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## How Jesus Taught His Disciples to Walk With Head Held High

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*In spring 2010, a student of the Orthodox Theological Faculty of Belgrade invited me to visit the well-known monasteries of his region of Valjevo: Celiје, Pustinja and Lelich. I had heard of Nicholai Velimirovich before. I knew about his outstanding role in the Serbian Orthodox Church and the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of the Serbian people. But when I saw his birth place and breathed the air and the spiritual atmosphere of this amazing scenery, he became for me a much more living person.*

*The following text is not a research paper on his homilies, but an exegetical essay. However, I am grateful to the Nicholai Studies for publishing it, since it shares the endeavour which was Nicholai's: to read and patiently reread the Gospel and to communicate the teaching of Jesus Christ as faithfully as possible so that it may illuminate both our personal lives and the destinies of our nations.*

*The Serbian Chrysostom insisted that we need Christ to open our eyes in order to understand who He is. This is precisely what the central section of Saint Mark's Gospel, analysed in the present study, is about. It also contains this aspect of Jesus' teaching which was central for Bishop Nicholai: we will see God's Kingdom and walk with head held high when*

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*we follow in the steps of Jesus, when we, instead of sacrificing the others to our interests, become their servants.*<sup>2</sup>

### ***Two blind men***

In the gospel according to Mark, two blind people get back their sight. The first is an anonymous person of Bethsaida, a village north-east of Lake Gennesaret. His recovery was laborious. Jesus put saliva on his eyes, but he didn't see clearly at once. He said: "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking" (8:24). It is only when Jesus put his hands on his eyes a second time that he "saw everything distinctly from a distance" (8:25). The other is Bartimaeus, a beggar of Jericho. He faced strong resistance from those around Jesus when he tried to come to him. But his healing happened easily, without Jesus even touching him.

In order to get to Bethsaida, the place where the first healing took place, Jesus had to cross the lake. In the boat, talking with his disciples he challenged them: "Having eyes, do you not see?" (8:18). They needed Jesus to open their eyes just as much as the two blind men did. But what was it they didn't

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<sup>2</sup> "Love is joy, the price of love is sacrifice. Love is life, the price of love is death. Those who love earthly riches, power and glory, ruthlessly persecute other people to serve their senseless 'love.' And they are ready to sacrifice everything but themselves to their 'love.' Their only fear is to serve others and sacrifice for others. The princes and commanders of the people threw the legions to death for their prey and their glory. It is the work of Satan the murderer. Not so Man-loving Lord, not so. He descended from the heavenly throne of glory, to manifest God's love for people through his personal service and sacrifice. The love of Christ is an example of the greatest courage. It is courage, before which both death and Hell tremble." Bishop Nicholai Velimirovich, "A Century of Christian Science on Love," 31 (originally published in Bishop Nicholai's book *Cassiana: The Science of Christian Understanding of Love* (New York — München: Logos, 1952), republished in his *Collected Works*, Vol. XII).

see, or only indistinctly, like the one who saw people looking like walking trees?

They saw Jesus freeing those tormented by unclean spirits and healing the sick. They understood that “the reign of God has come near” (1:15). They saw that where Jesus is, God is taking things into his hands. And when Jesus finally gathered the crowd, distributed bread and all were satisfied, they recognized in him the shepherd who takes care of his people. According to all four Gospels, this moment was decisive in revealing Jesus as the Messiah. But Mark inserts at this point the laborious healing of the blind man at Bethsaida. It is like a warning, “Watch out for blurred vision!” One can see without seeing clearly. It is not enough to say that Jesus is the Christ. It is still necessary to understand what this implies.

All along the way from Bethsaida to Jerusalem Jesus was teaching his disciples, working hard to open their eyes. The report of this journey ends with the healing of Bartimaeus, a blind man who will immediately recognize in Jesus the son of David. So Mark placed a healing of a blind person both at the beginning and at the end of the way leading to Easter. It takes no less than a miracle to see the reign of God in the crucified Jesus. The difficult healing in Bethsaida at the beginning of the journey is a warning that this cannot happen at once, but requires patient work. And indeed, the patient teaching of Jesus is central to the section of the gospel that the two healings of blind people delimit.

### *The context of Jesus’ teaching*

The first stop on the road to Jerusalem is Caesarea Philippi. This detail is not trivial. This city was the residence of Philip, one of the sons of Herod the Great. It was called Caesarea be-

cause Philip had dedicated it to the emperor Augustus in the year 14. Around the year 70, when Mark wrote the gospel, the city had just been the scene of crucial political events. In 67, the imperial general Vespasian had left from Caesarea Philippi to fight the Jewish rebels in Galilee. In 68, he had arrived at the gates of Jerusalem. His military campaign was so successful that his troops proclaimed him emperor in 69. On December 21 of the same year, the Roman Senate confirmed him, and Vespasian obtained the supreme title of *Divi filius*, son of a god. It is shortly after that Mark wrote “the gospel of Jesus Christ, son of God” (1:1).

Mark would not have needed to specify that Jesus began his journey to Jerusalem from the same place as Vespasian did forty years later. But he decided to draw a subtle parallel between the emperor Vespasian, son of God and master of the world, and Jesus, Son of God — Son of God in a different way. Many of the first readers of the gospel had been traumatized by the Jewish War of 66–70. Christians from Jerusalem and other towns in the region had to leave their homes and were forced into exile. Mark reminds those who were bewildered by Vespasian’s triumph that there was yet another power, another reign than that of the emperor: the reign of God which Jesus announced and which he represents.

The paradoxical parallel between Jesus and Vespasian is also suggested by the word gospel, *euangelion*, good news. For us, it’s a religious word. But in the days of Mark and his readers, it had a resonance which was just as much political. In the Bible, in the book of Isaiah, *euangelion* designates the good news of God coming to Jerusalem as her king. The propagandists of the Roman emperors used the plural *euaggelia* for the good news concerning the emperor: his birthday or a victory. Vespasian had the beginning of his reign proclaimed as *euaggelia* throughout the Roman empire.

Both Jesus and the emperor are called “son of God”. Vespasian had some difficulty in obtaining this title. If he were the son of a deified emperor, he would quite naturally have been a *Divi filius*, son of a god. But since he had no illustrious ancestors, he had to create a sacred aura otherwise. He had stories of miraculous healing spread. In Alexandria, he had cured a paralytic and restored sight to a blind with his saliva... It is quite possible that Mark tells the healing of Bethsaida, where Jesus put saliva on the eyes of a blind man, in order to subvert the imperial propaganda of Vespasian.

The parallel with the emperor becomes the most clear and most paradoxical at Jesus’ death. Vespasian was acclaimed emperor by his officers — and it was a Roman centurion who said of Jesus crucified: “Truly this man was son of God” (15:39). This is of course not a confession of Christian faith, for Jesus was not son of a God, but he is the Son of God. It is a subtle way of proclaiming the imperial, and more than imperial, other than imperial, dignity of Jesus. A few centuries later, the inscription on the Byzantine icons of the cross will follow the same line. Jesus crucified is “the King of glory”, *ho basileus tês doxas*. *Basileus* is the emperor’s title in Greek.

Jesus is king, and his reign is also the reign of his Father, the reign of God. And when God reigns, he “breaks the bars of the yoke and makes people walk with head held high” (Lev 26:13). God established his reign in Israel at the first Passover, when he led his people out of slavery. At the Red Sea, Moses and the Israelites sang: “The Lord reigns for ever and ever” (Ex 15:18). This is the first mention of the reign of God in the Bible.

Thus the teaching of Jesus on the way to Jerusalem is set in a tense atmosphere of expectation of the kingdom of God. Those who followed the general Vespasian were eagerly waiting for him to become emperor. Those who followed Jesus had heard him announce the reign of God. They could not but wait for a

liberation similar to that of the exodus from Egypt. But how will the Messiah Jesus break the bars of the yoke? Is it at all possible to walk with your head held high in a world where the rulers prevail by violence and are tyrants over their subjects?

### *The content of Jesus' teaching*

So what does Jesus teach on the way to Jerusalem? In the section delimited by the healings of the two blind men at Bethsaida and Jericho, Jesus continually returns to the same two points. The first concerns his own identity. Who is he? What will happen to him? The second point concerns the identity of his disciples. What will happen to those who follow him? How does he teach them to walk with their heads held high? What dignity does he confer on them?

Caesarea Philippi was the first stop on their journey. Jesus asked: “Who am I?” It was time for him to find out what people, and especially those closest to him, saw in him. Peter answered: “You are the Messiah, the Christ” (8:29). He was right, but immediately it became clear that he was still very much like the blind man of Bethsaida when he was only half healed. He saw correctly: Jesus is the Christ, the one God has anointed to represent God and to make present the reign of God. But as soon as Jesus said that “he must undergo great suffering” (8:31), Peter vehemently opposed him. He gave Jesus his real name of Christ, but he did not understand what it means. All the disciples saw so imperfectly and understood so little who Jesus is, that in Caesarea Philippi “he sternly ordered them” not to speak of him (8:30).

Then Mark takes up a formula he has already used several times: Jesus “began to teach them” (8:31). The new thing is that “he spoke the word quite openly” (8:32). This phrase recalls the

teaching of Jesus in chapter 4, then “he spoke the word in parables” (4:33). In both cases “the word” is the proclamation of the kingdom of God. From now on, Jesus is openly teaching that it comes through the Cross.

On the way to Jerusalem, he reconfigured the disciples’ understanding of his messiahship. There are repeated announcements of what will happen to him. Jesus avoids the title of *messiah* or *Christ* but uses the enigmatic expression “Son of Man”. “The Son of Man is delivered into the hands of men” (9:31): that sounds like a proverb. The “son of man” could be anyone. Abel, a son of Adam, a son of man, was delivered into the hands of men, the hands of his brother, Cain. Jesus’ words could be rendered: “people do with their fellow human beings whatever they want”. So when Jesus refers to himself as the “Son of Man”, he seems to be less than a messiah. He is a vulnerable human being with whom people will do what they want — as he just said of John the Baptist: “they did to him whatever they wished” (9:13).

But as the “Son of Man”, Jesus is also more than a messiah. His words about “the coming of the Son of Man in the glory of his Father” (8:38) allude to the visions in the book of Daniel. A “son of man”, a mortal human being, is “coming with the clouds of heaven” (Dn 7:13). In the presence of God, “dominion and glory and kingship is given to him, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed” (Dn 7:14).

Before the Sanhedrin, Jesus will confirm this hope. Now, on the way, he insists on his passion: “the Son of Man must suffer a lot” (8:31). But there is an enigmatic hope: “after three days, he will rise”. This is often translated by a religious word such as “resurrect”. But the verb is everyday language. We “rise” or “stand up” in the morning. Kings or prophets “rise” or “stand up” to accomplish their mission. Nations “rise up” to freedom.

God “stands up” to come to the aid of his people: “You will rise up and have compassion on Zion” (Ps 102:13). The paradox is that Jesus will stand up after his death: “they will kill him, and when he has been killed, he will rise” (9,31). The verb “to rise” or “stand up”, like the corresponding noun *anastasis*, generally translated by *resurrection*, is from the same root as *stasis*, the word used for the uprising in which Barrabas, the rebel freed instead of Jesus, was involved (Mk 15:7). Jesus will stand up, but not as an insurrectionist. He will rise from the dead, he will stand up against all powers that hold mankind in fear and slavery.

The disciples, the Twelve, even the three who were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, do not understand what Jesus is telling them. Mark comments: “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him” (9:32). They are still like the blind man of Bethsaida who saw people as walking trees. They will see clearly who Jesus is only after he has been killed and has risen. The young man in white seated in the empty tomb will say to the myrrh-bearing women: “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (16:7).

Jesus’ teaching is as much about the identity of the disciples as it is about his own. “On the way they argued with one another who was the greatest” (9:34). Realizing it, Jesus knew that he had to reconfigure not only their understanding of his messiahship, but also the understanding they had of themselves. They are right to hold on to their dignity as apostles. It was Jesus himself who gave them *exousia*, the authority and the power to establish together with him the reign of God by casting out unclean spirits. If they argue in order to find out who among them will be the best agent of the reign of God, their discussion might be justified. But it seems that they are more concerned with securing a privileged position.



The teaching by which Jesus reconfigures the notions of dignity and authority of the Twelve is located by Mark in Capernaum. The phrase “in the house” must refer to the house of Peter which Jesus had visited earlier. He came there with his first disciples and had a meal served by Peter’s mother-in-law. Now he seems to be at table again, this time with his twelve apostles. His teaching is as brief as it is clear: “Whoever wants to be first will be last of all and servant of all” (9:35).

In a corner of the room stands a child. He is in charge of the service. He is expected not to be noticed, but to pay attention to everyone. As discreetly as possible, he brings a piece of bread to one of the guests, pours water into the cup of another, removes the leftovers and cleans up. This child — *paidion* in Greek — was possibly a girl. In the Gospel of Mark, *paidion* has been used twice so far for a girl and once for a boy. She is probably not a family member, but the daughter of a destitute mother or poor parents who have had to give her away. Such children had a hard time and didn’t count for much.

Jesus continued his teaching with a gesture. He noticed the child everybody else ignored. He got up from his cushion. He went toward her and bent down to embrace her. This was quite unusual, people wouldn’t embrace except among equals. And he brought her to the table of the messiah, the future king, and his twelve dignitaries, saying: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (9:37). What a shock for them! How is it possible that this child represents Jesus as much as the twelve apostles whom he has formally invested with his authority?

This gesture and these words upset their image of Jesus. Why did he identify with this child? Probably the answer is found in what Jesus had said about himself just before. The servant girl counted for as little as the Son of Man to whom people do whatever they wish. But Jesus’ identification with her completely modifies her status: it grants her an inalienable dignity. Jesus

made her sit at the place of honor. And he extended the dignity he bestowed on her to every “such child”: “Whoever welcomes one such child welcomes me.”

The gesture and words of Jesus reconfigured the understanding that the apostles had of themselves. At first, they must have been confused. Maybe they got the impression that Jesus was disrespecting them. But later, when the things which people did to Jesus happen to them as well, when they too are “delivered to the courts, and flogged” (13:9), they will remember the dignity with which Jesus definitively invested those who don’t count for much. He said: “Truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose their reward” (9:41). When the apostles are not received with the honors due to dignitaries, they will nonetheless be bearers of the reign of God.

Approaching Jerusalem, Jesus speaks again of what will happen to him: “the Son of Man will be delivered to the high priests and to the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and they will deliver him to the Gentiles” (10:33). Instead of freeing his people from the enemy nations, Israel’s messiah will be mocked and scorned by them. But “after three days he will stand up”. As Jesus announced the shame of the Cross once more, James and John approached him and asked for the first two places, on his right and on his left. They understood that Jesus will rise and be king. But they were still like the blind man in Bethsaida. They saw things in a blur. If they saw clearly, they would see to the right and left of Jesus two crucified criminals.

Without seeing any clearer than them, the other ten got angry with them, and Jesus had to resume his patient work of opening the eyes of them all. He taught them a different dignity, one more absolute than what they had imagined. “You know that those who are considered to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But

it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (10:42–44).

Repeating his teaching in the house of Capernaum, he added as a new element a contrast with the emperor and his client kings. The attitude of James and John who were ready to risk their lives to obtain the first places brings to mind the brave and ambitious companions of Vespasian. They too were willing to risk everything with the hope of securing the most prestigious positions for the time when their general will be emperor. But in the reign of the messiah, things will turn out differently. The most honored will be those who serve.

A detail deserves attention. Jesus does not say “those who rule over the Gentiles”, but “those who are considered to rule over the Gentiles”. This is a subversive teaching, Jesus relativized the established powers. Of course, they dominate and their violence can hurt. But their power is not absolute. Another reign, the kingdom of God, has come near, although it is still hidden. It comes through the Son of Man whom “all peoples, nations and tongues shall serve.” And, as if he were contradicting the book of Daniel, Jesus said, “The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve.” The ruler all nations will serve is their servant, “the Son of man delivered into the hands of men”.

By serving, Jesus is reversing “the power vertical”. He is not on top. His kingdom is like an upside down pyramid, with Jesus at the bottom carrying all the others.<sup>3</sup> He “gives his life as

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<sup>3</sup> After having completed this essay and shortly before its publication, I read with deep emotion the following words of the Serbian Patriarch Porfirije in an interview given when he was still Metropolitan of Zagreb: “The Church is often considered as a community which has a pyramidal structure. As a believer and as a shepherd in the Church, a bishop and metropolitan, I would like to see this pyramidal structure turned upside down.” (Interview given to *Obzor Vecernjeg lista*, April 20, 2020, <http://mitropolija-zagrebacka.org/mitropolit-porfirije-intervju/>).

ransom for many” (10:45). During his life he freed many sick and possessed people. By serving and giving his life, he liberates peoples and nations. James and John were willing to risk their lives for the honor and authority they desired. Jesus gave all he had and all his self in order to free others, even the enemy nations to whom he is delivered (10:33).

Thus he taught his disciples to walk with their heads held high. The gift he made of his life overturns positions: “whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (10:44) and “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (10:31). In the house of Capernaum, he seated the child doing the service in the place of honor. Now he teaches his apostles that it is by serving that they will share in his messianic dignity.

### *Bartimaeus*

The journey to Jerusalem ends as it began: with the healing of a blind person. Bartimaeus reminds us of the blind anonymous person at Bethsaida, but there are differences. With Bartimaeus, Jesus doesn’t have much work to do. It is as if the Holy Spirit inspires, enlightens and animates him. Bartimaeus sees clearly from the start what Jesus has patiently taught his disciples. He was not ashamed of his poverty. His dignity is his faith and confident trust. He believes in the reign of Messiah. He stands up and follows him.

Jesus, his disciples and a large crowd left Jericho, the last stop before Jerusalem, when a beggar sitting by the roadside made them stop. He didn’t need to be brought to Jesus by others like the blind man of Bethsaida (8:22). He took the initiative. “When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth [who was passing by], he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’” (10:47). He was blind, but in reality he

saw, in Jesus he recognized the messiah. He was already crying out what the crowd of disciples will soon proclaim at the gates of Jerusalem: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed be the coming kingdom of our father David!” (11:9–10).

Now these same disciples try to silence him. They hinder him from coming to Jesus, just as they stopped the children from coming to him. For them, he doesn’t count. He is too poor to be respected. They do to him what they want. They treat him like a nasty child — and he may indeed have been quite young since he will jump up to come to Jesus.

Bartimaeus didn’t allow anybody to silence him. He cried out even louder: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” One may wonder why Jesus, who forbade the disciples to say that he is the Messiah, now accepted that Bartimaeus called him “son of David”. Was it because Bartimaeus did not try to impose his views on Jesus as Peter did? He only asked for mercy and for sight restored, while Peter stood as an obstacle in the way of Jesus.

As Jesus had noticed the silent child in the house at Capernaum, he paid attention to the beggar sitting by the roadside. He called him, and there is the same reversal of the situation as in Capernaum. The marginalized person is suddenly the focus of attention. Everyone came near and wanted to encourage him: “Take heart, get up, he is calling you!” (10:49).

“Throwing off his cloak, he jumped up and came to Jesus” (10:50). He stood up as Jesus will rise from the dead. His energy prefigures the power of the resurrection. “What do you want me to do for you?” (10:51) This is the typical question the emperors asked those whom they received in audience. It recalls the previous scene when Jesus asked James and John the same: “What do you want me to do for you?” (10:36). But there is a difference. The two brothers were quite demanding: “Mas-

ter, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you” (10:35). Bartimaeus came to Jesus and said nothing. It was only when Jesus said: “What do you want me to do for you?” that he replied: “Rabboni, that I may see!” (10:51). James and John had asked to sit on thrones to the right and left of Christ. Bartimaeus, who was sitting in the dust of the roadside, sprang up and only asked to see.

Jesus said to him, “Go, your faith has saved you!” (10:52). He didn’t have to teach him at length, Bartimaeus was taught by the Holy Spirit. And as soon as his eyes were opened, and without even Jesus telling him, “he followed him on the way” (10:52). He did not accompany Jesus as long as the Twelve. He came last, and became first (10:31).

Thus Jesus taught his disciples to walk with their heads held high. He patiently made them understand that it is not social status, achievements or merits that make the dignity of a human being. Bartimaeus was a beggar, but he had his dignity. He jumped to his feet as if to announce that Jesus will stand up from the dead. And he followed him with his head held high.

May we see the glory of God on the cross of Jesus, and in its light see the inalienable dignity of every human being, especially of those who are ignored and to whom others do whatever they wish. “Awake, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will be your light” (Ephesians 5:14).

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