



MERCY AND VOCATION IN THE BIBLE

Dr. Bruna Costacurta

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“I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry...I have come down to rescue them...Come, now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Ex 3,7.8.10).

These are the words God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, thus beginning a mission of salvation towards Israel that will bring the people to the covenant and to the Promised Land. The vocation of Moses comes forth from the merciful gaze of God who sees the oppression of the people and responds by sending a liberator. To be called by God means to enter into a journey of mercy, to make of us mediators of that same mercy.

In order to develop this idea, I will articulate my presentation in three points, evoking the biblical figures of “those whose calling” is particularly meaningful, especially for a priestly journey. Therefore we will first cover the fundamental events of the vocation of Moses, the great mediator of the salvific love of God towards Israel, who acts in the founding moment of salvation history. We will then go on to another particular prophetic figure, Jonah, who, instead, faces the difficulty of answering his divine call and struggles with accepting God’s mercy, a vocation that asks him to go beyond his people in order to extend the confines of salvation to the pagans, even to forgive his enemies. We will conclude with the New Testament fulfillment, through the definitive manifestation of divine mercy in the calling of the Twelve, the paradigm of every vocation to be disciples of the Lord Jesus and the privileged model of reference for the mission of the priest in the world.

I. To see the mercy of the Lord

In the story of the call of Moses and his mission, the dimension of mercy plays an absolutely fundamental role. Everything is borne out of the mercy of God who sees the suffering of His people and who is moved by it, not remaining indifferent to the cry of the oppressed but wishing to intervene and take care of His chosen ones. That is how the story of Moses begins. He is sent to Egypt, a place from which he had fled after having defended a brother Jew from an Egyptian who was mistreating him. Now, obeying the divine call, he must return to the country of his youth and face the power of the pharaoh, thus becoming the mediator of God’s will for salvation (cf. Ex 3).

The juxtaposition with the treatment of Egyptian powers is strong, as it included violent treatment: the ten plagues end with the death of all the firstborn and the swallowing of the Egyptian forces by the Red Sea. But even in these cases, it is the mercy of God that mysteriously guides history, because even those whose died must be understood in the context of a project of love, because their purpose was to open up the hearts of the Egyptians and make them understand that, by opposing God, they were destroying themselves and choosing death. Life is not possible without first acknowledging that God alone is the Lord of life.



Whoever accepts the Divine call places himself at the service of this salvation, which is not a simple “goodness” that ignores evil as if it did not exist or pretends not to see it. On the contrary, he faces it with all seriousness, aware that forgiveness and salvation require the sinner to acknowledge his own evil and he, in turn, must allow himself to be transformed, trusting in a mercy that is much greater than his own sin.

Moses becomes the mediator of this same salvation, first by leading the people out of Egypt and then by guiding them along the exodus journey towards the Promised Land.

During their pilgrimage in the desert, Israel had continuously to face the temptations of mistrust, rejection, and rebellion. The desert, a challenging school of faith, with its void and the absence of everything, forced the people to be confronted with their own need for God while, in their murmuring and protesting, they sought a response to their primary needs such as water and food. The various episodes of “murmurings” which make up the story of the Exodus are a good illustration of a constant of a life of faith, when the need of even necessary things becomes an absolute, this need becomes a temptation, this need leads to idolatry. That is what happened to Israel at Marah, where the water was undrinkable (cf. Ex 15,22-26) and at Massah and Meribah (cf. Ex 17,1-8; Nm 20,1-13), where their own thirst made them ask themselves the terrible question: “Is the Lord in our midst or not?” (Ex 17,7). And then there was hunger (cf. Ex 16), and the nausea of the manna (cf. Nm 11,4-8; 21,4-5), and the fear of entering into a land where the inhabitants seemed dangerous (cf. Nm 13,25—14,4). However, every time God responded: He made water flow from the rock, He sent them bread and quail from heaven, He made them feel His presence as a merciful and provident Father.

Already at the Red Sea the Lord had responded to the crisis of faith of the people who protested (cf. Ex 14). Stuck between the sea and the desert, with the Egyptian army chasing after them, the Israelites shouted their fear and accused Moses of having led them to die in the desert, while they would have much rather remained safe in Egypt: Better to be slaves, but alive, than free, but facing death. Israel has already forgotten the great intervention of God which mitigated the resistance of the pharaoh, who opened the gates of Egypt so that the people could come out, with “hand outstretched” (Ex 18,8; Nm 33,3), triumphantly, bringing with them the gold and silver of the Egyptians. The impassable sea, the boundless and lifeless desert, and Egypt, with its chariots and charioteers: this is the scene that appears before the frightened eyes the people, who feel trapped. They thus accuse Moses, and through him, God Himself. But God responds, through His mediator, and calls them back to faith, reestablishing the truth: That He Himself will fight for His people and will bring it to salvation. The sea will divide itself and allow Israel to pass, completely dry, and Moses will be the interpreter of the design of liberation of the Lord, by indicating the unimaginable ways of Divine compassion towards the people. This is precisely the task that is linked to the sharing of faith, this is the mandate that the priest receives by assenting to place himself at the service of God’s project of mercy.

Afterwards Israel, always forgetting the marvels done by the Lord, continues to protest. God, through Moses, then continues to manifest His patient countenance, capable of a superabundant love: the daily manna, the quails provided for their sustenance, water for the community and livestock.

Then, an even greater gift is given: forgiveness. There comes a time in which the fatigue of a life of faith becomes more acute, and the temptation of idolatry gains more strength. When, at Sinai, Moses disappears on the mountain, Israel asks Aaron to make them a more hands-on God, one that is tangible and easily recognizable: a golden calf that will represent him and visually signal his presence (cf. Ex 32; Dt 9). This is the continuous temptation of man, of being able to relate with a



more comprehensible god, rendering faith less demanding; a god whose thoughts are not much different from ours, in short, a god who, encapsulated within an image, even if only mentally, truly becomes an idol.

Hence, while Moses is on the mountain to receive the tablets of the Law and to agree upon the covenant, Israel pulls away from their relationship with the Divine. The Lord sends His mediator to place before the people their own sin, so they may understand its gravity, and, once aware of it, allow themselves to be transformed and forgiven. The tablets of the Law are broken, in a gesture that expresses the absolute gravity of what has just happened. The covenant has ended even before it started, but the greatness of divine mercy manages to overcome even that which may seem irreparable. Moses appeals to this same mercy when he intercedes on behalf of the people of Israel, obeying his own vocation. He then destroys the calf, the symbol of sin. Mercy has triumphed.

The new tablets God rewrites on the mountain testify to this: they are the tablets of the gratuitousness of love. If the first tablets were able to deceive man to enter into a relationship with God based on their own capacity and fidelity, now the second tablets, a symbol of a forgiven sin, testify that the covenant of the Lord with man is founded exclusively on divine mercy and on the fidelity of His love, an anticipation of that definitive covenant that the Son of God will bring to fulfillment in His Blood.

Thus Moses brings back the people of God, fulfilling his own mission. At the end of his journey, he will leave the people to enter the Promised Land while he remains on Mount Nebo and thereby entering into death, leaving no tracks (cf. Dt 34). No one knows where the tomb is, the mediator of the covenant disappeared once he finished his task, in a total gift of himself, by which he allowed himself to be completely consumed.

Now, just as for Moses, so also for the priest, to answer to a vocation means to enter into this journey of grace that is borne out of mercy. It means to see the mercy of the Lord in order to make it visible to the world, It means to make servants of ourselves, unprofitable servants (cf. Lk 17,7-10), ready to disappear, if need be, so that only the greatness of the Lord remains apparent.

But this can be an arduous journey; because sometimes mercy is scary. That is the case of another “who was called” in Scripture; the prophet Jonah, whose story must be meditated upon in order to come face to face with the fears and difficulties that a divine vocation may bring about.

2. The difficulty of entering into the mission of the mercy of God

The prophet Jonah receives a precise mission from God: to go to Nineveh and bring the prophetic news. Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians, was the enemy, *par excellence*, of Israel, which flourished along the Tigris, in Mesopotamia. When the Book of Jonah was written, the city had long been destroyed and remained deserted, but in the story it is presented as a great metropolis, at its highest splendor, a symbol of wealth and great power, that bloody power that had destroyed and brought the Northern Kingdom into ashes and endangered the Southern Kingdom. And yet, it is to that same city that a prophet of Israel is sent; a prophet who was himself part of a people who had been one of the many victims of the Assyrian Empire.

This is a problematic vocation, through which God desires to respond to the evil of Nineveh, but which Jonah refuses. God orders him to get up and go to Nineveh, and he gets up, but flees in the exact opposite direction. In fact, Nineveh, in reference to Israel, is situated to the east, but Jonah goes towards Tarsus, a far-away Mediterranean port, to the west. The reason for fleeing has not yet been revealed (the prophet will tell us only at the end of the story), hence it is about an evident pulling away from a task that is considered unacceptable, a radical rejection, which leaves no room



for doubts. Thus, while God declares that the evil of the city has “come up” to Him, Jonah, on the other hand, “goes down” far from God: as far as Joppa, and then onto a boat, far from the presence of God who imposes a mission perceived by him as intolerable.

However, in the midst of crossing the sea, a tempest breaks out, and Jonah continues his “descent”: to the bottom of the boat, then in his sleep, seeking oblivion, an escape from reality of which sleep is often the symbol.

In the face of the fury of the tempest, the sailors of the boat, full of fear, pray, in the only sensible reaction that one can have in the face of death, by referring to their gods, and the captain awakens Jonah asking him to do likewise. With an ironic and bittersweet smirk, the narrator presents to us a prophet from Israel who is told, by a pagan, that he must pray and seek help from God; this same person who sought to escape far away from the Lord.

Then, the lots were cast, and the men of the ship receive the confirmation that Jonah is the one responsible for all that is happening, the prophet allows himself to be thrown into the sea. He proclaims his “fear” of God, but here his fear is perhaps also a bit of fright (in Hebrew the same term is used), and he recognizes his own responsibility, thus sacrificing himself to save the others and resigning himself to be thrown into the sea and to die so that the others could be saved. Then, in fact, the tempest ceases; the sailors are converted and open themselves up to faith in the true God. Jonah was, with them, a prophet albeit unwillingly, fulfilling his task of helping and making the gift of himself. Despite everything Jonah, could not reject his own vocation.

As is noted, in the sea, by divine mandate, a large fish swallowed Jonah, and, from the belly he prayed; he was then spewed upon the shore.

Now everything begins anew: for the second time, God calls him and sends him to Nineveh. This time Jonah obeys, enters the city and brings the news that God has entrusted to him: “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed” (3,4). This, however, is purely material obedience, without true interior adhesion to the divine mission. Jonah follows the order, but without obedience to mercy. He adheres to the threat of destruction but without accepting the sense of the threat itself, which was made to convert and therefore to forgive. Scripture teaches that the prophets are sent by God to appeal to the conscience of sinners and to bring them to conversion by helping them to become aware of their own need to be forgiven. The sending of Jonah has this purpose. Jonah is aware of it will say it, by addressing God upon seeing the Ninevites repent: “This is why I fled at first to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, rich in clemency, loathe to punish” (4,2). The prophetic crying out “Four days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed” is, therefore, nothing else than the announcement of forty days of grace: Nineveh has four days to convert in order not to be destroyed. Jonah knows it, and even for we, readers, the reason for God sending the prophet is now clear.

Jonah does not want the forgiveness of Nineveh, however, and when the Ninevites carry out acts of penance, the prophet, whose own word, unwillingly, was rendered efficacious, retreats angrily. God graces the great city, and this seems to be an evil for Jonah. It is not the evil perpetrated by Nineveh that shocks him, but rather the fact that it has ended; and his wrath is not like the anger of God which expresses the oppressiveness of evil, but rather a vindictive wrath which finds God’s goodness and His forgiveness unbearable; so much as to want to die. The rejection by Jonah of his own prophetic vocation is radicalized and reaches its extreme. The mercy of God had become unacceptable for Jonah, especially because it was expressed towards his enemies and thus seems to contradict every type of justice.



Here, the fracture becomes irreparable. Jonah distances himself from the city with a behavior that contradicts his vocation all the more, refusing solidarity, repudiating the selfsame conversion which should have been his very desire as a prophet.

But God is merciful and he intervenes to bring Jonah to a new awareness: He makes a gourd plant grow to give him shade, then he dries it up, and the scorching sun beats upon Jonah's head, increasing his desire to die. Nineveh, the bloodthirsty city is saved, instead the pleasant and faultless gourd plant has been destroyed for no reason. Everything seems senseless and unacceptable.

It is at this point that God lays out for Jonah the true question in order to help him understand and make him feel mercy: if he was moved by a gourd plant, for which he did not labor, which did not belong to him; then, how much more for an entire city, filled with men unable to distinguish between right and left (like children, or the elderly, therefore without responsibility? In reality, we are all like this when confronted with our own evil, when we finally became aware of it).

Here we must underscore that in the discourse of God there is no mention of the conversion of the Ninevites; salvation has a fundamental dimension of gratuitousness that now comes forth. The love of God makes us all like children and shows us our littleness; penance responds to this and reveals the pardon already given, which needs confession in order to become operative but which is not caused by confession. It is rather the contrary: it is under the pardon of God that confession becomes at all possible. Nineveh, through its own acts of penance, shows itself to be incapable of distinguishing between right and left. But this is grace, operative through prophetic mediation.

That is how the book ends, with the question posed by God to Jonah: Should I not be moved by the city and forgive it? And us, to whom the Word of God is addressed, do we accept a God who shows His mercy to so many? Lastly, do we accept a God who, in death, reveals that, "we know not what we do" (cf. Lk 23,34)?

The question in the book remains open-ended, without response. It is up to the reader to respond and take up a position. Whoever is called to the priesthood, does he desire to be a mediator of that mercy by embracing the vocation God has given him?

It is a crucial question, but in order to answer it, we must look at its fulfillment in the Lord Jesus, which is our third and last point.

3. The New Testament Fulfillment

Everything that is revealed in the foundational text of Exodus and everything that is concretized in the sending forth of the prophets, finds its fulfillment in the Lord Jesus calling the Twelve to Himself.

In the Gospel of Matthew this episode is preceded by the compassion of Jesus when confronted by the crowd. The text says:

"At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest" (9,36-38).



And then:

“Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to drive them out and cure every disease and every illness” (10,1).

Here, also, everything springs forth from mercy. Jesus, “the face of the Father’s mercy” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 1), seeing the people abandoned to their own devices, as sheep without a shepherd, is moved to compassion. The verb used (*splagcni,zomai*) expresses that visceral sentiment of someone who is moved to pity and therefore decides to intervene and help. Jesus, the “Good Shepherd”, sees the need of his flock and asks for laborers, in fact, he asks for prayer, asking for shepherds after the heart of God, symbols of the Father’s mercy. The priestly vocation is a gift.

Then Jesus calls the twelve disciples to Himself and instructs them in their mission: to preach the Kingdom, heal the sick, raise the dead, drive out demons, without having any money, or sack, tunic, sandals, walking stick, bringing with them the gift of peace (cf. Mt 10,5-15). The call is to be sent forth and to fulfill the works of the Master, at the service of the Kingdom, in complete gratuitousness and in the awareness of being sent forth, as bearers and donors of something that does not belong to us. This is what it means to be laborers for the harvest, and it is a task entrusted to the apostles and to whoever prolongs their mission.

Every vocation is always for the mission, and a priestly vocation is even more so; like Moses, called to free the people, like the prophets, sent forth for the conversion of many. The disciples, called by Jesus, are set apart, they leave their nets and follow Him, but only to return to their brothers and sisters and to be, for them, merciful mediators of the gift of salvation.

They are sent, announcing the Kingdom, first and foremost: “as you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (10,7). In the mission, there is a priority of the word, the proclamation. Without that, symbols remain incomprehensible or subject to ambiguous interpretations; in the face of the miracles of Jesus, it can be said that he is a magician, a healer, that “[He] drives out demons only by the power of Beelzebul” (12,24). Instead, these are signs that announce the coming of the Kingdom, signs of salvation, signs of forgiveness and of life. Word and sign are complementary; they explain the gift of God to each other.

Thus, we have the prophetic gesture of victory; Jesus confers a special power to His own, that of being merciful: to heal, to overcome death, to drive out demons. These are gestures that render redemption visible and which pre-announce Easter, with its definitive victory over sin, over that which imprisons and possesses man by taking from him his freedom, life, and joy.

Likewise, the means to be used are adequate for the mission received: simplicity, poverty, complete trust in God: not silver and gold, not two tunics, or sandals, or a walking stick. The disciples must bear witness to the absoluteness of God, by means of a simple life, free of any human securities, in the awareness of the absolute importance of proclaiming the Kingdom, even to the point of renouncing every worry about their lives so as to entrust themselves exclusively to the God of life.

This is because everything comes only from God, gratuitously; and precisely for this reason it is gratuitously re-donated by those who have been called by the Lord, not because of their own merits, but because of grace; not because of their qualities or human capabilities, but only out of the free choice of the Lord. A vocation is always gratuitous, and it is an unmerited gift.



It is often the little ones who are chosen, so that the radical inadequateness of man, to whom the divine mission is entrusted, may be highlighted. In the vocational call of every man, especially those called to the priesthood, the experience of their own littleness and inadequateness is constitutive. This is because the acceptance, in their own story, of the calling of God, is a discovery and assumption of a project that does not belong to him. It is the embracing of a gratuitous gift and is therefore unfathomable.

One goes to God because it is He who calls, and the motives and criteria of the calling are hidden in His free will. Man cannot, autonomously, decide on discipleship and then on the fulfillment of the mission. It is necessary that God be the one who calls and that God be the one who sends forth, “giving authority”, as Matthew tells us.

Service towards mankind is received as a gift to be fulfilled. It is because it is received gratuitously, without merits and without the opportunity to give something back in exchange for it, that it is gratuitously offered to those to whom the person is sent. Everything in God is gratuitous: the election, the sending, forgiveness, the sun and the rain over the just and the unjust (thus contradicting our own idea of justice), the food for the birds of the air and the beauty of the flowers of the fields (thus revealing Himself as a loving and provident Father). By answering a priestly vocation, man becomes a living witness and a mediator of all this.

This is the gift that is entrusted to the Twelve. The list of the Twelve is meaningful.

The names of the twelve apostles are: first, Simon, called Peter, and his brother Andrew; James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James, son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus; Simon the Cananean and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him (10,2-4).

The group seems heterogeneous; the calling of Jesus is not conditioned by diverse social and cultural positions. Among the Twelve there is Peter, indicated firstly and as the “first”, then there are brothers, fishermen, and even a tax-collector; a collaborator with the occupiers; and then there is a zealot, a revolutionary, Simon the Cananean, and it seems that even Judas belongs to the same group.

It is precisely the mentioning of Judas, placed at the end, as if to emphasize his presence, which gives us something to think about: “Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him”. The divine mission is the offer of salvation, however evil has managed to nestle its way in amongst those who have been called to fulfill it. Jesus seems to accept that, it seems as though He took it into account, in order to reabsorb it with a much greater love.

When God chooses to call men to collaborate in His design of redemption, He also chooses radically to commit himself to reality, accepting even to run the risk of betrayal. It is the mystery, both beautiful and terrible, of human freedom, which shows in the history of the world that the mercy of God wants to transform it into a history of salvation.

This is because God is greater than evil and faces it in order to overcome it, through human events, until the fulfillment in the Lord Jesus, into whose discipleship the Twelve are called. Among these Twelve are Judas the betrayer and Peter, who denies Him three times, and James and John, who fell asleep at Gethsemane while their master was in agony, and the others whom, at His death, have abandon Him. Despite all this the mercy of God reveals itself in its totality.



The mention of Judas among the Twelve and the manifestation of the weakness of the others become an element of tragedy and of hope. They reveal the resistance of man to God's salvific mission. They also bear witness to the fact that the sin of man is already incorporated into it, and because it has already been incorporated into it, it is forgiven and overcome.

It is this reality of grace that the priest is sent forth to proclaim, this is the Good News that must be proclaimed and that can change the world: evil has been defeated, the mercy of God, from which a vocation to the service of the Kingdom springs, has overcome everything.