

JESUS CAME AND TOOK THE BREAD AND GAVE IT TO THEM, AND SO WITH THE FISH.–

Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

John 21,1-19:21

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberius, and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time,

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

When Jesus met with the disciples that were hidden for fear of coming to the same end as their teacher, Jesus had given them the Holy Spirit and had invited them to manifest God's love for humanity with these words: “ *As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.*” Jesus asked the disciples to be an extension and a continuation of God's faithful love for all humanity.

Apparently the disciples did not have any intention to do so. The evangelist, in the reading we examine now, points out the difficulty in the early church to accept the great novelty that Jesus brought: God's love is not limited to the people of Israel but it is intended for all humanity.

So, the disciples have no intention of doing what Jesus asks of them and they return to Galilee, return to their occupations. And it is there where Jesus joins them, on the sea of Tiberius. Referring to the sea of Tiberius remember the episode of the bread and fishes that was written in an Eucharistic key so that the verses that we now examine have this connotation of the Eucharist.

The evangelist lists the disciples as being seven – the number seven indicates totality- and Simon Peter says: “*I am going fishing.*” He is always the leader who takes the initiative. And the others reply, “*We will go with you.*” Rather than follow Jesus they follow Peter. And when they follow Peter the result is a total failure.

Jesus had said: “..for apart from me you can do nothing.”(John15,5), and He had also said: “... night is coming, when no one can work.” (John 9,4), but the evangelist comments: “*They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*” Following Peter brought failure. But Jesus does not abandon them. Jesus presents Himself at dawn, at daybreak – Jesus is the light of the world_ and He presents Himself on the shore. To the disciples, that do not realize that it is Jesus, they know the Jesus of their history, but have difficulty in recognizing the risen Jesus that had accompanied them for all their existence..... Well, Jesus presented himself to them with words full of affection: “*Children, do you have any fish?*”

Fish is something that is eaten with bread, normally roast or dried fish. So Jesus offers Himself as bread, but asks of His disciples for something to give some taste to the bread. They have none, so Jesus says to them: “*Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.*”

So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish." The word used by the evangelist was "multitude", .. of fish.

Why does the evangelist use this word "multitude", that is used only twice in his Gospel? the first time was in chapter 5, when Jesus in the pool of Bethesda finds a multitude of invalids , the blind, cripples and the paralyzed . It was the image of people that were excluded from the temple, and from God, the rejected, the invisible.

Well it is this the indication that Jesus gives; fishing should be given to these people. To these people that have no dignity anymore, to allow them to recuperate the dignity of the son of God. The people that are invisible in the eyes of society to make them visible.

So, when the fishing is addressed to the rejected, to the excluded, to those that have been driven away from the official religion, well, the catch is more abundant. In fact the evangelist comments: *"So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish."* So Jesus gives an indication of where to orientate the mission of the church; not to the 99 well behaved sheep, but towards the lost sheep, that have lost themselves or have been deceived.

When the church orientates itself towards the excluded of humanity the catch is more abundant. *That disciple whom Jesus loved* .. the anonymous disciple that is always near Jesus, recognizes in the fruit of their work the presence of the Lord, and says: *"It is the Lord!"* And here there is a strange reaction, if we take the episode from a literally point of view. *"When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord,..."* here he does not say he did up his robe, but *he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea...*". Behaviour somewhat strange. Let's see, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea...". One would of thought the opposite. Simon Peter took off his robe and threw himself into the sea. It is clear that to swim, to go into the water a robe would be a nuisance.

Why does the evangelist say he put on his robe? He is referring to when Jesus at the last supper *"...laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist ."*(John 13,4) to wash the feet of the disciples, but Peter refused. Here Peter begins to understand. He is naked because he lacks the sign of love, the sign of service, being that of the 'apron'. And Peter's conversion begins here in the following verses.

"..and threw himself into the sea...". As soon as the disciples reach land they see a charcoal fire, here also is a reference to the moment of Jesus' arrest, when Peter, rather than following Jesus stays with the guards and servants around the charcoal fire. Called to be free, but if one stays with servants; he is unable to follow Jesus.

So the reference to this charcoal fire recalls the betrayal and prepares the definite scene of Jesus' call to these disciples, *with fish on the bread*. It is a clear reference to the Eucharistic supper. Jesus, when He shows Himself to the disciples, he offers Himself each time as *bread*, as food of life. It restores the effort made and gives them new energy for new activity, for new missions.

And Jesus asks for some fish. Simon Peter takes the whole net with 153... even today there is no convincing explanation for the meaning of this number. “.. *the net was not torn.*” And Jesus does not present Himself as the master that asks to be served, but as a friend that puts himself at the service of others.

Jesus says to them: “*Come and have breakfast.*” Love becomes a gift, becomes service, one feels the presence of the Lord. And for this “..*none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord.*” In these verses the evangelist is giving us an indication of the Eucharist, he actually continues saying “ *Jesus came and took the bread....*” The verb is present because it means that every time that Jesus meets with His community he renews the same gestures .”.... *and gave it to them, and so with the fish.*”

They are the same words, the same actions that the evangelist uses for the Last Supper. Every time that Jesus shows Himself, He breaks bread, communicating the food of life. This is the meaning of the Eucharist: the love received from God, that is accepted and transforms itself in a love to be communicated to others. In the Eucharist Jesus, who is the son of God, and God himself, becomes bread, the food of life and when we take it, we become similar to Him, we are able to make bread, food of life for the others, becoming sons of the same God.

The evangelist concludes: “*This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples...*” Actually it is not true, it is the fourth time. But the number three in Jewish symbolism means “that which is definite, that which is complete” So the evangelist wants to say: here is how Jesus manifests Himself, always, at anytime, to every community , as bread and food for the life of His group.

The remaining verses are not commented because of the lack of time, but they can be found in the comment of the 18th April 2010