

**WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR ?- Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM**

**Luke 10,25-37**

*And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”*

*But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him: And the next day he took out two denari<sup>1</sup> and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”*

Should the divine law be observed even when it causes suffering in mankind? Let’s see what Luke writes for us in chapter 10, 25-37.

“*And behold, a lawyer..*” The lawyers are the scribes, the greatest legislators. Theirs was a divine authority because their word was considered the actual word of God. “*.. stood up to put him to the test,..*” Literally " to tempt him". Here the evangelist uses the same verb that he used in the desert for the temptations of the devil. So the evangelist warns us, "attention, these zealous defenders of the doctrine and tradition, are actually instruments of the devil. He asked “*Teacher,..*” this attitude is typical curial falsity, he turns to Jesus to tempt him, then to accuse him, and instead addresses him with this title of respect, as if he wanted to learn, but in reality he only wants to judge. “*..what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*” Here is the topic that interests him. Jesus does not talk about it, he came to change this life here. Jesus is not interested in eternal life.

“*He said to him, “What is written in the Law?”*” It is provocative and ironic on the part of Jesus. The lawyer is one of the greatest experts. He is the one that all his life, all day long has been above the law to scrutinize its hidden meanings. Well Jesus asks “What is written in the law?” Then with profound sarcasm “*How do you read it?*” Meaning “ what do you understand ? It is not enough to read what is written , we must also understand it. If the wellbeing of mankind is not put in the first place in one’s life, the Holy Scriptures are read but not understood.

He replies, and here a quote from Deuteronomy chapter 6,5: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"* meaning the love of God is total, it absorbs all the energy of man. And adds a phrase from the Book of Leviticus *"And your neighbor as yourself"*. Here is a difference between these two loves: while the love for God absorbs all of man's energies, love for others is relative, I love my neighbour as I love me *"And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."*

He does not speak of eternal life, but speaks of this life. *"But he, desiring to justify himself.."* What does it mean to justify oneself? At the time of Jesus there was a wide debate between two rabbinical schools, the school of Rabbi Shammai, very rigorous and strict, and that of Rabbi Hillel, more lenient, on the concept of "neighbour". For Hillel the concept of neighbour also meant the foreigner who resides in Israel, for Shammai, only the one belonging to one's own family clan or at most the tribe. The fact that we want to justify makes us understand that he is for the restricted position.

So he *"said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"* Well, Jesus does not respond in a theological way, but with a narrative, a parable in which he radically changes two fundamental concepts of religion: the concept of the believer and the concept of one's neighbour.

*"Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho,..."* Jerusalem is located in the mountain of Judah, more than 818m above sea level, while Jericho, down in the desert, is 258m below sea level. There are a few kilometres, about thirty, so there is a great difference in height. It is an arid and desert area, where it is difficult to walk.

*"..and he fell among robbers,.."* the area is dangerous and even today dangerous to travel alone *"..who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead."* On that road, in that situation, in that climate, he has no hope. He only has to wait to die, unless, providentially, there passes some good soul. This is what Jesus makes us understand.

*"Now by chance.."* which providentially means, Jesus presents the best that could have happened, the most suitable person. *"..a priest was going down that road, .."* It is important that Jesus speaks of a priest who comes down the road. What does it mean? Jericho was a priestly city where the priests, according to their turn, went up to the temple to Jerusalem, and, through complicated rituals of purification, for a week they exercised their liturgical ministry. So the priest is not going to Jerusalem to be purified, but he has already been in the sanctuary for a week (we can say that his clothes still smell of incense) and is in the fullness of ritual purity. So the best that could have happened.

*"..and when he saw him.."* here is the salvation at hand but no! *"..he passed by on the other side"* Why is this? Is he a cruel person, is he insensitive? No, worse, he is a religious person. For a religious person the duties towards God come before those towards men. After all, what did the doctor of the law say? Love for God is total, love for others is relative.

. He is a priest in a state of purity and the law in the book of Leviticus and in the book of Numbers prohibits him from coming into contact with a dead or wounded man, because otherwise he becomes unclean. Then he faces the dilemma: do I observe the divine law or help the person? What is more important the good of God or the good of others?

Religious people have no doubt, the good of God is more important to them.

. *“So likewise a Levite, ...”* the Levites were worshipers, they too had to remain in a state of purity for the temple ceremonies *“..when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.”* There is no hope. Then a ray of light

*“But a Samaritan,..”* the most terrible enemy, a horrible person, the most disgusting human being in the eyes of a Jew, *“..as he journeyed, came to where he was..”* And we would expect "he arrived there and finished him off". And instead, says Jesus: *“..when he saw him,..”* well so had the priest and the Levite but Jesus affirms something extraordinary: , *“..he had compassion.”*

"To have compassion" is a verb reserved only for God. It is only God who has compassion, because to have compassion means an action with which life is communicated to those who do not have life. So for Jesus this Samaritan, a heretic, a sinner, an impure person, behaves like God. Who is the believer for Jesus? Not the one who obeys God by observing his laws - and we have seen the results with the priest - but the one who resembles God by practicing a love similar to his.

The Samaritan approaches him, heals the unfortunate person and even takes him to an inn taking care of him, and in the end Jesus turns back to the doctor of the Law and asks him: *“Which of these three,..”* ( the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan) *“..do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?”* Jesus reversed the question of the doctor of the Law. He wanted to know "who is my neighbour", that is, "How far should my love go?" Jesus asks him "who made himself neighbour", that is, where does love start?

The neighbour is he who approaches those in need.

The answer is very easy, but unacceptable for the doctor of the Law. *“He said...”* (and he hates the Samaritan so much he doesn't even nominate him) *“The one..”* "And he does not accept that a man can love like God, he does not say - although here the translation speaks of compassion, the Greek text speaks of mercy, because God is the one who has compassion, men have mercy. And for the doctor of the Law it is unacceptable that a man can love like God. , *“The one who showed him mercy.”* And Jesus said to him, *“You go, and do likewise.”* Therefore for Jesus the believer is no longer the one who obeys God by observing his laws, but the one who resembles him by practicing a love similar to his.

Quindi per Gesù il credente non è più colui che ubbidisce a Dio osservando le sue leggi, ma colui che assomiglia al Padre praticando un amore simile al suo.

