

II ADVENT SUNDAY– 10th December 2014

PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Mark 1,1-81

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ""

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

We read and comment the first eight verses of Mark's gospel, which begins with these words: "*The beginning of the good news.....*". we know that this means good news. It is good news already known. The evangelist does not aim at the people that still do not know Jesus' news, but to those that already are living it. And Mark intends to tell how it all began.

So, why is it called the good news? Because there is a new relationship with God that is not based on the observance of the laws - the word "laws" never appears in Mark's gospel - but on the welcoming of the Spirit, as will be seen at the end of this paragraph with the announcement that Jesus' work that will be to baptize in Holy Spirit.

Therefore no longer observing the laws external to mankind, but welcoming of an individual inward reality. The good news is of Jesus Christ, Christ being Messiah, the article is missing meaning that it is not the traditional Messiah, the one that Israel is waiting for, the liberator that with violence will restore the Kingdom of Israel, but a liberator, a Messiah completely different that the evangelist now helps us to discover.

"*The Son of God...*" so, Jesus will be Messiah, but he will not be the son of David, and the kingdom of Israel will not be restored, but the Son of God will come to establish the Kingdom of God, the universal love of the Father.

"*As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,...*" and here the evangelist makes a collage of three texts, in which there is naturally also the Prophet Isaiah, but opens first of all with the text from the Book of Exodus. And

closes with that of Isaiah with the exodus. The first exodus was the liberation of the Egyptian slaves, the second from the Babylonian captivity

The expression that the evangelist quotes in these two episodes, to indicate that the activity and actions of Jesus, will all be in the sign of the liberation of the people.

The Promised Land had turned itself into a land of slavery from which it was necessary to escape. "*Behold, I send my messenger..*" this is taken from the Book of Exodus 23,20 and here the evangelist adds an expression of the prophet Malachi "*...who will prepare your way...*". The prophet Malachi had written - it is the Lord speaking- "*...and he will prepare the way before me.*" therefore the way of God becomes the way of Jesus.

The evangelist begins the transferring of the powers that were exclusive to God to Jesus. Jesus is the way of God. The way of God is realized in the figure of Jesus. And here finally the prophet Isaiah, announces the second exodus, "*... the voice of one crying....:*" not so much as in the desert, but from the desert. It is from the desert that the voice arrives from he who cries.

The kingdom of God will not come from above because of a divine act, but requires the collaboration of all those who want it. And here is the presentation of who is this messenger of God. It is one sent by God that excludes all religious institutes. "*John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness...*" The baptism was a known ritual, one is emerged in water which symbolizes the death of the past, to begin a new life.

"*...of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" the change of attitude obtains forgiveness for all sins, therefore it is an outward act to indicate a profound inner change. Well, at John's announcement, of a baptism to obtain the forgiveness of sins, there is an unexpected response, incredible.

In fact the evangelist writes: "*And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him..*" The evangelist uses the verb "to go out", it is the same used in the exodus to indicate the liberation achieved by God towards his people. This is surprising, because the temple was at Jerusalem, the appointed place for the forgiving of sins.

So, the people understand the forgiveness of sins is not obtained by a ritual in a religious institution, but one must be able to make a profound change in one's life. "*..and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan,*" ... here is another reference to Exodus. The Jordan has been a river that the population of Israel had to cross to enter into the Promised Land.

"*...confessing their sins.*" Then the evangelist gives us a description of this John, that is a description of a prophet. In fact "*John was clothed with camel's hair..*" which were the clothes of a prophet, "*....and wore a leather belt around his waist.*" Underlining this belt of leather recalls the greatest prophet, Elijah, here, the evangelist wants to represent Elijah, that the people were waiting for as a forerunner of the Messiah, manifested in the figure of John the Baptist.

"*... and ate locusts and wild honey.*" That which the desert offers, the normal food for nomads and Bedouin. "*And he preached, saying, After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.*"

John the Baptists expression is not intended for humility, but something much more profound. Here there is a hint of good three texts, the books of Genesis, book of Ruth and Deuteronomy that refers to a practice called Levirate, to levir, in Latin "brother-in-law" What was this practice? When a woman remained a

widow with no children, it was the brother-in-law 's duty to make her pregnant. The child that would be born would take the name of her dead husband, so the name would continue.

When the brother-in-law refused to make her pregnant, he who had the right after him proceeded to unlace the sandals -it was a particular ritual- the sandals were spat upon and meant: your right to make her pregnant passes to me.

So, John the Baptists proclamation is very profound. He is saying: "do not take me for the Messiah, the bridegroom of Israel, he who must fertilize this woman, thought to be a widow because the relationship with God is finished, it is not I, but He who comes after me."

Because "*I have baptized you with water,*" the external ritual, water is something external to man "*..but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*" Jesus' baptism will be a profound internal immersion, in the same divine life. Here then is the good news that the evangelist had announced.

The relationship with God is based no more on the observance of the laws, but on the welcoming of his love. It is this that will judge the life of mankind.