

Intervention of the Custos of the Holy Land at the Rimini Meeting

Presentation of the exhibition “Through the eyes of the Apostles – A presence that overwhelms life”

Rimini, 24 August 2011

“I would like to begin by saying that what has been asked of me is not at all simple. I have been asked to speak to you of Capernaum – a very beautiful and fascinating Place – in relation to my experience of faith in Christ, and to show how this experience nourishes even today my life as a Franciscan in the Holy Land. I am worried because – as with all experiences that are recounted, i.e., transmitted – I will have to make a synthesis, entering in the heart of the relation that nourishes and sustains my passage through the Holy Land. This encounter at the Meeting thus obliges me to redefine, by alterations in ages and circumstances, my personal relation with the certainty (this is the common bond of the Meeting) that is Christ, experienced in that school of real concreteness that is Capernaum and the Holy Land. It is this, I believe, to live the life and faith “through the eyes of the Apostles”: along with faithfulness to a immutable and static repository, the “*apostolic form of living*”, of Franciscan memory, itself provides the profound conviction that here and now, in the small fragment of our biography and geography, we are able to experience and encounter “an immense certainty” because this has already taken place “in that time” and “in that place”. What is thus my experience of Christ? What does Capernaum, a pile of ruins, tell us of that experience? How does that Land, even today, still nourish my experience of Christ in daily life? These are simple questions, yet also very difficult ones.

Before arriving at Capernaum, however, I would like to start from another Place, further away, in fact the first place that God inhabited on the earth, which wasn’t Capernaum, nor Nazareth nor Jerusalem, but the Garden of Eden.

And then I would like to move closer and listen along with you to several chapters of the Bible which seem very far apart from one another, the first chapters of Genesis and the initial chapters of the Gospel of Mark. Chapters which may seem very distant from each other, but which share something in common, namely that both represent a beginning.

The book of Genesis speaks of a beginning, of “Bereshit”, to indicate not only what came before all the rest, but also to announce the profound idea which moved the heart of God when he created the world and Man. He wanted to be, freely, certainly, and not out of necessity (“for his glory”, the Catechism would say) a God with the world and for the world, with Man and for Man: a world and a Man thought out, wanted, created, loved. It is not rash to affirm that if Man is *capax Dei*



(“capable of God”) this is possible because God wanted to be *capax hominis*¹ (“capable of Man”) and therefore *capax mundi* (“capable of the world”). The first truth of Man is that of being made for this encounter, for this living and real relation in which life is born and grows.

Sin is to imagine that life is to be found not within the relation between God and Man, but outside or against this, in the flight to an imaginary world of power and self-assertion. With Adam and Eve, Man has taken into himself this doubt.

That which was simply real, that is to say God and Man and their relation, now is marked by doubt. There remains only a life that has to be entirely reinvented each day, because Man no longer knows God nor that everything has already been given.

Salvation consists in the fact that a new encounter has taken place that gives new light and life to this world and to this wounded Man that God has not abandoned.

The Gospel of Mark, in the first chapter, recounts to us that after John had been arrested, Jesus began his preaching and entered into Capernaum. The evangelist Matthew is even more precise, and tells us that Jesus went to live there. Jesus came precisely to live in this wounded and fragmented land that had become inhospitable for both God and Man. And he did this in a simple and ordinary manner, entering in the day-to-day lives of the people, in their homes.

I would like to linger a bit longer over this banal but at the same time important aspect. Still to be seen today in Capernaum are the streets on which Jesus walked, the threshold of Peter’s house. We can understand what life was like for the inhabitants of this time. We can see the kitchens with their ovens, floors, stairs, we can comprehend what the thatched ceilings were like. Among these houses, there is also that of Jesus. We can see it and a few privileged ones can even touch it, there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Those inhabitants did not have an emotional or theoretical experience. Jesus was there, in their midst, in their own homes. The events that disrupted their lives took place there, within the very real and ordinary context of their lives, transforming them.

But let us return to the text of Mark.

Jesus’ first day at Capernaum was not just any day. It was a Saturday, a holy day that celebrated Man’s love for God, that celebrated the alliance, the profound link between us and Him.

And on this first day, there were four important moments. Let us listen to them as recounted by the evangelist Mark.

* The first (Mark 1:21-28) is when Jesus enters the synagogue and speaks. His speech is a lesson, a new account to man of the truth of God. And then, alongside Jesus’ voice, that of the demon arises. As in Eden, alongside the authoritative voice of God there is that of the demon. And the demon shouts, his voice seeks to be more powerful than that of Jesus, more powerful than the Word. He wants Man to again listen to his voice, rather than to that of God. And he shouts about the distance between us and Him: “What do you have to do with us?” The demon shouts his truth,

¹ Cf. A. Gesché, «Dieu est-il "capax hominis"», in *Revue Théologique de Louvain*, 24 (1993) 32 ff.



shouts his victory: You are a distant God. And therefore, why are you here? Your being here destroys us, you have come to ruin us...

But on this day, at Capernaum, Jesus' voice is able to silence this ancient voice. He removes from Man this doubt, God can no longer be a distant God. "Quiet! Come out of him!". When the Word speaks, evil must be quiet. When Jesus enters, evil must leave.

And then, when at last the shout of evil has been silenced, the true question is reborn in Man: and who is this one? Who is the one who speaks, who silences in us the voice of evil, the voice of doubt? Who saves us in this way? Has God really again approached us?

*On leaving the synagogue (Mark 1:29-31), Jesus enters into a home, Peter's home, and cures his mother-in-law, who had been sick in bed with a fever. And the mother-in-law, now cured, begins to wait on them.

And here Jesus goes to reside in another fracture, not the one separating Man from God, but that which separates Man from his own brother, which isolates him in his own loneliness, incapable of serving. Jesus comes to reside there.

He does nothing, apart from simply coming there. Again, simply, he enters.

*And then there is another very interesting passage (Mark 1:32-34), a third miracle. The evangelist Mark tells us that in the evening, after the setting of the sun, all of the city came together before the door, and brought to Jesus all those who were ill or possessed by demons. And this was the third miracle, that a whole city had been brought together...

Jesus passed into the synagogue, and cured Man in his relation with God.

He entered into the home, and cured Man in his most intimate relationships, those with his family members.

And thus the third miracle, that came by itself when the first two relationships had been made whole, was that an entire village was there, all together, in a new solidarity in the pain that begged for salvation from the only one who was able to give it to them.

*Finally, there is a fourth and last passage (Mark 1:35-39), and it is when Jesus goes away. Furtively, at night, he goes away to pray. And when they realize this, they are surprised that he is no longer there, and they search and they find him. But he tells them that he is not there only for Capernaum, but that there is somewhere else waiting for him and calling him. Capernaum is not everything, it is not a closed place but rather a door which opens onto another, onto all the rest. The salvation of Capernaum is that by which Man finds again his own solidarity with all other men. What took place in Capernaum is what will now take place for all men everywhere, for all families, for all cities. This everywhere is thus all the other villages of Galilee.

But this other place is above all the Father, and it is in prayer to him that Jesus returns, with the Man that he has encountered, with whom he has lived. He who has resided with men, now can lead Man to his true place of abode, living in God.

Capernaum has re-opened a door, to the land of men and to the heaven of the Father.



At that moment Capernaum tells us that the real life of Man remains the true Holy Land of the encounter with God. God is encountered through living one's life in His manner, which is that of relationship, of open meeting with Him. There is once again a place of encounter between Him and us, and this place is simple reality, the way it is. Life lived with and for others is the only place for meeting with Him.

And when I say life, I am not speaking of something abstract, idyllic, or refined. No, I am speaking of life itself, and he who knows anything at all of his own heart, knows how much this is marked by ambiguity, by sin. Well, then, it is precisely this life and this earth that are the site of the encounter with Him. There is no experience of God without the drama, painful and beautiful, of the life of each one of us. Here, in our encounters, within our own homes, salvation takes place. The eyes of the Apostles have seen, and contemplated, this.

Living in the Holy Land, I gradually became convinced of this. Not because I had learned this through the study of books but because I had had the opportunity to live it. In this regard, the Holy Land is a formidable place. Taking care of the Places is not simply a matter of archaeology. Living in the Holy Land since Franciscan times, and caring for the memory of the Places, obliges us above all to care for the testimony and the experience to which the Places make reference. The Place of the encounter where one arrives to the point of forgiveness should become the testimony of encounter and forgiveness. If Jesus lived in a land that provided an insight of truth and divinity to the human reality, it is possible to inhabit the Earth with and like Him. If there is a Holy Land, it means that there is a holy way of living on Earth. As Rahner says: if the Word became Man, then all men have the power to be the Word!

So Capernaum tells us that on this earth and between men the encounter with God is always possible.

It is not encountered here, though, beginning from ideas. Or better, it is not encountered here if the ideas of each person lack weight, depth, a real basis of life lived in openness to another and to Another. Because ideas, without life, you will have to defend them, and the other will be an enemy who will throw back upon you your lack of life. But if your ideas have life within them, there will be no need to defend them, life will do so itself, by pronouncing its own truth...

Not only this. And the encounter with another, and with the diversity of the other, will force you in a certain manner to confirm the reality of your own experience. Are these only ideas? Are they only nice thoughts, beautiful words? Or is there something else?

For us, therefore, living in the Holy Land should only be this: to do what Jesus himself did, namely to live with vitality within this fractured world, to be the prolongation of His hospitable and giving life.



How do we do this? In a very simple way, that is to say simply seeking to live the Gospel. The mission, in fact, is not to do anything in particular, but to live the Gospel, in the place and in the conditions in which you are placed from time to time.

To live the Gospel is precisely this possibility of not having fear of reality, of life, this possibility of our remaining within ourselves, without fleeing, recognizing a Presence in it. A Presence that can only be encountered by giving oneself up to life just as it is. The Gospel is the amazement at being able to live everything that happens, only because Someone is there, with you.

To live the Gospel is first of all to have this experience in the first person, and concretely to remain there, within one's own history, without inventing for oneself another road to salvation other than that which comes from the cross of Christ. To be only there, in one's own poverty, and to allow God continually to save you. To live only from this, and not to have anything else at all, to remain at the heart of the mystery. To live the Gospel in the Holy Land, where things frequently become very complicated, where the past (and the present) of violence has marked the life of entire communities, social and religious, to the point of becoming the only thing that one reads about today, is then, for a Franciscan, to try to interrupt that vicious circle of violence and fear, by bearing witness to salvation.

At times we have a vague and abstract idea of salvation. We speak of it as if it were something that will happen some day, and that while waiting for it we should try to do the best that we can. This is not Christian salvation. The pages of the Gospel of Capernaum speak to us of a very concrete salvation, and of a God who comes to live precisely in the space of your daily life, so that this daily life, just as it is, become the means of your encounter with Him. It is not necessary to invent anything.

If faith is not this, if it remains relegated to a few practices or a few moments of the day, if it does not become an abode within a life together with the Lord, a careful and curious look to recognize your passage through history, if then it does not transform your entire existence, reality will always be a menace to be protected against. "Your faith has saved you...", says the Lord to those he encounters.

Jesus lived on Earth with a concrete series of attitudes, those of peace, gratuitousness, welcoming, forgiveness. Jesus would not have been able to not abide our sin if his mode of remaining here had not been that of forgiveness. When, at Capernaum, they presented a paralytic to Jesus (Mark 2:1-12), opening up the roof, Jesus immediately forgave him. Only from this is born the possibility of encountering another in all of its diversity, and of discovering how this encounter gives you and reveals to you something of yourself, of your relationship with God, which otherwise would never have been discovered.

I would like to relate now a personal experience, which has marked in a very strong way my stay in the Holy Land. Initially, during my first years in Jerusalem, my contact with the non-Catholic and non-Christian realities was limited to simple encounters on the street with Jews, Muslims, and Christians of other denominations, to being aware of the different traditions



which, in one manner or another, influenced life within this ancient city. These weren't personal encounters of any special note, apart from the usual more or less congenial episodes that all inhabitants of Jerusalem experience: those who bless you, those who curse you, those who spit on you, those who stop to talk with you... All in all my life was taking place in a tranquil manner within the usual norms. In short, there were no particular opportunities for "dialogue", as we would say today. I lived within the world that had always been mine: Christian, Catholic, religious. I had my questions, I provided the answers myself.

Things began to change when I was invited to study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This was the first real exposure, the first real contact with a reality that was totally different and strange for me. I was studying the Bible and hence found myself in the Bible Department of the University, where nearly everyone was a religious. At this time I was the only Christian in the entire Department. After the initial inevitable difficulties, real friendships were born. In the relationships and in the far-reaching discussions that we had, I became aware that we did not have a common language. I am not referring to the spoken language, but rather to a way of thinking, to concepts. In speaking of my faith – because this was almost the only thing that was spoken about with me – I managed to get almost nothing across, and this not because I lacked the words, but because we were from two different worlds: Eucharist, Trinity, Incarnation, forgiveness, family, social life, etc. The same concept of messianism, which I thought to have been well established, was in fact rather different, while the interpretation of history was completely different. The Old Testament, which we had always told ourselves was something in common, in reality is read and lived in a totally different manner, and hence did not really unite us very much.

Gradually I came to understand that rather than my reflections on Christ, they were interested in my experience of Christ.

My reflections did not speak, did not say anything, but my experience did.

My companions for the most part were colonists, coming from the so-called settlements, occupied by Israel, or in some manner linked to this world. Their experience of faith and their reading of the Bible had led them to very major choices, even arguable ones. What had been my own? There was no provocation or hostility in their attitude, but only simple and sincere curiosity. In regard to which I was initially somewhat uneasy. Because: what had been my experience of Christ and how to speak of this in an understandable and believable manner? Until then I had always lived in a Christian and ecclesiastical environment and my mode of being reflected that world. But it was also apparent to me that along with an effort of communication an effort of purification of my own motivation also had to be carried out. I came to understand then what the word "testimony" signified in concrete terms, its effort and its charm. And I realized that testimony becomes both true and experienced only when there is a sincere effort to communicate it. There is no experience without testimony. There is no testimony that remains closed on itself.



That period marked for me a sort of refoundation of my vocation. The contact – or if you like, the dialogue – with the Jewish world had forced me to reevaluate my own experience, to compare it with that of other persons, to share it in a particular manner that previously was unknown to me. I was speaking of Christ to people who did not accept him as Lord. But not only did this not divide us, but more than anything it reinforced our relationship. I will never be able to forget the continual reading of the New Testament, which we did together in the afternoons or in the evenings. Several people came from far away in order not to miss these encounters. And it was not I who imposed these sessions. In fact I submitted to them somewhat reluctantly, at least initially. On almost every page came the questions: “what does this mean, what does this mean for you, why...”, and they always were able to find a conceptual parallel in the rabbinical literature, and then I listened to their impressions and I was moved by their being moved. When at times I allowed myself in a friendly manner to make a slightly critical comment on questions related to the Church, perhaps unconsciously seeking to capture their goodwill, I only embarrassed them. They loved Israel. I should love the Church. I should not discuss my internal questions with them. Testimony was no longer only my commandment, but also a necessity for them. It was in a certain manner “imposed” on me by their friendship.

And it was thus on the terrain of the real that I encountered my friends.

And I also discovered that friendship is that experience which brings you back to the real, to that which you are, that compels you simply to be yourself.

This experience of encountering people who were radically different, followed later by other meetings of various types but of equal intensities, transformed my relation with Christ. Since then, the things to be done have not changed, but rather my manner of relating to them. Those encounters led me take, in an entirely new manner, a personal decision in relation to Jesus. In this sense I can say that thanks to these friends, I found a new and more intimate Jesus.

How do I encounter Jesus today? I am not always ready for the encounter. But I know what my strong points are: the Word and prayer, the Place and the people. Together. The relationship with the Place continually calls one back to the Event of which the Scriptures speak to us, making it a memory that is both near and concrete. The relationship with individuals compels you to certify the truth of your experience. The relationships in the Holy Land have been terribly injured. But by living there within this reality, you will find the daily challenges with regard to Christ and everything to have become concrete, difficult, and yet necessary: forgiveness, gratuitousness, liberty, charity, moderation, patience, welcoming... become a necessity. Denying yourself these attitudes would be a denial of yourself.

In conclusion, as Franciscans in the Holy Land, we do more or less what all the others do: we pray, we study, we teach, we make excavations, we take care of the sites, we welcome people, we build houses, we work, we carry on our affairs, we buy and sell... But the meaning of what we do is not to be found in what we do, but in the possibility that comes from loving the life of Man,



knowing precisely that each life represents the possibility of the Presence of God. This is the sacrament of an encounter. The objective is not the finished product, but the process, the encounter: it is the Gospel of the presence, it is remaining there, being there.

From the encounter with this land we receive the grace of duty of a real experience of Christ, because here words alone do not suffice. Or perhaps because here there are too many words, and nobody believes in them any more.

What remains, on the other hand, is the concrete experience of getting to the essence of humanity itself, beyond appearances, along a road towards truth that is by no means an easy one.

Hence we do more or less what everyone else does, and we are neither better nor worse than they. We possess only one certainty, that the Lord continues to walk within the history of Man, which remains a demanding history, but one that is both occupied and forgiven. And hence precious.

We remain here with the desire of one who wishes to bring to everything that which is the unique novelty of our faith, which is salvation, a personal salvation that touches each and every person. Here we remain, therefore, holding the door open, as was open the home of Peter that welcomed the Lord Jesus. We open to God the door of the real, and in so doing give to God that which Man often doesn't have the courage to give him, namely his pain, his sin, his need for salvation. And with the tenacity and hope of one who wishes to see the fulfillment of this salvation, who wishes to see the dawn of Capernaum there where it would still seem to be night.