

SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ

25

Brother Luc

“Go, I am with you”

Meditations on
Vocation and Mission

Giving and receiving are fundamental to building up our person. Receiving a gift opens us up to the other and to our environment. It delivers a message and expects a response. To enable us to listen better to a few figures from the Gospel, let us try to understand what is at stake in these two key moments at the heart of every call and every commissioning.

Offering

It was mine; it is now yours. You have become its owner and beneficiary. I looked for it, prepared it, spent for it ... If this gesture makes me happy, it is because it allows me to tell you how much you mean to me. Do you agree to be present in my life and I in yours? Do you recognize the delicate nature of call; can you feel the promise of a relationship in freedom?

Opening the desire of one's heart in this way means revealing oneself as dependent on the response of another. This conveys a confidence.

Successive discoveries, sometimes through misunderstandings and failures, may be needed in order to recognise this message ... Gradually the meaning emerges, along with the implications of the gift as well as the conditions needed to maintain the relationship created.

The more important the gift, the deeper it challenges the receiver and the more they will engage themselves by their response. If the gift means “you are unique, for me you matter more than anything else,” accepting it implies in return “I will belong to no one else.”

Receiving

I receive your gift and what it tells me. I acknowledge your request; I will take care of it. You make me exist beyond myself. I agree to be present in your life, and no longer to belong just to myself.

Seeing the world, others or oneself as positions to conquer generates anxiety and isolation; receiving them as presents liberates space where my own longing can unfold. Through this opening, life comes my way. I too can give, without fear of losing anything because I am already rooted outside of myself.

Call

Before being a request or a demand, a call carries with it a gift: another believes in me and hopes for my answer. This broadens my freedom and entrusts me with a responsibility. The more the one who invites me is important to me, the greater is the trust that they communicate. When God is the one calling, it is fundamental. It allows me to leave a familiar setting and set out on a totally new path. On that road, I cannot take a single step by myself but, rely-

ing on the one who is counting on me, I can make myself available and move forward. Gradually I am shaped by a word that comes from beyond me and that I can pass on to others.

Commission

Being commissioned invites me to live what I have received for others. The one who sends me invests his or her authority in me so that I may commit myself in the real conditions of my existence. The fruitfulness of the initial gift provides what it takes to take that mission on. Being sent by God confers incomparable boldness and courage.

Jesus

At the resurrection, the disciples receive the revelation that Jesus gave his life for his Father and for humanity. If God himself welcomes Jesus who dies on the cross as an offering, nothing can prevent the disciples from accepting it in their turn. They then understand that his death was not an accident or a failure but the result of his own decision to pass through violence and humiliation without even condemning those responsible. So Jesus’ response to God’s expectation unfolds in its greatest abundance.

Receiving this unique gift, the disciples of Jesus grasp its message: “In my eyes, you are more valuable than anything. Despite your poverty and your

weakness, if you accept the offering of my life, you are set free from violence and equipped with a solid foundation in God...”

The Resurrection illuminates every encounter with Jesus. In different situations, the light it casts prepares my own discovery. The transformation that Christ can operate in me is not less than that which he brought about in the lives of his disciples and of the people he met during his travels. Before wondering about the shape my life will take or the fruit it will bear, it is essential to recognise the fullness in which such commitment can be founded and which will keep it alive over time.

Andrew and Simon

How long had he been watching us? What did he want? He had approached in silence while we were fixing our nets. Once they had been cleaned and spread out to dry, we would have taken a little rest. The stranger waited, quiet and determined.

“Follow me!” Two words were enough. No introduction, no attractive offer or inspiring speeches. He did not want to compel us in any way, and yet what an upheaval! He believed that we would respond. He hoped that we would leave everything behind and keep going amidst the questions and hesitations that he triggered in us!

To shake up the course of a life to such an extent, you need to have had the experience yourself that a path opens there, that a human heart does not break

into pieces by giving up all that has awakened and fashioned it. He must have been on that path himself already and known this passage, in order to be able to invite us to such freedom.

Is it still possible to live like Abraham, Moses or Elijah, with the same fire, the same faith, the same blessing from God? This boldness corresponded to our deepest hopes. The initial encounter with Jesus, the clarity of his calling and his gift, have illuminated each of our steps.

There was no route to follow or program to be implemented. He asked us a question he could not answer for us: “Do you agree to put my trust at the beginning of everything?” Building our lives on his call means letting him believe first (in us). It was his faith that enabled us to respond to him. He himself lived out what he proposed to us. From that first day, he let us sense what was at the heart of his commitment: the expectation of God who found his joy in him and handed everything over to him.

“I will make you fishers of men.” As the fisherman, never sure of a catch, casts his nets with perseverance, he led us to encounter others, to welcome and gather them. It was he who taught us to cast the net of God’s hope, to awaken others to that opening of the heart in freedom and peace and to enable the joy of self-giving to grow in them. Nothing was indispensable but his trust. We had received it for free and it set us on the way.

A leper

Misfortune had swallowed my life. The disease was eating my skin away; bitterness and confusion filled my soul. This trap isolated me, cutting me off even from my relatives. Gradually, everyone had turned away out of helplessness, fear or shame. I had become a curse. I had lost my name. I was no one any longer but “the leper.” Suffering and misery were my only horizon to beg and survive day to day. I could receive alms, but I scared people away. Faces were shut; hearts were terrified. At best they avoided me, complaining, but mostly I was cast out irritably. I judged them all to be cowards and hypocrites. Injustice hardened me. A worry was gnawing at me: if God let this happen, wasn't because of some fault? But how could human error defeat him? In my despair there was still the light of a refusal to give in, that only he could confirm.

That day, I took all my courage and pushed through the crowd. People could have beaten or stoned me. But that life as a hunted animal, that continual condemnation could go on no longer. If there is no way out, let things end right away; at least it will be a relief.

I threw myself at the feet of Jesus, I shouted for help; he heard me. He came closer, paying no attention to those who tried to draw him away. He didn't avoid the question with a few words or a handout. He didn't ask me how I came to be there; he didn't

try to understand my misfortune or to justify it in any way. He denounced it. Beneath my degradation he recognized the indelible image of the Creator. He reached out and touched my ailing skin. At the risk of being defiled and condemned in turn, he came to me. The revolt that made me curse heaven and men, the evil that claimed to have invaded me, did not hinder him. He broke through the barriers that kept me away, and stood with me in front of those who remained locked in their fears and anger. For one person in the world, I was no longer a threat. Exclusion and despair did not have the last word; they were therefore not God's will.

“I am willing; be cleansed,” he said, agreeing to my pleading. The desire to escape from this curse was neither forbidden nor illusory. People around me saw an extraordinary healing but it was thanks to Jesus faith and courage that God acted.

“Go show yourself to the priests; do not remain bitter against anyone. Forgive even those who have abandoned you for so long. This will be evidence to them of the work of God in you.” He had pulled me out of the worst so I could, in turn, dare to take a step too. It is now my responsibility. I, the returnee-from-misfortune, am the living sign that God is not resigned to losing anybody. My cleansed wounds, my heart free from any obstacle now radiate mercy.

A Woman

“Go and sin no more.” Without asking anything else, he sent me. The price he paid gave an inexhaustible strength to his words. He is the one who grants me this new life each day. The former public sinner can now go on without straying from God. Like him, I want to condemn no one and keep alive his hope even for the wicked.

They dragged me in haste to the Temple, causing a huge commotion. They wanted to give a moral lesson and show their zeal; I was their chance. They got themselves heated up, exaggerating the scandal, gathering onlookers. They appealed to Moses, invoking the Law, brandishing God’s wrath and claiming to purge the people to restore Holiness.

I was caught, but in fact it was him they were trying to crush. In the midst of this turmoil he was the only peaceful and silent person, leaving no room for confusion.

Sure of their trap, they handed the judgment over to him. He sent everyone back to their own consciences. Who could impose God’s will if he himself does not observe it?

Then, for me alone, he ruled: “I have not come to condemn but for everyone to have life in fullness. God does not want the death of a sinner but is longing for their conversion and salvation. He does not mete out punishment but heals and renews people.”

Not only was I released providentially, but he

encouraged me, “You have nothing to pay. Do not look back; learn from your ordeal. May the experience of the mistake that almost destroyed you become a signpost to help you on your way forward. God gave you life, his laws and commandments are there to preserve this gift. It is up to you to love according to his will.”

For a long time I ran toward mirages. I thought that excitement was the assurance of genuine commitment and the sign of going beyond yourself, while instead it left no room for another. I tried to grasp and always found myself alone. To escape the bitterness and rekindle the fire, I changed location. But doubt had seized me: Is not love beyond our reach? Is it possible to love without passion destroying us? Won’t disappointments quench any enthusiasm?

If Jesus risked so much for me who was lost, how could he step back? Is he not the one worthy to be loved forever? While I was at death’s door, he freed me without rejecting me or asking for anything. He cleared me of the contempt that failures had instilled in my mind. He opened a path of peace and freedom. He brought me an existence beyond all fear and allowed me to anticipate a more radical mystery able to bring my heart to life without putting it to sleep, fulfilling it without exhausting its longing.

Zacchaeus

That day my life changed. When I announced in front of all the believers that I would pay back four-fold those I had cheated and would give half of my possessions to the poor, Jesus introduced me as their brother! The greedy thief who had been coveting others' property could give freely, far beyond what was required. The inveterate and self-sufficient, godless sinner was abandoning his security to make an act of faith!

I manoeuvred well to get this job as chief tax collector in Jericho. It was a lucrative post. Beyond the agreed sum that I had to hand over to the authorities I could make a profit at my leisure. It was enough to know how to deal with people—roughing some up, confiscating things from others, holding impatient people up, combing carefully through loads looking for some small contraband under sheepskins, firewood or vegetables ... A few months had been enough to get back my investment and start building up a bit of capital. This allowed me to take it easy, guaranteed not to miss anything and protected in times of hardship. What God could offer me more?

People feared and despised me. At the same time, I could scare and shame them. I was never invited anywhere, and forbidden to attend common prayer. They saw me as a collaborator of the Roman occupiers, a traitor to my country. Most religious people condemned me as a thief and an outcast. I didn't

mind. You shouldn't dramatise things, and after all, wasn't I the winner? They were always willing to pay. They tried to hide their mediocrity, but they didn't let their convictions let them take too many risks. As they didn't denounce them, weren't they accomplices? Why should I have restrained myself and not taken advantage of all the opportunities? I was running on the road to success ...

That day I only wanted to put a face to the name of the prophet whose reputation had spread around the country. I wasn't involved in his prayers and lessons, but I wanted to get a sense of the man who aroused such fervour among the poor, the sick, the losers and those who prefer to dream rather than rolling up their sleeves. What could he give them so that they rushed in such numbers to meet him?

He stopped under the sycamore. There was a little scuffle because the crowd had swollen. What was happening? Wasn't he expected at the synagogue by the council of elders? I was in the branches, my heart quickened. How had he noticed me? He raised his eyes, searched mine and called me by name, then he said, "I need you now, will you welcome me into your house?"

The man of God was interested in me and wanted my help before all the others! If he knew my name, then he knew who I was! Staying at my place, he would lose all credit and arouse discontent. Cowards would cry foul and the jealous discredit him a little more, "he went to eat at the sinner's; he ruined himself. He is a threat to believers who respect the

law; we can no longer associate with him!” Even his disciples could not dissuade him. Their caution and the execrable portrait they made of me did not divert him.

Under my roof, he said the prayer and called for God’s blessing on the guests; many were of my ilk. He shared our bread and our wine. What a surprise, a genuine devout man who eats, drinks and feasts with rich people of bad reputation! He had neither money nor power, and yet he was freer than any of us. He asked me for hospitality, but in truth he was the one who made a special place in his life for me. Nobody ever asked that of me before. All the money in the world could not give me that ease! His visit opened my eyes to the depths of my loneliness. If he considered me worthy of his company and hoped for my friendship, couldn’t I, too, try this greater availability and finally forget my concerns with security, my obsession with money, no longer live for myself alone but for others?

Leaving calculations behind, I jumped into the unknown to try out the freedom of faith. From that day on I began to visit the poor. It was to keep my promise and share my goods but mainly to hold onto the joy of that meeting with the Galilean. I discovered that among them there are more courageous people than among the rich and powerful. They do not like life less than others, but they know its price better. It is they who welcome me and I learn from their patience, their wisdom, their generosity. Jesus

had knocked on my door, but it was to invite me to walk in his steps.

The Sons of Zebedee

We thought we had already left everything to follow Jesus but we were still driven by many self-interested aspirations, “Who is the greatest? How do we ensure the best positions in the Kingdom?” How naive we were when we asked to sit at his right and at his left to share his glory! We weren’t the only ones; some hoped for a share of his power, his recognition or his success ...

How could we guess that this glory would be manifested by a Christ without beauty or face, without form or charm to attract attention ...? Yet he warned us. One day we nearly revolted, so harsh were his words: “Human beings cannot enter the Kingdom of God!” At least it was clear: human will and generosity cannot ensure salvation.

We had seen the young man who had come to question him. His air of the perfect pupil rather irritated us, but he awakened our attention with his question. It’s not so common to meet a rich man who cares for Heaven and seeks advice! He had previously managed to observe the law and its demands fully; he seemed to have it all. He asked for a recipe for access to eternal life and to enjoy his wealth at the same time. Jesus opened for him the road beyond legal requirements and religious practice; he offered him the greatest risk of all: “What you lack is total

availability, to be poor in front of God and men in order to love him with all your heart, with all your strength, with all your mind. Letting go of everything to live by faith alone!" We held our breath, waiting to hear what the visitor would answer. But he was so focused on his quest that he missed the loving look that Jesus showed him; he was not available for joy from someone else! He understood well that the invitation exceeded his capacity but, instead of asking for help, he missed what was on offer. He went away sad, still caught in the dream fed by his wealth and abilities.

That day we understood that even God does not know everything and cannot do everything. His love cannot do without a personal response. He neither manipulates nor forces anyone. He does not know what we will reply and cannot answer for us.

When we recognize that we are unable to accomplish our greatest aspiration by ourselves and when we know that we shall forever remain deprived of the essential, we become free of the illusion that we are in control of our lives. If we can respond to an invitation that surpasses us, that is because, from the very first step, we can ask for help and rely on someone else.

Simon Peter

He had wanted to make me a fisher of men, and I was back on the lake looking for fish ... Far from

Jerusalem and its detestable intrigues, far from this senseless tragedy where God had been defeated. I found myself at the starting-point, a deserter who had fled the battle.

Desolation, anger and shame still warred within me. Had not death taken everything? Had not our hopes to be part of the coming of the Kingdom been undone? Why all these years spent at his side following his teaching and his miracles? Men are intolerable, blind and wicked. If they refuse the love of God, who will ever be kind to them?

I spent my time blaming others, but despite the enormity of the crisis and the coalition of the enemy forces, the break came from me alone. Jesus revealed my refusal to follow him in humiliation, exclusion and failure. Abandoning your life to the wicked who destroy you, is this not to be complicit in a lie? How could I love those whose conduct and motives I had always denounced? I refused to go to this extreme. I no longer recognised the master who was addressing the crowds with authority, casting out evil spirits, the leader who had brought us from village to village to console and encourage the multitudes.

I denied the man who had meant the most to me; will I ever be able to love again?

Every day I passed the place we first met, where he had invited me and where I had jumped from the boat to follow him. His first words were still burned within me. Could I have guessed then that his call contained a gift greater than death? There he joined me, humble and insistent. He appeared defenceless,

wounded, cast out of the earth as a criminal but refusing to protect himself, to spare himself and to put an end to his hope.

His question fought its way through pain and confusion. It had survived the disaster and emerged intact from the rubble of my illusions. He believed that I could run after him on the dark sea, without being fascinated by the violence which claimed victory. He was waiting for me when I resisted with all my being. He saw more than the denial that I spent my time justifying.

“Do you love Me? Don’t I always have a place in your heart? I believe you will answer me again. Did they make me give up or curse? Can they keep you from welcoming me?” Hearing his request was already receiving his faith and being free with him, beyond despair and fear. My denial had not changed him; his confidence was offered to me as on the first day. It became the possible ground of my answer. Far from any exaltation, I refused to abandon him again. Then, trembling, without explanation or understanding, I let my lips take up his yes, “I love you, not as I would like to, but I do love you.”

“Feed my sheep, continue my mission. Nobody can stop you. After me, become a servant who does not judge his companions but carries their burdens.” Where isolation and loneliness seemed to have taken over, a fullness was promised: daring a “more-than-anything”, one love, giving my life as I had received: a free and good gift. To me who had fled, he entrusted those he had devoted himself to. He sent me look-

ing for them to give them his peace, counting on a goodness that can penetrate even the greatest ruins. He had no one else to accredit this Good News. If we do not live for others as he lived for us, people will remain in the darkness, caught in the destructive web, without knowing where it comes from or how to escape! His faithfulness shows me the way: not looking back, not looking for any explanations, but awaking the heart’s bond and showing that it was not destroyed. Our perseverance and brotherly unity will now attest to it.

Paul

Today as I am ferried in chains to Rome, I am freer than everyone. God continues to work in me and allows me to strengthen my brothers.

Make no mistake, it is through our poor lives that we ought to radiate the beauty of his love. Our weakness only makes this clearer. I once wanted to govern everything, not putting up with failure, and now I have agreed to lose everything, in order to carry his forgiveness that kept me free through so many trials. It is because it filled me beyond all expectations that I never turned back from any fatigue, hunger and thirst, deprivation, repeated trips, bandits. I have suffered more than any other apostle: prison, beatings, assaults, shipwreck... Even what affected me most, being rejected by others, did not strike me down. Intelligent people make fun of a contradiction which escapes them. Many religious

people maintain a false credulity. I was persecuted by my own and humiliated by the wise of this world. This is my pride because in all this I was faithful to Jesus Christ, who condemns no one and offers salvation to all.

He led me far from the beliefs of my youth. In those days I stood without trembling before God and men, with my qualities and my zeal. I possessed the truth and I was sure of being right. All our misfortunes come from allowing ourselves to be distracted by novelties and turning away from God. We had abandoned his covenant ... The disciples of the Galilean were causing one more scandal: they dared make a crucified convict the Christ of Israel! They dragged our glorious hope in the mud and undermined the expectation of our people. Who could recognize the Messiah, the new Moses, the son of our King David in a public offender? Don't our Scriptures warn us clearly: cursed be everyone who hangs on the tree? We had to stop things from going adrift. I was the most ardent opponent of this way, determined to get it over as soon as possible. I did not see that I was the plaything of a hate opposed to God's plan.

On the road to Damascus he enveloped me in his brightness. It came from the Crucified One of Nazareth! "Why do you persecute me?" The call of my victim pierced the armour of my questioning certainties, ready to bring my compatriots back to the right path by fair means or foul. I thought I was the Lord's defender, and I had made myself his enemy! I

considered the Crucified One punished by God but I was the one putting him down. Far from any accusation, his appeal was rather a surprise. Gently and patiently he freed me from my blindness. I was cured by the one I strove to destroy. If God is on the side of the condemned and cursed, did he not remove the most impervious barriers? Evil has nowhere to stay. Jesus broke hatred, the greatest divide between people. If the Messiah has been outlawed and suffered as a victim to fulfil salvation, how could we set limits? Nobody can be excluded. Everyone should be invited. That was the turning-point of my life, I left my career and my relationships, and from that moment this discovery gradually unfolded.

I used all my ardour to attest to this amazing truth. Since it is through the gift of himself on the cross that Jesus brought salvation, we no longer have to escape trials of any kind. It is through them, when we welcome the fullness of forgiveness, that God's glory is manifested most surely. Neither persuasive words nor brilliant demonstrations could attest to this unthinkable reality: God himself was the one who led me and opened for me the way of patience.

John

We had lost the Spirit of God. As ever, we pretended to be his chosen people, but instead of basing everything on his appeal, faith had become the mere setting for our business and our arrangements.

The Law, proof of God's commitment to us, had become a historical monument. We were developing endless rules and regulations in a vain attempt to secure our salvation. We honoured God with our lips while burning for our passions and personal interests. Religion had become a business and we were endlessly negotiating: "Must I also pay tithes on herbs and spices? How many steps can I take on the Sabbath? What is lawful to eat? What can I swear upon? How many times should I forgive? How can I get the first place in the Kingdom of Heaven?" This narrow piety could not hide our pride and hid a loneliness filled only with scruples and observances.

From the beginning, Jesus fought against this hypocrisy. He sought to release authentic access to God from human distortions by focusing everything on the commandment: "Love with all your being and without counting the cost". As he had chased away merchants and moneychangers from the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem, so he aspired to free hearts so that God could dwell within them and open them up to our neighbours.

At first we had taken him for a religious teacher. His invitation in Galilee had set us on the road with a little thrill of adventure. Then through the signs he performed, his teaching and determination, we sensed a whole other agenda. Yet it was not until the end that we understood the gift that he bestowed on us. Beyond all wisdom and caution, he finally burst all calculations and duties. No one has ever endured

hardship like him. He denounced evil, but did not condemn anyone. God alone can love in that way.

I was at the foot of the cross with his mother. Only his love kept us there. At his side, we received until the end what he wanted to give us. We were broken with grief but at the same time stunned and already free of hostile outbursts. He succeeded in accomplishing what nobody had dared to do until then: to break the logic of evil and free those who took his life. He led us to share his hope for humans and, beyond our own desire, to despise no-one. This victory concerns us all, no matter where we are from. This is what God's holiness had forever concealed! That is the beauty of his love, which our fathers only glimpsed from a distance! Sealed by this ultimate commitment, each of his words, each of his gestures took on an unexpected authority. His forgiveness on the cross became our starting-point.

Then I understood what had happened on the last evening we were with him. We were excited but also baffled by the turn of events. Jesus remained determined. He clearly knew what Judas was going to do when he let him leave. He could still have protected himself but he went out to meet and greet him in front of everyone. He also knew that we were going to flee. He might have given up, considering our lack of understanding and our weakness. But had he called us conditionally? From day one, his gift was unreserved and irrevocable. As a grain thrown on the earth must disappear to sprout and

produce fruit, he believed that his life, given, would pierce through our thick skin.

In gradually accomplishing his will, we discovered how he himself had drawn courage from the Father's love. It was this love that enabled him to carry out his mission until the end. His whole life was oriented so that we would believe that he was sent by the Father and that we share his communion with him. We mattered for him as much as he did for God! United to him as he had been to the Father, we can continue what he began, proclaiming the Good News of repentance and the fullness of life offered to all.