

ASCENSION – MAY 17th, 2015

**THE LORD WAS TAKEN UP INTO HEAVEN AND TOOK HIS SEAT AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD -
Biblical commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM**

Mk 16.15-20

Jesus said to his disciples: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned.

These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

The ascension doesn't separate Jesus from believers; the Lord enters their existence strengthening it with a even greater power in respect of the one they already knew. We are offered a last passage of the Gospel of Mark, but it is not written by him. The Gospel of Mark ends with Chapt 16, verse 8 with the announcement of Jesus' Resurrection without evidence of apparitions. This caused great scandal in the early community, so in following years three finals were added to this Gospel. Today we read one of them.

It doesn't belong to Mark, the evangelist, but no doubt it's fruits of the experience of Christian communities.

According to the author Jesus says "*Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature*". The mission for believers is to move – never stay motionless - and announce what? The good news. We know that the term 'gospel' means 'good news'. And what is this good news all about? God is not only good, he's EXCLUSIVELY good; God is love, only demanding to be welcome. God-love offers himself not in order to deprive the individual, but to strengthen his existence and no one is excluded from this love, whatever his behavior might be.

This is the Good News. God loves every one unconditionally and this message has been announced to every creature.

The author goes on with *"whoever believes"* – 'to believe' doesn't mean to adhere or accept a doctrine, a truth, but to welcome this power of love being willing to instill it into others. Love one has received by God turns into a 'offered love'.

"... and is baptized". At the beginning of this Gospel baptism was an expression of conversion. 'Conversion' means 'a change of direction of one's existence': whereas until now I've lived for myself, from now on I will differently orient my life by starting living for others. As a sign of this change there was the rite of baptism. So, the one who complies with this love, welcomes it and publicly displays the change occurred in his existence, already experiences the fullness of life.

"Whoever does not believe will be condemned". The one who rejects it and remains in his selfishness, only taking care of his needs, will be condemned – not by God, for God is love and never condemns – by self-condemning.

Then we find the typical signs that will accompany believers during their mission; a sort of protection against any form of evil, particularly the last expression *"and they will recover"*, well Greek text was quite different. It means "they will obtain the good". Jesus, the Lord, doesn't provide us with the ability of recovering the sick, but for sure of getting them happier! Offering love, attention, care and service we can make a sick person happier or at least feeling better.

"So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven" – As we read Gospel we always have to distinguish 'what the evangelist wants to say' and 'how he says it'. 'What he says' is the Word of God which is always forever valid; 'how he says it' is a matter of literary abilities of the author, his writing style. In this passage the difference between 'what the author wants to say' and 'how he wants to say it' is very clear. *"Was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God"*. What does the author intend to say? He wants to tell to religious authorities: "the man you condemned as a blasphemer, heretic, was God instead. He lived the divine condition".

It was not him to who was blaspheming, as scribes claimed the first time they listened to him, but "you are the blasphemers, for you didn't recognize God's presence".

How does he say it? By using literary schemes of those times. 'Heaven' doesn't mean the atmospheric sky, but refers to the divine dwelling or directly refers to God. 'Sitting at the right hand' is a way of referring to a person who has a strong power. At court the one who used to seat at the right hand of the king, was the one who had his same power or a similar one. Therefore the evangelist uses these well-known images in order to hand on a truth.

The author confirms that through the ascension Jesus doesn't separate himself from life of believers; he says *"but they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them"*. Therefore the Lord hasn't gone somewhere, but the evangelist wants to say that in Jesus the fullness of a divine condition is displayed and this allows him to strengthen the work and the behavior of his disciples.

“And confirmed the word” – ‘the word’ is the good news, the message - *“through accompanying signs”*.
The word is not credible and truthful until it is accompanied by signs like love, forgiveness and sharing.