

III ADVENT SUNDAY – 17th December 2017

AMONG YOU STANDS ONE THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW - Biblical commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

John 1, 6-8.19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John." The reading this Sunday opens with this splendid image taken from the prologue of John's gospel. Being God's project towards humanity the Lord chose a man to manifest it. Not a member of the priesthood, nor from the religious elite.

Religious places and people are impermeable to the works of the Spirit. "...whose name was John." John in Hebrew is Yohan, meaning Jahvè, the Lord of mercy. "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might ..." God's message is universal, embracing all humanity ... "... believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light."

John's task is to awaken in mankind the desire to the fullness of life and make them aware of the existence of light, despite the darkness.

"And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews..." ...this is the first time that the word Jews appears in this gospel, and it will be repeated 71 times, with this the evangelist did not mean the Jewish population but the leaders, the religious authorities. "...sent ..." And here the evangelist plays with this word. God sent John to awaken the desire of the fullness of light, the religious authorities immediately sent the "police" to extinguish this light.

"...priests and Levites from Jerusalem.." The Levites in the temple also acted as police. So there are the priests to interrogate John and the Levites ready to arrest him. *".. to ask him,"* the same phrase is used in the interrogation that lead to Jesus' death.

In a brutal way, they ask: *"Who are you?"* they are the darkness that hate this light that John is awakening. *"He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."* It is that that they are frightened of. It was known that the Christ, the Messiah for them would come to put down the entire religious hierarchy, for corruption. This is what they fear.

Even in the prays they wanted and hoped for the coming of the Messiah, in reality they were afraid because with the Messiah they would be finished; the Messiah would have made a clean sweep of the corrupt and compromised priesthood. *" And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"* It was believed that Elijah would come before the Messiah. *" He said, "I am not."*

Johns replies are very short and brief. *"Are you the Prophet?"* that was promised by Moses , *" And he answered, "No."* So they said to him, *"Who are you?"* It's interesting that God sends his messenger, but the priests and the Levites who should be the first to recognize him, do not know him. They ask *" who are you?"*

"We need to give an answer.." the leaders *".. to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"* *"All this because for them one who begins an activity without asking the right authorities, cannot be innocent. He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "* and here the evangelist quotes the Prophet Isaiah, but omits the verb 'to prepare' inserting 'to make straight'

'Make straight the way of the Lord,' to take away all obstacles. The religious authority is the proper obstacle to the coming of Jesus, to His works and His teachings. *"...they had been sent from the Pharisees."* this is the first time the Pharisees are mentioned in this gospel, the last time will be the moment of Jesus' arrest.

These people are very pious, very devote and very observant of the laws, they are the refractory of the divine action, they do not know the one sent by God, nor John, nor the Son of God in Jesus, and they will be bitter opponents of God's project for humanity.

"They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing,..." if John is baptizing there is someone that recognizes him as the one sent by God, but it is not the religious authority, but the people. *".. if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"* And here is the John's reply. *" John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know,..."* they do not know him and they will never know the Christ. Those that live a relationship with God based on the observation of the law will never to able to feel the presence of a God creator that manifests itself in life, or the observance of the laws, or the welcoming of that which the life presents.

"...even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." *These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing."* It is the part of the river used by Joshua to enter into the Promised Land, but now the Promised Land has become a land of slavery and death from which the people must escape and this will be Jesus' mission.