavenly Father concerning humankind.

Jesus was convinced that God his Father, by creating the human race, expected people to live together in solidarity and to share and enjoy the abundance of the earth together. With a sad heart, Jesus noticed that his Father's plans were not known or totally ignored. Certainly, Jesus understood that human life always involves suffering that can be very painful, such as sickness and death, bereavement due to the loss of a loved one, or the suffering caused by natural disasters. However, so much other suffering could be prevented if only people would live in accordance with the Father's will and participate in the plans of the Father concerning humankind.

A Distorted Understanding of God's Will

Many poor and handicapped were totally depending on their family (e.g. Mark 2:1-12), or reduced to beggary (e.g. Mark 8:22-26). Some chronically sick or mentally ill people were even considered to be possessed by unclean spirits. And Jesus certainly also met people who were really possessed by the devil. Jesus observed how the economically poor, the severely sick or handicapped, and the people regarded as possessed, suffered both physically and spiritually. Besides having to bear the hardships of daily life, they also felt their miserable condition as a curse of God. God, they believed to be the heavenly Judge, always ready to condemn people in regard to any violation of the law. Due to this false God-image and their inability to abide by all the regulations of the law, they believed their physical or mental disabilities to be God's punishment. Accordingly, these people lacked any form of self-confidence and felt themselves powerless to bring about any change in their miserable condition.

Jesus was above all appalled by the fact that religious leaders reinforced the view that dire poverty and physical disability were

God's punishment for sin, either personal sin, known or unknown, or sins of the parents (e.g. John 9: 1-3). Instead of helping poor people to cope with their misery, and to fight against injustice, the religious leaders made peoples' suffering even worse by their unsupportive teaching. Due to this false teaching, the poor and the handicapped even doubted whether the God, in whom they believed, really took care of them. They accepted their situation as a fate, which they were doomed to suffer until the end of their lives and even in their after-lives.

So, later on, during his public life, Jesus will blame the scribes and Pharisees, saying that 'they tie onto people's backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry, yet they aren't willing even to lift a finger to help them carry those loads' (Matt. 23:4), and they neglect to practice 'the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice, mercy and honesty' (Matt. 23:23). The Evangelist Matthew very accurately describes the people, who in droves came looking for Jesus, by saying: 'they were troubled and abandoned like sheep without a shepherd' (Matt. 9: 36).

The Desires of Jesus' Heart

Now we may better understand the deeper desires of Jesus' Heart. First of all, Jesus desired to involve himself in people's life situation not as an outsider, but as someone who really wanted to share the worrying conditions of oppressed people. He felt a great compassion for people who had to endure the demanding circumstances of ordinary human life and, on top of it, unnecessary suffering. So much suffering was inflicted upon them by people, who exploited them and treated them unjustly.

However, Jesus did not join one of the political movements of his day which attempted to liberate the Jewish people from Roman occupation, the tyranny of King Herod, or the corruption of the priestly cast in Jerusalem. His deepest desire was to redeem the poor

and handicapped from their distorted understanding of God's will. He wanted to replace such false understanding by an experience of God, which would generate joy and gratefulness, courage and hope. Jesus felt himself strengthened by his unconditional trust in God his Father, and he wanted to share this trust with others, especially those struck by enduring misery. Therefore, he longed to empower people so that they would be able to bear their suffering in a new way. In short, he desired to give them greater joy in life.

Moreover, from the Prophets of Jewish Scriptures, he had learned that God did not desire ritual sacrifices or the observance of external religious practices, but compassion and solidarity among his sons and daughters. Religion should help people to look beyond the borders of tribal relationships and social classes by becoming a movement of compassion and care.

A Spirituality of the Heart for Today

By attentively contemplating the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth, we learned how Jesus grew in wisdom, by living, what we now call, a Spirituality of the Heart. It should become a model for the formation of our own way of living a Spirituality of the Heart. By taking the Heart of Jesus as a model, we should first of all live a Spirituality of the Heart as an incarnational Spirituality. Without any reserve, Jesus embraced humanity and associated with the people. He became one of them and shared their lives. He used their language and symbols, and listened to their stories. He joined in their daily struggle for life, worked hard, and celebrated and prayed with them as well.

And in the middle of all these activities, Jesus contemplated both on God's word and on the life of the people. So, to live a Spirituality of the Heart as Jesus did, means also for us, to be involved in the life of ordinary people, to learn of their aspirations, to empathize with their concerns and sorrows, and to listen to God's message in the midst of people's joy

and hope, fear and distress. Or, with the words of Pope Francis, we should become shepherds, who take on 'the smell of the sheep' (*EG* n. 24).

In his Heart, Jesus intensely empathized with the suffering of the people around him. He discovered his mission and vocation by contemplating on it during his time of prayer. Not unlike Jesus and together with him, we also are called to accompany people in their daily struggle for life. By being with them, we will redeem them from feeling alone and desperate in their suffering. Helping people to cope with their pain, to liberate them from unnecessary suffering, to make their life more meaningful and joyful as Jesus did - that is also our mission in living a Spirituality of the Heart. A Spirituality of the Heart is a missionary Spirituality which arouses in our hearts a great concern for the poor and the lonely. Through our involvement in the struggle for life of our fellow human beings, wherever they are, and by reflecting on God's word, we will also become aware of our mission.

With Jesus, we surely accept that not all suffering can be prevented or removed. Suffering caused by the concerns of daily life, untreatable diseases; the decline of energy in old age, bereavement when losing a loved one – such suffering is inherent in our existence as human beings. And where people love one another, anxiety and suffering are nearby. However, with Jesus, we also understand that it makes a big difference whether people are able to endure such a suffering strengthened by trust in God or, on the contrary, in loneliness, without any faith at all. Many people may also nurture a misguided faith, and so feel left on their own in their pain. Therefore, by taking Jesus' Heart as a model, we want to bring a true understanding of God's will in people's lives.

Not unlike Jesus, we also witness that people inflict much unnecessary suffering upon one another, due to injustice, exploitation and violence. Most scandalous is the fact that so much injustice is done on behalf of God, whose

will is totally misunderstood. Such a wrong understanding of God's intentions also creates a false perception of the role of religion in society. Therefore, it should become a core element of our mission to pass on the real meaning of God's presence among us, as well as the true role of religion.

Not unlike Jesus, we should proclaim that God challenges people to reach out to one another, without any discrimination; that God sends us to build bridges between the different tribes, classes and religions. Certainly, the development of a worldwide family in which all people live as brothers and sisters of one another will always remain a unreachable horizon. But together with Jesus, we try to realize the ideal of the coming of God's reign on earth, step by step, encounter after encounter. It will lead us to new priorities in the practice of religion. Not a religion concentrating on the application of rules and laws which only can be observed by a few people, and create divisions among people, but a religion of the heart, based on trust in God and mercy to one another, Not a religion for private consolation only, but a religion, which establishes unity and solidarity among all peoples.

A Misguided Image of God in Public Life

The situation of today's world shows us how urgent it is to give witness to a true understanding of God's relationship with the universe and humanity. So many people still keep God at a distance from their real life. Instead

of finding strength in their belief in God at a time of pain and distress, often people even blame God for their worries and sorrow. Time and again, their experience of God is not a source of support and happiness, but of anger and aversion. By doing so, they increase their own suffering.

Today also, there are people, who for the sake of the glory of God's name, feel entitled to oppress and persecute their fellow human beings, to terrorize and maltreat them, and even to torture and kill them. There are people, who consider themselves representatives of God when sentencing to death anyone who according to their opinion violates the rules of divine law. That happened in the past as well as in the present.

Moreover, in today's society so much suffering is caused by human crimes often committed by people who believe that God is on their side. Even people calling themselves Christians or Catholics are often involved in wars, unjust behavior, greed, and the destruction of the natural environment. And there are still believers, including Christians, who tend to look at natural disasters or tragedies in their personal life as punishments of God for people's sins.

Therefore, by living a Spirituality of the Heart, we should be committed to spreading a true understanding of God's presence among humankind, as revealed by Jesus. Not a belief in a divine presence that creates self-righteousness, while alienating believers from non-believers, but a belief that generates humility and solidarity.

NOTES

1. For the following description of life in Nazareth I rely on James Martin in his book *Jesus, a Pilgrimage*, Harper, e-book edition 2014.
2. James Martin, *op. cit.*

'[The Scribes and Pharisees] tie onto people's backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry, yet they aren't willing to lift even a finger to help them carry those loads' (Mth 23.23).