

LENT II – March 16th, 2014

## AND HIS FACE SHONE LIKE THE SUN – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

### **Mt 17.1-9**

***And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.***

***And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."***

***When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."***

The evangelist Matthew presents Jesus' reply to the temptations in the desert. The third and last temptation in the desert, was when the devil had taken Jesus up a high mountain - the high mountain means the divine condition - offering Him all realms and glory of the world. That is the invitation, the seduction, the temptation towards Jesus to conquest the divine condition, obtaining the power to dominate. To understand this temptation one must remember, at that time, all those that thought they were considered of divine condition, like the Pharosés who were gods, the Roman emperor that was the son of god, therefore the devil offered to Jesus the divine condition through power. Well, the episode of the transfiguration is Jesus' reply to this temptation.

We see the chapter 17 in the Gospel of Matthew. "...after six days..", the indication is precious. Six days after recalls two important events: the creation of man in the Book of Genesis and when God shows all his glory on Mount Sinai. Therefore the number "six days" recalls two things: the creation of man and the glory of God. The evangelist wants to demonstrate that in Jesus, the fullness of the creation is shown and with this the glory of God. And we will see the reason why. "Jesus took with him Peter..", the disciple is presented with his negative nickname, meaning "the obstinate or headstrong one", ".. James, and John.." they are three difficult disciples, they are those that attracted by power.

Jesus will announce that in Jerusalem He will be put to death, it will be James and John that He will ask to divide with Him the most important places. Well then, Jesus takes Peter with Him, and Peter, in the previous episode, had been the object of the most violent accusation, of the most violent insult from Jesus to one of His disciples. Jesus had called him "Satan". "Go from me, Satan!". The same words with which Jesus had rejected the temptation in the desert.

"...and led them up.", when we find the words "led them up", it is a technical formula used by the evangelists, that always indicates hostility, incomprehension, on the part of the disciples or others, towards Jesus and His message. "... a high mountain..", here, as the devil took Jesus up a high mountain, here Jesus is taking His own devil, His own tempter, Peter, up a high mountain, the place of the divine condition

"And he was transfigured before them," . The divine condition, for Jesus, is not obtained through power, but through love, not dominating, but serving, not taking life, but offering His own. The effect of orientating this way of life for the good of others, it is transformation. The death for Jesus does not diminish the person, but it is that which transforms it. Therefore the death is a transformation of the individual. " And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun," , this means the divine condition.

Jesus had said that the just will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of the Father, "... and his clothes became white as light." They are the colours of the angels that announce the resurrection. Therefore the effects of the resurrection are shown in Jesus; death does not destroy life, but it is that which permits the flowering of a new form, full, complete and definite. A form of life that in the terrestrial existence cannot be reached.

"And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah," Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets, that which we call the Old Testament, "... talking with him." Moses and Elijah are two personages that, in the Old Testament had spoken with God and now speak with Jesus. They had nothing to say to the disciples.

"Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." There is a very important feast in Israeli that does not need to be named, it is simply called ' the feast'; it is the feast for excellence, even more important than Easter. It is the feast of the tents that remember the liberation from the Egyptian slavery, for this week, between September and October, everyone lives in tents. So, to remember the old liberation, one waited and hoped, to see if the liberator would come and join them.

Therefore the Messiah would have appeared during the tent feast. So, here continues the role of Peter as tempter, Jesus' Satan. Why, what does he do? He says . "If you wish, I will make three tents here", it was the feast in which the Messiah would have appeared, and note the order of these tents "...one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." When there are three people, the most important is always in the middle. For Peter the most important is Moses not Jesus.

Peter recognizes in Jesus the Messiah, but a Messiah in the second place observing the laws imposed by Moses. The Messiah would have been a pious devotee of all the rules of the law, and above all, like Elijah. Elijah had been a zealous prophet, maybe too zealous, that personally slaughtered four hundred and fifty priests of another divinity. Therefore the Messiah that Peter wants is this: one who observes the laws and imposes them with violence like Elijah.

*“He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud..”* the cloud in the Old Testament, is an image of the divine presence, *“.. overshadowed them.”* Therefore God does not agree with what Peter is saying. He was still talking, therefore the Lord interrupts Peter. *“...and a voice from the cloud said,”*, it is the voice of God, *“«This is my beloved Son»,”* Son means he who is like his father in his behavior, not only, *“«..my beloved.. »”*, that means the heir, he that inherits all, therefore he that has everything of the Father.

*“« ...with whom I am well pleased; »”*. It is the same identical expression that God pronounced of Jesus at the moment of His baptism. The evangelist wants to demonstrate in this way what is the effect of the baptism. In the baptism Jesus took upon himself the task to show faith to the love of the Father, even at the cost of His life, God’s reply to this commitment is a life that is able to overcome death. Death does not destroy the person, but strengthens him.

And here is the imperative: *“« ..listen to him. »”*. Therefore they must not listen to Moses, not even Elijah; they must listen to Him, only Jesus. Moses and Elijah become relativized and placed in relation with the teaching with the life of Jesus. Those that agree with the laws or the prophets are received well with Jesus, those that are distant or contrary, are left out.

The reaction of the disciples. *“When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces”*, to fall down with the face on the ground is a sign of defeat, of failure, therefore they felt that they had failed. This is not the Messiah that they were following, *“... and were terrified.”* Therefore they felt defeated because the Messiah that they followed is the Messiah that does not die, that is triumphant; in fact they must believe Jesus’ words that had announced that at Jerusalem He would go to His death.

For them it is a sign of defeat and now they are also afraid of what the reaction of Jesus will be that had been so denied by them. *“But Jesus came and touched them,”*, as He had done with the infirm and dead *“saying «Rise, and have no fear»”*. Jesus’ reply is always a communication of life. *“And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one..”*, Peter, James and John still search for Moses and Elijah because it is the past, the tradition. It is this their security; therefore they search for the confirmation of the past values. *“..they saw no one but Jesus only.”* From now on they must trust only Jesus, and not rely on Moses and his laws or on the zealous prophet Elijah.

*“And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, «Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. »”* This image of a Jesus that passes through death, a death that, not only does not destroy Him, but strengthens Him, could be interpreted wrongly, as a sense of a triumphal sign on the part of the disciples. They do not know yet that this condition of Jesus he will obtain passing through a more infamous death, that reserved for those cursed by God, the death of a crucifixion.