

## Passing beyond

II Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21  
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In any limit situation the final step is when you see things in a different way. You believe at such a time that the form in which you see a thing at that moment is the only valid one, the only one possible, maybe because (you say to yourself) you were educated in that manner or because all your experiences have been inducing in you a conviction that there is no other way of thinking about it— although, to be honest, you would have to admit that this new perspective represents a total break with the past.

For example...the people of the Bible tell in the Book of Chronicles how their exile in Babylon changed everything for them, even their own awareness of guilt. This Sunday's psalm expresses the same idea in a poem full of vivid memories recast now in the light of new understanding. The exiles had to assume a different historical perspective on Yahweh's intervention when Cyrus, a foreign military leader and their captor, made possible the return of the Hebrew exiles to their own country. The road to their liberation and rebuilding as a people lay along a route they least expected— a road smoothed by their enemy!

Christian existence develops from a similar necessity to change perspective. The synoptic gospels call it "metanoia" or conversion. An entire people has to re-root itself in order to survive. Families have to re-ground their habits and presuppositions in order to grow. Each person too must break away from the perspective of his or her own personal history. There is no other way to enjoy the liberty and responsibility of an adult human being.

The communities where the Gospel of John was born deepened this understanding. When we read about the nocturnal encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, it is of this slow, difficult process of metanoia that we are speaking, a process with profound consequences. Faith isn't possible unless we go through this un-learning. It's like passing from shadows into light. It's about the event of "grace." The mercy and love of God wrap around our lives as we open ourselves and welcome this life-giving presence in its own unexpected, unpredictable being... and we experience "the incomparable richness of his grace." But in doing so we have battle our fears. How can we know that this grace is ours every day? Will we be able to find it even where events seem to work against us? Do we truly believe that grace is always present in us and that it is saving us?

The early Christians experienced this grace. For many of them, born in the bosom of the Jewish people, the force of their faith consisted at first in their degree of compliance with rules and laws, for this was their sure path not only to God but also to their authentic identity. But then Jesus both announces and makes freely possible new relations among people and a new relation with God, relations based not in the Law but in love and liberty. Yes, he ended up condemned and nailed to a cross as a malefactor because his gospel had radical practical consequences. But then the scandal of the cross, after the experience of the resurrection, led his disciples to cast away their previous perspective. It lit in them all a new light. "Whoever believes in Jesus given to us by the Father will not perish but will have eternal life."

The risen Christ does not bring us a message of accusation and condemnation. He is himself a free offer of life in its fullness. Accepting that offer or rejecting it is what decides everything. Nor is this a matter of our having to perform grand actions. Even a

tiny light is enough to open the way in the densest shadow. Our part is to be attentive to every sign of the times and to recognize there the “free” action of the merciful God who respectfully invites us to transform our perspective and to open ourselves to new attitudes.