

II LENT– 12th MARCH 2017

HIS FACE SHONE LIKE THE SUN - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 17,1-9

*And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."*

In Matthew's gospel there are four mountains, all related to one another. The mountain of the beatitudes corresponds to the mountain in the resurrection, practicing Jesus' message, one experiences the risen Christ and the indestructible life. The mountain of the temptation corresponds to the mount of the transfiguration; the divine condition, according to the evangelist, is not obtained through the worshiping of power, but through the gift of one's self. It is what the evangelist expresses in chapter 17 of his gospel. Let's read.

"*And after six days...*" the days are important: the sixth day, in the biblical tradition, is the day of the creation of man, and it is also the day in which God, on Mount Sinai manifested his glory. The glory of God is manifested in Jesus, in the fullness of his creation. "*Jesus took with him...*" he takes three disciples with him, the most difficult, those that he will have as companions, even at the time of his passion. The first, Simon, is presented with his negative nickname Peter (Pietro – stone), which means stubborn.

"*James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.*" This is a precious indication that the evangelist gives us. Every time Matthew writes "by themselves" it indicates misunderstanding or hostility, against Jesus and his teaching. "*...up a high mountain by themselves.*" Here is this high mountain, like the one where the devil took Jesus, offering him all the kingdom of the world, on condition that he worshiped power, the divine condition through power. Jesus does not agree, and shows his tempter, that the divine condition is not obtained through power, but through the gift of love giving one's self. (remember that, in this gospel, it was Peter that received the insult of Satan, his devil tempter)

"*And he was transfigured before them, ...*" The evangelist shows what is the condition of man that passes through death. Peter, in the previous passage turned against Jesus, because he did not accept the idea of a Messiah that went to his death. So Jesus shows them that death is not the end, but a fullness of life, death does not destroy the person, but the power. "*..and his face shone like the sun,*" the sun is the image of the fullness of the divine condition "*..and his clothes became white as light.*" This is the image of the divine condition, as when Jesus will say that the just will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father, and these bright clothes are those of the

resurrection. So, Jesus shows that passing through death, his figure is not only not destroyed, but actually reinforced.

*“And behold, there appeared to them Moses..”* who was the great lawgiver, *“.. and Elijah,..”* who was the great prophet that, through the use of violence, imposed the observation of the divine laws, *“..talking with him.”* This precision is important. Elijah and Moses, that which we call the Old Testament, the laws of the prophets, had nothing to say to Jesus’ community; as they had talked with God, now, they talk with Jesus.

*“ And Peter... ”* presented with his negative nickname *“..said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here,..”* it is important what Peter has the intention to do. Peter, again in this gospel, continues Satan’s actions, Jesus’ devil tempter, and what is this temptation? The Messiah, according to the tradition, would suddenly appear during the most important feast of Israel. The great feast of the tents. It was the feast for excellence, between September and October, for a week, the Jews would live in tents, to remember the liberation from the Egyptian slavery. During the feast to remember the liberation, there would be the appearance of the new liberator.

*“..I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”* For Peter, Jesus is not in the middle. When there are three personages, the most important is always in the middle. It is not Jesus, for Peter the most important is Moses. What is the temptation of Peter towards Jesus? Here is the Messiah that I want: he who observes Moses’ laws, with the prophetic zeal and the violence of Elijah.

*“He was still speaking...”* but it seems that he does not agree with what Peter says, *“.. when, behold, a bright cloud...”* the image that, in the book of Exodus indicates the liberating presence of God, *“...overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said,..”* God’s voice naturally *“This is my Son,”* son also means one who is similar in behaviour *“beloved..”* he who inherits all *“...with whom I am well pleased;”* the same words that God expressed about Jesus at the moment of the baptism, *“...listen to him.”* Do not listen to Moses or Elijah, but it is in Jesus that there is the fullness of the will divine, of the divine revelation, he should be listened to.

*“When the disciples heard this..”* This divine intervention causes despair and desolation, and a sign of defeat *“..they fell on their faces and were terrified.”* Why? The Messiah that they are following in Jesus, is not the one they hoped for, a victorious Messiah, the Messiah that imposes laws and violence; so it is a defeat of their dreams of ambition, of supremacy desires. *“But Jesus came and touched them,..”* Jesus must touch them, exactly like he touches the ill and the dead, *“... saying, “Rise, and have no fear.”* But the reaction of the disciples is again negative; *“And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one...”* they search still for a point of reference of the tradition of the past, they still search for Moses, the laws that give security, they search for Elijah the prophet, but there is no one. No Moses, no Elijah and almost reluctantly, the evangelist writes *“...they saw no one but Jesus only.”* Jesus alone is not enough for them, they want Jesus like Moses and Elijah.

*“ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them,” “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”* They have experienced what is the condition of man that passes through death, they must still see the kind of death that Jesus must face, the death that the Bible reserved for those cursed by God, a shameful death, the death of the cross. So to avoid feelings of enthusiasm out of place, do not say anything to anyone, until he is not risen, because first I have to pass through death, and this kind of death.