

## **Nazareth weekend with Little Brother Marc**

### ***“I lost my heart to Jesus of Nazareth”***

I was invited to speak about “Nazareth”. Of course this is a central theme in the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld: like Brother Charles we were all seduced by the “*human face of God at Nazareth*” as Emmanuel Asi says. So I guess that nothing new will come out, but it is always important to come back to the source and drink fresh water.

My presentation will have 3 points:

- to look at how Charles de Foucauld’s conception of Nazareth evolved;
- to go through the Gospel and see what does that mean for Jesus to be a man of Nazareth;
- some fundamental attitudes to enter into the dynamic of Nazareth.

### **Charles de Foucauld: from separation to proximity**

“I lost my heart to this Jesus of Nazareth, crucified 1900 years ago, and I am spending my life trying to imitate him as much as my weakness allows.”<sup>1</sup>

It is a beautiful definition of his life that Charles gives here. His story after his conversion was, in fact, before all else, the story of “*a heart given and lost*”, the story of a real and strong friendship with Someone living and close, whose face fascinated him: Jesus of Nazareth. And it was within the dynamic of Jesus that he wanted to place himself: (“I seek to imitate him”). But this was a search that took time, going step by step, discovering little by little. At every step, Charles tries to interpret what “*the Nazareth of Jesus*” is like.

1

Soon after his conversion, while he was seeking how to give his life to God, he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and, while visiting Nazareth, walking through the streets, he "glimpsed", as he said, what the life of Jesus was like: the life of a simple inhabitant of this town, one of the anonymous people whom Charles saw in the streets. This fascinated him: it was this life, with no relief, that the Son of God chose! And as he looked at them with his view as a Westerner, son of a rich family, their life seemed to him one of extreme poverty and “*abjection*” as he called it.

He had also in his mind the image that people had at that time of the life of the Holy Family of Nazareth: a life of perpetual silence, of constant prayer, almost one of having one's hands together all day long! In order to find these conditions of silence, recollection and poverty, in an intimacy with Jesus, he chose, logically, the monastic life.

“The Gospel showed me that ‘the first commandment is to love God with all your heart’ and that everything should be enclosed in love. Everyone knows that love’s first effect is imitation; I had therefore to enter the Religious Order where I would find the most accurate imitation of Jesus. I did not feel done to imitate His life in public preaching: I had then to imitate the hidden life of the poor and humble worker of Nazareth. It seemed to me that no Order could offer a better way to that imitation than a Trappist monastery.”<sup>2</sup>

He entered on the 16th of January 1890.

2

He left it seven years later (16/02/1897) and moved to the Poor clares who housed him in a garden shed and gave him a few tasks to do. In a letter he explained,

"The good God has caused me to find here, as perfectly as possible, what I was seeking: poverty, solitude, abjection, very humble work, complete obscurity: the imitation, as perfect as it can be, of what the life of our Lord Jesus was in this same Nazareth... [...] The Trappist monastery caused me to rise up, created for me a life of study, an honoured life... that is why I left it and here I have embraced the humble and obscure existence of the divine worker of Nazareth.”<sup>3</sup>

We see what his reading of “*the Nazareth of Jesus*” was at that moment: poverty, solitude, work, social obscurity (note the allusion to studies as social promotion). And he summarised it in this formula:

"the humble and obscure existence of the divine worker of Nazareth".

In fact he has discovered that there is a difference in nature between the poverty of a monk and the poverty of a poor, a poverty of means and social status. And he felt that it was the latter that brought him close to Jesus of Nazareth. It is interesting to know that among the steps towards this awareness, there were some rare occasions of encounter with the concrete living conditions of a poor family:

"About eight days ago, I was sent to pray a little beside a poor, native Catholic who had died in the neighbouring hamlet: what a difference between that house and the places we live in! I long for Nazareth....”<sup>4</sup>

In the same way, he suffered from seeing that their monastery was protected, while in that area the first massacres of Armenian Christians had taken place.<sup>5</sup>

Living next to the Poor Clares at Nazareth, without any kind of “*religious statute*”, considering himself as a poor worker, he thought he had found the solution: he had, at the same time, intimacy with Jesus and the social obscurity of the poor.

3

After three and a half years at Nazareth, he agreed to be ordained priest (something that until then had always seemed to him to be contrary to the social humility of Nazareth), and a new change resulted from it – he went to Algeria:

"My recent retreats for the diaconate and the priesthood have shown me that this life of Nazareth, my vocation should be led not in the Holy Land, so greatly loved, but among the sickest souls, the most lost sheep, the most abandoned people: this divine banquet, of which I have become a minister, needs to be presented not to my brothers, to relatives, to rich neighbours, but to the most lame, the most blind, the poorest, to the most abandoned people who most lack priests..”<sup>6</sup>

It was still the life of Nazareth, but he understood that in order to be with Jesus in that life, one has to go where Jesus went, to the most abandoned people: no longer was it to be separation and isolation as in the Holy Land, but living “among” the most abandoned people. It was a very important step!

4

But that raised a new question for him: how was he to reconcile presence to people (who did not delay in swarming into his house) with the recollection of the life of prayer (in order to remain close to the Friend Jesus)? On a trip he made into the great south Sahara region, he looked for a place to go and live among the Tuaregs. One day he found a place that might suit him, at the foot of a cliff near a path people walked along. So should he move high up in order to maintain recollection in isolation, or down below in order to have contact with people in the hurly burly of life? He wrote down his hesitations and reflections, and he placed into the mouth of Jesus what seemed to him to be the line to follow:

"As far as recollection is concerned, it is love that should recollect you in me interiorly, and not distance from my children: See me in them; and like me at Nazareth, live near them, lost in God. In these rocks where I have brought you myself despite yourself, you have the imitation of my homes at Bethlehem and Nazareth, the imitation of the whole of my life of Nazareth....”<sup>7</sup>

This is a new reading of “the Nazareth of Jesus” which allows him to resolve the tension between presence and recollection. Through love and by love, Jesus could be both totally present to God and totally present to people. It is love that keeps us recollected in God: if one truly loves, one can give oneself to others totally

and without fear: one does not leave God by giving oneself to people. And we receive this magnificent and simple definition of Nazareth:

"like me at Nazareth, live near them, lost in God".

5

One of the best-known texts about Nazareth by Charles de Foucauld was written a year later, when he had moved into Tamanrasset:

“Jesus has established you forever in the life of Nazareth: the lives of missions and solitude are only, for you as for him, exceptions: practise them each time that His will clearly indicates them; as soon as they are no longer indicated, return to the life of Nazareth. Desire the establishment of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Follow the rule as one follows a directory without making it a strict duty for yourself, and only in what is not contrary to the life of Nazareth; (either when you are on your own, or when with a few Brothers, until there is really a possibility of leading perfectly the life of a Little Brother or Little Sister in a Nazareth that has enclosure) take as an objective the life of Nazareth, in everything and for everything, in its simplicity and breadth [...]: for example, until the Little Brothers and Little Sisters are duly established, no habit – like Jesus at Nazareth; no enclosure – like Jesus at Nazareth; no habitation far from every inhabited place, but close to a village – like Jesus at Nazareth; no less than 8 hours of work a day (manual or other; manual as much as possible) – like Jesus at Nazareth; no large lands, no large habitation, no large expenses, and even no large almsgiving, but extreme poverty in everything – like Jesus at Nazareth... In a word, in everything: Jesus at Nazareth [...] Your life of Nazareth can be led anywhere: lead it in the place that is most useful for your neighbour.”<sup>8</sup>

I find that this text gives a lot of clarification. This is still a new reading of *“the Nazareth of Jesus”*. But *“Nazareth”* serves to designate two very distinct forms of life: a monastic religious community (*“a Nazareth that has enclosure”*) and, while waiting for it to be possible, a life (*“the life of Nazareth”*) directly in reference to the life of Jesus at Nazareth (*“like Jesus at Nazareth”*). While the first will be marked by separation (*“enclosure”*), the second is wholly characterised by what will make possible a proximity to the ordinary life of people. To describe this proximity, Charles de Foucauld indicates a cluster of examples that complement one another and form a whole. It is remarkable, also, that these elements that Charles emphasises and which he says are *“like Jesus at Nazareth”* are the exact opposite of the elements of the monastic life that he *“wishes to establish”*: no habit, no enclosure, no isolation, the working day, no lands or large buildings, limited expenses and even alms at a normal level (with even the curious remark that certain elements of the rule for the Little brothers and sisters of the Sacred Heart, a monastic project, might be contrary to the life of Nazareth!...).

“Take as an objective the life of Nazareth, in everything and for everything, in its simplicity and breadth [...] In a word, in everything: Jesus at Nazareth”.

Now that he knows how to keep his heart in God while being with people, and now that he is adopting a lifestyle similar to that of ordinary people, Nazareth is no longer a closed model; on the contrary, the meditation ends with openness to various realisations:

“Your life of Nazareth can be led anywhere: lead it in the place that is most useful for your neighbour”.

This last element clearly shows what is at stake: through our proximity, if we are united to God, the good news of the God who is close is proclaimed to the poor and this is his true good.

6

Charles spent the final years of his life making himself close to the Tuaregs, and this was the path of a friendship that needed to be built up patiently. He learned, little by little, the reciprocity of a true relationship (in particular, when he was cared for by them at a time when he was seriously ill), he worked to understand their culture, he learned to appreciate them:

“I have spent the whole of 1912 here, in this hamlet of Tamanrasset. The Tuaregs have been very consoling company for me here, I cannot express how good they have been for me, and how I have found upright souls among them: one or two of them are true friends, something that is rare and very precious everywhere..”<sup>9</sup>

I cannot end this little excursion on the reading of Nazareth that Charles de Foucauld made without quoting a text that touches me deeply, written a few months before his death. Charles was looking for a priest to take on the steps that needed to be taken in France to create an association of the faithful, on which he had been working for several years. He wrote:

“I believe that I am less capable than almost all other priests of taking the steps that need to be taken having only learned to pray in solitude, keep silent, live with books and at the most to chat in a familiar way, person to person, with the poor..”<sup>10</sup>

This text touches me because it related to my experience and, as a Little Brother of Jesus, I wanted to say: see what being with Jesus leads to: it is an apprenticeship of prayer, of listening and of familiar conversation with the poor – three things that need to be learned. And the third of these, in what Charles says here, appears as the one he has learned best... From that apprenticeship, little by little, is born an openness of heart, an ability to be with the other where he is, to understand him from within, and to appreciate him. Charles has entered into the real life of Nazareth, united deep relation with God and deep relation with the people around him.

But isn't that the same path that Jesus of Nazareth took? That brings us back to "*the Nazareth of Jesus*": what reading can we make of it?

## **The Nazareth of Jesus: when God humanises himself**

People sometimes say to us, "But the Gospel says nothing – or almost nothing – about the years Jesus spent at Nazareth. So how can you take Nazareth as a reference for life?" It is true that the Gospels are more than discreet, but the little they say is very significant and has not been included by chance. That is an additional reason to look at it closely. Let us note the few elements that are given to us:

A – The Old Testament never mentions Nazareth, when so many towns and villages are named... Nazareth and Galilee therefore are deeply despised as places that are without significance in the history of salvation:Nathaniel asks:

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?(John 1:46);"

"Go into the matter and see for yourself: prophets do not arise in Galilee.(John 7:52)"

the Pharisees say to Nicodemus, who defends Jesus.

For the religious groups, the circles of power, the doctors and the educated, Jesus is a man from below and from the margin. Certainly they do not have a better opinion of him than of those who follow him:

"This rabble knows nothing about the law, they are damned!(John 7:49)"

– the TOB translates it as "This mass... "). He is exposed without special protection, a simple pawn on the political chessboard in the eyes of the notables

("You do not seem to have grasp the situation at all; you fail to see that it is to your advantage that one man should die for the people than that the whole nation should perish!" John 11:50),

he takes on, right to the end, the situation as a man from the ordinary people and this leads him to death. The Gospel clearly indicates that here there is a revelation of the face of God and of his way of doing things:

"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father who would promptly send more than twelve legions of angels to my defence? But then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say this is the way it must be?" (Matthew 26:53ff; cf.John 11:51f).

So it is then very moving to think that everything that Jesus said to us, about God, about people, about relations between God and people, was thought out and felt by someone from this great "mass", this ordinary crowd, scorned and suspected by the experts and the great. His words are the words of a "little one", of someone who has integrated into his personality the scorn that others have for his own people. I find that we do not marvel at this enough! It should make us read his words, about the merciful Father or the

Samaritan for instance, with different eyes... A mysterious attitude of God who takes on, not humanity in general, but this precise humanity, doubtless because he judged it better able to express correctly who God is and what God wants!

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

## **B**

The offering by Mary and Joseph, at the time of the presentation of Jesus, is the offering of those who “cannot afford a lamb” (*Leviticus 12:6-8*), thus a modest family, but there are doubtless families who are even poorer (*Leviticus 5:11*).

When Jesus begins to teach and do miracles, the people of Nazareth are shocked, scandalised (*Matthew 13:58*):

“Where did the man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? This is carpenter’s son, surely? Is not his mother the woman called Mary, and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Jude? His sisters, too, are they not all here with us? So where did the man get it all?” And even the people of Jerusalem: “How did he learn to read? He has not been educated.” (*John:7:15*).

The answer to their questions is indicated in the Gospel, and it shines with light:

“They went back to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew to maturity, he was filled with wisdom; and God’s favour was with him”.

We find this formula twice – in *Luke 2:39f* after the presentation of Jesus in the temple, and in *Luke 2:51f*, after the story of Jesus being lost and found in the Temple among the teachers. On two occasions, after two scenes that take place in the Temple, we are presented with Nazareth as a place of growth and grace, and as a school of wisdom. It is all the more remarkable that these texts in Luke make reference to the story of the child Samuel (*Luke;2:52* is a quotation of *1 Samuel 2:26*). But for Samuel, it is stated several times that his place of growth in the service of God is the Temple (*1 Samuel 2:11, 18, 21 and 26 and 1 Samuel 3*). So it is very significant and certainly very intentional that Luke takes up the same expression in order to bring out better that radical difference and the newness of Jesus’ situation: his place of growth, in stature and in strength and wisdom, was Nazareth. Luke emphasises this: in the scene with Jesus in the midst of the doctors, Jesus is surprised:

“Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”(*Luke 2:49*)

Our logic would be to say, “Yes, of course, he will remain in the Temple: that is his Father’s house, isn’t it?” The Gospel, however, says that his parents did not understand and that he went down with them to Nazareth:

“he lived under their authority and he increased in wisdom, in stature and in favour with God and with people” (v.51-52).

Of course he needed to be with his Father, but in the astonished eyes of his parents, Jesus discovered that being with his Father meant being with them at Nazareth, being the Son of the Most High means being subjected to them.

So for him, growing in stature and wisdom was something that happened at Nazareth, or in other words in the school of simple people and ordinary life, through his family relationships and relationships in the village, at the synagogue, at work, observing life, people, and nature while listening.

All that is for me the most important thing about Nazareth, the key: Nazareth is the place where God humanises himself, where the Son of God becomes man. To state it in big words, Nazareth is the sociological location of the Incarnation; to say it in simpler words, if he had been born into a priestly family, or with a father who was a scribe or doctor of the Law, his words and his personality would have been very different. He speaks to us of the Father with the words of a peasant of Galilee. It is important to be aware of that: we read that “*the Word was made flesh*” and thinking about it, this immerses us in contemplation; but the Word was made this particular flesh, a Galilean of Nazareth, and that also should immerse us in wonder. Why do you think that Jesus cried out one day,

“I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little ones. [...] No one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him” (Matthew 11:25)?

He cried out because he had had the experience of this wisdom himself. And the Son who reveals is “*the divine worker of Nazareth*” to go back to the expression used by Charles de Foucauld.

So what is important is not so much to imagine what the life of Jesus at Nazareth was like, but to scrutinise in the Gospel what Jesus learned at Nazareth and the kind of man he became there. And why is that very important? Because if that context of life with simple people was the nourishing terrain which formed Jesus, I am permitted to think that with the same terrain and the same Spirit that animated Jesus (a Spirit that he promised and gave to us), Nazareth could also be for me the place of growth and discovery “*before God and before people*”.

I have said there what is at the heart, but we are not finished yet because I would like to make a rapid tour with you through the Gospel in order to identify exactly what kind of man Nazareth formed. It is inspiring to re-read the Gospel while trying to note what Jesus received from “*the school of Nazareth*” We will always discover new elements. Let us take up some of them:

+ Formed in prayer by the family liturgy and prayer of the synagogue, Jesus developed a very intimate and very special relationship with God, whom he called "*Abba, daddy*". One sees all through the Gospel that he nourished this relationship by taking time to pray to his Father and speak with him: he got up early (Mark 1:35) or else he remained late in the evening. (Matthew 14:23) He isolated himself and people looked for him. (John 6:24) It was a relationship that was always awake, that one sees sprang up spontaneously in the face of events and encounters (Matthew 11:25f; John 11:41) and which must also have had a discreet expression in the secret of the heart, because he learned that "*the Father sees in secret.*" (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18)

+ Probably because he had the experience of the look of contempt directed to the "*little people*" and to himself, he always brought forward the value of the little ones:

"Your Father does not want a single one of these little ones should be lost" (Matthew 18:14)

Similarly, he did not tolerate at all anything that excluded, anything that created categories resulting from origin and social situation: while they were unclean and everyone fled from them, he approached lepers and touched them, thus contracting their uncleanness (Mark 1:40-45); he let himself be touched by the woman with a bad reputation whom everyone pointed at (Luke 7:36); he admired the faith of the pagans he encountered, and even declared it to be greater than the faith he saw in Israel. (Luke 7:9; Matthew 15:28)

+ He had, in particular, a manner very much his own of looking at those whom everyone considers as sinners: a look of respect which refused to condemn and always referred the accuser to his own conscience.

"Let the one among you who is guiltless to throw the first stone at her." John;8:7; "How can you claim to see the speck in your brother's eye with the beam that is in your own eye?" Matthew 7:3; "Shouldn't you have mercy on your brother as I have had mercy on you?" Matthew 18:33;

a look of hope which glimpsed an open future

"Go and sin no more." John 8:11;

"There is hope for the sick man as soon as the doctor approaches" cf Mark 2:17; "The son who was dead can come back to life" cf Luke 15:32.

+ He learned to see the simple everyday things as messengers which spoke to him of his Father. Looking at things and events, he had a kind of contemplative view which saw further:

"Look at the flowers of the fields and the birds of the sky and think of your Father who watches over you all." (Mark 6:28).

"Look at the grain which grows all alone and remember that the Kingdom grows little by little, even if we do not notice it."(Mark 4:27).

"Look at this woman who sweeps her whole house in order to find the coin that she has lost: that is how your Father searches for all those who are lost."(Luke 15:8).

"Look at how the rain falls on the just and the unjust." (Matthew 5:45)

"See how the wheat and the weeds grow at the same time (Matthew 13:24) and understand that the Father, who alone can say what is good or wicked, always opens an opportunity to come back to him."

+ It was mainly towards people that he had this view that went further and sees the heart. Because he knew only too well that there was falseness (and contempt) in readymade ideas about people, and because he had experienced the spontaneous generosity of people who did not have very much, he knew how to draw attention to the true greatness and the true dignity of those men and women he encountered: as when he remarked on the tiny offering made by the poor widow who took something from her own wretched state in order to give everything, more than all the others together (Mark 12:41); or when he invited Simon to open his eyes:

"This woman, do you really see her? If she has loved so much, it is because she has been forgiven!" (Luke 7:44).

+ One sees him always ready to learn from the others, to allow himself to be questioned, when he encounters righteousness and faith wherever they come from: from foreigners like the centurion (Luke 7:1-10) and the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28) – both of whom expressed themselves in the same language imagery as Jesus – or from his mother (John 2:1-11; cf. Luke 2:48-52) or from a scribe:

"You are not far from the Kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34).

+ He had an extreme sensitivity to the misfortunes of people, and in particular the poor. Several times the Gospel notes that he was touched by compassion, sometimes even that he was deeply moved interiorly: in the face of the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36), in the face of the widow who buried her son at Nain (Luke 7:11), before the sick of all kinds, those who approached him or those towards to whom he made the approach (John 5:6). This compassion gave him courage in the places where the world capitulates, as with the possessed Gadarene men (Matthew 8:28).

+ At Nazareth he gathered proverbs and stories, and he knew how to speak with the simple words of the people of the land. He also observed the people and the "great ones": the unjust judge (Luke 18:2), the rich man unaware of what was around him (Luke 16:19), the corrupt administrator (Luke 16:1), the priest and the Levite who were prisoners in their world (Luke 10:31)... He knew the humiliation and suffering of the poor who were incapable of making an invitation (Luke 14:14). He learned the daily good sense that made the simple people see the absurdities of the law when it was no longer at the service of life:

“Who is going to make me believe that if his son or his ox fell into a well on the Sabbath Day, he would not go and pull them out because it was the Sabbath!” (Luke 14:5; 13:15f; cf. John 7:23; Matthew 15:1-5)

Like the simple people, he had a sense of what sounds false, and he was quick to point it out: what he reproached most often was hypocrisy. One day, he struck out at the Pharisees who love money:

“You pass yourselves off as just men, but God knows your hearts: what is raised up in the eyes of men, God is disgusted by!” (Luke 16:15).

+ Of course, this way of doing things didn't earn him nothing but friends: he was told that he must be a drunkard, that he only thought about eating, that he only went around with disreputable people (Luke 5:30; 7:34; 15:2). The Gospel often notes that the great ones used to grind their teeth at him while all the ordinary people were filled with joy by the words of mercy that came out of his mouth, and by the cures that he did (Luke 13:17; cf. Luke 4:28; Matthew 15:31).

It is interesting to note how the Gospel of John (which people say is more “*contemplative*”) stresses the theme of Nazareth. At the beginning we find the question,

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46).

At the end, in the writing above the cross, Pilate says ironically,

“Jesus the Nazarene, king of the Jews” (John 19:19).

All that seems to support the sceptics. However, in the likeness of a gardener, Mary recognised the voice of the Master; in the unknown man beside the lake, the beloved disciple recognised the Lord. This is not a revenge, nor the end of a parenthesis: the Master and Lord had not taken on the likeness of a great person which he might have been hiding until then. He remained Jesus of Nazareth, he still needed to be found in his ordinary form, by those that are his own:

“You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified; he is risen, he is not here [...] He has gone before you ... into Galilee, that is where you will see him” (Mark 16:6).

I do not know if you have the same reaction, but for me this reading of the Gospel fills me with wonder. And I feel “*at home*” in these texts, not only because they show me the face of Jesus, but also because behind each scene, behind each attitude Jesus has, I could put the names of people who, by their behaviour or reactions, have helped me to understand the word of God and decipher its mystery.

I will add one more thing: that Jesus having taken on this face, and having been formed in this school, is also a revelation of the mystery of God. We often say, in pious words<sup>11</sup>, that at Nazareth God hid his divinity. But it is exactly the contrary: at Nazareth, God revealed his true face as God! When God wants to tell us who he truly is, he takes the face of a simple man of Nazareth, this village unknown in the Bible, in a peripheral region, distanced from the Temple and the religious centres, far from Judea and the circles of

power, “*crossroads of the pagan nations*” and contaminated by them. It is as if to say to us: Every discourse in religions and theologies has presented me as the Most High, the Wholly Other, the All-powerful, the Absolute, the Separated One, etc. But these terms are only true if you agree to empty them of their usual meaning! And you would be closer to my reality – which, in any case, no words can translate – if you were to call me also the Most Low, the Wholly Close, the One who involves himself with you, the Servant. We have an unambiguous confirmation when Jesus affirms very clearly:

“You call me Master and Lord, and rightly, for so I am; but I am a master and lord who washes your feet; and if you want to be mine, you also must act in the same way as me.” (cf John 13:13f).

So yes, we can say to God,

“The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory are yours”

on condition that we do not forget that his royalty is proclaimed in the writing on the cross, and recognised by a man condemned to death, the royalty of a Nazarene who gives his life when it seems that it is taken from him; that his power is that of the friend who begs for the renewed love of the one who has betrayed him (his betrayal was, precisely,

“I have nothing to do with this Nazarene” Matthew 26:71ff).

At Nazareth, it is not only the being of God that is clarified with a new light; it is also his action, his way of doing things. He no longer presents himself as the one who saves “*from outside*”, “*with a strong hand and arm outstretched*”. The Bible always stressed this mysterious preference of God for the poor, the despised:

“When a poor man calls, the Lord hears!” (Psalm 34:6).

With Jesus at Nazareth, this preference is expressed in a new way: although he is still the one who “*collects our tears in his bottle*” (Psalm 56:8), it is “*from within*” by weeping them with us. “*He took our infirmities on himself*” (Matthew 8:17), the Gospel says, after the account of a series of cures; but he took them on, before all else, in his own flesh: “*he was tested in every way that we are*”, and “*he is not ashamed to call us ‘brothers’*” (Hebrews 4:15 and 2:11). It is the whole concrete nature of his life as a Nazarene (at Nazareth, on the roads and on the cross), everything that made him “*like his brothers in every way*” which made him “a merciful high priest, capable of making the expiation for the sins of the people; it is because he suffered trials himself that he is able to bring help to those who are tried” (Hebrews 2:17)<sup>12</sup>,

not just help in the form of cures and miracles, but the radical help of transplanting into us the life of God.

## **The basic attitude of Nazareth: being a brother and a sister**

It is this face of Jesus that has seduced us; it is in his steps that we want to walk, by choosing to live among the simple people, among the poor. But people sometimes say to us, *“You are deluding yourselves. And anyway, whether you like it or not, you are not like the poor”*. And that is true. Even for those of us who

come from modest families, the education we have received, the guarantees of security that the community gives us, the absence of worry about the future of our relatives, distances us from the situation of the real “little ones”. What are we to do?

Perhaps we should begin by saying that destitution and certain forms of deprivation and poverty (physical, cultural, educational) are evils that we need to combat. It is not destitution that I choose, but I choose to live with people who suffer from destitution, to struggle with them in order to get out of it, seeking with them. That means that I refuse to take myself out of it on my own and that I accept, out of friendship for them, the deprivations they suffer from. Struggling against these deprivations, while bearing them with them, is not, perhaps, totally foreign to the attitude of offering our life from day to day.

A second thing that it is necessary to say is that, in any case, it is not a matter of being like the poor, but of being with them as brothers and sisters. And there, we are not the only agents: although there is an effort of adjustment on our side to make in order to be as close as possible, another part of the process does not depend on us. We cannot be “*like them*”, in many ways we are not “in the same gang”, but if they feel in us the desire to join them, it is they who take us by the hand in order to bring us to their side and welcome us into their life; and they ‘forgive’ us all our riches and securities. There are so many examples many of us could give of this true welcome that takes no account of differences!

However, there are also a certain number of fundamental attitudes that allow us to enter into this dynamic of Nazareth.

1- The first attitude is, perhaps, that we are among the ‘little ones’ in order to learn in their school.<sup>13</sup> I like to place in parallel an extract from our Constitutions

“The brothers live among people, not to become shepherds or guides, but simply to be their brothers” and a passage from the Gospel:

“You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called ‘Rabbi’ since you have only one Master and you are all brothers and sisters” (Matthew 23:8).

For me it is very significant that the word ‘*brother*’ is associated in this text from the Gospel not with the Father,<sup>14</sup> but with the master, the teacher. It is as if it puts a finger on one of our great temptations, that of always wanting to teach others without wanting to learn from them!... Wanting to be among people “*simply to be their brothers (and sisters)*” invites us to enter into a different attitude: we are brothers and sisters of the ‘*little ones*’ if we journey together by sharing our lights. This is both the hope for and the realisation of the promised new covenant:

“In their minds I shall plant my laws, writing them in their hearts... There will no be further need for each to teach his neighbour and each his brother or his sister, saying ‘Learn to know the Lord’. No, they will all know me from the least to the greatest” (Hebrews 8:10f, quoting Jeremiah 31:33).

In order to enter into a relationship of true fraternity, it is not enough, in fact, even though it is a primary precondition, to “become of the country” – as Charles de Foucauld wrote – by being “*so approachable, so very small*” that the other can dare to ask me for anything... That the other can regard me as a brother or a sister is not enough if I do not change my view of him. As a human person and child of God, she (he) is also worked by the Spirit and tries to respond to what appears to her (him) as the good, with the lights available to her (him), from day to day. From her or his fidelity, groping like mine, I can also learn and, thanks to her or him, I will grow if I accept putting myself in her (his) school. Only then will we truly journey together ... as brothers and sisters.

2- A second attitude is vigilance of heart, remaining constantly alert to seek the face of the Lord. It is closely linked to the first. It requires, before all else, that we read and re-read the Gospel constantly <sup>15</sup> Not primarily to seek a moral in it, to sound out what is good and what is evil, but in order to seek the face of Jesus constantly: to watch him act, to scrutinise his reactions, to see his behaviour. Little by little, allowing ourselves to be inhabited by him and transformed by him. He is a man of Nazareth, a “little one”: by looking at him we can discover, little by little, how we should behave in the world of simple people, which is our own, and learn to marvel, as he did, to allow ourselves to be touched by compassion, to struggle against evil, to find paths towards the Father etc. Very simply – to love!

This search for the face of Jesus is a “full-time commitment”. Not just in times of prayer, but in the vigilance of a heart that is awakened. We cannot confine it just to the times of prayer: each encounter, each event should find us attentive to seeking the imprint of the Lord who has promised to accompany us. We should learn to re-read our lives that way? “These encounters that I had today, these events, even the very small ones, have they slid over me without affecting me, or have they taught me something about the face of God?” We often say that our contemplative life is nourished from sharing the life of ordinary people; I believe that this can enrich our prayer (personal or in community) if we dare to allow our hearts to speak from our discoveries or our sufferings on this path with the Lord through the days. Like the disciple Jesus loved, to recognise him in unlikely traits of daily life (cf. John 21:7 and 12).

3- “Whoever gives you a glass of water to drink because you belong to Christ, I tell you truly, he will not lose his reward” (Mark 9:41; Matthew 10:42).

In a context (Mark 9:33-34) in which the disciples are asking themselves the question, “Who is the greatest?” Jesus calls a child and replies,

“The greatest is the one who is little like this child; for he allows those who welcome him to welcome me, and to welcome the One who sent me”

(v.37). The greatest is the one who is little enough to allow his certainties to be overturned and recognise the good wherever it comes from, even places where one does not expect it to be (v.9). The greatest is the one

who is little enough to ask for a glass of water: it enables someone to give to him and to show himself or herself as a brother or a sister and gain his (her) place in the Kingdom of God (v. 41).”

Perhaps we have assimilated too well the words that St Paul attributes to Jesus, “It is better to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). We like to give; we do not like to allow our needs to be seen, we do not find it easy to receive. What we want to do to others (show ourselves to them as their brother or sister by coming to their aid, welcoming them, valuing them, making ourselves close to them) we do not permit them to do for us! Journeying with them, in truth, without hiding our limitations and our needs, with our pettiness and our greatness, is perhaps giving them the possibility of considering us as their brother or their sister simply by giving us what we lack! ... That also is Nazareth, being little enough to allow the other to give the best of herself or himself.

## **To conclude**

To end with, I would like to illustrate what I have just said by referring to the concrete examples of three small personal stories, three faces I met. I do not know if you have seen the Argentinean film by Carlos Sorin called *Historias minimas* (Very small stories). Our stories are always very small stories of very little things, but it is necessary to be there in order to gather them, perceive the mystery that gives itself there, give thanks, ask. They are stories full of meaning and revelatory of the mystery, if we are attentive to it.

The first is David, a friend that I went to see in prison for many years; it was from him that I learned, with the greatest depth, what forgiveness is. He told me once that one of his fellow prisoners had promised him, “When I get out, I swear to you, I will organise your escape”. David, being reasonable, said to him, “Don’t make oaths like that. You know very well what happens here to those who do not live up to their word!” But the other man promised, he got out of prison and, of course, he never went back. On the next visit I found my friend very angry and disappointed. And I tried to calm him down by explaining, “But as you know very well, when you are inside you make promises because you do not know the extent of the difficulties, but once you are outside, you become aware that it is much more complicated. You must understand that.” Then David said to me, “Yes, you are trying to talk to me about forgiveness (I had never spoken about it!) but, you know, if I want to forgive him, I will have to change all my internal laws!” No one had ever explained forgiveness to me like that!

Second story: my most beautiful Christmas gift last year. In front of the shop where I was working, there was a group of young homeless men who spent their days drinking and begging. Little by little we got to know each other, and I stopped each time to greet them; I remembered their names, they remembered mine, and we became friendly. I liked to see them and I believe that they also liked it when I stopped. On the eve

of Epiphany, a charitable organisation was distributing the traditional Epiphany cakes to them just at the time when I passed by. Just as I was going to leave, one of them stopped me and said, “Wait, Pascal has gone to get you something”. And Pascal came back with a cake. “Here, big fellow, this is for you. You will have a celebration!” When the excluded one becomes the one who includes, there is joy in the Kingdom of Heaven, isn’t there?

A third story, again at work: there were a lot of young probationers sent by their schools to learn the trade. Often they were young Arabs, who are usually not viewed very kindly. I developed the habit of asking their names. I was struck to see how important this insignificant little thing was: when you go back the next day and say, “Hello, Jamal” or “Hello, Kader!”, the number of times they said to me, with joy and surprise in their eyes, “Oh, you remembered my name!” And after that, they came to greet me every day, which they did not do with the others. That caused me to reflect a lot and understand more deeply these words of Jesus, “The shepherd knows his sheep and he calls each of them by name and they follow him!” To what depth of the human, to what secret hope of salvation Jesus makes allusion in that simple phrase! The interesting thing for me is that this story has a follow-up: one of my colleagues was a practising Moslem, an open and curious man: we always talked a lot with him about religion, politics, justice, etc. And with a lot of freedom and friendship, he often commented to me on my ways of doing things. He always insisted on telling me that when I spoke about humanity, he saw that the source of my attitude was my faith in God. I found that very beautiful. And so he spotted my way of doing things with the young men and the fact that they then came to greet me. He then spoke to me and I explained to him what this had led me to discover of the mystery of the love of God, from the words about the sheep. It touched me a lot that when I left he said to me, in reference to this little story, “I am going to miss you. Being with you has made me work on my own Islam: there is a dimension of humanity with you that we do not have” and I thanked him for his help in re-reading my life. All that happened because we were together for more than a year, brooms in hand.

I will finish for good with a sentence from the Gospel that is a great light for me:

“You are the salt of the earth. If the salt loses its savour, what will make it salty again?” (Matthew 5:13). There is a mystery on the salt, and that comes through in our manner of speaking. If food is a little tasteless, we say, “It needs a bit of salt”. If there is too much, we say, “*You have been a bit heavy-handed with the salt!*” But if there is just the right amount, we don’t speak about salt any more, we just say, “*What a good soup!*” It is the taste of the food that comes out, not the taste of the salt! And that is exactly the meaning of the image in the Gospel. We sometimes ask ourselves anxiously how to give a Christian flavour to our world. Perhaps that is not the right question. There is flavour in the world, and it is God that has put it there. Our role, as Christians, is to be there so that the mysterious exchange is produced and the divine flavour of the world can be expressed. Not our own taste...<sup>16</sup>

Is there any better way to talk about Nazareth?

Marc Hayet

Jordans

Pentecost (10-12/06/2011)

## Notes

We French are not very good with inclusive language, I am sorry about that. But I can assure you that when I say “sister” or “women” or “she” or “her” it includes all the “brothers”, “men”, “he” and “him”!...

Some times I will speak “as a Little Brother of Jesus” and from our situations and commitment but you will be able to translate to your own situations.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Gabriel Tourdes, 07/03/1902.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Henri de Castries, 14/08/1901.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Louis de Foucauld, 12/04/1897

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Marie de Bondy, 10/04/1895

<sup>5</sup> “It is painful to be on good terms with the cutthroats who killed our brothers”. Letter to Marie de Bondy, 24/06/96

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Mgr. Caron, 09/04/1905

<sup>7</sup> Beni-Abbes Notebook, 26/05/1904

<sup>8</sup> Tamanrasset Notebook, 22/07/1905

<sup>9</sup> Letter de Henry de Castries, 08/01/1913

<sup>10</sup> Letter to Father Voillard, 11/06/1916

<sup>11</sup> See for instance the Handbook of the lay fraternities of Charles de Foucauld page 35, §D, 4th line...

<sup>12</sup> The letter to the Hebrews names Jesus “High Priest”; but it is remarkable that to do so, it has to “empty” the word “High Priest” of its usual meaning: in the First Testament, to signify that the High Priest was “in

the world of God”, he had to be different and separated from the rest of the people (special dress, special meals, etc.); Jesus at the contrary is called High Priest because of his proximity and likeness to the people, and that proximity to his ‘brothers and sisters’ introduces him in “the world of God”...

<sup>13</sup> “They first listen to what lies deep in the hearts of their friends, and to the richness of the people among whom they live, by placing themselves in the school of the poor who are the treasure of the Church.” Constitutions of the LBJ C 95 II. In a very significant way, this passage is found in the chapter about our mission in the Church.

<sup>14</sup> This verse is often quoted as “You are all brothers and sisters because you have only one Father”; that is true, of course, but it is not what the Gospel says! And it is important to stay close to the text...

<sup>15</sup> “We should try to become impregnated with the spirit of Jesus by reading and re-reading, meditating and re-meditating constantly on his words and his example: so that they may act in our souls like a drop of water that falls and falls again on a slab, always on the same place...” Charles de Foucauld, Letter to Louis Massignon, 22/07/1914. “Let us return to the Gospel. If we do not live the Gospel, Jesus does not live in us” Charles de Foucauld, Letter to Mgr Caron, 30/06/1909.

<sup>16</sup> Same meaning for the sentence on the lamp: “No one lights a lamp to cover it with a bowl or to put it under a bed. No, it is put on a lamp-stand so that people may have light when they come in” (Luke 8:16). There is colour in the world, it is God who has put it there and people who have woven it. It is necessary to have light so that people can see the colours of the world. We are not the light, just the lamp. What is interesting is the world seen thanks to the light. The lamp is just a help.