

BAPTISM OF THE LORD – January 12th , 2014

WHEN JESUS WAS BAPTIZED, HE SAW THE SPIRIT OF GOD DESCENDING ON HIM – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mt 3.13-17

At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus' activity, in Matthew's Gospel, opens and closes with the sign of the baptism. In the passage that we see now, Jesus was baptized and with the baptism of Jesus there is a visible manifestation of the presence of the Father in humanity and the last words of Jesus to His disciples, once risen, will be to send them to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

That is, to be a visible manifestation of the fullness of the love of God and to allow everyone to experience it. In Matthew's Gospel, as soon as Jesus comes on the scene, problems begin straight away. In fact the evangelist writes in chapter 3,13, "*At that time Jesus came from Galilee...*" Here the evangelist uses the same word that was used for the appearance of John the Baptist.

With this literary ploy the evangelist wants to indicate that in Jesus there is the continuation and the fulfillment of the Baptists' activity. "*...to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.*" From the beginning in the church the problem of Jesus' baptism has created problems. If the baptism of Jesus, as Mark announced, was aimed to obtain forgiveness of sins, why did Jesus go to be baptized?

If the baptism of Jesus, as in Matthew's Gospel, is aimed at conversion, that is to change in one's own behaviour, from a wrong behaviour to one orientated towards the good of mankind. Why did Jesus go and get baptized? Did He need to be converted?

The baptism is a symbol of death, death of that which one is and that which has been, to welcome a new life. Also for Jesus the baptism is a symbol of death, but not of the past, because he does not have an unjust past to cancel, but death in the sense of accepting death in the future to be faithful to the will of the Father and show His face of love. Jesus will speak of this baptism as an actual symbol of death. In Mark's gospel it is written: "«*Are you able....to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?* »"

The baptism is a symbol of death. If for the people it is a symbol of death of the past, for Jesus it is for the future. Well then, Mathew writes: " *John would have prevented him,*" because this Jesus that goes to be baptized as if He also has need of conversion is not in line with the Messiah that John the Baptist had announced, the Messiah avenger, the Messiah that comes to judge, to praise and to punish, who comes to baptize in the name of the Holy Spirit, but also with fire, He who comes to burn the chaff.

And so John the Baptist protests and says: "*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*" But Jesus answered him, «*Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.* » The term 'righteousness' in the Old testament has the meaning of faithfulness, faithful to the covenant. The righteousness of God consists in the faithfulness to the covenant, even if mankind abandons it, even if the people may betray it, God is always faithful to the covenant and to His people.

And mankind is just, that is the righteousness of mankind, when he is faithful to this covenant. Therefore Jesus invites to be faithful to the covenant, that is to carry out the will of God. And here the evangelist puts in a strange expression that is found twice in Matthew's Gospel, here and at the end of the temptation in the desert, when it reads in chapter 4,11 " *then the devil left him*".

"*Then he consented* ", John the Baptist left Him. Not to "let it be so now", as some translators try and finish the phrase. "Then he left him", exactly like the devil. The evangelist wants to indicate that this for Jesus is the first temptation: to be the Messiah waited for by the people, the Messiah announced by tradition. He would have been recognized, welcomed and acclaimed immediately.

In fact Jesus must free the people of this idea of the Messiah to present a completely different one. Not a powerful Messiah, but a Messiah of love, not a dominant Messiah, but a Messiah that serves.

So, "*And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water,*" water is the symbol of death, so the evangelist anticipates that which will be the resurrection of Jesus "*..and behold, the heavens were opened to him..*", the heavens are the dwelling place of God, "*..and he saw the Spirit of God*";" indicating the fullness of love, of energy, of the life of God. "*..descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.*"

What is the meaning of the symbol of the dove? It is double. One is the reference to the Book of Genesis, in the story of the creation, where it says that, "*.. and the Spirit of God was hovering*

over the waters," therefore the evangelist sees in Jesus the new real definite creation willed by God. And the other is taken from a proverb in which recalls the love of the dove for its nest.

The dove is faithful to its nest, even if it becomes changed, made more beautiful, more new, it is always faithful to the original nest. Therefore Jesus is the nest of the Holy Spirit, He is the dwelling place of the Spirit, there resides the fullness of the love of God.

"... and behold, a voice from heaven said," heaven means a divine dwelling place, and here the evangelist blends three Old Testament texts. He blends the psalm 2, the 22 chapter of the Book of Genesis and Isaiah chapter 42. "*«This is my beloved Son,.. »*", is the coronation of the Messiah, therefore Jesus is confirmed by God as the Messiah, this is the quotation from the psalm.

"«..beloved.. »" means the only son, He who inherit all, and it is a reference to Isaac, to the son of Abraham, that Abraham wanted to sacrifice for the divinity, "*«..with whom I am well pleased. »*" this is a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, in which is seen the activity of the Messiah willed by God. Therefore in Jesus the will of God is shown completely and fully it is seen in Him and in His activity the Messiah. In Him there is no confliction with God because He is the son, that is He that is like the Father in everything and He is the beloved, only son, He that inherits all from the Father.

One cannot distinguish Jesus from God, but, seeing Jesus, one will understand who is God, a God completely different from that which was expected by tradition.