

You shall be my People and I will be your God

Keynote Bernard and Simone Dangeard

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"You shall be my people and I will be your God". The title phrase of this presentation is a recurring theme throughout the Bible: "You shall be my people and I will be your God". It appears for the first time in Exodus 6:7 then it is found in Jeremiah 11:4, Ezekiel 36:28 ... God tells us: the key to life and happiness for us is to be with God, and for God to be with us. How are we to be with him, and he with us? By observing his laws, precepts, his commandments, by hosting his own Spirit in us which will enable us to observe them (Ezekiel). The Covenant, a true marriage contract, "ketubah" in Hebrew, is relentlessly pursued by God throughout the history of the Jewish people. The Covenant is made between God and his people, but also between God and each one of us in particular. The verb expressing God's desire of a covenant is used in the future form, which means in Hebrew that which is not yet accomplished. That means it is still to be done, never really achieved.

To examine this phrase and what it might mean for me today, for us, I propose to build on some important texts from the biblical tradition including the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels. For several years, Simone and I¹ have particularly studied the Gospel of St. Mark, and we gradually learned it by heart in order to integrate it more deeply. I therefore propose to turn our attention first to the beginning verses of the Gospel of St. Mark, as well as some texts from the Old Testament to which they refer. In Saint Marc, the beginning of the Gospel, or "Good News," is as follows: Mk I, v. 1-3

*Beginning of the Good News
of Yeshua
Messiah
Son of God
As it is written
in Yeshayahu the prophet
Here I send my messenger before thee,
who will prepare your way
Voice of a crier
In the desert
Prepare the way of the Lord
make his paths straight
It came to pass
In the desert
Yochanan the Immersing one ...*

¹ Simone and Bernard: Who are we?

We have been members of the Community of the Arche of Lanza del Vasto for over thirty years. We have four daughters and seven grandchildren. The two of us are Catholic Christians, and we lived in a community house for over 25 years. For a little over ten years we have had our own household, with strong links to community groups and houses of the Arche. Bernard has been responsible for the French Arche for two years. He works in an agricultural reintegration project primarily using horsepower. Simone has a strong collaboration with the association Bethasda whose goal is 'the evangelization of the depths', integrating the psychological and spiritual, and based on the Word of God.

Alongside this commitment, we are both members of the Saint Mark memorisation fraternity for the past twenty years. We follow the teachings of Anne and Bernard Frinking, Orthodox Christians. These teachings are rooted in the work of Marcel Jousse. We are fed by this thorough engagement with the word of God, which incorporates the writings of many Church Fathers.

We are not theologians or scholars. What we share is the result of work on the Word nourished by this double affiliation.

As you can see, these verses, which reflect the Greek original rather literally are presented here rhythmically, which is of great help if you try to learn the text by heart. Those of you who wish to may participate in a workshop this afternoon in which we shall explore the meaning of the text's rhythmic presentation. For now I want to underline that this text refers to several passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, including: Exodus 29: 4-6, Exodus 23: 20-23, Isaiah 40: 1-17, Malachi 3: 1-4, and 19 to 24.

These first verses in Mark's Gospel are based on the history of Israel as the quotes extend from the beginning of Exodus to Malachi, the last book of the Hebrew Scriptures, and allude to God's covenant with his people.

In the book of Exodus, chapter 23, the Covenant is presented in its personal and communal components. The French translation here was done from the Septuagint by Bernard Frinking. It is this passage that shows most clearly those two aspects.

We see that from the very first verses, St. Mark introduces us into the Covenant and summarizes in a few words rich in meaning, the covenant between God and his people. He actually summarizes the whole Bible:

The words "and it came to pass" is a formula that tells us it is about a new creation, and thus a reference to Genesis. The evocation of Yeshayahu, Isaiah, and the following quote is an invitation to take into account all the biblical books of Exodus through Malachi, including all the prophets represented by Isaiah. In rendering the name of Isaiah here the phonetic Hebrew is retained, and reminds us that the good news which follows is an announcement of salvation for humanity: Yeshayahu meaning "Let God save, "the Hebrew root" yasha "meaning: to save, to deliver.

For us too in L'Arche this passage is important because it refers to John the Baptist (Johanan) whose mission it was to prepare the road, the way. Or, if we want to take another image, he is the friend of the bridegroom and not the bridegroom himself who is Christ. He appears in the first verses in St. Mark as a fundamental figure: the one who prepares the new covenant. He announces a new creation, he is the new Elijah who revives the teaching and the prescriptions of Moses (see the Malachi quote).

Lanza del Vasto, Shantidas, put John the Baptist in a central place for L'Arche, giving him a seat as a crossroads between different religious traditions of East and West. It is also very striking to see at the centre of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the tomb of John the Baptist, revered by many Muslims.

Let's come back to Exodus: "If listening you listen to my voice and if you do everything I command you and if you keep my covenant, you will be for me a people chosen ye will indeed hear my voice and if you do all that I command you, and if you keep my covenant, you shall be my chosen people among all nations, for all the earth is mine. And you will be for me a priestly community, a royal and holy nation. You shall say these words to the children of Israel." We have here some details about the contract between God and his people. A contract, way back then but also today, should be a win-win. Everyone bringing something and getting something, balanced between both parties. What should the chosen people do to honour his contract? "If listening you listen": that means that God speaks. Numerous passages shed light on the attitude you should have vis-a-vis the Word of God, about how to listen. I quote one example, a very significant one from Deuteronomy, and it will be easy to memorize: "The word is near you, it is on your lips and in your heart and in your hands to do." Deuteronomy 30:14

What are the "Benefits to God"? You will be with me like a husband or wife could say he or she is with the other. You, as a people, are chosen. What does it mean to

be chosen by God? What are the consequences? God wants happiness for humanity. It is expressed in many passages, and in various ways. For example: "I have set before you life and happiness, death and misfortune. What I command you today is to love the Lord thy God, to follow his ways and observe his commandments and his requirements and rules, that you may live ... ! (Deuteronomy 30:1-3)

The "benefits to the people": to be a priestly community, a royal community, a holy nation.

A priestly community

The whole people is declared to be a mediator for all humanity. That is the sense of 'priestly', mediator between God and people (Exodus 19:46). Later on, scared by this responsibility, the people will delegate to Moses and then Aaron and then to the whole priestly family this mission of mediation between God and humanity.

A royal community

Kingship, meaning authority, the power of God has been transferred to the chosen people. Let us not forget that was the reason why Jesus was crucified. The inscription of the motive for his condemnation was written 'King of the Jews' (Mark 15:26). But this kingship, this kingdom, is not of this world. It has upset the Roman and the priestly authorities and they both felt threatened by it.

Holy nation

The holiness of the community, of the people, means that the name of the Lord is on them, (Exodus 23:21). It is notable that the noun (shem) and the verb listen (shma) come from the same Hebrew root. My name is upon him, or my name is inside him, that would mean that the very being of God is written in the heart of men and women. We find this very clearly in St. Mark where Jesus gives each of his disciples a name. Why? Because the name signifies the vocation, the mission, the name of God on the community means that the authority of God is entrusted to it. What a responsibility for the people of God!

Another benefit appears in the second part of the text. If you do everything I will tell you I will be the enemy of your enemies and the adversary of your adversaries. In other words, God engages himself personally beside each one of us. And how does He do that, how does He commit himself? The answer can be found, for instance, in Matthew 11:28-30: "²⁸ Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Here we find again an image that is borrowed from marriage. Is there a stronger stricture than a yoke? That's where the French word 'conjugal' comes, which designates the union between men and women, each carrying the yoke of the other, carrying one with the other. The covenant has the same nature as this yoke: it is rooted in God's covenant with his people and pursues itself in the covenant of Christ with each one of us. As a people, as a community, and as a person, Christ is under the same yoke as us.

In the Exodus text there is a differentiation between the covenant between God and his community, the people of God, the chosen people, and on the other hand, the covenant with each one of us personally. Jesus Christ is the Craftsman, the origin of this personal relationship as the Gospel shows us.

The beginning of the Gospel of Mark teaches us and reveals to us that the covenant which has been proposed over and over again in the Old Testament, is still in effect and is proposed again in a new form with Jesus Christ. But it is still the same covenant. It concerns the people, the community, and it deals with me personally, in a

privileged relationship between Christ and me. That's what the Mark Gospel reveals: a renewal of God's commitment with each one of us and with his people. This commitment picks up the preceding one and deepens it and fulfils it for today. That is the meaning of the whole Good News.

In the following section, we will concentrate on the communal aspect of this calling and not on the personal aspect.

People, Community: where does that come from?

Is it important to be constituted as a people? Is it not possible to live the relationship with God at the personal level only? And what does it mean to be with Him? The first time the word 'people' appears is in the book of Genesis. After the Flood, God made a covenant with Noah and his sons, and the sign for this covenant was the rainbow. This first covenant, called Noah's covenant, has to do with the whole of humanity as we are all descendants of Noah. Noah is also an important person for the L'Arche community. All human beings can feel that they belong to this first covenant. But Noah's sons have spread all over the world and then they gathered together and decided to make bricks and to build a town and a tower whose summit reached to heaven (Genesis 11:6).

The last time that the word people appears is at the end of the book of Revelation, chapter 21. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. (Here the tent of God with the people)."

The comparison between both episodes is particularly interesting. In the one case, human beings on their own initiative and without a reference to God (without consulting God who has made them in his image) decide to build a town and a tower which would reach to Heaven although they had been entrusted to the task of cultivating and tending the Garden of Eden. In the book of Revelation, the city comes from heaven, it is not manmade as the first city in Genesis was. It is compared with a woman, a bride who is adorned for the encounter with the bridegroom. This city is, as it were, the achievement of history. It is given, delivered, all ready, built with perfection (constructed). It is the home, the tent of God among humans.

The whole history of the people of God, the history of God's covenant with his people and the history of the unfaithfulness of the people towards God are to be found between those two important events. This seems to be saying that our lives' fruitfulness our salvation, to use an old word, depends on our accepting the covenant proposed by God. This is a fundamental law of life. Even with our goodwill, or in spite of our goodwill, if we act without God, we risk division, Babel, and failure. This is our fundamental wound. To accept our failure, our limited human condition, is a requirement for success.

Bounty or fruitfulness is a gift, the same way the heavenly Jerusalem is a gift. The covenant between heaven and earth is not realised through human construction which would reach to heaven, but it is from heaven that the holy city descends, the tent of God among humans.

The fruitfulness of our existence comes from the yoking of God's work and that of humans as it were. Together under the same yoke we live the trajectory of our existence, which makes it fruitful.

In St. Mark the word "people" is rarely used. It is used only twice, and the word "crowd" is used 34 times. The word people is used each time in reference to a passage in the Old Testament (Mark 6:6-7 and Mark 14:2) What is the difference bet-

ween a crowd and a people? A crowd is people side by side, but without an organization, without a structure. For instance, in Mark 7:7 Jesus speaks to the Jews who are supposed to know the law, the ketubah. They are the heirs of Moses' tradition. They are the people. But they do not follow their law, the rules of God's covenant, of the marriage contract between God and his people. Later he puts them back in their own tradition in reminding them what the Law really is, what is its pedagogy, what is its goal; and he reproaches strongly the Pharisees, the Elders, and the scribes who do only what is convenient for themselves. Actually, they are not exercising their priestly vocation.

But when he is with the crowd, he speaks to them, he teaches them, he heals them, because they do not know the law, the contract between God and his people.

The comparison between the life of the people, the organized life of the people, and the pagan crowd is well illustrated by the two stories of the multiplication of bread. In Saint Mark you will find this story in Mark 6:34-46 and Mark 8:1-9. In Mark 8:2, Jesus says: "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat."

His goal here is to gather, to constitute a people, an organized community, to feed them with bread and with fish and also with his word. Speaking of Israel, the people, he said, 'they were like sheep without a master' (Mark 6:34) and further in Mark 14:27 quote, referring to Zachariah 13:7. 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' This is the failure of the chosen people. In other words, Jesus repropose with this crowd the covenant that has not been kept by the chosen people. It is interesting to ask the question, 'how does he do that?'

We can locate in the Gospel of Mark how Yeshuah constitutes a people, a community of brothers and sisters, out of this crowd. In truth, the chosen people, the one that was the people of the covenant, has not followed it and calls his teaching into question. Interestingly, the only mentions of the people in Mark show how, through its representatives (scribes, Pharisees and high priests), the covenant has been rejected. This leads to death. Not as a condemnation, but as a tragic consequence of this rejection.

In Mark 7: 6-7 "⁶.. This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." This quote picks up almost word for word Isaiah 29:9-21.

In the second multiplication of bread, the sharing of seven loaves, the people in the crowd are not organized. There's no green grass, only dirt, so it is a regression in the order of creation because we go from the green Earth to the dry earth of Genesis 1. We are right now in a desert (8:4) and in this passage the people are not organized in groups of 100s and 50s which is the case in chapter 6:40 but without order 8:6. They have seven loaves. This number suggests that is the whole of humanity whereas in the first story of multiplication of loaves, number 5 suggested creation 4 with God 1. That is God with his people.

The covenant is now for all people, directly. Yeshuah conducts his mission with the crowd and not only with the people.

Rather than opposing people and crowd, or rather than denouncing the chosen people who have not been faithful, we can notice that God nourishes us where we are. If we belong because of the covenant at Sinai to the priestly community, the royal and holy community, he feeds us in letting us sit in groups on the green grass. And if we have known nothing of this covenant we will be taught, healed and nourished in the very heart of the desert.

Nevertheless it is not possible to do without what is called in democracy the intermediary bodies. Around Jesus there are several circles. That is said explicitly when

he teaches, his disciples sit in a circle around him (Mark 3:32-34). The teaching and the actions also differ from one place to another, at the seaside, in the house, on the road, and on the mountain, those are as many places for teaching, but the public changes from situation to situation.

The crowd is everywhere, it is suffocating. The crowd is thirsty. The place where he teaches is the **seaside**. Mark 3:7-10, 7:14-15

The disciples come together around Jesus in the **house**. Mark 4:10-11, 7:17-18, 9:28. Or in the lonely place. This is the place for debriefing.

On the **road**, that's the place where he now teaches explicitly without hiding or concealing the probability of the crucifixion. 8:31-32

On the **mountain**, he reveals himself as he really is. And that is not even for all the disciples, only for the closest ones, Peter, James and John. This is also the place of retreat and prayer. Mark 6:46, 9:2 et sq

So in order to constitute this new community, he addresses the crowd, but he calls them to a particular service. The teaching is deeper, more explicit, more complete. It is not a hierarchy, it is a matter of thirst and desire. On the other hand, this closed circle, which will accompany him to the mountain of Transfiguration, will be criticized by Jesus and by the other disciples on the question of power and service. This question of power, of authority, of service, remains a burning reality, even in our communities and peace movements.

The paths suggested by Jesus in his way of constituting a community of people are found explicitly in the book of Acts. Acts 2:42 "42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The four pillars of the first Christian community, are they not essential to the life of every community?

Every community will articulate what this means differently, but each community will be something of those elements, otherwise they will not have a solid foundation.

Jesus meets us where we are, without judgment, but he invites us to change, to change our worldview, to change our words and to change our way of listening and to change our heart.

And we know it very well, a community is structured according to a teaching. That's the case in the L'Arche of course and all our churches and peace communities.

What is the teaching? Which teaching? It is a teaching that makes the word of God that He has been wanting to share with us since the dawn of time, present, lively, relevant.

It might be transmitted by a charismatic person, but not necessarily. But it is absolutely necessary for the life of the community. No community can thrive without teaching and without an incarnation of this teaching, a rootedness of this teaching, in the reality of today. It is always the same, but still not finished. I will be your God, your God with us, from the beginning to the end of time.

Fellowship: is it possible that one lives in abundance and the other suffers need in a community that has been founded along these guidelines? How should we go about this? Here too we are invited to change, we are invited to move, we are invited to go out, and we are free Mark 8:27

Which community should we then build? The form, the conditions, the place ... we are free in all of this. But certainly the sharing of riches will be an essential point.

The breaking of bread: this term evokes the last supper. It speaks about the Eucharistic bread, among the four pillars of every community, it is the only one that seems to be specifically Christian, that marks the belonging to Christ. The breaking of bread speaks about meals, places where we meet each other, encounter each other, exchange, celebrate. No celebration without a good meal! In every community, the meal, be it taken in silence or in a climate of convivial exchange, is an essential moment because sharing of the bread and of the Word are related to each other.

The prayers ... this is not necessarily something that is shown publically. The monastic community is explicitly and publicly centred on common prayer, here if we look at the Gospel of Mark, prayer is a time alone or together, which is experienced mostly in a retreat apart from the crowd. It is a vital respiration. Every community, communal life, will integrate prayer in its own way. Jesus withdraws, alone or with his disciples, from the 40 days in the desert until Gethsemane.

God cannot be God-with-us, and we people-with-God, unless we nurture, and make the relationship between us and him alive, particularly in prayer.

This scenario, in reality, hasn't changed at all. Already in Deuteronomy, this is the way God had interacted with the Hebrew people, which he had brought out of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 30:14 quote "¹⁴ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it." This summarises what we have to do: listen with our ears, with our mouth, that is, in learning and repeating, and in teaching others to learn and to repeat, in letting God's word go down to our heart and then putting it into practice.

Peter's speech to Cornelius enlightens us on the question of being open and rooted, a theme which the L'Arche very much loves, a central theme for an ecumenical process.

Acts 10:34 and 35 "³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all."

Cross references:

This last text summarises the whole intervention of God for us and how he invites us to work for peace. We have seen how to be community, how to be an organized people in order to receive the peace that comes from above, Jerusalem, the city of peace. We may choose where we locate ourselves, in the middle of the people or among the nations (the crowd), that is not the most important, he is the Lord of all.