

“It is often spoken of, whether positively or negatively, in your family, at school, at GS, at church, with your friends, or on social media: everyone has his own opinion and her own experience, but for you, what is Christianity?”

“GENERATING TRACES IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD”

1. The Christian Event as an Encounter

by Luigi Giussani*

1. ANDREW AND JOHN

Christianity is the announcement that God became a man, born of a woman, in a fixed place and at a fixed time. The Mystery that lies at the root of all things decided to make Himself known to man.¹ It is a fact that happened in history, the breaking into time and into space of an exceptional human Presence. God made Himself known by revealing Himself, by taking the initiative of becoming a factor in human experience, in an instant that was decisive for the whole life of the world.

After forty days of fasting and contemplation He came back to the place of baptism. He knew already for what encounter. “The Lamb of God!” says the prophet as he sees Him coming (surely in a whisper). This time two of John’s disciples were with Him. They looked at Jesus, and that look was enough: they followed Him to the place where He lived. One of the two was Andrew, Simon’s brother; the other John, the son of Zebedee: “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” What is written about the rich young man, who would go away sad, is taken for granted here. What did Jesus do to keep them there? “As He saw they were following Him, He said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ and they answered, ‘Rabbi, where do you live?’ He said, ‘Come and see.’ They went and saw where He was living and stayed with Him that day. It was about the tenth hour.”² »

¹ See L. Giussani, *Il valore di alcune parole che segnano il cammino cristiano*, in “L’Osservatore Romano”, 6 April 1996, 4.

² F. Mauriac, *Life of Jesus*. Julie Kernan, trans. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co. 1937).

* Source: L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2010, pp. 3–6.

» This is how François Mauriac, in his *Life of Jesus*, recounts the first emergence of that presence as a "problem" that affects history for all time.

Chapter 1 of St John's Gospel is the first page of literature to speak of this. In addition to the explicit announcement—"The Word was made flesh,"³ that of which all reality is made has become man—it contains the memory of the first two men who followed Him. Years later, one of them set down in writing the impressions and the features of that first instant when the event occurred. He reads in his memory the notes that are still there.⁴ The whole of St John's first chapter, after the Prologue (vv. 1-18), is a sequence of phrases that are really notes from memory. For memory does not have a law of uninterrupted continuity, like fiction; memory literally "takes notes": a note, a line, a point, so that one sentence covers many things, and the next sentence begins after many things that were not spelled out in the previous one. Things are inferred rather than actually said; only some are said, as reference points.

"The following day John was still there with two of his disciples. Fixing his eyes on Jesus, who was passing, he said ..."⁵ Picture the scene. After one hundred and fifty years of waiting, the Hebrew people, who had always had prophets throughout a thousand years of its history, finally has another: John the Baptist. Other ancient writers speak of him, he is historically documented. So, at long last, came John, called "the Baptizer." The way he lived impressed everyone. From the Pharisees to the humblest peasant, they left their homes to go to listen to him, at least once. Everybody—rich and poor, tax collectors and Pharisees, friends and foes, from Galilee and from Judea—went to hear John⁶ and to see the way he was living, on the far side of the Jordan, in a desert land, feeding on locusts and wild herbs. He always had a group of listeners around him. Among these people, *that day* were two who came for the first time. They came from the lake, which was rather far away, outside the area of built-up towns. They were two fishermen of Galilee. They felt out of place there, like two peasants going to town, and they were watching everything around them closely, especially the Baptist. With eyes and mouth wide open, they were watching him, paying close attention. Suddenly a young man, one of the group, who had joined the others in listening to the prophet, walked away on the path along the river leading north. Immediately John the Baptist focused his gaze on Him and cried out, "There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"⁷ People did not budge: they were used to hearing the prophet come out, now and again, with strange, meaningless phrases, unconnected and out of context. So most of those present took no notice. But those two were there for the first time, hanging on his every word, following his gaze with their eyes, and they noticed that as he was saying those words he had his eyes on that individual who was walking away. And they set off after Him. They followed Him from a distance, afraid and embarrassed, yet strangely, profoundly, obscurely, magnetically moved to curiosity. "Those two disciples, hearing him speak like that, followed Jesus. Jesus turned around, saw that they were following Him, and said, 'What are you seeking?' They »

³ John 1:14.

⁴ See L. Giussani, *Il tempo e il tempio. Dio e l'uomo* (Milan: BUR 1995), 43-6; see also L. Giussani *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, Viviane Hewitt, trans. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1998), 44-5.

⁵ John 1:35-6.

⁶ See Matthew 3:1-6; Mark 1:4-8; Luke 3:7-18.

⁷ John 1:29.

» answered, 'Rabbi, where do you live?' He said to them, 'Come and see.'⁸ "Come and see." This is the Christian formula, the Christian method. "They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour."⁹

The narrative specifies nothing else. The whole passage, even the next one, as we have said, is made up of notes: sentences end at a point that assumes that many things are already known. The time is indicated ("the tenth hour" is four p.m.), but nothing is said of when they arrived, nor of when they left. The narrative continues, "One of the two who had heard John the Baptist's words and had followed Him was called Andrew, he was Simon Peter's brother. He first met his brother Simon, who was coming back from the shore, either from fishing or from mending his nets, and told him, 'We have found the Messiah.'¹⁰ Nothing is added, nothing is quoted, nothing is documented; it is well known. These are notes about things everybody knows! Few pages can be read like these, so realistically and simply truthful, where no word is added to the essential that is fixed by memory.

How could Andrew have told his brother, "We have found the Messiah"? Jesus must have used this word when He had spoken to them. It was a word in their dictionary, else it would have been impossible for them to say and so suddenly to assert that He was the Messiah.

It is obvious that after listening to that Man for hours, watching Him speak ("Who is He who is speaking like this? Who else has ever spoken like this? Who has ever said these things? I've never seen or heard anyone like him!"), a precise impression had slowly formed in their heart: "If I don't believe this man, I'll not believe anyone, I'll not believe my own eyes!" They did not spell it out, perhaps they did not form the thought, but they certainly felt it. That man must have affirmed, among other things, that he was the Messiah, the One who was to come. He was so clear in making this exceptional affirmation that they accepted it as something simple, easy to understand. It was something simple!

"Andrew led Simon to Jesus. Jesus fixed His eyes on him and said, 'You are Simon, the son of John. You will be called Cephas (which means rock).'¹¹ The Jews used to change someone's name either to describe his character or to recall something that had happened to him. Let us imagine Simon going with his brother, full of curiosity and a little afraid, and looking at the Man to whom he was being led. The Man is watching him from afar. Let's picture the way Jesus was looking at him, piercing him to the very marrow of his bones. Let's think of how He saw through his character, "You'll be called Rock." What an impression it must have made, to feel looked at like that by someone, a total stranger, and feel oneself understood in the depth of one's being.

"The following day Jesus had decided to leave for Galilee."¹² This page is entirely made up of these short hints, of these points where what had happened is taken for granted, as evident and well known to everybody.

⁸ John 1:37-9.

⁹ John 1:39.

¹⁰ See John 1:40-1.

¹¹ John 1:42.

¹² John 1:43.