**YWAM – FutureWise**

**22.02.2021**

“Thus says the Lord:

Stand at the crossroads, and look,

and ask for the ancient paths,

where the good way lies; and walk in it,

and find rest for your souls.

But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’” (Jeremiah 6:16)

Thank you Jonny for inviting me to introduce your time of reflection today.

Dear friends,

Before we have to choose in what way we want, or do not want, to walk, ever before that the first choice we have to make is simply whether or not we want to walk at all. For us Christians, the answer to that question is quite clear: if we want to imitate Christ, if we want to be Christ in the world, then we have to want to walk.

In John’s Gospel, after the famous prologue text, one of the first things we are told about Jesus is that he walks. This fact is less trivial than it seems. In the Gospels, Jesus walks a lot, what this displays is more than a question of personal style or a concern to keep fit. The wayfaring of Jesus has a theological significance. Jesus does not engage in aimless wandering but in a directed progression towards a fulfilment: the fulfilment of his identity and mission.

What was true for Jesus is true for each one of us. We are not a settled people. We are a pilgrim people. Like Abraham, we are called to advance boldly towards an unchartered future, and so we will find ourselves regularly confronted with new scenery, unexpected meetings, unforeseen experiences. If we want to follow Christ, we have to be willing to change often, we have to change the ways in which we look at the world, the ways in which we relate to one another and to God.

As St Paul reminds us, a central element of our Christian faith is the humble acknowledgement that we have not yet obtained what we long for and have not yet reached the goal (Phil 3:12). We are a pilgrim people, we are called by God to be the people of the Way (cf. Ac 24:14).

It is obvious that some of us will never travel very far geographically. As Christians our walk is not measured first in miles outside ourselves. For us, to journey implies that we are ready to open our eyes, minds and hearts to new horizons which make us grow in the knowledge of who we are and who God is. This is an inner journey, an interior experience.

The new horizons to which we are called are not very far from us: they call us to cross the boundaries of religion, race and politics, the barriers of gender and sexual orientation, to step out and advance into the land of forgiveness, dialogue and respect, in truth and love.

Sometimes the walk looks like a long trek or an adventurous safari, and sometimes – yes sometimes – like an enjoyable cruise. What matters is not the distance or not even whether it is easy or difficult but the result: what is important is that we are changed. Like St Peter who receives a new name, the Christian walk must change us, there must be a shift within us, not necessarily an earthquake, but something that makes us humbler and more real, more human, more conformed to Christ.

As Christians we are called to walk. The first implication of that statement is that we are not called to fly or to hover above the ground. We are not angels, we are human beings, grounded in and connected with the earth. We are meant to have our feet in touch with the real world. Recently Pope Francis insisted on this aspect. According to him, in order to continue to be a living expression of the founding intuition, our institutions, groups and ministries need “a dynamic fidelity, capable of interpreting the signs and needs of the times and responding to the new demands of humanity. It is a question of remaining faithful to the original source, striving to rethink it and express it in dialogue with the new social and cultural situations. It is firmly rooted, but the tree grows in dialogue with reality.” (Address, 06.02.2021)

This dialogue with reality, this encounter with the real world means that we cannot expect to remain spotless: perfectly immaculate and clean. To dialogue with our brothers and sisters in humanity, to walk with the world implies dust and dirt on our shoes, sweat and sometimes smelly socks. For us, as persons and as communities, our Christian pilgrimage is inevitably linked with struggles, painful decisions, misunderstandings and mistakes, failures and disagreements.

Ultimately what matters is to walk. We can learn from our mistakes and grow from our disagreements and so become more obedient to God’s will for us. God who, by the way, is never short of plans for us, after the plan B he has a plan C, a plan D an so on; when after we have prayed about it and discerned to the best of our abilities, if it happens that we take the wrong turn, God cannot give up on us and so like a good GPS, he is recalculating all the time, looking for a new way by which to lead us to our destination.

It is necessary to point out that “the ancient paths” mentioned by Jeremiah are not an invitation to return to a nostalgic “old time religion”, they do not look to the past but to the present.

The ancient paths speak of our fidelity to a calling that we are always supposed to live in the here and now.

Faithfulness is as much about the past as it is about the future but both, past and future are relevant only in regards to the present. We have to be open to what is to come, to Christ who is coming in the present, always new and always challenging. In order to remain faithful to our identity and our mission we must continually make an effort to be creatively inventive; we must be ready to take risks and to produce new talents, new fruits. As Christians, be that out of fear, laziness or selfishness, we cannot close the present to the future, and deprive ourselves, the Church and the world, of the life that is to be, here and now.

The question which is at the beginning of the Bible and which should be at the beginning of our journey in faith is: “Where are you?” (Gn 3:9). If we want to move forward we have to know where we are, and for us and for God the only answer is “Here I am”, neither in the past which does not exist anymore, nor in the future which does not yet exist, but here and now.

God is, by definition, the one who is present in the present. In Matthew’s Gospel we are told that the name of Jesus is “God is with us” (1:23) and at the end of the same Gospel, Jesus promises: “I am with you always” (28:20).

From the beginning and until the end, God is not only a being, but he is a being who is present to his creation, to each one of us. The whole of biblical revelation is about God persistently and patiently reminding his people that he is there with them, that he is with us. What our contemporaries need, what we have to proclaim is that God is with us, that he is present to you and me in a very personal way and in a totally unconditional way, here and now.

If God’s identity is about being present, and if we are supposed to be like God, to reflect him in this world, the question appears to be very relevant: Where are we? Are we present as God is present?

Unlike Adam and Eve “who hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God” (Gn 3:8), and Cain after them, who after killing his brother “went away from the presence of the Lord” (Gn 4:15), we have to be present to others, to ourselves and to the world where God reveals himself to us. We have to be present to ourselves as we are and to others and the world as they are, not as we would like them to be. If we want the Spirit to accomplish his work in the hearts of our brothers and sisters in humanity we first have to love them with respect because, according to Martin Luther King, “love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”

The second question which we need to ask ourselves is found in the story of the blind man. He shouts many times: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” When he is invited to move closer, Jesus asks him: “What do you want?” (Mk 10:46-52). A strange question and yet a necessary one because the Lord does not, cannot impose anything upon us. He needs our desire, our openness.

If we want to walk we need to be moved by a desire, a longing, a certain restlessness. When we feel comfortable, when we are settled, installed in our cosy ways and our certitudes, then we do not want to move, to be challenged and to walk. The answer to the question “what do I want?” is important because it reveals what the driving force of my life is.

Sometimes, because of our insecurity and our desire to be in control we run away and hide ourselves in the safe ghetto of the past, in the secure dynamic of the group, in what we know about God, in what is trending on Twitter or Facebook.

At the beginning of John’s Gospel, we have two of John the Baptist’s disciples who decide to follow Jesus. When Jesus notices their presence, he asks them: “What are you looking for?” (1:38) What do we look for? What do we really want?

We have to be honest. The point is not to give the answer we think Jesus expects from us or the answer that will make us look smart or good Christians, but the answer that comes from our hearts. What do I really want?

Jesus’ question is not a way for him to learn something he does not already know. It is a way for us to become more aware of the force which is directing our lives and where this force is leading us.

We have to remember that our lives are shaped and directed by our desires, we become what we want. Abraham Heschel (1907-1972) reminds us that “a person is what he aspires for.” (*Man is not Alone*, p. 259). For his part, Miroslav Volf (b. 1956) warns us: “Our hopes are the measure of our greatness. When they shrink, we ourselves are diminished.” (*Against the Tide*, p. 41)

Here lies the problem: we are what we hope for. The smaller our hopes, the smaller we become, the more difficult it is for God’s grace to accomplish its work in our lives, the more difficult it is for God – the One whom nobody and nothing can contain – to come and dwell within us.

The question: “What do you want?” provided an opportunity for Jesus to place the disciples before the challenge which lay ahead of them: to be followers of Christ means that they must be ready to be stretched beyond the narrow limits of their petty, self-centred expectations.

Last year Pope Francis expressed the regret that, in this world that races ahead, we lack a shared roadmap, and he invited us to advance along the paths of hope (*Fratelli Tutti*, n. 31 and 55).

Today, is there a lively hope in our hearts? Are we a hope-full people?

This is not an optional question. According to St Paul, our Christian calling is at stake. In the letter to the Ephesians, in the one Body which we are called to form, we share “one and the same hope”. For the Apostle, hope is one of the hallmarks of our Christian identity. For him, Gentiles are characterised by the fact that they have no hope (Eph 2:12).

What is our hope?

We have to humbly acknowledge that all too often, in our Christian communities, our hope appears to be reined in, cautiously channelled, and made stingy by our fear of walking with the Lord and taking risks.

We have to remember that we are accountable, we are supposed to give a fruitful account of our hope (cf. 1P 3:15).

The communion of hope that we are supposed to form is not an end in itself. It is for the whole world. For the glory of God and the salvation of the world, hope must be the standard of the Church, of our communities and organisations.

Your Conference has gathered together women and men from many different countries and Christian backgrounds. This diversity bears witness to the fact that hope has been kept alive in you, in all of us. As followers of Christ, we cannot acquiesce with things as they are. Our hope should be a resistance movement against our fears and complacency. We must take the risk to hope because we want to be faithful to Christ.

The hope that something else is possible should make us capable of treading on new paths today, of being ready for fresh starts, of being free to move along the path ahead.

A few years ago, Patriarch Bartholomew invited the Orthodox Church “to give the contemporary world a testimony of love and unity and to reveal the hidden hope that lies within it” (19.06.2016). These words apply to us today. We are called to give to our divided world a testimony of love and unity and to reveal with boldness and patience the hope that is within it.

There is no glory or salvation for us in keeping our hope hidden and buried. Like the sower in the parable (cf. Mt 13), we are supposed to sow seeds of hope everywhere, generously and indiscriminately.

From the beginning, Christian hope kindled a fire on the earth, a fire which was kept alive in the hearts of so many of our ancestors who walked the path of faith.

In the last pages of one of his books, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) asked: “Successors to Israel, we Christians have been charged with keeping the flame of desire ever alive in the world. Only twenty centuries have passed since the Ascension. What have we made of our expectancy?” (*Le Milieu Divin, An Essay on the Interior Life*, Collins, 1964, p. 151)

More than 60 years after those words were written, the question is still relevant for us today. What do you want? What have you made of the hope that is in you?

When Jonny contacted me, he asked me to finish with a contemplative exercise. I wonder if the word exercise does not come from a good Protestant work ethos…

Instead of an exercise in which you have something to do, I invite to allow the Word of God to do something in you. *Lectio Divina* is an ancient monastic way of prayer with the Sacred Scriptures. I invite you to chew the words of Scriptures over and over again like a cow chewing a mouthful of grass. Chew over the two questions I asked during this talk: Where am I? What do I want?

Please do not transform this time of prayer into a Bible study! To ruminate on these questions, which are God’s questions to you, is primarily about listening to them; it is about allowing them to resonate within your hearts.

Concretely I suggest that you pause regularly during the course of this day. Take just a few minutes of silence in which you are attentive to what the scriptural words awaken in your hearts and minds. Maybe it will take a few days for you to see what they really mean for you… *Lectio divina* is a dialogue with God and so we have to respect that he speaks to us in his own time, at his own pace, in his own way.

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