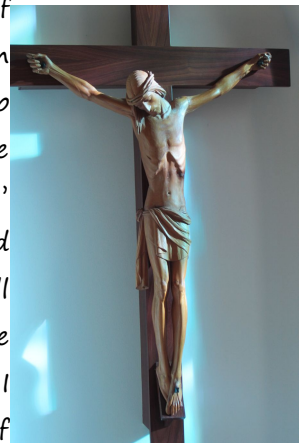


Not As I Imagined

Our imagination and expectations play a big role in the way we live our faith. This is not new, we can see it so clearly in the Gospels, where Jesus has to teach his disciples time and again that he was not the kind of Messiah Israel had been waiting for so long. They wanted a victorious king, and Jesus refused to fulfill their expectations. He presented himself as the Suffering Servant; the only throne he accepted on this earth was the cross. The disciples' complaints for the disappointment that this caused them are not different from ours. Who would not have joined Peter, as Jesus talks about his passion and death on the cross, and say, "This shall never happen to you" (Mt 16:22). Even now, knowing him risen and victorious, an annoying voice remains inside us asking always the same question: Why the cross? Why the narrow path? We keep forgetting that we are the ones who made things difficult for God, not God for us; we are the ones who invented the cross and introduced into our history when we preferred sin and separation from God to love and obedience.

The stories that form today's popular culture give shape to our imagination and how we project into the future. Presently movies mold the way we see and judge what might be ahead of us and our present situation; in some way they become the reference script for our own lives. In a movie, even the most terrible of problems gets solved in less than an hour, and so, when this is not our case, we start feeling anxious and disappointed. As in fairy tales, we are willing to fight against a dragon or two, but only if it is for a little while and the "and they lived happily ever after" is there in less than three pages.

In the discernment of our vocation it is of great importance to be aware of how our imagination can influence us. Who would choose a path in which she thought she was not going to be happy? St Benedict is trying to tap into this desire for happiness deep in our hearts when he asks in the Prologue of his Rule: "Who desires life and wants to see happy days?" (Prologue 15) I wonder what kind of expectations the rich young man had in his heart when he approached Jesus. It looked like things were going well for him, but he still wanted something more; he desired life. Maybe he thought: this Master will point out to me what is missing in my life, then I will be happy. But Jesus' answer did not sound to him not like a way of receiving what he did not have, but of giving away what he already had. No, I can't do that, he thought, no, not that. And he left sad, disappointed.



One of the most moving moments at a wedding is the exchange of vows. When the bride and the groom make their vows, they obviously don't know the future ahead of them, but they promise to remain faithful to their love, faithful to each other "from this day forward, for better, for worse,

for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do us part.” To truly enter a relationship of this kind means selling everything we have and following another. The most difficult thing to sell is not our belongings but our self-will. This cannot be done once for all, but it means a thousand little deaths. Good husbands and wives, good parents know all about that. Is Jesus request so different? Why then, if he approaches us do we seem to have a prenuptial agreement ready for him? In the Bible we repeatedly find the image of espousal love used to express God's covenant with his people, a people, who in response, is constantly unfaithful to him. He is the faithful one, the one who is willing to go all the way to find us, no matter where we are, and restore us to his house, his love. Why is it so difficult for us to trust him?

At the end of Mathew's gospel, before Jesus' Ascension, we find these words: “They worshiped him, but they doubted” (Mt 28:17). He is about to leave them, and he sets before them this incredible mission to make disciples of all nations. How are they going to do it? What were their thoughts at that moment? No wonder they doubted, wouldn't you? But he made them a promise that last to this day: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20)



No one received a more formidable mission than our Blessed Mother. When the angel Gabriel announced to her that she was going to conceive and bear a son, her imagination, her expectations started to work. What came to her mind is the natural way of conceiving a child, and so she responded: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Lk 1:34). When she was told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, she didn't doubt, she surrendered her will and her whole person: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be done according to your word” (Lk 1:38). But this does not mean that Mary was finished once and for all with the need of adjusting what she could imagine for her life and the life of her Son to God's plans. Her constant pondering in her heart—the gospel of Luke mentions it twice—is more than a peaceful way of meditating, it is the exercise of surrendering her own expectations so that she could respond fully to God's plan. When Jesus at the age of twelve stays in Jerusalem without Mary and Joseph's knowledge, we can see in Mary's reaction how this was not an easy process: “Child, why have you treated us like this? . . . Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house? But they did not understand what he said to them” (Lk 2:48-51).

When Jesus began his public ministry and his Mother and relatives tried to reach him, Mary must have overheard his response: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk 3:35). Once again, she had to surrender her expectations, she could not take care of him anymore. In her heart she pronounced her *fiat*, the same *fiat* in which she stood at the foot of the cross.

Our Blessed Mother received a unique grace to respond to her unique vocation, but we can learn from her how to respond to ours; we also won't lack the necessary grace, if we are open to receive it. Mary, the apostles, the rich young man and ourselves have been looked upon with infinite love by our Lord. Mary surrendered herself completely, the apostles worshipped the Lord but doubted, and the rich young man left sad. We all have in common a deep desire for happiness in our heart, but we don't know how this happiness looks. For the apostles, the young rich man and the people of their time happiness was very much related with wealth and a many offspring. These were considered God's blessings, as we can read in the stories of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis, and so they were shocked when Jesus asked them to leave those blessings behind to follow him. Our images of happiness are very much influenced by our own culture as it is conveyed mostly in movies and TV series. How is happiness portrayed nowadays? Think about it. When Jesus' call to follow him means leaving behind these images of happiness, our images of love and comfort, we can react in different ways: we may leave disappointed or we may worship him even though there are still doubts in our hearts. To go from the "How can this be?" (Lk 1:34) to "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be done according to your word" (Lk 1:38) we need to do what Mary did: constantly ponder his word in our hearts. Only his word can teach us to open ourselves to a promise that goes beyond our imagination. Only his word can help us to overcome the fears of walking into a future that cannot be shaped by our own expectations.

His word is in the Gospels, the whole Bible, waiting to be read and meditated. His word is in the sacraments and those he brings into our lives to help us on the way, as Mary had Elizabeth, Joseph, Simeon and Anna. His word is the promise he whispered in your heart at that moment that caught you by surprise. His word is his constant loving gaze upon you. Fix your eyes on him, don't let your gaze fall, and you will be able to follow him where ever he leads you.

My life has definitely not been as I imagined it. But I know that, on the day I pronounced my vows, he was there, he smiled and look at me with love. He not only received me, the simple offering of myself, but he committed himself to give me all the love and grace that I needed to live my religious consecration. I pronounced my vows, he had pronounced his long ago—"from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health. Death will not part us.

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