

WHEN JESUS ALSO HAD BEEN BAPTISED AND WAS PRAYING; THE HEAVENS WERE OPENED - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke 3,15-16.21-22

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

In Luke's Gospel the baptism of Jesus is that of the imprisonment of John the Baptist by Herod. In this Gospel one reads that the tetrarch Herod was criticized by John the Baptist because of Herodias, his brother's wife, but only Luke gives us a precious indication, *for all the evil that he had done*.

We know from other exact-biblical sources, like Giuseppe Flavio, that John the Baptist exhorted to the practice of justice of the people and he had a great following. This is why Herod, that lived in the injustice, put this prophetic voice in prison. But it is the stupidity of power. Persecution makes live flourish, it does not extinguish it and, stop one voice and one stronger will follow.

So, it is in this contest that the baptism of Jesus takes place. Let's see then.

"Now when all the people were baptized". John the Baptism had announced a baptism of conversion, that is, a change, for the forgiveness of sins. It is a tremendous thing that John does, because the forgiveness of sins was obtained in the temple at Jerusalem giving an offering to the Lord.

Well, here Luke writes that all the people were baptized. The people had understood, that the forgiveness of sins did not come through the rites of the temple, but through a radical change in

the way of life, a change of behavior and not by giving offerings to God for one's own faults, but by welcoming a God that offers himself with his spirit, to be able to live the fullness of this life.

"...and when Jesus also had been baptized" Why does Jesus get baptized ? Baptism is a sign of death. For the people it was a sign of the death of their past life, a past of injustice. For Jesus it was the acceptance of a death in the future.

He Himself, in this Gospel, will talk of Baptism as a symbol of His death when He will say: *"I have a baptism to be baptized"*(Luke 12,50) So, while for the people the baptism means the death of their own past, for Jesus it is the acceptance, for the faithfulness to the design of the Father, for His death in the future.

"..was praying", therefore in communication with God, *"...the heavens were opened.."* At that time, it was believed that, because of sins of the people the heavens were closed and there was no communication between God and mankind. Through Jesus' commitment communications between God and humanity was restored and will be continual.

At the express willingness of Jesus, the total gift of His life, corresponds now, on God's behalf, to the total gift of his spirit. *"... the heavens were opened.."* Therefore the definite and permanent communication between God and mankind, *"..and the Holy Spirit descended on him.."* The spirit is the strength of God, the love of God. The same capacity of God's love descended on Jesus.

"..in bodily form, like a dove;" Why a dove? The evangelist already at the announcement had seen in Jesus a new creation and returns to this theme dear to him. The book of Genesis opens with the picture of God's spirit that hovers over the water and then the dove appears again to free Noah after the flood.

What is the evangelist trying to say to us? That in Jesus there is a new creation, that after the flood, in which God will not punish anymore the people, but will forgive everyone their sins. *"..and a voice came from heaven,"* from God. And here the evangelist brings together three texts of the Holy Bible, a psalm, the Book of Genesis and the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

The psalm is " You are my son"(psalm 2,7) it was the consecration of the Messiah. " Son" in that culture did not only mean he who was generated by the father, but also he that was similar in behavior. Receiving God's spirit, that being the same capacity of love, Jesus manifests God fully. Jesus is God.

"..beloved.." This term, that means also the only son, and therefore he who will inherit everything for the Father, is taken from the Book of Genesis for Isaac, son of Abraham. *"In thee I am well pleased"* and this is from the Prophet Isaiah , where he speaks of the future Messiah that receives the satisfaction on the part of God.

Therefore on Jesus, in the moment of the baptism, descends not only the Holy Spirit, but God that recognizes himself in Him. With Jesus there is no more need to search for God, but to accept Him and with Him and like Him work to make the world always more human.