

WHILE HE BLESSED THEM, HE PARTED FROM THEM AND WAS CARRIED UP INTO HEAVEN – Biblical Commentary by Fr. Alberto Maggi OSM

Lk 24,46-53

At that time, Jesus said to his disciples, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.

And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.

To understand the liturgy of the Ascension one must first understand the culture of that time, the cosmology, how the relation between heaven and earth was understood. God was far from mankind and was in heaven, and mankind naturally was on earth. So all that came from God came down from on high, came down from heaven, while all that went towards God went up to heaven.

This is important to understand this reading, in which the evangelist, with the Jesus' Ascension, does not want to indicate a separation of Jesus from mankind, but a more intense union. With the Ascension Jesus does not distance Himself from the world, but is nearer; His is not an absence, but a more intense presence.

But let's see the reading that the church has chosen for this day. It is the final part of Luke's Gospel, chapter 24, 46-53, but begins at verse 45 because it is important. It is the introduction that the evangelist gives us and indicates to us for the understanding what he has written.

Luke, in fact, writes: "*Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,*" To understand the scriptures it is not enough to read them, one must open one's mind, to be open to the new. Who refers to patterns, models and formulas of the past and does not open one's mind to understand the new can read the scriptures, but cannot understand them.

And Jesus says to them; *“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,”* Jesus confirms that the Messiah, sent by God, would have suffered and risen for always – number three, as we know in the Jewish culture indicates that which is definite.

And here is the mandate that Jesus gives to His disciples and to the believers of all time. *“..should be proclaimed in his name..”* the name of this Jesus , the Saviour , *“.. to all nations,”* the word used by the evangelist indicate the pagan nations, therefore Jesus’ message is not reserved to one population, but is for all humanity because it is the realization of God’s design of love for his creation.

“...that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations,” that is a change in the way of thinking that brings about a change in behavior. Repentance in the Gospel has this meaning :If until now you have lived for yourself, now your life must be orientated for the good of others.

“...repentance and forgiveness of sins...” A radical change in one’s own behavior, where mankind does not think of himself, but thinks of others, does not think only of his own needs, but the needs of others, this results in the cancellation of the weight of sins that lie heavily on ones shoulders.

And Jesus adds: *“.. beginning from Jerusalem.”* What Jesus is saying is sensational, because it was in Jerusalem, in the temple, through sacrifices, offerings and rituals, that sins were allowed to be forgiven. With Jesus the role of the temple has ended, it is finished. There is no more a ritual for the forgiveness of sins, but in life, not through sacrifices or offerings, but by orientating one’s life for the good others.

And Jesus says “ that this will begin right there in Jerusalem” the home of the religious institution where in the temple forgiveness of sins was allowed in God’s name.

Here is the novelty, the opening that Jesus proclaims and that His disciples must make it known to all the world. And then Jesus announces: *“And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”* He is announcing the coming of the Holy Spirit, and this spirit Luke, makes it happen on the very day in which the Jewish community celebrate the gift of the laws given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai , the day of Pentecost.

In the world in which the Jewish community celebrate thanksgiving for the laws, the Holy Spirit descends on the community, God’s love. It is the new orientation of the community, the relationship with God will be different. The believers, with Jesus, will not be those that obey a God observing his laws, but those that like the Father practice a love like his, therefore no more laws, but a relationship of love.

“Then he led them out...” The word used is the same as for the Exodus, therefore he must begin this liberation from this institution, *“..and lifting up his hands he blessed them.”* This is practically important because it refers to the Book of the Exodus, the episode of a war, when Moses lifts up his hands, the Israelites win, therefore it is a sign of victory, not a defeat.

“...he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.” As we have said at the beginning the evangelist uses the cultural language of that time, in which God was on high, for which who went towards God went on high. The evangelist wants to say that Jesus manifests Himself in the divine condition. That man, that the religious authority had condemned as a blasphemer and on whom had inflicted a punishment reserved for those cursed by God, in reality was God.

Who blasphemed was not Jesus, but the religious institution that, for their own interests, had killed Him. The conclusion of Luke's Gospel is very disappointing. He writes: *“And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy,”* - a final surprise - ,*“.. and were continually in the temple blessing God.”*

The evangelist wants to say that they had not understood a thing. The temple, the place that for Jesus was that of great danger, the place that Jesus had said was a den of thieves and that would be destroyed, for the disciples is a place of great security. The descent of the Holy Spirit is needed, the power of God, to make them leave the temple and go towards humanity, towards all the pagan population, as Jesus had asked them.