

ARE YOU THE ONE WHO IS TO COME, OR SHALL WE LOOK FOR ANOTHER? – Biblical commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 11,2-11

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

The evangelist Matthew writes for a Jewish community and presents the figure of Jesus along the lines of the life and works of Moses. Moses freed his people, by sending from God the ten plagues, the famous ten plagues of Egypt, against those who opposed the liberation of the Jews from slavery. Well, the evangelist presents Jesus who does not send ten plagues, ten punishments against those who opposed him or his enemies, but ten works with which to communicate life, even to his rivals and his enemies. All this is disconcerting, because the activity of Jesus is not the one expected, that which had been announced by John the Baptist – remember the avenging Messiah has the axe in his hand, every tree that did not bear fruit was chopped down and thrown on the fire, this Messiah who would come to divide the people between the pure and impure, the good and the bad. And in fact, John was in a crisis. Let's read Matthew's gospel chapter 11, 2-11

“Now when John heard in prison.. “ the evangelist takes for granted that the news was known that John is in prison, even if in reality he will tell us only in chapter 14. Why in prison? According to Matthew, it is because John the Baptist had accused Herod of marrying his brother's wife, but there is an historian of that time, Giuseppe Flavio, that in the “Jewish Antiquities”, gives us a political reason of the imprisonment and then the murder of John the Baptist. Giuseppe Flavio writes that Herod was preoccupied of the success, and the number of people that followed John the Baptist and said.” "Herod therefore decided it would be much better to strike in advance and get rid of him before his activities would lead to an uprising." So, for Giuseppe Flavio there is a political reason. John is in prison, a super prison, he is in a fortress built by Herod the Great, on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, Machaerus.

“John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ..” they are all the works with which Jesus, the Messiah, communicates life even to the sinners and enemies.

“.. he sent word by his disciples... “ it is strange that the disciples of John the Baptist appear, we see that people did not accept Jesus as the one to follow.

“he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” John the Baptist’s request seems like that of an excommunication, because Jesus is not, the Messiah that John the Baptist had announced, this avenging Messiah who came to carry out the punishment of God. So John the Baptist, is in deep crisis, he sends this excommunication: you're the one who was to come, or do we look for another?

Jesus does not respond to dispute with theological and biblical reasons, but in deed.

And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see:” meaning your experience. And here Jesus lists six works, six actions. The number six are the days of the creation, therefore Jesus, in continuation with the God of creation, continues to communicate life, and they are all actions with which one communicates, reconstructs and rejoices in people’s lives. *“.. the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed..”* lepers were not considered ill, but were cursed and punished, *“..and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. “* and what was this good news that they heard? The end of poverty.

This list of the Messiah’s actions, Jesus takes from what the prophet Isaiah announced in the two chapters of his book, in chapters 35 and 61, but, in both, Isaiah had announced also God’s vendetta against the gentiles and the sinners. Jesus omits this: the action of God, through Jesus, is an offer of love for all, there is no kind of vendetta or punishment.

That is why Jesus proclaims blessed, so here is a new beatitude in this gospel, *“..blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”* What is the offence? It is the offence of mercy. This is strange. While punishment, God’s punishment is undoubtedly intimidating, but it does not offend people, mercy offends and still continues to shock people, especially religious people, those who think that God loves them for their merits, for their efforts, cannot bear this image of a God's mercy, God's mercy means that his love knows no obstacles made by men, his love is for everyone.

Jesus had announced it: his Father is not the God of religion, in every religion God rewards the good and punishes the bad. Jesus had said: no, the way of Jesus’ Father is that of communicating love, regardless of behaviour and response of the people. This is what offends : That even those who do not merit it, also the unworthy, unclean, sinners are able to be objects of God’s love, without penitence or purification, this is the offence of mercy. So, Jesus proclaims blessed those that are not offended by him.

“As they went away,..” they go without any reaction, which means on the one hand misunderstanding, on the other disagreement with what Jesus had said. *“ Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? “* It was proverbial behaviour of the reeds, also known in a fable of Aesop. What is the reed? It bends in the wind, it is the 'image of the opportunistic person, one who is always willing to bend his back, just to stay in his place. The wind blows and the reed always bends, the image of an opportunist

“What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.” in the palaces of kings are the courtiers. Who are the courtiers? They are those subservient to the powers that be, always ready to change sides, to change the way of thinking, just to remain on the right side

“What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.” Because John the Baptist is he who was sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus. Then Jesus makes us understand that to be sent by God, collaborates of God, can be neither opportunists nor courtiers, but must go straight on their own way.

“This is he of whom it is written,” and here the evangelist puts together two expressions from the Old Testament from the Book of Exodus and the prophet Malachi. *“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.”* The evangelist presents the figure of John the Baptist as that of Moses, who had taken his people towards the Promised Land, but he had not entered, it is Jesus that will be able to take these people to freedom.

And finally the eulogy of Jesus: *“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”* The kingdom of heaven, remember, in Matthew it is his community, an alternative society, a community where one enters with the acceptance and the welcoming of the first beatitude, that of poverty - blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven - *“is greater than he”*. John the Baptist could not enter in Jesus’ community, because he was imprisoned, and especially could not be born again, born again of the Spirit, passing from son of a woman to the son of God .