

“WE HAVE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE THIS!” (Mk 2:12)

LESSON - 2

“Now my soul is troubled” (John 12:27)

by Pierluigi Banna*

Even Jesus experienced sadness, fear, anguish, that night: the same feelings as His disciples. He says: “Now my soul is troubled!” But He, unlike His disciples, did not run away, tossed about by the wave of these feelings; nor did He remain like a piece of ice, with great self-control, un-moveable in front of His imminent death. He acknowledged and lived His human feelings with deep reason. Fear and anguish had opened His human heart and He was not blocked by the dictatorship of feelings.

He didn’t run away. Why? First of all, because He, the greatest of all—the Master—was not afraid to acknowledge His feelings, His infinite sadness. Therefore, *the first condition* for not becoming enslaved to feelings is to recognize them, to acknowledge them: they are the most human thing, they are an expression of my humanity; they enlarge my heart and my reason, they open up my need. How human my feelings are! I recognize the fact that I am angry, bored, sad or thrilled, and I am not ashamed to say so. This is truly human. Even my dog experiences feelings. When he sees me, it is clear that he is happy: he wags his tail, comes to meet me, jumps up; when I close the door and don’t bring him outside with me, his eyes become sad. I believe that my dog has feelings, but he “coincides” with his feelings. My dog is the feeling he experiences; he cannot say: “Ah, today I am sad, how human these feelings are!”, because he is a dog! But we are able to say to a friend and to ourselves: “Today I am sad” and begin not to be dominated by this feeling. This is the first step.

Father Giussani had a profound respect for the feelings that put the human heart in motion, not permitting them to be reduced to instinct, nor to a cold and unfeeling mechanism. In one of his books, he tells about when he went to the party for the end of the year for one of the classes he taught; at one point, the kids started to dance. He sees a girl who is a little bigger, who dances well; he sees those bodies that were normally stuck to their seats turning around, spinning each other around. Dancing in the style of the 70’s. He tells how beautiful it was to see them twirling around, but at a certain point, toward the end of the night, he stopped them and told them that, when they went home, just like after every evening of dancing, a shadow would come over them, a sense of sadness—a sadness that slowly arises, clutches them and from which they can escape only by going to sleep; »

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» but the next morning, or another time during the day, that sadness will return. And he concludes: "This sadness is the sign of man's greatness."¹

The first step, therefore, is to recognize how human this sadness is. Father Giussani recounts this episode, which helps us understand the esteem he had for human emotion. How human is this sadness from which philosophy is born, which distinguishes man from the animals! How human our emotion is: anger, boredom, anxiety, everything, everything that is human must be recognized, welcomed. It would be inhuman to pretend like it wasn't there, to censure it—like we said last night—, with that lack of tenderness we so often have for ourselves.

Let us try to identify ourselves with the feelings Jesus had that night. He was not afraid to recognize and look His feelings in the face. Let us stand and listen to what He says on that night of profound sadness and anguish.

"They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.'" He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,' he said to them. 'Stay here and keep watch.' Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father! Everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.'" (Mark 14:32-36)

Still standing up, let us listen now to a song that repeats these same words of Jesus (on page 32 of the Booklet).^{**} *Tristis est anima mea*. "My soul is sorrowful to the point of death; stay here and keep watch with me. Now you will see a crowd that will surround me. You will flee and I will go to sacrifice myself for you. / Behold, the hour is near and the Son will be handed over into the hands of sinners."

Tristis est anima mea

"You will flee on the wave our your emotions; instead I, who have these same emotions, stay and go to sacrifice myself for you." Why didn't Christ run away? Because His sadness opened His heart to attach itself to the only One who could live up to the height of that emotion: His Father. His emotion, welcomed and taken seriously, pushed Him to cry out, to ask the Father: "Everything is possible for You! Yet not my will, but Yours be done." Therefore, "Emotion is not [...] negative", but "it must be 'registered', it must [...] be allowed to take you where it wants to go, to that capacity for an affective relationship that can be lived." (L. Giussani, page 31 of the booklet) That sadness allowed Christ to rediscover His relationship with the Father, wagering everything on the relationship that constituted Him.

This is the point, the key point for today, you guys! All of our feelings—all, nothing excluded—can be useful, once they are taken seriously, for discovering what is true in life. Looking at Christ, we can understand that there is a way to face up to all of our emotions, without being overwhelmed by them. Once they are welcomed, *every emotion can become a way to recognize and attach ourselves to what is true in life*. It is possible to look at any emotion because every emotion—like Lady Gaga said very well in her song *Million reasons* (see page 31)—that makes you want to run away from a relationship, all the doubts that come over you, all the sadness that assails you, can help you find "one good one to stay," to see if there is a good reason to attach ourselves. All the doubts, all the uncertainties, if we do not stop at them, can be a path, *first*, to realize how human we are, and *second*, to discover »

¹ Cfr. L. Giussani, *Avvenimento di libertà*, Marietti 1820, Genova 2002, pp. 70-71.

^{**} The booklet "*We have never seen anything like this*" contains the quotes cited throughout the Triduum and is [downloadable in pdf format](#).

» what is true in life. Every feeling, rather than confusing us or being something to avoid, can become a path.

To make this point, let me give you an example from *The Religious Sense*² by Father Giussani. I see a beautiful mountain, and to see it better, I get out my binoculars. As soon as I look, everything is blurred because apparently the lenses are not in focus. Father Giussani says: our emotions are like the lenses that are not focused. What is our temptation? To say, "I was wrong, the mountain is ugly," to throw out the binoculars and leave. Instead the most beautiful thing in life, the most human thing is to recognize first of all, "Oh, the binoculars are not in focus," and then focus the lenses—which serve to help us see better the objects that are far off—and say, "What a beautiful mountain!" This is why we have emotion, but they need to be focused, in order to see what is true for my life, what is noble, what really lasts!

Many times we find ourselves in front of feelings that appear unfocused, we only see fear and sadness, joy and enthusiasm, and we either run away or try to stay unmoved. The strong temptation is to stop as what happens to us, saying that everything is beautiful or everything is ugly. Instead any emotion put in focus, understands how sadness, boredom, anxiety, joy, wonder, can help us see reality better, discover more of what is true, attach ourselves more to what is beautiful. In a word, they have to be focused.

Emotion is precious because it represents the first reaction in front of what happens, but this state of the soul is not an end in itself. It serves to put the heart in motion, those criteria that bring you forward and allow you to say, "This is really beautiful, true, good, just!" The heart says, "This is not focused, this could go better, this looks good"; and then it can judge, "This sadness is good, because it pushes me to adhere to what really counts; this other sadness, instead, is a lie, because it makes me doubt something true! This enthusiasm is false, because following it always makes me feel more alone; instead, this other enthusiasm is true, because it is for someone who embraces me even when I am sad." With just the emotion, it is possible to get confused, but with the emotion united to the heart, it is not; the heart does not err, as Dostoevsky says (*Letters on creativity*, page 31 of the booklet), because the heart goes in search of what remains, what lasts, what is beautiful, what doesn't deceive. With the heart, you recognize what satisfies the open abyss of your emotion and what leaves you more alone and afraid (cfr. Emily Dickinson, page 32).

So, we have to compare the emotions, as Christ did that night, with the heart. Because emotion can confuse us, but the heart cannot. For example, after a beautiful night together, my girlfriend invites me to have a drink and smoke something: it is so beautiful, so rich, so wonderful! But I have such a great esteem for each of you that I think you can all realize that there is a way of loving, of being with your girlfriend, that chases emotion and then leaves you empty, and there is another way of giving focus to that enthusiasm, of giving it a credit that does not leave you empty, does not ruin everything, but which lasts. This is emotion compared with the heart. Thus, even during the entrance, I start speaking with a friend and I think, "Eh, I started talking, and what should we be doing?" You can recognize your tiredness, your distraction and ask yourself, "But why am I here?" "I am here because I expect something for my life"; then I focus my distraction and, instead of distracting my friend, I hold back from speaking and think, "Wow, I am here because I am expecting something great." Or I can follow the wave of emotion and keep talking, forgetting why I came here.

So how can we understand if our feelings are truly in focus and are not being trampled underfoot by our emotions? From the fact that the feeling, when focused, makes you breathe, attaches you, makes you stop spinning around in the void; the feeling becomes a new »

² Cfr. L. Giussani. *The Religious Sense*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 1997, 27ff.

» energy that makes you set out again and attaches you to what is true on the path of life; it makes you live, it doesn't make you a slave! You become master of your life.

A girl who sent us an impressive contribution says it much better than I can. "Exactly a year ago, when I was at the Triduum, I began to have health problems, I had a terror of being abandoned which kept me from being with people and conditioned my behavior. I tried to dismiss my condition and got angry, because I didn't understand the reason for such great pain, why it had to happen to me. I had a great desire to live and to really enter into the things I was doing, but I was inevitably limited." Do you see? Rightly, in front of her sickness, our friend experiences certain emotions: anger, fear of abandonment, not understanding, incomprehension. But then she continues—listen to the voice of her heart—: "Everything became a demand for fullness, every relationship cried out for freedom. At that point, I took up the most sincere position: I found myself needing Someone to whom I could entrust all my misery." Do you understand? Had that emotion not been compared to her heart, she would have said, "My life is crap", she would have thrown herself on the ground and said, "I am so unfortunate". Instead, because of that condition, compared with her heart, she experienced a will for life and a unique question. I envy this friend's desire for life. I always want to have friends like her, who look at their emotions like this. To the point of asking, "I want to carry this cross, but I can't do it by myself. Give me the courage to be in front of my wound." Maybe she was not aware that she had repeated the same words that Jesus used when he went to die: "Father, I know that everything is possible for you. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (cfr. Mark 14:36)

When someone faces his anger, his boredom, his incomprehension like this, what humanity, what capacity for gladness, what fullness of life can emerge!

Our friend, like Christ, understands that every emotion, compared with the heart, can be an occasion to open up life, to discover what is true, what remains, what truly enflames us. Christ understood that every one of His human feelings (sadness, anguish, fear) must not be lost, or escaped from, but must be put in order, in focus, toward the "good reason" for which life is given: His relationship with the Father, who has never betrayed Him: "Not what I will, but what you will." If He had stopped at the crest of His reaction, He would have run away, like His disciples did. Instead, He did not ignore His emotion, but understood that this human sadness and fear of death opened up His heart, served to rediscover and reaffirm His relationship with the Father, what had kept Him going His whole life.