

HOLDING ON OR LETTING GO

“I have removed a few useless things from my life, and God has come closer to see what was going on.” I read this in a book by Christian Bobin¹, and many other words come to mind, of very different origins yet with points in common: letting go, leaving, detaching, releasing, untying, giving, abandoning, breaking, sharing out, handing over... We tend to prefer their opposites: holding on, keeping, clinging, reserving, gripping; and we do so with determination and sometimes even with ferocity, often without distinguishing whether what we cling to has the strength of a rope or the fragility of a thread. But John of the Cross had already warned: “It makes no difference whether a bird is tied by a thin thread or a thick one: unless it breaks it, it will never be able to take flight.”²

In its most literal and primary sense, to abandon implies the gesture of letting go: someone who was in possession of something stops holding on to it, releases it, and consents that it no longer belongs to them. In everyday life, so present in the parables of Jesus, this gesture occurs often: the sower lets go of the seeds he carried in his hand, letting them fall on the ground (Mk 4:3.26); a woman drops leaven into the dough so that it may rise (Lk 13:21); a Samaritan pours oil and wine on the wounded man (Lk 10:34); the man who found a treasure hidden in a field sells all his possessions to buy the field (Mt 13:44). Other figures who appear throughout the Gospel also make this gesture of letting go: the women who anoint Jesus do so when they do not hold back their precious perfumes but anoint his feet or his head with them (Lk 7:38; Mk 14:3; Jn 12:3); Zacchaeus did so, giving half of his goods to the poor (Lk 19:8).

On one occasion the disciples invited Jesus to admire the great buildings of the temple, but his response was one of indifference: soon nothing of all that would remain (Mk 13:1-2). Yet if the grandeur of the buildings had not stirred his admiration, it had been awakened by the gesture of the poor widow who put into the temple treasury the two small coins that were all she had to live on (Mk 12:41-44). She never came to know that an unknown teacher had granted her gesture a “teaching authority” and had called his own to learn from her.

In all these gestures of letting go appears the “mark” of the ways and counsels of Jesus himself: “sell what you have” (Mk 10:21); “whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Mk 8:35); “whoever does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:33); “if anyone wants to take your tunic, give him your cloak as well” (Mt 5:40; Lk 12:33; 18:22; 19:8); “do not store up treasures on earth” (Mt 6:19); “he broke the loaves and kept giving them” (Lk 9:16); “take this and share it among yourselves (...) taking bread, he broke it and gave it to them (...) this is my body, which is given..., this is my blood, which is poured out...” (Lk 22:17-20).

By contrast, holding on, keeping, accumulating, clinging, hoarding... form a dark background against which the brightness of letting go stands out; and sadness accompanied the decision of the young man who kept his possessions (Mk 10:22). He had framed his concern for eternal life in terms of possession (to inherit), and what he says of the commandments is that he has kept them. In his answer, Jesus uses the same codes of language, but in another direction: not that of increase, possession or inheritance, but that of dispossession, detachment, self-emptying and self-giving... That is “what he lacks.”

The young man's concern was centred on eternal life, and Jesus answers by pointing him to earthly life, where it is possible to sell and to give to the poor. Faced with his preoccupation with the "hereafter," Jesus points him to the "here and now." The way to attain the other life (a treasure in heaven) necessarily passes through a way of using his goods that takes concrete form in leaving them in the hands of the poor and following Jesus. "One thing he lacked": not in order to inherit definitive life, but to fulfil God's plan in himself, to find the happiness he did not possess and the fullness to which he was called. All access to a "treasure in heaven" passes through a concrete way of "managing" the treasure one possesses here "in God's way." To share in the life of God, which is what eternal life consists of, is to share in his lavishness and his generosity.

If we let the rich young man speak, perhaps we would hear this:

"I turned away slowly, avoiding his eyes, afraid that the affection I had felt in his gaze would be too persuasive, and I walked off unhurriedly, aware that his eyes remained fixed on me and that perhaps he was waiting for me to decide to come back.

I did not, and since that moment there has not been an hour, nor a day, nor a year in which I have not regretted it. I live without lacking anything, but joy is missing. I am someone people respect and consult, but I would give my life to have become a disciple of that Master who spoke to me from another wisdom.

Money, knowledge and power have become ties so strong that they have stifled my dreams and shut me in behind fences that keep me from walking free of hindrances.

And never again will the longing and the nostalgia leave me, for not having trusted the promise of life offered me by that wandering Galilean who one day crossed my path."

Dolores Aleixandre rscj
(*Christus. Accompanying the spiritual life* 267)

¹ *Ressusciter*, Paris 2003, p. 18

² *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book I, ch. 11, 4