

“For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1Cor. 9: 16).

“ ...they reported all that God had done with them...” (Acts 14: 27).

“ Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight” (Mat. 3: 3).

John: from Boanerges to the disciple of love

Christ’s gospel has power to transform lives. The apostle Paul says: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1Cor. 1: 18).

Jesus said that they would receive this power : “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1: 8).

In the greek text, the word power appears as ‘dinamis’ which means ‘capacity’, ‘strength’. The term dynamite comes from ‘dinamis’ and it denotes an extremely strong explosive capable of destroying a whole mountain, changing the topography of a place.

The only unique power capable to transform a human life is found in God, who works through His Spirit in the heart of each individual, making him a new creature (2 Cor. 5: 17).

This was Paul’s experience, who from persecuting christians, would be persecuted by his former Jewish brethren because of the change operated upon his heart.

This was also John’s experience. He had not always been the disciple of love.

I. John encounters Jesus

John was born a Galilean, son of Zebedee and Salome (Mark 15: 40). He had a brother whose name was James (Mat. 4: 21).

Zebedee contracted hired servants meaning that the family was well off economically (Mark 1: 20).

John was the youngest of the two brothers for in the gospel he is always named in second place.

Zebedee and his sons were fishermen. They were accustomed to go out at sea for their daily sustenance. John had accepted the good news of the gospel through the preaching of John the Baptist (Jn. 1: 35-40).

When Christ started his public ministry, John and Andrew, who was Simon's brother, were the first disciples to accept Him as the Messiah.

From that time John followed Christ for one year in Judea, not on a permanent basis, but rotating his discipleship with fishing.

John followed Christ permanently when Jesus started His ministry in Galilee. Jesus called him directly, as well as his brother James together with Peter and Andrew (Luke 5: 1-11).

This memorable call was confirmed one day when John was working on the lake of Gennesaret together with his brother as well as Peter and Andrew. They had not caught anything during the whole night; then Christ approached them and said to Peter:

“Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” (Luke 5: 4). They obeyed and the fish was in such quantity that the net was near breaking.

In reality this was a symbolic teaching of Christ, to have them understand that years later, when they would enter the sea of souls, they would have success only if they obeyed the Word of Jesus.

Secondly, Jesus assured them that He would make them ‘fishers of men’. “So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him” (Luke 5: 11).

II. John and his training

A few month later, John would become one of the twelve disciples who formed Christ's group of apostles (Mat. 10: 22).

From this moment, John followed Christ wherever He went and he strove hard to learn from the divine Teacher, until the day arrived when he would become part of Christ's small inner circle together with Peter and James.

It was a great privilege for John to receive the living water from His divine Teacher, the water that springs unto eternal life (Jn. 14: 4).

For more than three years, he walked with Christ and was able to witness His life and labour. We, just as John, can enter into Jesus' school. We can contemplate Him in the sacred pages of the Bible, we can receive directly from His hand the water that will quench our thirst. Do we desire it?

John witnessed the miracle at Cana's wedding feast. He saw how Christ transformed the water into wine and his heart rejoiced.

He witnessed the resurrection of Jairus's daughter and he also heard and saw how Christ brought Lazarus back to life after being dead four days and his body in the phase of organic decomposition (Jn. 11: 17-44).

He contemplated with deep thoughts how two fishes and five loaves were multiplied to the point of feeding more than 5000 people (Mat. 14: 19).

He was present during the transfiguration of Christ, when Moses and Elijah joined the Master (Mark 9: 2).

He was also a witness of honor in many of Jesus' miracles. He saw Christ walk on the waves of the sea and heard His command to calm the tempest. He saw how He cured lepers, gave sight to the blind, made the paralytic walk, gave freedom to the demoniacs, comforted the afflicted and offered dignity and hope to the people who were rejected by the official religion.

He saw Christ shedding drops of blood when He was praying in Gethsemane (Mat. 26: 33).

John joined the world best school and received such an instruction that no human institution can offer. Do we want also to contemplate Jesus' wonderful works?

III. John and his defects of character

However we must remember that John had not always been the disciple of love. When he met Christ and decided to follow Him, the Teacher named

him, together with his brother James, Boanerges, that is, ‘Sons of Thunder’ (Mark 3: 17).

John had a very impulsive and aggressive character, was a fault-finder, selfish, suspicious, “easily resentful by contempt and insult” (Eca, 52).

He would argue strongly with the other disciples concerning who among them was the greatest (Luke 9: 46), which means he also had dreams of greatness and had placed his ‘ego’ on a very high level.

This was such an intense desire cherished by him and his brother James, that their mother went with the request to Christ that each of her sons should be sitting at His right and the other at His left in the kingdom Jesus was about to establish.

On one occasion, he rebuked some people who were working independently from them, who did not belong officially to the group of Christ’s followers (Luke 9: 49).

On another occasion, he gave Christ the brilliant idea that fire should come down from heaven to consume the inhabitants of a Samaritan village, who did not want to receive his Master (Luke 9: 52-56).

John was a rude man and he needed special power to transform his life. This power, this strength – dinamis – was in Christ, who desired to transform him as well as with all His disciples.

Are you maybe like John? Proud maybe? Do you tend to criticize those around you? Do you maybe feel rather easily wounded by them? Are you aggressive and impulsive? Licentious and selfish? It does not matter what you are, what matters is what Jesus can do for you. He holds the power to transform lives. Will you let Him transform yours?

IV. John and his transformation

John’s transformation did not occur in one day, but it was a process. He voluntarily entered Christ’s school, just like the other disciples. Jesus was the Teacher and they were the students.

However just like any other school where there are different classes of teachers and students, as well as teaching methods and courses, in Christ’s school, He is the best Teacher of all times, who possesses absolute wisdom and the highest knowledge.

The classes that Christ imparts are of such depth that they can transform the lives of His students, His methods cannot be compared, any student can graduate from His school with the best qualification. Do we want to be a student in Jesus' school?

Of course the student's attitude is most important. Some students stare at the ceiling or day-dream while the teacher speaks. Years can go by without them learning anything. Others, on the contrary, can absorb the taught material in such a way that in a short lapse of time they know as much as their professor or even more.

There are three conditions to be able to learn in Christ's school and receive the power of the Spirit; John knew them and applied them in his life:

1. To be ready to detect one's own mistakes: "Those who were ready to see their own failures... had great opportunity to achieve it" (Eca. 57). (Ps. 19: 12).
2. To feel a strong desire to improve one's own character: "Those who felt anxious to improve their character... had great opportunity to achieve it" (Eca, 57). (Ps. 42: 1).
3. To take advantage of each lesson Christ imparts us: "John felt the strength of this lesson and took advantage of it" (Eca, 57). (Ps. 119:11).

Each day brings us new experiences and opportunities to learn from Christ's school. One of these wonderful lessons that our Lord imparts was precisely what a group of sixty persons were able to experience on a trip to the island of Patmos, Greece, on August 11, 2005.

After having visited the cave where it is supposed that John received God's revelation, after having spent some wonderful hours walking on holy ground, we boarded the boat to take us back to Ephesus (Turkey) from where we had come.

A couple of hours later, the Aegean sea became very rough, and we feared that the boat would turn over and sink. The waves were at least six meters high and crashed onto the boat and it seemed that soon it would be swallowed up by the furious sea. Many were sea-sick and vomiting, others were lying prostrated on the floor... but all were praying and begging God to help us.

The captain and his crew were visibly preoccupied and there was a moment when the captain closed himself in his command cabine to ask God to help him and what to do. I was not afraid, but I suffered quite a lot physically because I suffer from sea-sickness on ships and airplanes since I am a child. I was thinking of our little Maria and also of br. Pablo Hunger's children.

These were more than four hours of intense prayers, and one more opportunity to learn in Christ's school. When we arrived at port and the sea had calmed down, some of the brothers told me: "Let us hope we won't forget too soon how the Lord helped us".

Are we from this class of persons? As for me I decided to profit from the strength of this extraordinary lesson and to draw conclusions that will help me in my life of faith.

"Judas had the same precious opportunities as John to study and imitate the Model. He heard Christ's lessons and his character should have been transformed by divine grace. But while John faught with earnestness against his own shortcomings, and tried to become like Christ, Judas was violenting his conscience, falling into temptation..." (Eca, 57).

We can place ourselves in John's place and have the same attitude as he had or be as Judas, which means to seem to be followers of Christ but no hearers and no doers of the truth.

"The first – class of people – was dying to self each day and was overcoming sin. The latter – class of people – pleased their own desires, and became Satan's servants... (Eca, 57).

V. John and his testimony

As John was drinking from the source of wisdom of his beloved Teacher, he obtained the highest education and his character was transformed.

From Beonerges he was converted into the beloved disciple of love (Jn. 21: 20).

When Christ was arrested, he followed him to the high-priest's palace, and it did not bother him if he would be recognized as a follower of Him who was considered a seditious, in contrast to Peter who tried to hide himself and wanted to pass unnoticed.

John was at the foot of the cross and Jesus gave him the care of His mother (Jn. 18: 15; 19: 26).

Hearing that Christ's tomb was empty, early on the first day of the week, he ran to the tomb to verify the news and arrived before Peter (Jn. 20: 1-10).

John contemplated Christ risen and also saw how He ascended to heaven with the promise that He would come again.

After the ascension, John and the other ten disciples remained in the upper room in Jerusalem continuing with one accord in prayer (Acts 1: 13-14).

John and the other disciples received the 'dynamis' – power - of the Holy Spirit at the former rain (Acts 2: 1-4), who made them able to preach the gospel.

Together with Peter, he realised missionary activities in the city (Acts 1:13) and for this they were imprisoned; but this did not impede them to testify vigorously for Christ (Acts 4: 19).

VI. John and his last days

During the last years of his life he took care of the churches in Asia minor, which was governed by the Roman empire, living in Ephesus.

“...for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1: 9), he was driven into exile to the island of Patmos by the emperor Domitian because John refused to render him cult, a prerogative unique to God.

Patmos is a volcanic island which was used, in the days of John, as a prison; John, considered a political prisoner of the Roman empire, was sent to the island in chains to carry out his sentence and with the objective to silence his voice.

John was eighty years old when he arrived on Patmos and it is said that he arrived with one of his disciples named Prohoros.

Patmos is an island of the Aegean sea, and together with 11 other islands form what is called the Dodecanese belonging to Greece.

It is an island close to the coast of Turkey, at about 80 km southwest from the ruins of Ephesus. Patmos is 12 km long and 6 km wide in its larger part. In total, it is about 42 km². Actually 3000 inhabitants live there and their principal occupation is fishing and tourism.

When John reached the island, there was a temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis known also as Diana.

John, being of an advanced age, was not discouraged by such an experience. Others would have fallen into despair and discouragement. John searched to have a closer connection with God. Accustomed to the flourishing vegetation of Asia minor, he was now surrounded by a dry and rocky landscape. However he could recognize the power of God while observing the clear skies at night and the breeze's fragrance during the day.

“The strong waves, in their terrible commotion, held within their given limits by an invisible hand, spoke to John of an infinite power that governs the void” (Eca, 71).

Are you capable to recognize God even in your life's most terrible circumstances? During difficult times, can you hear His voice and value what He has always done for you?

While John was contemplating sacred things on the Lord's day, a Sabbath day, Jesus honoured him by appearing to him in vision. He heard a great voice like a trumpet, saying: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last” (Rev. 1: 11).

He saw seven golden lampstands and among them Jesus, dressed in a robe down to His feet and girded around the breast with a golden band. His head and His hair shone like sunlight. His voice was like the sound of many waters (Rev. 1: 13-15).

Jesus appeared to John to encourage him, to comfort him, and to use him as an instrument of salvation for millions of people who would live after John's time and would read the book of Revelation.

Domitian thought that with John in exile, the history of christianity would end, but it was just beginning, for by writing the book of Revelation, John would bequeath humanity one of the most important books of all times, and the key to understand the history of Christ's church, and all the last days events.

John was thrown into a barrel full of boiling oil but he survived this terrible ordeal, just like the young Hebrews in the court of Babylon, when they were thrown into the burning furnace.

At Domitian's death, another emperor more benign, Nerva, gave him back his freedom so he returned to Ephesus after having lived 18 months on the island.

According to tradition, Polycarp, Papias and Ignace were John's disciples. He lived his last years in Ephesus and after having lived a life of self-sacrificing work and abnegation for his beloved Jesus, he died of natural death at nearly one hundred years old.

CONCLUSION

John's life was one of sweet, agreeable fragrance and until today gives testimony to the power of the gospel.

Do you want to be transformed, as John from Beonerges to become a disciple of love? Do you want your imperfections burnt by Christ on the altar of forgiveness? Do you really want to become a new creature?

May the Lord help us to imitate John in his faithfulness and example, that we may reflect the image of Jesus in our life as disciples of love. Amen.

José V. Giner
Pergamos (Turkey), 12 of August, 2005.