

# EXILE

LIVING STONES SPIRITUAL PATHWAY 2023/2024



LIVING STONES



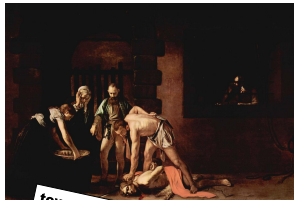
Wind from the sea, Andrew Wyeth, 1947, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



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## “Art, Violence and Religion”

an aid for a pathway of prayer in “Living Stones”



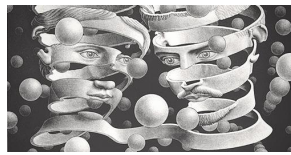
towards Malta  
April 30<sup>th</sup> -  
May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020



Spiritual Pathway 2019/2020

## Who am I? Faith, art and identity

The spiritual pathway for Living Stones in 2020/2021



Spiritual Pathway 2020/2021



Spiritual Pathway 2021/2022

WELCOME, HOSPITALITY, FAITH  
LIVING STONES SPIRITUAL PATHWAY 2022/2023



Spiritual Pathway 2022/2023

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The theme of the year 2023/24 (“Exile”) was chosen by the Central Coordinators of the international Living Stones (LS) network: Caterina Bruno (Naples), Valentina Cammarota (Rome), Jean-Paul Hernández SJ (Naples), Almudena Mounier Tebas (Paris), Giulia Privitelli (Malta), Massimo Ricci (Milan), Dan Ruscu (Cluj), Marco Schmid (Zurich-Luzern), Prisca Zurrón (Fribourg). The decision was made after sharing and praying together with the coordinators of the LS groups.

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## EXILE

The “exile” is the deportation of the Jewish people to Babylon at the beginning of the sixth century BC, after Nebuchadnezzar had taken Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. It is probably the most traumatic event in the history of Israel, as reported in the Hebrew Bible. This is why it was then re-elaborated through a deep theological transformation that shapes the whole Bible.

### The exile as the crucible of Israel’s faith

Precisely during the 50-60 years of Babylonian exile, and in the years just after the return, the core of the Hebrew Scriptures took a fixed form. Exile was also the framework in which central Jewish institutions arose, like the Shabbat, the synagogue, circumcision and the first “Good News” (of the possibility to return). The exile and the return from exile were also the times when Jewish theology began to imagine a final resurrection and a final judgement for all peoples (as the final “return to Jerusalem” of all peoples). The symbolic power of the exile determined much of further biblical narratives and was the main “grammar” of the New Testament, which announces the “Good News” that God brings us back from the exile of death, and that this return is “now”, in Jesus. But the exile “scheme” also goes backward, moulding the narratives of the original “garden” from whom we were expelled or of the brother’s murderer becoming “a restless wanderer on the earth”.

The “exile symbolism” goes much beyond the biblical frame and finds many echoes in Western culture (e.g. Verdi’s famous “Nabucco”), likely because the exile narrative gives words to the deepest human feelings in times of crisis. Trauma, a sense of guilt for it, a loss of meaning and loss of identity, a re-elaboration of one’s own certitudes, the newness of the promise, hope...these are the steps of every moment of human growth. In Western culture, “meaning is in exile”, and in the time of “post-humanism”, even the human being is in exile from himself. The Church herself feels in exile, spread in small minorities, processing many feelings of guilt, far away from her past magnificence. Even her temples are “deconstructed”, as we Living Stones constantly observe. But this is precisely the time of the deepest fruitful transformation. The time to listen to the Good News, the time to imagine a return which leads never to the past situation but to its open transfiguration. It is the time of faith.

### The geopolitical events

The factual context of the Babylonian deportation is, as usual in the military history of civilization, a matter of geopolitical clashes between major powers. By the second half of the 8th century, a significant component of the Northern Jewish population was already brought to Mesopotamia as part of the expansionist policy of the Assyrian Kingdom. In 734 BC, the Assyrian monarch Tiglath-Pileser III destroyed the settlements of the Northern tribes of Israel, which were allied with the anti-Assyrian king of Damascus. As reported in 2 Kgs 15:29, a substantial part of the ten Northern tribes of Israel was then deported to Assur. The reaction of the remaining Jewish population was to search for alliances with the other major power: Egypt. That caused a further reaction from the Assyrians, who in 721 BC attacked Israel again and replaced part of Palestine’s population with non-Jewish people, as reported in 2 Kgs 17:6. The new mixed population in the central area of Palestine became “Samaria”, which developed its own practices as an alternative to the temple of Jerusalem.

After that, the Jewish population in Palestine consisted mostly of the Southern tribe of Judah, around Jerusalem. The Judean kings were under Egyptian influence. But a new power in Mesopotamia, the Babylonians, took the place of the Assyrians, reinforcing their expansionist anti-Egyptian policy. 2 Chr 36 and 2 Kgs 24 tell us how Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem in 597 BC, bringing a part of the Jewish aristocracy to Babylon. The new Jewish king, Sedekia, attempted a new alliance with his neighbours to gain some independence from Babylon, and that explains Nebuchadnezzar’s second and definitive attack in 586 BC. 2 Kgs 25 narrates how the Babylonians

destroyed the Temple and deported the better part of the Jewish population (in actuality probably no more than 14,000 people). Among them, the Jewish king Sedekia was blinded and his whole family was killed. The breakdown of 586 BC is the actual “trauma of Israel” which was then remembered as “the exile” tout court, since before that date the Jewish aristocracy, even if already in Babylon, still hoped to restore its power in Jerusalem.

With the destruction of the Temple, every hope was now wiped away. Israel lost its land, but also its “religion”, since until now no Jewish religion was conceivable without the sacrificial liturgy of the Temple. And no Jewish person could imagine that God could abandon the land He had given to Israel as a sign of His eternal covenant. Israel began there the “exile from itself” in a long process of re-understanding its history, its faith, itself.



Conquest of the city of Ashtaroth by the Assyrians, soldiers of king Tiglath-Pileser III led away inhabitants and cattle. Wall relief from the palace of king Tiglath-Pileser III. 730-727 BC, The British Museum.

### **1st step: crying out the pain**

A first group of texts in the Hebrew Bible simply cries out the pain of leaving the land. The whole book of Lamentations describes the desolation of Jerusalem. The city is like a “widow” and “nobody consoles her” (Lam 1:1-2). Isaiah also writes: “Your sacred cities have become a wasteland; even Zion is a wasteland, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned with fire, and all that we treasured lies in ruins” (Is 64:9-10). This text became part of the famous Advent “Rorate” liturgy where we all sing “Jerusalem desolata est”, waiting for the Saviour. Only the “poorest of the earth” remained in the Land. By the rivers of Babylon, the deported Jews “hung their harps” because it is not possible “to sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land” (Ps 137). In these texts, the exile has just “happened” and the first need, before any understanding, is to put the sorrow into words.

Other psalms and prophets describe the sadness of the people who have “no prince, neither leader, nor prophet, nor burnt offering, no sacrifice, no oblation, no incense, no place to present you the

firstfruits and find mercy” (Dn 3:38). This text presents the crucial situation very clearly: without all these institutions, will the people of Israel be able to survive? Many other peoples who were deported by the Babylonians in the same period simply lost their national identity and disappeared, dissolved among the Babylonian population. What will hold Israel together now? Should they keep strictly closed in themselves as Tobit suggests? He explains: “After the Exile to Assyria, I came to Nineveh as a captive. All the members of my kindred and of my people ate the food of pagans, but I conscientiously avoided doing so. (. . . ) I remained faithful to God with my whole heart” (Tob 1:10). Or should Israel be open to pagan culture, as much of the Wisdom books suggest? But how is it possible to be open without losing one’s own identity? Looking for a way to remain faithful to God in a time without power, Israel will (re-)discover the deepest core of the faith.

In the New Testament, some of the main images of this breakdown are introduced by the evangelists just before the narration of the Passion. In Mark, Jesus seems to predict what the prophets had predicted just before the exile. To those who admire the Temple He says: “Do you see these great buildings? Not a single stone will be left upon another; everyone will be thrown down” (Mk 13:2). A few verses later, Mark even introduces the expression “abomination of desolation” which was actually coined during Hellenistic times, but refers back to every profanation of the Temple, first of all its destruction during the exile. With this narrative strategy, the synoptic Gospels lead the reader to the Passion of Christ as if it were the final exile. Then, the Resurrection will be the final “Return to the Land”.

## **2nd step: understanding the reason**

The second step of the re-elaboration process is an attempt to understand the reason for this breakdown. The largest part of the Hebrew Bible converges in a pedagogical explanation: the exile is understood as God’s punishment so that Israel will abandon idolatry and purify its faith. The goal of the exile is to come back to the one God. Even the narratives of the books of Kings and Chronicles, which are supposed to be more “descriptive”, underline the moral decadence of the Jewish establishment before the exile. Every new King in the North and in the South, with few exceptions, “did even worse than his father”. It is especially curious how the author of 2 Chr concludes his book (2 Chr 36:21): the time of exile seems to be a time to recover the shabbats that they had not respected before. This opens an understanding of the time of deportation as a long “shabbat”, a long period of “bearing”, before a new birth.

But above all, the whole book of Jeremiah narrates the warnings of the prophet before the catastrophe. Jeremiah is one of the best interpreters of the pedagogical and moral explanation of the exile. He rebukes the people: “Your wickedness will bring about your punishment, and your infidelities will condemn you. Therefore, concentrate your thoughts and see how bitter it is to forsake the Lord” (Jer 2:19). Another text is even more precise: “As you have forsaken the Lord and served stranger gods in your own land, so you will serve strangers in a land that is not yours” (Jer 5:19). In other words, the exile is just the visual manifestation of what is already true in the heart of the Jewish people: they serve idols (“alien gods”). More than a “choleric revenge”, the “punishment” of the exile is a “powerful process of awareness” that God offers to Israel. Isaiah, Ezechiel, and Baruch also share the same perspective, sometimes using very creative metaphors.

Jeremiah compares Israel to a “rotten belt”. It had rotted in the Euphrates (which already alludes to exile) and is now good for nothing. God says: “For just as a loincloth clings to a man’s loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says the Lord, in the hope that they would become my people, my praise, and my pride. But they refused to listen” (Jer 13:11). Oseah is comparing the sin of Israel to a wife’s adultery, who now needs to be “led into the desert” (i.e. into exile) to rediscover the unique love of her husband. The same spousal metaphor is already in Jeremiah (2:24.33; 3:20; 4:30; 30:14) and in Ezechiel (16). Many other Biblical books which



appear to narrate different events are likely just a “metaphorical elaboration” of the same process. For instance, Jonah is a victim of the “pedagogical” storm that was caused by his unfaithfulness.

In the New Testament, since the death of Christ is “the final exile”, it is also the “final awareness” of our sins. Christ takes the “punishment” onto Himself, not in the sense that the Father had to punish someone, but in the sense that the cross is the “final exposition” of sin and of its pain.

### **3rd step: crying out for help**

Like Jonah in the belly of the big fish, Israel cries out to God from the depths of exile. This is the third step of the process: asking for help, which means asking for forgiveness, having finally arrived at awareness. In this very prayer, Israel rediscovers itself. The definition of Israel is precisely “the people who cried out for help to their God”. From the awareness of sin, the very fact of expressing this prayer leads Israel to a wider awareness. Israel rediscovers that its very identity includes its relationship with God. Israel is either a relationship with God or just is not.

This relationship is like a desperate and, at the same time, unifying cry, like a “last chance” that gathers all remaining forces. In the midst of the furnace, which is another excellent symbol of exile, the three young men confess: “By a judgement, you have done all this because of our sins” (Dn 3:28). And at the same time they invoke: “Now we cannot open our mouths; we, your servants who worship you, have become a cause of shame and dishonour. For your name’s sake, do not abandon us forever or renounce your covenant” (Dn 3:33-34). The text presents the fact that Israel can no longer open its mouth as a problem for God Himself, because in this way no one will worship God, no one will pronounce His Name. It is understood that the vocation of Israel is to proclaim the Name of God. In fact, “Judah” comes from the root “jada” which means to confess, to proclaim. Implied: to proclaim the Name of God. Then, out of love for His Own Name, God should allow Israel to open its mouth once again, to be freed from the shame of the exile. Otherwise the shame of Israel could become “a shame for God” in the eyes of other nations as suggested by Baruch: “Pay heed, O Lord, to our prayers and requests. For your own sake deliver us, (...) so that the entire world may acknowledge that you are the Lord, our God, and that Israel and his descendants bear your name” (Bar 2:14-15).

But the expression “for your name’s sake” alludes also to the very meaning of the Name of God, which means “the One who is faithful”, the One who does not abandon. This is why we read just after: “do not abandon us forever”. It seems as if Israel would remind God of His very identity. Of course that is an “anthropomorphic” way to speak about God, but the true meaning underneath is that precisely in this prayer Israel understands the identity of God, which is His faithfulness, His mercy. This is why Jonah’s analogous prayer in the belly of the whale is already a surprising praise of the mercy of God before any real deliverance: “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the belly of the netherworld I cried out for help, and you heard my voice” (Jnh 2:3). The exile is a process leading from the awareness of one’s own sin to the discovery of one’s own identity and from there to a deeper comprehension of who God is. “The One who does not abandon us in exile” will now be “the One who never abandons us in any exile”, be it one as radical as death.

### **4th step: the Good News**

In fact, the fourth step of this process is the announcement of liberation, which Ezekiel presents as a liberation from death: “I am going to open your graves and raise you up from them and bring you back to the land of Israel” (Ez 37:12). This text uses physical death as a metaphor for exile. For the author, it is a way to say that, bringing back the people from exile, God would do something as impossible as raising a dead body from a grave. Later on, when Israel actually came back to its Land, the Jewish people began to consider that if the event which was signified through this metaphor really happened, then perhaps the metaphor itself could really happen. Before the exile, the faith of the Jewish people in a life after death or even in a final Resurrection was lightly suggested in some

texts but was certainly not a common belief. Experiencing a God who delivers from exile, the Jewish people began to believe in a God who delivers from death. The “return to the Land” is now not only a geopolitical event but also becomes the final destiny hoped for by every believer.

This announcement of liberation actually works as the divine confirmation of the prayer of the repentant heart we saw above (in the third step). That is why, in the same book of Ezekiel, this “good news” is presented together with (or “as”) the announcement of a “conversion”: “I will gather you from the nations and bring you together from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. (...) I will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their bodies and give them a heart of flesh” (Ez 11:17-20). The difference between the third and the fourth step is not only a matter of content (the Jewish people asked just for political freedom, and God’s answer enlarges this freedom to an infinite horizon) but it is above all a matter of who is pronouncing these words. Now God Himself is speaking about forgiveness and freedom. And that is the reason why this announcement is the announcement “par excellence”, the Good News, the Evangelion. The Word of God that has the power to change hearts and history. The announcement that renews hope and re-creates the people.

That is why Isaiah can proclaim: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who bears good news and proclaims glad tidings, announcing salvation and saying to Zion, “Your God is king”” (Is 52:7-8). The people listening to this announcement are actually still in Babylon. Physically, nothing has yet changed. But the fact of hearing this Evangelion already changes all. Now, they know that only God is king—that means they are no longer slaves of any earthly king. This freedom is “the Kingdom of God”. That is why the Evangelion announced by Jesus was that “the Kingdom of God is at hand”. Jesus’ announcement sounds exactly like the return from exile.

In actuality, the whole second part of the Book of Isaiah (chapters 40-55) is called the “Book of the Consolation of Israel” because it develops with an incredible tenderness the “Good News” that the people are free to come back to their Land. The first words of this “Deutero-Isaiah” book are: “Comfort my people and console them, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her time of servitude is over” (Is 40:1-2). And the same author adds: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; nor will the waters engulf you. When you walk through fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your saviour. (...) Because in my eyes you are precious, because you are honoured and I love you” (Is 43:3-4). In these words, we understand that the experience of liberation from exile will become the archetype of every future liberation, of every future “difficult passage”.

### **Excursus: the categories of the exile**

From the experience of the exile the Jewish people will interpret the future until the final Resurrection (with texts like Ez 37 and Dan 12:2), but they will also interpret the past. The exile will very soon be “the new Passover”, the “new Exodus”. Jeremiah explains this link very well: “It will no longer be said, “As the Lord lives who brought the Israelites up out of the land of Egypt,” but rather, “As the Lord lives who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had driven them.” For I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors” (Jer 16:14-15). For Hosea, the “Spouse Israel” coming out from Babylon “will respond as she did in the days of her youth, when she came up from the land of Egypt” (Hos 2:17).

The spousal symbolism leads to the introduction of an important biblical category which arises in this very context of exile: the need of a “New Covenant”, which essentially means the renewal of the first and unique covenant. As the liberation from Egypt was made by God but needed the commitment of Israel on the Mount Sinai, so the liberation from Babylon, made by God, now needs the renewal of the covenant, which will be an inner transformation: “The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. However, it



Jeremia the prophet. Mosaic of the presbytery of San Vitale, Ravenna (Italy), VIth cent.

will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt, a covenant that they broke even though I was their master. However, this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will establish my law in their minds and inscribe it in their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jer 31:31-33). The renewal of the covenant changes the identity of Israel: now Israel is “the people of God”. And somehow we can symbolically also say that the “identity of God” is “transformed” (or rather: “more deeply revealed”): now God is “the God of Israel”.

Precisely in the same context, a way to speak about God appears using a name He very rarely had: “the Father”. God promises in Jeremiah: “I will console them as I lead them back. I will lead them beside streams of water along a level path where they will not stumble. For I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn son” (Jer 31:9). A further name of God appears in this promise of return: God is also “the Redeemer”, which means the one who purchases you back to deliver you from slavery. In Hebrew it is the “goel”. He was the rich parent who had to vindicate the relative who was humiliated by a member of another clan, and he also had to buy back those of his clan who were sold as slaves abroad. In Isaiah we read: “Have no fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name; you are mine” (Is 43:1-2). And in Jeremiah: “Thus says the Lord of hosts: The people of Israel are oppressed, as are the people of Judah. All their captors hold them fast and refuse to let them go. But their redeemer [GOEL] is strong; his name is the Lord of hosts” (Jer 50:33). A further symbolism that flourishes around the exile is the description of the return as the healing of a wound: “For I will restore you to health and heal your wounds, says the Lord” (Jer 30:17). Then God is the healer of Israel. During the exile God also becomes the Shepherd of Israel: “As a shepherd goes forth in search of his flocks when they are scattered from him in every direction, so I will go forth in search of my sheep. I will retrieve them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them back from among the peoples and gather them from foreign lands, I will lead them back to their own land and pasture them on the mountains of Israel” (Ez 34:12-13).

All these categories which were born (or at least developed) in the dynamic of the exile are



recovered in the New Testament to express the “Good News” of the new Passover: the death and Resurrection of Christ. He is the Groom, His cross is the New Covenant, His Father is “our Father”. He is the Goel, the Healer, the Good Shepherd. But many other categories of the New Testament are rooted in the theology of the exile...

The return of Israel “back home” from exile becomes a spatial metaphor for the forgiveness of sins. We read in Jeremiah: “In those days, and at that time, says the Lord, you will search for evidence of the iniquity of Israel, but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but these will no longer be found, for I will pardon the remnant of those that I have preserved” (Jer 50:20). The sin is the distance from “home” and the forgiveness is the possibility to “fill” this distance. The Hebrew root “KPR” (cf. “Yom Kippur”) actually means to “cover” (or to “fill”) and to “forgive”. In Lk 15, the prodigal son who is far away “in a distant land” recalls what we read about Israel’s exile in Baruch: “they are a stiff-necked people. But in the land of their exile, they will return to themselves” (Bar 2:30). The return of the prodigal son is not only the image of the sinner who comes back home and who meets the merciful Father who runs towards him to “fill the distance”, but it is also the image of the Son Jesus Christ, taking onto Himself the sin of the world (the distance and the exile of death) and coming back to be embraced in the feast of the Father (the Resurrection) where we all are invited to enter and to rejoice (as the eldest son is).

Another topic which arises again in the New Testament and which is moulded in the exile narrative is the “sanctification of God’s Name”, which we ask for in the prayer of the Our Father. We already saw above that an intelligent way to ask God for liberation in exile was to tell Him that the nations risk despising the Name of God if they see the distress of the people who bear that Name (see Dan 3 and Bar 2). Now, in God’s answer, as we already saw for the other metaphors, God is confirming this argument: “But whenever they came to the nations, they profaned my holy name, so that the people there would say about them, “These are the people of the Lord, yet they have been banished from his land.” However, I have relented because of my concern about my holy name which the house of Israel has profaned among the nations where they have gone. Therefore, say to the house of Israel: Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am acting, but for the sake of my holy name which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I intend to prove the holiness of [to “sanctify”] my great name which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them” (Ez 36:20-23). The “sanctification of God’s Name” is then the return from the exile. When we ask this in our prayer, we ask to be brought back from our exile.

There is a last category which “flourishes” in the depths of the exile and which is central for the New Testament: the New Temple. Beginning with chapter 40, Ezekiel is transported from the Babylonian exile to a “high mountain” which symbolises Jerusalem. And there, he has the amazing vision of the reconstruction of the Temple. The darkest moment of Israel’s history is the context of the most magnificent prophecy for the people. The reader soon understands that this text is no longer a mere architectural description, but that the Temple is now the entire people of Israel. The text is about the reconstruction of the people as the new House which waits for the Messiah. In the New Testament, Jesus is the New Temple which will be destroyed (like in the exile) and risen again after three days (see Jn 2:19). But the Church, which forms the “Body of Christ”, is also the Temple of “living stones” (see 1 Pt 2:5). Precisely during the exile, Israel had understood that the Temple, the very place where God dwells on earth, is not a matter of architecture but is the community of the faithful. The first Christians grasped back to this exile point of view and were therefore accused of despising the physical temple which was rebuilt after the exile. In fact, the first martyr, Stephen, was stoned because he “spoke against the Holy place” (Acts 6:13). That is probably a hint which indicates that the first Christian generation used the temple to speak about the Temple, as “people constitutively in exile”.

Israel received much not only from processing the trauma of the exile in Babylon, but also from the Babylonian culture itself. One of the most relevant Babylonian symbols which were adopted in

the Hebrew Scriptures was the symbolism of the garden. In Mesopotamia, the hanging gardens were wedding gifts of the King (or Prince) to the Queen (or Princess). The wedding ceremony consisted of a walk hand-in-hand where the Prince explained to the Princess each plant as a statement of love: “out of love for you I went far away to capture this beautiful plant for you”. The Jews adopted this tradition (still present in Central Asia until a few generations ago) to speak about their relationship with God. He is the King who built the Garden where we are: the earth. And life is like a wedding walk where we are invited to hear, behind every being (every plant of the garden), a statement of love by God. It is striking that Israel adopts this Babylonian symbol to say precisely that the time of Babylon was for them a time where they were “far away from the garden”. In reality, they will slowly understand that “coming back to the garden” is not a matter of geographic travel but an inner pathway which allows them to experience each land as a garden.

### **5th step: coming back to the Land**

After the prophecy of the return, and all the theological creativity around it, comes the factual historical return. The instrument which made this return possible was King Cyrus II, the king of the Persians who destroyed the Babylonian kingdom and took its place. In 1879 the famous cuneiform “Cyrus cylinder” (dated about 538 BC) was discovered in Iraq. This attests to the decision of the new king to release the whole foreign population which had been deported to Babylon. Among them were the Jewish people, as the Biblical texts explain. According to 2 Chronicles, the decree of Cyrus was as follows: “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up, and may the Lord their God be with them” (2 Chr 36:23; very similar to Esd 1:1-2).

The first observation about this text is that, in this case, the “Saviour” of Israel is a pagan king. Cyrus is sometimes even characterised as “messianic” in the Bible. God “says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please” (Is 44:28). Or even: “This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take” (Is 45:1). Israel learns here that God’s salvation can come even through a pagan king. There is a second important observation about 2 Chr 36:23: the first reason to be liberated and to go back to the Land is allegedly to build the Temple. The goal of the return from exile is to build the Temple, which now means to build the people. In the same way, in the New Testament, the goal of Christ’s Resurrection is to build the Church.

A third observation about 2 Chr 36:23 is even more important. The text speaks of a “God of heaven” who is able to “give all the peoples of the earth”. The pagan king who “saves” Israel is revealing the claim of universality of the God of Israel. It is surely speaking about the God of Israel since in the same sentence we read: “may the Lord their God be with them”. Here, Israel starts to understand that the God of Moses, who was the God of Israel and who led the people all along the history, now appears as the God of all the nations. Israel will slowly develop this claim for universalism over the centuries until the New Testament will reveal in Jesus God’s salvation of God for all peoples.

Already in Daniel we read: “Let them know that you alone are the Lord God, glorious throughout the whole world” (Dn 3:45). And Darius, again a pagan king, says after Daniel was saved from the lions: “I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and revere the God of Daniel. For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions” (Dn 6:26). The same book of Daniel contains a further symbol of the liberation from exile which will become, in the Christian faith, one of the main prophecies of the coming of the Messiah: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power;



The Cyrus' cylinder, VIth cent. BC, British Museum, London.

all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him” (Dn 7:13).

In the New Testament, Jesus is himself the return from exile. This is why the oldest Gospel, Mark, begins with a double citation about a return from exile: from Malachi 3:1 (“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”) and from Isaiah 40:3 (“a voice of one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him”). Both texts, situated as “overtures” of the Gospel, present Jesus as the return to the Promised Land. Mark actually was the first to give the title of “Evangelion” to his writing, which again links it immediately to the “Good News” heard during the Babylonian enslavement. “The Gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mk 1:1) means not only the Evangelion pronounced by Jesus Christ but also the Evangelion that Jesus is in Himself. His whole life and His Passion and Resurrection “announce” that the people are free and actually –in an efficacious way– makes them free.

The performative power of the “Good News” of the liberation from exile is very clearly expressed by Isaiah: “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Is 55:10-11). It is the Word of God, the “Gospel of liberation”, that actually accomplishes the desire of God and nourishes the people. This desire is the return to the promised Land which is put in parallel to the Word’s “return to heaven”. The whole earth is then like a land of exile where the announcement of the Good News creates the return. This is why we read immediately after: “You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow” (Is 55:12-13). The whole creation participates in the joy of the returning Israel. The book of Isaiah has other beautiful texts which express the joy of the return to Jerusalem as the joy of the



city itself: “Awake, awake, Zion, clothe yourself with strength! Put on your garments of splendour, Jerusalem, the holy city. The uncircumcised and defiled will not enter you again. Shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, Jerusalem. Free yourself from the chains on your neck, Daughter Zion, now a captive” (Is 52:1-2). Afterwards in the same book, Jerusalem is called “the magnificent crown in the hands of the Lord” (Is 62:3). The town will be called “my joy” by God and the Land will be called “married” (Is 62:4).

Psalms 125 expresses in a powerful way the amazement of the people who could come back: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them” (Ps 125). From the perspective of those who were walking back to Israel, the exile now becomes a time of sowing and the return to a time of harvesting. We are not so far away from the metaphor that Jesus used to announce His death and Resurrection: “unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies. . . .” (Jn 12:24).

## **6th step: the rebuilding of the Temple**

The books of Esdras and Nehemiah narrate the reconstruction of the “beit hamikdash” (the “sanctuary”) which will become the so-called “second Temple”. The number of workers was not very high since not all the Jewish people came back from exile. At the end of the day, many of them had found their advantages in the land of Babylon and did not want to leave a comfortable situation. Only a “small rest” actually left Babylon. They were the poorest. The most despised people. They remained faithful to the Lord because “they had nothing else”. From them, the “saint root” as Isaiah 6:13 names them, the people will rise again. This will be a constant in the Holy Scripture: the poorest and the last will be the way of the Salvation of God.

According to the texts, the reconstruction of the Temple was interrupted several times. To come back from exile is one thing, to build a new life again is another. In the personal spiritual pathway, every experience of liberation is followed by a patient and long period of “construction”. The liberation now has to become effective in every area of one’s own life. Here the struggle starts, not against “foreign enemies” but against “those of the house” or even “against oneself”.

For Israel, these very difficulties transformed the work on the Temple into a work of rebuilding the Jewish community. The book of Haggai explains that many Israelites began to say that “this is not yet the time to rebuild the temple”. Their motivation was actually that they were only taking care of their own private houses. To build the Temple means to accept leaving a private good in order to put it in common. In this dynamic, the community is built. In an analogous way, in Christian history, the building of cathedrals and churches is a kind of “constitutive sacrifice” where a population offers (or puts in common) the best it has and becomes by this very fact a community.

The “second Temple” of Jerusalem was never fully satisfying to the Jewish expectations. In its very disappointing aspect it was more and more an invitation to wait for a final Temple, which the New Testament will identify with Jesus the “Living Stone”, surrounded by “the living stones” we all are, coming from every nation.

## **The Church in exile**

In some parts of the world, the Church still has many strong institutions—schools, hospitals, assistance centres, parishes, leisure centres, university residences, magazines, monuments, fraternities, cooperatives, volunteer networks, youth associations, NGOs. . . . But in all these places, one often feels like paraphrasing Diogenes with his lantern and whispering, “I seek Jesus Christ”.

We often have to deal with large, still powerful works that bear the label "Catholic" in their name, or even legally belong to the Church, but are no longer animated by faith, that is, by a living relationship with the Risen Christ. On the contrary, the very explicitness of faith is set aside because it seems "non-inclusive". It is all right to be a "Catholic" institution, as long as Jesus is not in it. It is fine for the school to be "Catholic" so parents delude themselves that "there are fewer drugs", but more disturbing than the drugs is the proposal of faith, and therefore it is very often entirely absent. It is fine that there are still parishes so that we still "occupy space", but those who restlessly seek an experience of God often find in them the cold delivery of "merely human" services. It is fine for bureaucratic behemoths to provide material help to the "poor" because there is no power greater than this (as understood from the Hellenistic "evergetians" to the North American "philanthropists", and as Luther and Nietzsche well explain), but it seems forbidden to do so "in the Name" of the One who sends us to "proclaim the good news to the poor". It is even all right that we still possess sumptuous "spirituality centres" because we would like to intercept the greatest thirst of the children of our time, but we teach them to "pray without God" (as the title of a best-selling book on contemporary spirituality goes), in a lonely and empty "search for the inner self". And lastly, it is fine that we still manage many great monuments of sacred architecture, but we like to turn them into museums (more and more often for a fee) of a vanished religion, because we have forgotten Him who drove the merchants from the Temple.

This is the Church we meet: made up of so many buildings, so many jobs, so much bargaining power, so many institutions. The Church that absolutises its human means to the point of transforming them from means to ends, to the point of setting aside the only end for which it was born. When Christ is removed from the Church, only power remains in it as an end in itself, which is the anti-Christ.

In 1520, Martin Luther wrote a treatise with a suggestive title: "The Babylonian captivity of the Church". In it, the theologian of Wittenberg wrote against the way the Church administered the sacraments. Today, we could use the same title to describe a phenomenon which occurs before our eyes: the epochal and unprecedented collapse of all the institutional apparatuses of Western Catholicism. We can call this process a "providential exile" of the Church, or even a "mild leading of the Holy Spirit".

As Joseph Ratzinger already predicted in 1968, of the Church's worldly power, of its "institutional castles" that made it a power alongside others (just as for centuries the Papal States were a secular state alongside others), there will not remain "stone upon stone". We are already "leaving Jerusalem": the closure of Catholic schools, the precipitated selling off of the immense empty structures of religious orders, the total loss of credibility of the clergy, the very rapid dismantling of the Church's social presence. In short: the radical loss of all power. Of the institutions of the Church only the façades remained, which are now collapsing on those who lived there. Whatever we put in the place of faith is falling, it has already fallen. And the Church finds itself in exile.

It is then a great time of grace for us! It is similar to the time when the Temple in Jerusalem and its entire economic and political apparatus was miserably destroyed. Only then Israel began to realise that the massive power structure, born out of and for the relationship with God, had progressively become an idol over the centuries. Empty that it was of God, it had replaced God.

The temple was already no longer a "true Temple" well before its dismantling. The physical destruction merely made visually explicit what was already true in essence. Today we are scandalised to see many churches turned into supermarkets or private clubs. But in essence, perhaps many of our churches are already this. Exile then is the purification from every idol of power. For the Jewish people, it was the discovery that the only true Temple, the only place where God "dwells", is the community of believers. So it is also in our West: the epochal collapse of our institutions and the frequent humiliations make it possible to rediscover the centrality of faith as the Church's only *raison d'être*, to rediscover the freedom of those who do not have to defend any privilege, any economic

interest any territory. This is the greatest of the gifts that the Church is receiving today, and the gift which is beginning to spring up in an "undergrowth" of small Christian communities, gathered solely and only "in the Name of Jesus". May Living Stones be part of this dawning! May we tell each other in our communities: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger of peace".



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“Living Stones” is a pathway of formation in faith. The community meetings alternate between intellectual and spiritual formation.

**INTELLECTUAL FORMATION** consists of moments of common study according to a pathway which is articulated in three years: 1. basic theology, 2. basic symbolism, 3. the study of the church where service is offered. Each year includes about 15 units, and each unit has its own podcast and bibliography. In the “seminar method”, each member of the group studies and reports to the others important basic works for the comprehension of the faith and of its expression in sacred art. The experience is that of a “community studying together” so as to be more and more able to “help souls” (this was St. Ignatius’s motivation for his study and for the long years of study undertaken by the Jesuits).

**SPIRITUAL FORMATION** consists of a common meditation on the Word of God, using the Ignatian method outlined below. The group gathers in an atmosphere of prayer. One member of the group comments on the Biblical text. Then, the group disperses in silence for personal meditation for 30 to 60 minutes. Following personal reflection, the group gathers again to share the fruits of prayer; it is also a time to share what is happening in our lives and the indications given by the Spirit before, during and after the “Living Stones” service. The intimacy of sharing our personal faith builds up the communion of the group.

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## How to use this booklet

This booklet contains 41 commented Biblical texts. They are selected to form a precise spiritual pathway around the theme “Exile”. This is the theme the “Living Stones” international network chose for the year 2023/24. It will also be the theme of the international LS formation meeting in May. The Biblical texts can be used for the prayer meetings of the LS groups.

The commentary is not to be given as such to the whole group, but is aimed at helping during the personal preparation of the one who will give the points of meditation to the group. Thus, the points cannot be these commentaries but rather the fruits of the prayer and reflection of the one who will lead the common meditation.

The order of the texts is to be respected. However, since most of groups will not be able to have 41 meetings for prayer during the year, the coordinator or the spiritual assistant chooses which texts have to be considered and which texts can be skipped.

## The Ignatian method of Biblical meditation

Each text is meant to be meditated on according to the method of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, which can be summarised in the following steps:

0. Choose a precise time (30? 45? 60 minutes?) and a precise place.
1. **PRESENCE.** Come into the presence of the Lord, thinking about His gaze—with how much love He is looking at you in this very moment, and asking for the gift of concentration. Then, ask for the proposed “grace” in your own words (in a short phrase which you can repeat during the meditation), specific to each text (for instance: “Lord, give me light on my vocation”, or “Lord, give me the grace to be grateful for how I am”).
2. **MEDITATION.** Read the text several times and stop where some word moves you. Put this “living word” in touch with your memory, with your understanding, with your desires.
3. **CONVERSATION.** Speak with the Lord “like a friend speaks with a friend”. NB: do not write during the time of prayer. Afterwards however, it helps to take five additional minutes to remember what happened during the prayer and to write down some important words that touched you, or some new feelings or thoughts.

## What does “Ignatian” mean?

Living Stones is an Ignatian network and in several countries it is also part of the apostolate of the Society of Jesus. The spiritual source of LS is the Ignatian “Spiritual Exercises”. Their presence is evident in every aspect of the “style” of LS.

The group’s spiritual assistant can belong to another spirituality, but it is important that the group is invited to do the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises regularly.

Here is a short sketch of some characteristics of the Ignatian approach:

- Personal love and fascination for Jesus Christ (not as an idea, nor as a list of values, but as a person). To have as a goal in everything the “defence and propagation of faith”.
- Love for boldness and radicality. Desire to go where no one else wants to go. Attraction for the most difficult missions.
- Preference to encounter those who are the most far away from the Gospel and Church, to announce Jesus to them.
- Positive vision of humanity. Capacity to recognise the Spirit already at work in each human being and in each culture. Preference for the “heart of the city”.
- Capacity to “listen to events and to experience”. Practise of reflecting and “making memory” in order to listen to the “voice of God” in one’s own history.

- Capacity to distinguish the things and thoughts coming from God and those coming from evil: “discernment”.
- Courage to confess one’s own limitations and to consider oneself a “pilgrim” who has not yet “arrived” and who will never understand all things. Pope Francis speaks of the Ignatian “incomplete thought”.
- Importance of intellectual work, to be able to put together “head and heart” and to better help other people encounter the Lord.
- Capacity of listening to and consoling people.
- Love for putting in touch the richest and the poorest. Love for the poorest as “best friends of the Eternal King”.
- Love for the Church with the desire to renew it constantly, in the light of the Gospel and of the experience of the first communities.



Life of St. Ignatius of Loyola by Peter Paul Rubens: vision of the Cardoner River near the village of Manresa.

## Principle and Foundation. “Where are you?” Gen 3:9.

### Genesis 3:9-24

**Grace to ask:** awareness of my distance from home, from the place where I can truly be myself.

**Points for meditation:**

- To the question “Where are you?” Adam answers not with an indication of place but with a feeling. It is the first time we hear him say how he is. Fear enters the world; it is this doubt about love that lies at the origin of all sin.
- God knew exactly where Adam was. With this question Adam becomes aware of his distance from himself, from God, and from the other, with the accusation of Eve, whom the Lord has placed beside him. The whole creation, too, will no longer be perceived as a sign of the Creator’s love, but as a hostile environment. EXILE is this feeling of separation, of loss of the relationships that give us life.
- Adam and Eve are exiled from Eden “until they return to the ground”, which is clearly an image of death, but at the very beginning God formed man from the dust of the ground. Thus, this place of death that is EXILE can give hope for the birth of a new kind of humanity.

### Genesis 4:9-16

**Grace to ask:** awareness of the places in my life where I feel lost, restless.

**Points for meditation:**

- We are different from one another, but Cain experiences this diversity in terms of comparison. He does not see his own shortcomings as opportunities to enter into relationship, as beauty, and Abel becomes an enemy, not someone to look after. The crisis of otherness leads to the killing of Abel. From then on, for Cain every man becomes someone to defend himself against, to be afraid of.
- “You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.” In Italian, ‘ramingo’ is used to render wanderer, which is a type of bird that has not yet learnt to fly, and therefore leans on whatever branch it encounters. It is a metaphor for the time in which we live, of instability, we are in EXILE when we lack an existential foothold, when we feel lost.
- “More than I can bear”, the feeling of heaviness due to sin seems to be hiding Cain from the Lord. But the Lord puts a mark, a sign of protection, on him. He himself is Cain’s (and our) keeper, beyond the fear of the unknown and death.

### Hebrews 11:8-16

**Grace to ask: trust in our Lord in this time of exile.**

**Points for meditation:**

- How is a journey made? If we could look at every frame, we would notice the countless actions and alternate possibilities that each position offers us as an experience, having absorbed them in order to stay balanced. How is a journey made? By sure and less sure steps, measured or daring, leaps, rests, escapes and chases. From waiting for the destination to the march to reach it.
- These steps make us realise that we are kneading with something continually new, which has been kneaded by the steps of those who have gone before us and also mysteriously prepared for the step we are about to take. Yet, this amalgamation we encounter on our path is something we cannot take with us, except in the memory of having encountered it and in the knowledge that it "gave us calluses".
- We realise that these steps are instruments, the faith St. Paul speaks of. We could read "by faith," as well as "through faith." The instrument given by the Lord to cross a path includes in itself a path; that is why we can never say that we possess it. This is the longing that accompanies us in our search for the promised land.
- See Figure 3. This is the way artist-photographer Maurizio Galimberti uses the lens as an instrument through which he observes the world and whose gaze traverses the different perspectives of an experience.

## First step: crying out the pain

### Lamentations 1:1-12

**Grace to ask: awareness of the deserted places in my heart.**

**Points for meditation:**

- "Ah! how lonely she is, the city once rich in people!" (Lam 1:1).  
The city is not in ruins because of its adversaries; the idolatry and forgetfulness of God have produced devastation, affliction and desolation in the heart of Zion. All this reveals a simple truth, a truth that we have experienced, felt first hand: with God life flourishes, without God life dries up. Where did you lose your way? When did you get lost?
- "Those who honoured her despise her, because they saw her nakedness" (Lam 1:8).  
Everyone saw "her nakedness", her prostitution. Jerusalem sought life by devoting itself to idolatry, giving itself over to the people's idols. God and sin cannot coexist. Returning to life requires a choice; why live in exile from yourself? Why turn your back on Him who is the





Figure 3: Maurizio Galimberti, *Cenacolo Pannello 4 Studio 2*, 2019, Polaroid mosaic.

source and meaning of life? “All His people sigh for bread; they give the most precious objects in exchange for food, to sustain their life” (Lam 1,11).

- What feeds your hunger for life? What really nourishes your life? Are you not yet satisfied with the bread of idols? Choose who you want to serve (the idol will use you). We give the most precious objects in exchange for bread, while God, the precious bread of life, asks for nothing in return. Why buy what is given to you?
- See Figure 4. Even our own cities experience desolation and aridity. Chaos is our desert, disorder creates fragmentation, exclusion, “every city receives its shape from the desert which it opposes” (I. Calvino). Looking at Victor Enrich’s architecture, the point of view seems to perceive a geometrically organised chaos. The surrealist photography of the Catalan artist becomes an interpreter of the distorted visions of our suburbs. Through fragmentations, decompositions, explosions of forms, Enrich re-shapes metropolitan spaces according to impossible volumes and equilibriums. Everything bends to the artist’s creative will, like a childhood dream capable of transforming buildings into hot air balloons and streets into imaginative launch pads. Digital sculptures, deconstructed forms, unrealisable architectures provocatively confront us with the theme of the intelligibility of inhabited space. A space that can be conceived as a laboratory of social subjectivity or place of dis-integration. Real “urban heterotopias” (cf. M. Foucault), where invisible borders delimit areas dedicated to diversity, in the illusory intent of preserving the “normality” of our centres, of our “centre”.



Figure 4: Manipulated photography, Victor Enrich.

**Jeremiah 20:7-18**

**Grace to ask: to allow myself to be vulnerable before the Lord.**

**Points for meditation:**

- “You seduced me, Lord, and I let myself be seduced; you did violence to me and prevailed” (Jer 20:7).  
Giving voice to the pain, to the struggles, without shame, without camouflage. “You seduced me [...] I let myself be seduced”, every seduction brings with it a compromise with the/an Other, an ambivalent dependence. In our lives we live sterile ”dependencies” and fruitful ”dependencies”, vital relationships that shape our existence, infertile relationships that empty our existence. Have I learnt to recognise them?
- “But in my heart there was something like a burning fire, held in my bones; I tried to contain him, but I couldn’t” (Jer 20, 9b).  
I am inhabited by a ”fire”, by the Spirit of God who lives in me. In every exile of life, the Lord is my homeland, my home, the safe haven where I can find shelter and consolation. The presence of God is more intimate to me than I am to myself (cf. Augustine). A ”fire” that pushes me in the direction of a dual destination: ad intra, in that interior pilgrimage where I

discover the presence of God; ad extra, that push which requires me to go out of myself to bear witness to life in Christ ("I tried to contain it, but I could not"). Where am I on my journey?

- "But the Lord is at my side like a mighty man" (Jer 20:11). He is "the brave", we the poor soldiers of an army of peace. The Lord calls us to his "mission", He calls us to follow Him into the exiles of our world to be witnesses of reconciliation and love. What relationship do I have with the exile of "my" brother? Do I feel "sent" as a prophet of peace for the liberation of man oppressed by indifference and exclusion?
- Figure 5. The photographic series *Stateless* (2014/2015) by Gohar Dashti recounts the forced exile of a generation of men and women in search of hope. A refined poetics narrate the final farewell to an unkind and inhospitable land, a land of persecution and violence. Leaving your country means condemning a part of yourself to forgetfulness, to oblivion. Nothing will ever be able to return the caress of a land called "home". In the small suitcase that accompanies the refugees' journey, feelings too big to be caged are crammed in. All that remains is a story to witness, a life to share, often marked by bitter memories, by broken affections. Gohar Dashti tells it through the metaphor of absence. The emptiness that surrounds the protagonists of his photographs is like the desert imprisoned in the souls of his protagonists. A photograph that screams desperation through ghostly stone horizons and tiny breaches of hope. It is the story of many men and women of our time, stateless from hope, itinerants trapped in a tragic destiny. The civilisation of Europe is measured on the backs of these little ones. In the hope that our borders can become cum-finis, and our land a safe refuge for those fleeing wars and persecution, we continue to dream of another Europe.



Figure 5: Photographic series *Stateless* (2014/2015) by Gohar Dashti.



### Psalm 22 (21):2-19

**Grace to ask: to be aware of my distance and profound need for the grace of the Lord.**

**Points for meditation:**

- “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”. The opening words of this psalm were recited by the suffering Christ on the cross (Mk 15:34), and these words have been the uttering of every suffering man ever since. The Saviour experienced and endured all human suffering in all its depth, transforming the distance from God into closeness, the painful experience of suffering man.
- In the depth of the image that permeates the text is one’s shapeless and ashamed identity that cannot hold anything back for the self, cannot stand straight: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast”. Do I have a similar experience in my life? What helped me to cry out loudly with the words of the psalmist? “But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!”
- Let us become deeply aware of the possibility of being distant from God. This distance is the consequence of sin, which might be my personal sin or the darkness created by the sins of others committed by humankind throughout history. Do I have a profound experience of being closed off from the love of God? How did this experience help me understand how much I depend on God’s grace?

### Psalm 137(136)

**Grace to ask: to remember what drove me away from the Lord/to put out my sorrow into words.**

**Points for meditation:**

- The crisis, the experience of EXILE, contradicts the promise of the Lord; Israel is no longer in the promised land, which also leads to a crisis of faith. How is it possible that God could do nothing? The idea that He would not defend His people is unbearable.
- “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”: they cannot formulate a prayer, they give up singing because there is no joy far from Jerusalem, far from God’s presence... but realising this impossibility is also a way of praying. Artists of all times stand as witnesses to this impossibility of giving voice to suffering, especially in our century. As Living Stones, how do we talk about their shattered works, and through these works, about our reality?
- There is a form of resistance through memory. Memory is linked to identity; it is a possibility to keep alive the hope of returning. To forget is to make oneself mute, to become unable to express, to be, oneself. What things do we hold on to in times of crisis so as not to lose out altogether?
- See Figure 6. In his preliminary research Libeskind found Arnold Schönberg’s opera Moses und Aron, interrupted by its author in the final scene, where the action takes place without sound. On one side there is Moses, who experiences something but cannot speak about it, and



on the other side Aaron, who despite not understanding it can communicate with the people (the Jewish experience vs. the German experience). Schönberg, faced with the impossibility of expressing this conflict musically, will decide to give up composing music. If the space of the unspeakable is devoid of sound, rather than an accumulation of ruins or an abandoned place, it is imaginable as an empty and inaccessible human space, shrouded in its absolute silence. In the extension of the Berlin Museum, Libeskind decides to incorporate the void of the Holocaust into the building as the consequence of the intersection of two lines, a zigzag of 140 metres, with a variable cross-section, and one straight line. At their intersection, a space is formed within the building, but one that is not walkable; one can pass through it with the feeling that one can arrive there but never reach it. These variations bring out in the visitors the feeling of being in a place where their experience is dispossessed. The compression of space deforms all surfaces, erases and denies boundaries.

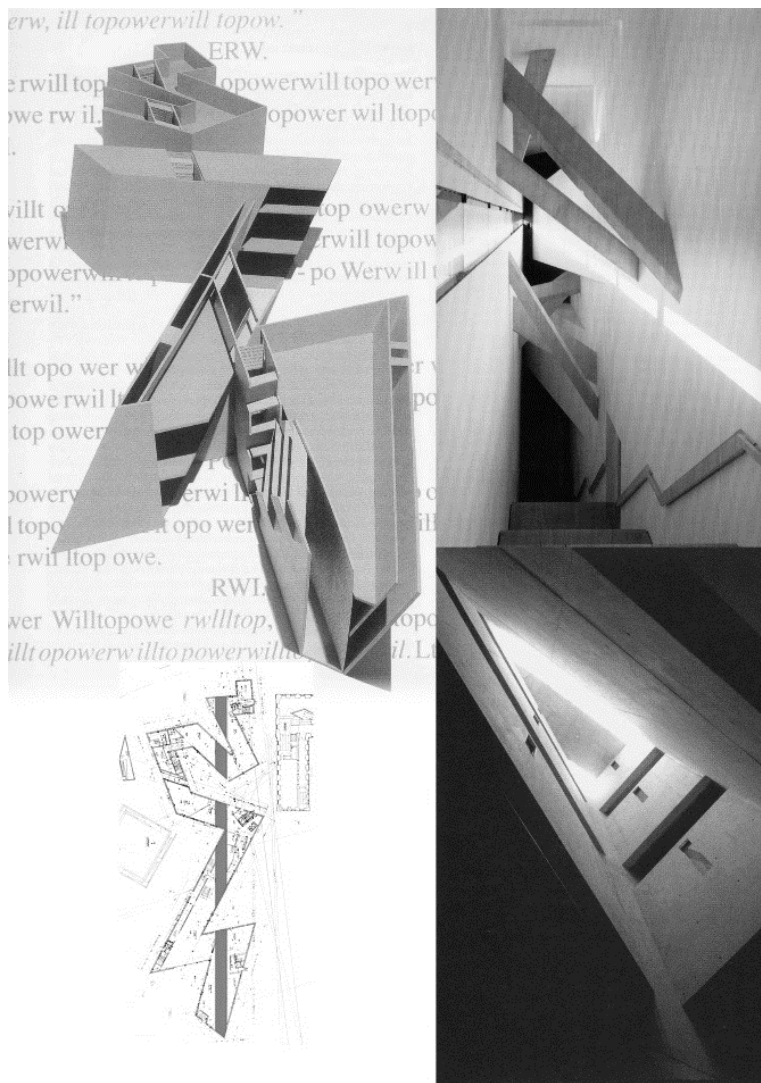


Figure 6: Berlin Museum – arch. Daniel Libeskind.

### Mark 5:1-20

**Grace to ask: to acknowledge the pain of my divisions (giving them a name).**

**Points for meditation:**

- There is a man, a man from Gerasene, in a situation of exile and radical alienation. Does he find himself in this situation for a specific reason? Perhaps it is the sum of many discernments and choices that are, in themselves, overlooked.
- Did this man have any hope? How is it possible that even in the most brutal and lonely exile we are visited? And who is it who visits us? Who offers us a path to liberation and gives us back our squandered dignity? What does this liberation and dignity consist of? Could it be the fact that we are re-finding ourselves?
- Can newfound dignity and normality be so beautiful as to be scary, even more so than alienation and more so than exile? Could they be the announcement of the hope that we are called to bring in the places where we will return?

### Mark 15:29-36

**Grace to ask: to deliver my cry to the Lord.**

**Points for meditation:**

- Unjust suffering has no explanation. We can think of the torment of the most innocent, of children all over the world, victims of unjust violence. Their situation is atrocious: they are often deprived of a father to whom they can cry out their pain. I can put myself at their side, give them the voice and cry out in despair: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”.
- We can put ourselves in Christ’s place for a moment: what is the cross I am called to live today? Can I cry out with all my might, giving vent to my anger, without politeness and “useless” manners? Am I able –only for a moment– to “tell God to go to hell”, just as I could get angry with a good friend with whom I feel completely disappointed and abandoned?
- The cross of Jesus, as Mark’s text illustrates well, is also a relational suffering. After having spent Himself for the people of Israel, He is rejected by all, misunderstood and crucified. It is a situation in which, perhaps, I have found myself within my relationships; the community of Living Stones itself can be a place of loneliness. Can I look back on situations of contradiction experienced in my own communities to cry out to the Lord for the suffering experienced? See Figure 7.

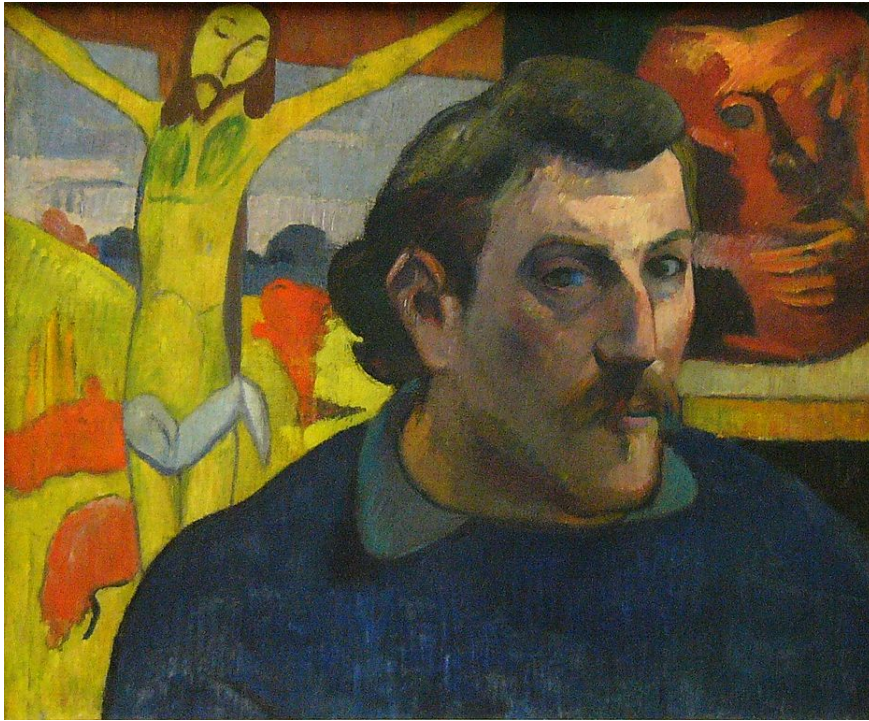


Figure 7: Portrait of the Artist with the Yellow Christ, Paul Gauguin, 1891, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

## Second step: understanding the reason

### 2 Chronicles 36

**Grace to ask: to remember the events of my life under the His gaze of love.**

#### Points for meditation:

By the time the eight-year-old prince Josiah ascended to the throne of Judah in 639 BC, Egypt was experiencing a great political renaissance. The key to this Egyptian renaissance was, first of all, the sudden and precipitous decline of Assyria in the closing decades of the seventh century BC. The precise date and cause of the collapse of Assyrian power, after more than a hundred years of unquestioned world dominance, are still debated by scholars.

With the withdrawal of the Assyrians from the northern regions of the land of Israel, it seemed possible for king Josiah, the righteous king of Judah, to expand to the north. King Josiah went to meet Pharaoh Necho II at Megiddo, but Necho II slew him (2 Kings 23:29, 2 Chronicles 35:20-24), the dreams of Josiah were brutally silenced, Josiah was dead and the people of Israel were again under the control of Egypt.

The last four kings of Judah - three of them sons of Josiah - are negatively judged, as apostates. Jehoahaz, seemingly anti-Egyptian, ruled for only three months and reverted to idolatry. Deposed and exiled by Pharaoh Necho, he was replaced by his brother Jehoiakim, who also “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord”.

But in Mesopotamia, the power of the Babylonians steadily grew. In 605 BC, the Babylonian crown prince Nebuchadnezzar crushed the Egyptian army at Carchemish in Syria (an event recorded in Jeremiah 46:2), causing the Egyptian forces to flee in panic back toward the Nile. Nebuchadnezzar,

now king of Babylon, sought to gain complete control over all the lands to the west and to plunder of the Judahite state. After the sudden death of Jehoiakim, his son Jehoiachin faced the might of the terrifying Babylonian army (2 Kings 24:10-16). These events, that took place in 597 BC, are also documented by the Babylonian Chronicle: *In the seventh year, the month of Kislev, the king of Akkad mustered his troops, marched to the Hatti-land, and encamped against the City of Judah and on the second day of the month of Adar he seized the city and captured the king. He appointed a king of his own choice and taking heavy tribute brought it back into Babylon.*

The Jerusalem aristocracy and priesthood were taken off into exile, “they slew the sons of king Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him in fetters, and took him to Babylon” (2 Kings 25:3-7). Four hundred years of Judah’s history came to an end in fire and blood. The kingdom of Judah was utterly devastated, its economy ruined, its society ripped apart. The last king in a dynasty that had ruled for centuries was tortured and imprisoned in Babylon, his sons were all killed, the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed.

- The books of Kings and Chronicles understand the exile as a punishment of God so that Israel abandons idolatry and purify its faith in a unique God.
- The author of 2 Chronicles concludes his book describing the time of exile as a time to hold back the not respected shabbats, this opens an understanding of the time of deportation as a long shabbat, a long period of silence before a new birth.

#### **Jeremiah 2:1-15**

**Grace to ask: to receive a sense of sin, remembering that while I was digging broken cisterns He remained the source of living waters.**

**Points for meditation:**

- Living our personal exiles, internal and external, it is possible to hear a voice inside our heart that says: “God has forgotten me, He has abandoned me”! But God, speaking to the prophet in verse 2, says: “I remember you!” Yes, even in this exile you live in, God remembers you. Can you see the signs in your life of a God close to you? Can you name these signs?
- In verse 11, God accuses the people of having abandoned Him to follow useless idols. It is possible as well that idols have hidden themselves in our lives. Can you name your idols? Do you know how to recognise them?
- We too, like Israel, build cisterns to collect water that does not come from the source of true Life. What cisterns, what securities, have we thought of building as a LS community to avoid the Lord’s gaze?

#### **Jeremiah 18:1-12**

**Grace to ask: to be like a vase in His hands, like clay which can turn out badly, but with the same clay He tries again.**

**Points for meditation:**



- The image of the potter working the clay recalls the image of Genesis 2 where God creates man by working the earth. Remain with this image. How has the Lord patiently worked, or how is He working, your heart?
- In verse 7, God says: “I decide to uproot and demolish” and in verse 9 “I decide to build and plant”. Look at your life: What is God trying to eradicate or demolish? And what in your life is he trying to plant and build?
- In verse 12, we read about the closed heart of Israel and their stubbornness in following their own plans, without listening to the voice of the Lord. As a LS community, are we able to mould ourselves on the plans that the Lord has for us, or do we close in on ourselves, pursuing only our own ideas?

### Jonah 1:1-16

**Grace to ask: to ask to recognise where I sleep during the storm when I flee from my land/mission**

**Points for meditation:**

- Jonah refuses to listen to God’s words and to carry out his mission, closing himself off inside and fleeing. Why does he do this? Jonah has an image of God and, faced with his request, he may have decided not to fulfil it, considering it unjust for the people of Nineveh (it is the city of violence), or he may have felt inadequate/afraid, or he may have wanted not to take on this request/burden, but to continue to live a peaceful life instead. For whatever reason, he decides to go to Tarshish (the city farthest away), a symbol of fleeing without return, believing he was distancing himself from the mission and from the gaze of God. It is interesting to note that Jonah positions himself in the lowest area of the ship, falling asleep and not praying, as if to symbolise his anticipation of death. In fact, when he tells the sailors to throw him into the sea, he is sure he will die. The fears, the burdens, the requests, the crosses of life can lead us to choose not to have ears to listen and eyes to see, because we believe we are dying. Can I name and recognise my attempts to escape from situations, places, or relationships? How do I react when faced with God’s proposals/requests?
- The storm symbolises the call to remorse, to the internal torment that does not allow the conscience to fall asleep. God unleashes, through the image of the storm, a stronger Spirit from which Jonah can no longer hide upon meeting Him. Try to bring to mind the internal ”storms” you have lived and how they were dealt with, or try to imagine your heart with its own ”scaffolding” and hidden areas and ask God to let you be able to entrust them to Him, to let you be able to descend into the depths.
- Jonah runs away from his mission to redeem and reconvert the (pagan) people of Nineveh and finds himself on a ship with a crew of pagans. Even though Jonah is not fulfilling his mission at that moment –in fact he has refused it– the pagan crew prays and converts because man’s weakness is, in the hands of God, an instrument/means for another’s fulfilment. Indeed, in this case, it will be precisely the sailors who become the instrument that forces Jonah to react. The Living Stones service is one of the forms of evangelisation/mission that is requested of me. How do I live it? What attitude do I take towards this request? Were there meetings during service that have helped me face my fears/weaknesses/anxieties?

### Hosea 2:4-25

**Grace to ask: to discover that I need to be led into the desert.**

**Points for meditation:**

- The prosperity and prominence that the kingdom of Israel attained during the eighth century BC offered great wealth to the Israelite aristocracy. Over two hundred delicate ivory plaques carved in Phoenician style with Egyptian motifs and stylistically dated to the eighth century BC probably decorated the walls of the palace or the fine furniture of Israelite royalty; they attest to the wealth and cosmopolitan tastes of the Israelite monarchs and the noble families.

It is at the height of prosperity of the northern kingdom under the rule of Jeroboam II, that we have the first record of prophetic protest. The oracles of the prophets Amos and Hosea are the earliest preserved prophetic books, containing denunciations of the corrupt and impious aristocracy.

Hosea, speaks out against those who “multiply falsehood and violence; they make a bargain with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt” (Hosea 12:1), he both offer searing critiques of the social injustices, idolatry, and domestic tensions that international trade and the dependence on Assyria have brought.

- But underneath Hosea message of destruction is a promise of restoration. Hosea decided to marry Gomer, an unfaithful woman, as a sign for Israel. He compares the sin of Israel to the adultery of his wife Gomer, she is led into the desert to rediscover the unique love of her husband.

### John 8:1-11

**Grace to ask: to be able to see strategies I have to clear my conscience from my infidelities.**

**Points for meditation:**

- The Gospels often note that Jesus’ adversaries try to set a trap for him, they try to put him in contradiction with the Law of God and to accuse him of blasphemy, of disobedience to God. But this time the trap does not concern interpretations of the Law, concerns a woman who is used as a mere legal case. Yet Jesus transforms even this trap into a human and humanising encounter.
- Their declaration is formally impeccable: in Lev 20:10 and Dt 22:22 the Law provides for the death penalty for adulterous men and women and according to the Torah the attack on marriage is an attack on the alliance with God, of which marriage is a figure in history. Marriage is a love story that spans the years and seasons of life and that narrates the faithful alliance made by God with his people, “*Guard your breath of life and do not be unfaithful*”(Mt 2,14-16). The question posed to Jesus aims to catch him in contradiction. In fact, if he does not confirm that condemnation he can be accused of transgressing the Law, if, on the contrary, he decides in favour of the Law, then why does he welcome sinners and prostitutes and eat with them? Why does he announce mercy?

- Only the woman was brought to trial, not her accomplice who, according to the Law of Moses, should also have been condemned: only she, exposed to public opinion with her sin. A woman in shame, and everyone around her is judge, enemy, accuser. There is no space to consider her history, her feelings, her awareness: for her accusers she has not only committed the sin of adultery, she is an adulteress, entirely defined by her sin. Jesus bends down and starts writing on the ground, without saying a word. From the position of someone sitting he moves to that of someone leaning towards the ground; he bows to the woman who is standing in front of him. The woman who had been taken to stand before Jesus like a teacher and a judge, who has her accusers behind her with stones in their hands, sees Jesus bowed to the ground in front of her.
- On the one hand we have the scribes and Pharisees who remember the Law of Moses carved on stone tablets; on the other hand we have Jesus who, writing on the ground the earth of which the children of Adam are made, shows us that the Law must be inscribed in our flesh, in our lives marked by fragility, weakness, sin. Jesus writes "with his finger", just as the Law of Moses was written in stone "by the finger of God" (Ex 31:18; Dt 9:10).
- "*No one has ever seen God*" (Jn 1:18). Jesus, the only man who spoke fully about God, states that when faced with the sinner, God has only one feeling: not condemnation, not punishment, but the desire for him to convert and live! "*I do not want the death of the sinner, but that he should convert and live*" (Ez 33:11). At the end Jesus stands in front of the woman, like the judge who justifies and absolves.

## Third step: crying out for help

### Baruch 2:11-35

**Grace to ask: to ask our Father for help, for forgiveness.**

**Points for meditation:**

- At the end of the road of exile, it is time to turn towards God. After the struggle, the absence, it is time to consent to His love. With the people of Israel, I can recognise that I need the Lord. God guides me and brings me to the surface when I am sinking. I step out of myself, and I can finally breathe again. To let myself be overwhelmed by this relief: to ask your forgiveness is to welcome your mercy.
- God knows us, He knows our stubbornness. And that is why His tenderness and mercy know no bounds. He comes to save us, especially in extremes. It is there, in our littleness, where something has weakened, where there is almost nothing left, that we can fully turn to Him. To feel that God is listening. He knew beforehand that we would leave and lets us do it, so that we could come back to Him.

- "I am the Lord": yes, Lord, You are, and this is enough for me. The Lord is before us, He is the centre, I am not. "I am somebody else", as the poet says. I step back and look at God before me. Let us not forget that He is at the centre of our lives and of our LS community; may our whole desire be turned towards Him. He is the Father, we are His children. See Figure 8.



Figure 8: Jonah, Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican Museums.

#### Jeremiah 14:17-22

**Grace to ask: to trust in the name of God for forgiveness.**

**Points for meditation:**

- Astonishment at such a scene of violence, desolation, and an inability to discern any good brings us to bitter tears and to many radical questions addressed to God! Confronting God's silence, just when it seems to leave no room for entrusting ourselves to Him, actually directs many of our thoughts towards God, making us return to an experience of relationship, just when that same experience seemed impossible. The questions we address to God end up then interrogating ourselves as well: What do we truly hope for? Where do we seek healing?
- Because it is You who does all this. As we question God, we remember that He cannot fail to remember His promise. It is He who makes all things, and creates me as I am, He who keeps giving me life through his forgiveness.
- God's silence can also take the form of frustrated expectations and efforts followed only by small and slow "results", or perhaps nothing at all but obstacles and "failures". The risk is to lock oneself in a feeling of loneliness that narrows one's gaze. In our experience of small communities, how do we keep our hearts open to God's gifts and creative work? Do we take the time to discern together what our hope is?



**Jeremiah 29:4-14**

**Grace to ask: to feel God's love for me in the depths of my sin.**

**Points for meditation:**

- This is the letter of the Lord to the exiles of Babylon: what to do in times of EXILE? There are those who resist, opposing the power, and those who allow themselves to be subjugated and adopt Babylonians' customs and gods. But there is a third way: to seek the well-being of Babylon by praying to the Lord for it. How is it possible to live like this without betraying one's identity?
- We remember the story of Joseph, as a foreigner, how he had been a blessing to the Egyptian people and in this way had also managed to save his family and his people, or that of Esther, or Daniel. Their loyalty was always to God. Times of crisis could be times of opportunity: EXILE is the time to come out for who you really are, by choosing the Lord. It is by asking the Lord for help that I discover what I really want.
- In EXILE we experience a God who lets himself be found. In the same way, upon entering the church, tourists and pilgrims experience a God who was waiting for them, who cannot wait to bring them home. As Living Stones it would be interesting to ask those who enter what (or who) they are looking for.

**Dan 3:25-50**<sup>1</sup>

**Grace to ask: feeling God's love for me in the depths of my sin.**

**Points for meditation:**

- The experience of EXILE takes the form of the fiery furnace into which three young Jews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, are thrown because they refused to worship the golden statue of King Nebuchadnezzar. Even their real names (Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah) were changed in an attempt at assimilation by the Babylonians. Like Daniel, they served the king, but they chose to remain faithful to God.
- Azariah can rise in the midst of the flames by singing a penitential song. Here his real name is used, because in prayer we rediscover our true self; this is what allows us to stand, as free men and women, in the face of evil. His asking for forgiveness brings a dewy breeze into the furnace; it does not remove the flames, but enables the three to endure them—asking for help enables us to endure trials in times of EXILE.
- Thinking about the angel of the Lord in the furnace, can I lean on the community in difficult moments? How do I live the times of prayer in Living Stones? I recall when I felt the presence of the Lord praying together, when I felt risen by the Word.
- See Figure 9. Here the angel of the Lord takes the form of a dove. It represents the consoling Spirit, but it also has an olive branch, which refers to Noah, amplifying the salvific value of the scene. The fresco combines the flames with the waters of death from which we are saved. The

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<sup>1</sup>Pay attention to the version of the Bible. For ENG readers the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition is being used here (the New American Bible Revised Edition also contains this passage).

dove also refers to the baptism of Christ in the Jordan. Prayer allows the three men to stand in the midst of the flames. A golden cross is visible on their clothes.



Figure 9: The three Hebrew youth in the furnace, 3rd Century fresco, Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome.

### Psalm 40(39)

**Grace to ask: feeling God’s love for me in the depths of my sin.**

**Points for meditation:**

- Ours is a God who lowers Himself and pours Himself down on us. A God who cannot help but turn toward our weeping. I think about my roots (“he set my feet on a rock”): who supported and sustained me? What gives me security, a sense of stability to walk with trust in the world?
- “burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require”: in times of EXILE we discover the real image of God, a God who does not ask for sacrifices, who is not an enemy of our happiness. This means that we can give thanks for the help that has not yet arrived as if it were, but also for the desire to be transformed, to be the best version of ourselves.
- Psalms are supposed to be sung, so by listening to and praying with it, we gradually become this new song of joy, of thanksgiving, it becomes our reality. “I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart”: God’s will and my deepest desire coincide. We recognize ourselves as poor and needy, but we can ask for what we need. Through the EXILE we ask the Lord to “not delay” . . . how long will we sing this song? See Figure 10.



Figure 10: Listen to “40” by U2, based on this Psalm, here in live version.

**Mark 10:46-52**

**Grace to ask:** to feel the Lord’s forgiveness and mercy for me deeply.

**Points for meditation:**

- How many forms can a condition of exile take? Could it consist of a marginal social position without the possibility of redemption? In such a position, what hopes can you have? What improvement can be aspired to?
- How is it possible that, from our conditions of exile, lukewarm expectations can receive a response so full of life and hope? What made the difference in this encounter? From the perspective of faith, how far can our expectations go? What can be discovered? What path of liberation can be fulfilled?
- How is it possible that Jesus does not ask for something in return for what happened? Why does He not bind Bartimaeus to Himself? And how is it possible that, despite this clear invitation, we find Bartimaeus following Jesus? Is it a free choice?

## Fourth step: the Good News

**Ezekiel 3:14-21**

**Grace to ask:** to contemplate my life in exile, working along the rivers of Babylonia and listening the promises of God.

**Points for meditation:**

To understand the story of ancient Israel, we cannot stop at Josiah's death, nor can we halt at the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the fall of the Davidic dynasty. It is crucial what happened in Judah in the decades that followed the Babylonian conquest.

From the concluding chapter of 2 Kings and from the book of Jeremiah, we learn that part of the population of Judah had survived and was not deported. The Babylonian authorities even allowed them a measure of autonomy, appointing an official named Gedaliah to rule over the people who remained in Judah, admittedly "the poorest of the land". Mizpah, a modest town north of Jerusalem, became the center of Gedaliah's administration.

The Bible provides few details about the life of the exiles during the next fifty years. Our only sources are the prophetic works. Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40-55 in the book of Isaiah) tell us that the Judahite exiles lived both in the capital city of Babylon and in the countryside. The priestly and royal deportees established new lives for themselves, with the exiled Davidic king Jehoiachin - rather than the disgraced and blinded Zedekiah - possibly maintaining some sort of authority over the community.

From scattered references in the book of Ezekiel, it seems that some Judahite settlements were placed in undeveloped areas of the Babylonian kingdom, near newly dug canals. Ezekiel, himself an exiled priest of the Jerusalem Temple, lived in a settlement on an ancient mound named Tel-abib (in Hebrew, Tel Aviv; Ezekiel 3:15). See Figure 11.



Figure 11: Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942. In response to a query on loneliness and emptiness in the painting, Hopper said "unconsciously, probably, I was painting the crushing loneliness of a large city".

### Jonah 2:1-11

Grace to ask: to remembered the Lord.

### Points for meditation:

- Jonah dared to remain silent to God's call. He swallowed the Word he had received for Nineveh and for this reason he was swallowed. Paradoxically, being swallowed by this big fish saves Jonah from certain death. Jonah does not drown in the sea; the time of EXILE in the belly of the fish allows him to breathe.
- The first verse recalls Hosea 2:16: "So I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart". Jonah is actually rescued and protected by the fish. The belly of the fish, or the desert, is the place of our difficulties, our weakness, but it is also the place where we are alone, in silence, ready to listen every sound, also a subtle voice: a place where it is possible to listen to the Lord. Where is my desert? Can I recall the deep, desperate situation that allowed me to listen to the voice of the lord?
- We can imagine this cavern of flesh, where sounds are muffled. Here is where Jonah finally decides to embrace his mission, to bring the word of God, out of gratitude that he has been saved, even though he is still in that condition of 'non-life'. The first thing he does is to answer, turning to God with a song from the depths, a point that seems to be furthest from His presence. Perhaps this is his first real prayer.
- "three days and three nights": when Jesus mentions the sign of Jonah (Mt 12:39-40), he refers to this experience as a prefiguration of his death and resurrection. By remembering the Lord, Jonah becomes aware of the inner abyss into which he had fallen, and there recognises his true identity, his vocation. Now he is ready to return to life from the EXILE, after having experienced that salvation only comes from the Lord. The Lord who answers our cry is coming back from EXILE. Try to write your prayer from the deepest depths.
- We can fill this song of Jonah with our own abysses and 'exiles', but also with our praises to the Lord. To praise instead of complaining means to accept and welcome Lord's plan. It means to be guided, not to guide. Is Living Stones, during the service or during prayer times, a place where I let to be guided?

### Isaiah 40:1-9

**Grace to ask: to meet God who has come to comfort us.**

### Points for meditation:

- We are at the beginning of Deutero-Isaiah, the second part of the book attributed to Isaiah, which announces the return to Jerusalem of the exiled Jews in Babylon. Starting from this chapter, the atmosphere changes, right at the darkest moment, with a message of hope from the prophet, an imperative: "Comfort, comfort!". We are all called to listen and to bring this proclamation of hope, especially as Living Stones.
- The image of the desert recalls the Exodus, and from the desert the voice of the Baptist will also rise, calling for conversion ("prepare the way") by listening to God. Everything passes, but His word endures forever, revealing the way back from EXILE. The high mountain instead recalls the Sinai, the place of the Covenant, which is the place where it is possible to meet God. But if every valley is raised up, and every mountain, every hill, lowered, then God allows himself to be encountered everywhere.



- We are asked to raise our voices to say that our Lord is here. Consolation is the coming of the Lord, this is the “good news”, the evangelion: God with us. Jesus will be the fulfilment of this proclamation. His power is the tenderness with which the shepherd holds His lambs close to His heart and leads the sheep. The good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep that are lost. This is how He will bring us home.

### **Ezekiel 37:1-22**

**Grace to ask: to feel the breath of God on my bones so that they may come to life.**

**Points for meditation:**

- The Lord leads us out of ourselves, as he does with Ezekiel. In this vision, Ezekiel is led into a valley full of very dry bones. Death is the ultimate EXILE. And it is necessary for someone to see and name our deaths. These bones are what remains, what little is left of the people of Israel. There seems to be no more hope for them. Even the prophet refrains in his reply to God from saying that it is possible for these bones to live again (“you alone know”). O Lord, You alone have the power of life and death.
- The next images refer us back to Genesis, it is a re-creation. Using Ezekiel as a mediator, the Word/action recalls and puts these bones back together, each in its proper place. We see them covered with tendons and flesh, and skin, but this is not enough. Only the action of the Spirit in us (Ruah, breath of God) from the four corners of the earth can make us human, make us stand up on our feet.
- From this text the idea of the Resurrection of the flesh is formed, for death has been defeated forever. The Lord brings us out of our tombs and into that sabbatical rest that is fullness of relationship. To return home is to enter this rest, it is to recognise that He is the Lord of life. The prophecy closes with a promise “I have spoken, and I have done it”, in this promise our hope finds its foundation. See Figure 12.

### **Matthew 1:1-17 or Isaiah 11**

**Grace to ask: to feel the presence of the Lord who accompanies and guides history.**

**Points for meditation:**

Jerusalem is destroyed, the Temple is in ruins, the last reigning Davidic king, Zedekiah, is blinded and exiled, his sons slaughtered. Many members of the Judahite elite are deported. The priestly and royal deportees established new lives for themselves with the exiled Davidic king Jehoiachin - rather than the disgraced and blinded Zedekiah. But also Jehoiachin will never return from the exile, after Jehoiachin the Davidic family will play no role in the history of Israel, with the exile Israel loses the lineage of David. It seems as if the history of the people of Israel has reached a bitter and irreversible end, but *there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.*



Ezekiel prophesies the resurrection of the dry bones. The spirit of God reanimates the recomposed bodies.

Figure 12: Dura-Europos synagogue, 200-235 AD, Syria.

**Luke 2:22-39**

**Grace to ask: to contemplate the fulfilment of God’s promises.**

**Points for meditation:**

- Here we have faith spoken of in visual terms—Simeon who will not “see” death before he has “seen” the Messiah, who says “his eyes have seen your salvation”, “in the sight of all”, “a light for revelation”. It is in this “seeing” that the hope in the Messiah is renewed. St. Ambrose refers to believing as receiving an image of God, and St. Cyril of Jerusalem speaks of faith as an “interior representation that has God as its object” with the believer as the one who even now “sees” God’s judgement and “foretastes” the promised reward. To contemplate that God’s promise is fulfilled is in some sense to “see” it interiorly, to taste it, to perceive it with the senses as fully as possible.
- It is significant that this takes place in the reconstructed temple, which is itself a symbol of the people of Israel and a prefiguration of Jesus, who Simeon says will be a “sign” (Greek: semion, a sign or miracle in the strongest, efficacious sense).
- After this contemplation in a holy space, this “taste” in prayer of God’s promise, the passage shows how Anna shares the “evangelion”, the good news, to all who await it (v. 38). See Figure 13.



Figure 13: The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii, Chicago.

## Fifth step: coming back to the Land

**Jeremiah 50:1-20**

**Grace to ask: let me be led back home.**

**Points for meditation:**

- Israel's sin –anyone's sin– alienates them and creates a gap with God, their neighbour, and themselves. Bridging this gap, returning from exile, is a visual representation of God's mercy.
- Verses 6-7 and 17-19 build the lost sheep metaphor, prefiguring Jesus, the Good (“Beautiful”) Shepherd. They –we– are not alone, but have such great need to be led that they are compared to sheep brought by a shepherd, completely lost on their own. They are returning “home” even if, because of the length of exile, they may have never been to this “home”. In some sense, this is like entering the garden of paradise at the end of time, which is a return to the original Garden of Eden.
- They believe that a place they may have never been to is home, and have hope that they will return there, partly because of the transmission of faith by their community. It is our prayer that those who enter our churches may come to recognise the Church “as man's home where he will find life and hope beyond death”, that place for which, in reality, “they have always been searching” (Ratzinger) even if they have never been there before. See Figure 14.



Figure 14: Good Shepherd, Priscilla Catacombs, Rome.

#### Ezra 1:1-4

**Grace to ask: to listen to the Good News.**

**Points for meditation:**

The mighty Neo-Babylonian empire crumbled and was conquered by the Persians in 539 BC. In the first year of his reign, Cyrus, the founder of the Persian empire, issued a royal decree for the restoration of Judah and the Temple (Ezra 1:2-3). A leader of the exiles named Sheshbazzar, described in Ezra 1:8 as “the prince of Judah” (probably indicating that he was a son of the exiled Davidic king Jehoiachin), led the first group of returnees. They reportedly carried with them the Temple treasures that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem half a century earlier.

A list of returnees by town of origin, family, and number follows, about fifty thousand altogether. They settled in their old homeland and laid the foundations for a new Temple. A few years later another wave of returnees gathered in Jerusalem. Led by Jeshua the son of Jozadak and an apparent grandson of Jehoiachin named Zerubbabel, they built an altar and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. In a moving scene they began to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 3:11-13). The construction of the Temple was then finished in the year 516 BC. Thus began the era of Second Temple Judaism.

Another dark period of over half a century passed until Ezra the scribe, from the family of the chief priest Aaron, came to Jerusalem from Babylonia (probably in 458 BC). “He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses which the Lord the God of Israel had given ... For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord” (Ezra 7:6,10). Ezra was sent to make inquiries “about Judah and Jerusalem” by Artaxerxes king of Persia, who authorised him to take with him an additional group of Jewish exiles from Babylon who wanted to go there. The Persian king provided Ezra with funds and judicial



authority, he arrived in Jerusalem with the latest wave of returnees.

### Jonah 3:1-10

**Grace to ask: to listen to the word of life.**

**Points for meditation:**

- The Lord is not tired of calling us, and now Jonah can welcome this call to bring the Word of God because he experienced it. He was dead and came back to life; his very life is a sign that salvation comes from the Lord. Yet he does not go to Nineveh to bring words of salvation. The second call uses different words than the first, but a judgement has been issued: the city will be “overthrown”; the word used is not “destroyed”.
- Nineveh is three days’ journey wide, as long as Jonah’s time in the belly of the fish, it is the distance of death. It is as wide as it is distant from the Lord, how do you make up that distance? It is Jonah himself, who goes through it alive, unconsciously recovering that distance, by bringing the Word. The forty days harken back to the desert years. Even before Jonah has time to go through the whole city and announce the message to all, the people begin to believe.
- Conversion is to return from EXILE: accepting to listen to harsh words that overthrow us, threatening words from One who has our lives at heart. In the end it is God himself who turns towards his people, He is not indifferent, He is the One who really sees us. Something in Jonah’s way of walking in this city gave hope to the people of Nineveh. What kind of word do I bring with my life, in Living Stones, to the great city?

### Isaiah 52

**Grace to ask: to listen to the Good News.**

**Points for meditation:**

- The reference to the Song of Songs is evident throughout the text. The return from EXILE is linked to the most beautiful song, a story of wisdom, a love song. Love is the bridegroom waking his bride from her sleep of death. Here comes the good news, the evangelion: death is defeated, we have been liberated. We can know the name of the Lord; He is the One who can say “Here I am” (or it is I).
- In the eyes of the prophet (Deutero-Isaiah) we can see the joyful return of the people of Israel, by listening to this invitation to come forth. It is an exodus, an invitation to leave with the dignity with which the Lord clothed them and us, the dignity of a son. The lifted-up servant of the final part is prefiguring the manner of the body of Christ on the cross by which we are saved, in Him we are beloved sons.
- As part of Living Stones, I try to listen to this call to life that is an awakening. How can I be a messenger of hope? What good news do I feel the urge to bring? And as a community, what does it mean for us to emerge, to say “Here I am”?

## Ishaia 62

**Grace to ask: to feel the joy of returning from exile, of this new life.**

**Points for meditation:**

- The return from exile is a journey itself, a journey where, however, it is now the recognised freedom in the space of the intimacy of exile that acts as a filter for the gaze. The longing for the goal remains, but if in the exile it is in a tension that sees it in the opposite, contracted direction, here the tension is directed and oriented on an enlightened path.
- This perspective opens to song and is the openness of every word, of the Word. If in exile you cannot even give a name to what you experience, the song of return makes you say "not forsaken": there is in the return also the word of exile, now with a name, now stitched up. It is the new light that gives life to the humiliated, a word that comes from humus, earth; it is the spaded earth, which in winter dryness unknowingly accumulates that nourishment which when illuminated by light is made fertile.
- Just as this passage from Isaiah reads in words and song the journey of the exodus, Arcabas knows how to read the exodus of Jesus (Mark 2) as one journey: in the flight there is the mystery of the return, and in the return there is the mystery of the Cross. Joseph rows and dreams, a refugee of the Spirit, and the Angel guards Mary and the Child, toward the light of a transfigured cross. That boat is the same water: every road is return, it is the echo of the "rede in te ipsum" (return to yourself) St. Augustine speaks of in recognising himself as inhabited by God, a counsel to return to self-awareness amid the unbalance of the waves of life. See Figure 15.

## John 20:11-18

**Grace to ask: to feel the joy of returning from exile/to go out to meet the others.**

**Points for meditation:**

- When you lose someone close to you, you can feel homeless and left alone. In the suffering of loss, you can see the world only negatively. This makes you blind to what is new and future-oriented in Christ. What experiences or attitudes in my life "blinded" me for God?
- Despite all her sadness, Mary's belief and longing that the death of Jesus cannot be the end still exist. That the words and actions of Jesus, which point to something more in the world, are not just empty ideas. Therefore, her blindness immediately disappears and she recognises Christ when she is addressed personally, in her concrete life. The relationship with Christ is revived and promises a home that can now outlast everything, even death. When and where did I experience that I specifically have been addressed by God?
- As Living Stones, we can demonstrate through our guided tours that we have found our home in the Church, in Christ, His body. On one hand, by witnessing our faith in Christ, and on the other hand, specifically through the "church" building, which is as familiar to us as our own living room.





Figure 15: Arcabas, Matthew 2, mixed media on canvas, coll.priv.

**Luke 24:13-35**

**Grace to ask:** to feel the joy (heart burning within) of returning from exile.

**Points for meditation:**

- The path of faith is a constant practice of turning back to God. How often do we run away from God and the community of believers, like the two disciples of Emmaus who likely left the community in Jerusalem out of disappointment or fear. What reasons did you experience that pull you away from God or the Church?
- Do I experience that the Holy Scripture and the celebration of the Eucharist are leading me to God and the community of believers? Are there any Bible passages that make my heart burn in particular?
- As Living Stones, we can also tell stories from the Bible during our guided tours. Are there points of contact in my church that are linked with Bible passages for which my heart burns? What I am passionate about is the best way to inspire others.

## Sixth step: the rebuilding of the Temple

Ezekiel 40:1-14 and 43:1-9

**Grace to ask: to receive the strength and the desire to rebuild and repair your house, Lord.**

### Points for meditation:

This text consists of two parts (ch. 40 and ch. 43), which can be read in continuity since the second part narrates what happens at the "eastern gate" described at the end of the first part. The text in between contains the description of other parts of the Temple. In the book of Ezekiel, ch. 40 inaugurates the prophet's long "vision" about the new Temple that the Jews hoped to be able to build as soon as they could come back from exile. In reality, this "architectonic vision" is a symbol for a "social vision". The whole community of Israelites had to be rebuilt. "Symbol" here does not mean "allegory" or "metaphor". The "symbol" already contains what it refers to. The concrete "re-building" of the architectural Temple will be a necessary process to unify the community around this work, and in this way rebuild society. At the same time, choosing the symbol of the Temple to refer to the reconstruction of the Jewish people means that they understood that the real "Temple" where God dwells is the people itself. This was the main insight they received during the exile. It is striking that this "vision" is chronologically situated in the very worst moment of the exile (25 years after the first big deportation of 598 BC). The "prophet" is the one who is able even in the worst moments to "dream", to "see" salvation and to communicate it to the people. The Jewish people already begin to be "rebuilt" in exile thanks to the sharing of this "vision". To allow others to "see the salvation" is the first and most important step to "rebuild" the community. As LS we share the "vision of salvation" which is the sacred art. Our announcement in the heart of the exile starts to "rebuild" the Church.

- The prophet is "transported" into the "high city of Jerusalem". He lives in Babylon, but with his heart and with his inner imagination he is in the rebuilt Jerusalem. This is the inner dynamic of the prophets, of the saints, of every evangelizer. Only the one who has the eyes of the heart in the Beauty of the Church as she should be is able to start reforming the Church, just sharing what he "sees".
- During the vision, the act of measurement seems to be very detailed. It is a sign of the precision and the care the New Temple demands. To rebuild a community means to measure with precision the different "spaces", roles, and needs.
- The most precise description is devoted to the "eastern gate" (which in Christian architecture is represented by the apse). It is the gate that is built to allow the Messiah to enter the Temple. Actually, the whole Temple is summarised in that gate. The whole Temple is "awaiting the Messiah" as the whole people of Israel are awaiting the Messiah. Israel exists as the visible sign of the Hope of seeing God dwell on earth. The community, the Church, exists only to announce that we are all waiting for this fullness of communion.
- The last verses describe God's entrance into His Temple and the announcement that the experience of exile and of the return from exile does not lead to the same situation that Israel knew before the exile. The new Temple, i.e. the new people, is now purified from other buildings which were signs of idolatry. Israel finally understood that only God saves. And that only God is with us "forever". This "dwelling for ever" is in the Christian faith the very person of Christ, where God and the earthly temple (human being) are one person forever.

### **Ezra 1:5-11**

**Grace to ask:** to receive the strength and the desire to rebuild and repair your house, Lord.

**Points for meditation:**

- Ezra 1:5: everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord. God's strings were working in the background both in the exile and now again in the return. He moved the heart of the king; he moved the hearts of the Israelites. He wants to move my heart too. He will not do it without my consent. Let us ask for an open and welcoming heart: for ourselves, for new members of the Living Stones group, for the people we meet during the visits.
- Ezra 1:6-7: All their neighbours assisted them.... Cyrus the king also brought... The interior of the future House of God in Jerusalem is composed of the stolen temple treasury (2 Chr 36:18) and gifts from the friends and neighbours of the Hebrews in Babylonia. All of us may bring our gifts, even if they are small. When we put them together, the temple becomes beautiful. Where does our Living Stones house need repair? What could be my contribution? Who can help us?

### **Revelation 21:11-27**

**Grace to ask:** Christ, help me to see that the Church is built around and by you.

**Points for meditation:**

- "I saw Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, possessing the glory of God" (21:11). The reconstruction of our lives and of the Church is not something we have to do on our own. God is with us. What is more, his glory [Greek: doxa, "good opinion, praise"; Hebrew: kavod, "weight, presence"] accompanies us. How do I perceive his presence in the rebuilding of my life and our community?
- "He measured according to the standard unit of measurement [according to the measurement of a human]" (21:17). The new city is not a fantasy place somewhere in heaven, away from our human reality. It is built for us in accordance with our needs. What are my expectations and desires for the new Jerusalem, for the rebuilding of my life?
- "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb" (21:22). As a Living Stone, we are used to explaining all the stones of a temple (church) of God. In the new Jerusalem, the Triune God is the living Temple. It is an offer, but also an invitation. How can I be a living stone for the living temple? What contribution do I want to make?

### **Acts 6:8-15 and 7:1-60**

**Grace to ask:** to see that the Church is built around Christ, the new temple is Christ.

**Points for meditation:**

- In his speech to the Sanhedrin, Stephen retraces the history of the salvation of the people of Israel, a history marked by resistance to a God in constant search of a relationship with man. It is also the story of our Church, whose miseries in all ages have challenged the relationship to an ever-faithful Christ. If I reread my experiences in the Church, can I recognise the presence of Jesus, his faithfulness, beyond all the difficulties experienced?
- At the moment of his martyrdom, Stephen demonstrates a great closeness to Christ, a closeness that does not stop at the contemplation of the Son of God, but culminates in a progressive adherence to his person, to the point of echoing the very words of Jesus: 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. If I reread my last year, in what situations (in daily life or in the activity of my Living Stones community) can I say that I felt a stronger adherence to Christ and to his life? See Figure 16.



Figure 16: The Judgment and Stoning of Saint Stephen, Fra Angelico, 1447-1448, Cappella Niccolina, Vaticano.

**Jonah 4:1-11**

**Grace to ask:** to contemplate our poverty as Church builders.

**Points for meditation:**



- God changes His mind, it is He who is converted about the fate of Nineveh. Jonah himself, more or less consciously, shortened the distance of sin by walking through this city which has the width of a three-day walk (the distance of death). He is a living testimony of a man snatched from death, yet he cannot rejoice at the return to life of his brothers. On the contrary, he is even at the point of asking to die. Why? He has a distorted image of the Lord and His justice.
- Jonah leaves the city, choosing voluntary EXILE in a place to the east, thus continuing the movement of Adam and Eve, of Cain, away from the Lord. He builds himself a shelter, an artificial cave, as an assertion of self-sufficiency from God. From which to observe the city without being seen. Only the shadow of the tree received from the Lord, however, gives him joy. We can think of this shadow as the mercy of God.
- Jonah goes from one extreme to the other: as soon as the tree withers, he again asks to die. A just life, as “good people” but alone, devoid of mercy, is meaningless. This lesson is hard to learn, and Jonah does not respond. We condemn ourselves to eternal EXILE when we do not recognise ourselves as forgiven sinners and are unable to build a dimension of communion. When am I incapable of welcoming others, and rejoicing for them? As LS, how can we contribute to the building of a Church shaped by God’s mercy?

#### **Revelation 1:1-19**

**Grace to ask: to see the Church as a fire on a gold lampstand in the midst of many difficulties.**

**Points for meditation:**

- John sees “one like a son of man”. His appearance is described in detail. We invite you to draw his appearance and then meditate. What associations come to mind? What does the image evoke in you? Are there Biblical passages that run through your mind?
- As individual communities, we belong to the Church and are like lampstands around the Son of Man. In chapters 2 and 3 of the text, we see the difficulties faced by the individual communities. What would John receive that was intended for our Living Stones group?
- The image of fire is ambiguous: metal is purified and refined in fire—an image of purification. But fire also radiates warmth, security, and light a positive image. Let it have an effect on you. What movements do you feel in yourself?

#### **Matthew 22:1-14**

**Grace to ask: Lord, give me a wedding dress so that I can be at the banquet with you.**

**Points for meditation:**

- The image of the banquet is a typical image in the Bible to speak about communion and about what to expect at the fulfilment of times. Actually, here we have a wedding banquet which, anthropologically, is the way spouses share their joy. Their bodily pleasure is shared with others

through the mediation of the pleasure of food. The king preparing this feast in the parable is an image of God. The son who gets married is of course Christ himself. What is the "wedding of Christ"? Christ himself is the "wedding", the "eternal covenant", between God and humankind. God the Father wants to share with everyone the joy of this "union forever". In this case, to be invited to this banquet means to become, by eating, part of the marriage who is Christ himself. The guests become part of the body of the groom.

- In the Greek text, the servants are sent not to "invite the guests", but to "call the called". This lexical repetition means that every human being, by essence, is called to this banquet. The deepest identity of every human being is to become part of the body of Christ. By their invitation, the servants are just reminding the "called" who they truly are. The announcement of the Gospel consists of making people aware that they are born to be in intimate union with God.
- The violent reaction of the king when the "called" do not come is to be understood as the pedagogy God uses in our interiority when we are not doing "what we are", when we are not answering the call to be our true selves. Ignatius explains how "desolation", a sense of emptiness, deep homesickness, and remorse are the way God teaches those who turn away from Him.
- To go out in the streets and call everyone so the banquet hall can be full "of good and evil" is one of the nicest images of the work of the Church, an "assembly of good and evil". As LS, we have the privilege to visually experience this "ministry of invitation into the C/church".
- The last verses can be shocking because of their unusual violence. Since the whole episode has a eucharistic meaning (the banquet of the Son that transforms you into members of His body), the man without the wedding garment was usually interpreted as the man without the "new garment" the first Christians received at their baptism. This man symbolises a non-baptised person, and his expulsion means that the Eucharist can be celebrated only by baptised people. This was very important for the first generations of Christians because baptism provided the "kerygma" of the foolish love of God, and the Eucharist was experienced as the commitment to a new way of acting (the way of the members of the Body of Christ). Without the first announcement (the baptismal kerygma), the Eucharist could be misunderstood as a moral obligation and not as an expression of gratitude based in the discovery of the love of God. We can then ask the Lord to always wear this "wedding garment", i.e. to remember always that God loves us freely and that our commitment to the banquet of the Church is the consequence of that. However, we can consider another interpretation. This man "without the wedding garment" is somehow "naked". And he was already "inside the house" ("How could you enter..."). There is also nothing said about the groom. Where is he? Furthermore, for the reader of the Gospel, who is the one who will soon be thrown away and killed? These elements lead us to consider that this man is like a second appearance of Jesus. He is the one who is naked on the cross. He is the one who will be "killed outside". He is the groom. His death allows us all to celebrate this wedding feast. Of course that does not mean that God the Father "kills" His Son. But the story proceeds like this: the Son is killed and the wedding starts.



**John 21:1-14**

**Grace to ask: to contemplate ourselves, the Church, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee together with the risen Christ.**

**Points for meditation:**

- “Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing”” (21:3). Peter is a fisherman. He was a fisherman before Jesus called him and does what comes naturally to him. When we rebuild our lives, our Church, and our community, God does not ask us to be Superman or Wonder Woman, but to give ourselves with new energy. What are the talents that I want to share and offer to the community?
- “So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord”” (21:7). Immediately after the miracle of the fish, John recognises the Lord. Jesus appears where there is the greatest need. What are the signs of the Lord’s presence in our lives that will help us to rebuild our future? Do I feel a particular call about the direction I should go to shape my future?
- “Jesus said to them, “Come, have breakfast [aristao: to eat a meal any time before supper, i.e. before the main meal, usually eaten in the evening]”” (21:12). Jesus is inviting us, creating a community through hospitality. How do I want to live hospitality as a Living Stone? What do I offer to the people who come to visit our churches, to help them to rebuild their lives as well?

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See you all in Santiago de Compostela



**LS International Formation Weekend  
26 - 28 April 2024**

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**SUMMER CAMPS 2024**

- Service camps in Amsterdam (4 shifts in July)
  - Formation camp in Greece (8-14 July)
  - Pilot camp in Berlin (July)
  - Service camp in Paris during the Olympic games (26 July - 11 August)
  - Service camp in Santiago de Compostela (30 July - 12 August)
  - Spiritual Exercises in the Swiss Alps (10 - 17 and 18 - 25 August)
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**Living Stones has two sides: local and international.  
Take away one and the stones will not be living any more.**