

**WITH YOUR EDURANCE YOU WILL GAIN YOUR LIVES – Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM**

***Luke 21,5-19***

***And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” And he said, “See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.”***

***Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.***

This Sunday's gospel is quite complicated and is likely to be misinterpreted. For this we must put it in its historic context. Luke's gospel chapter 21,5-19. To understand it we must go back, a good seven centuries, to 701, when Sennacherrib, the powerful king of Assyria, began his march towards Palestine and during the march he had already attacked and devastated 46 cities and had invaded little Jerusalem. King Hezekiah and all the population believed themselves lost because all Jerusalem was surrounded by the mighty army of the Assyrians. Well, what a surprise in the morning when there should have been the attack, they saw the encampment was empty, it had been abandoned.

For what reason? The official religious explanation given : God's intervention. Well, in the Book of Kings 2 , at chapter 19, 23, we find that the same night, the angel of the Lord, the angel of Yahweh came and struck the Assyrian encampment of 185.000 men, leaving the bodies in the desert, and Sennacherib, the Assyrian King, broke camp and left to return to Nineveh.

This is the religious explanation. Actually in the writings of Sennacherib it's said that King Hezekiah had paid an enormous ransom . The fact is that this incident had given rise to the belief that, in moments of maximum danger for Jerusalem, God would intervene. There is a psalm that celebrates all this, Psalm 46, 5 where it says . *God is in the midst of her ( city of God- Jerusalem ); she shall not be moved.*

Therefore in the moment of maximum danger God intervenes. So, let's read the gospel.

*"And while some were speaking of the temple," this "some" are the disciples, "how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings,"... the temple in Jerusalem was splendid ". he said, "As for these things that you see,..." And this is strange. Jesus had spoken of the temple as a den of thieves and bandits. His disciples, however, continue to appreciate its appeal, the admiration. ". the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."*

Why? The previous episode was that of the poor widow who offered for her whole life to maintain this institution . It was the institution that with the proceeds should have maintained the poor in society . But the religious institution had overturned all this. It was the weak that maintained this institution. So, for Jesus, a religious institution that, rather than help others, the weak, exploited them of maintenance, has no reason to exist. This is why Jesus says: *".. there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."* And even today in Jerusalem the stones thrown down by the Romans in the siege in the year 70, can be seen.

*"And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?""* The disciples are not preoccupied or alarmed, they only want to know when. Why? As we have said earlier it was believed that in the moment of great danger for Jerusalem God would intervene. This is what the disciples hoped. They still hope that the Lord comes to restore the deceased Kingdom of Israel. But Jesus replies: *"And he said, "See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them"*.

Jesus is adamant. There will always be in the history people that think to have this divine command to restore and reform, Jesus asks not to follow them. Historically we know that after Jesus other alleged messiah, presented themselves, the last of these was Bar Kochna, the said son of the stars, that certain rabbis recognised as the messiah sent by God, and caused under the emperor Hadrian the revolt against the Romans, and on the behalf of the Romans the complete destruction of Jerusalem.

*"And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once."* Jesus says not to get agitated with this expectation, because they think it's time to inaugurate kingdom of Israel. Jesus says that will not be like this.

*“Then he said to them,”....* And here to understand these expressions it is necessary to refer to the language of the prophets with which the prophets describe the great social upheavals. *“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences.”* They are the images that the prophets used to indicate great social changes.

*“ And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.”* All this is an image to frighten. We will see at the end of this episode how Jesus will speak of the signs of liberation for his disciples. But this upheaval and change, unfortunately, will not be painless for his disciples. This message that Luke writes is an encouragement to the Christian communities that have seen persecution and marginalization.

*“ But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you,”* And here Jesus presents the three sacred values on what the society is based they are God, country and family, all united under the insignia of power over men. Well these three sacred values... -for sacred value it means a value for which it is permissible to sacrifice one’s own life and take another life – Jesus’ disciples will be against this.

*“...delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.”*

The evangelist is anticipating the scene that will be presented in the Acts of the Apostles, the martyrdom of Stephen, which will have words to which his opponents will not know how to resist. Also Stephen has touched the Temple of Jerusalem, the institutional nerve centre of this religious institution. Why all this aversion toward Jesus and his disciples? Because the universal message – announced by Jesus – of the Kingdom of God, cancels the privilege of Israel to be the first among the nations, and the dream of its reign. All this will not be painless.

And indeed Jesus says... therefore we have seen God, the religion, the country and the leaders, but ... *“You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death.”* Here it refers to the book of Deuteronomy where it states that it is also permissible to kill an idolatrous relative. So adherence to Jesus, in the eyes of society, is an idolatry that merits death.

Following Jesus, with the radical subversion of values, is a crime so great as to be able to undo even the closest ties. *“You will be hated by all for my name’s sake.”* So the persecution is not unexpected in the life of the believer, but it is a confirmation that you are following Jesus.

And here is Jesus’ reassurance: *“But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.”* So Jesus reassures that on God’s behalf there will be his protection and that this is not a message that gives fear and anguish, but actually takes it away. And in verse 28 at the end of the chapter we find where Jesus says: *“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”* So all this that has been said is not a message to give fear, but to take it away.

Jesus assures us that liberation is near. Of course this liberation will not be without pain, there will be suffering, but Jesus is always on the part of the persecuted, never with those who persecute, even if they claim to do it in his name.