

II LENT– 17th March 2019

....AS HE WAS PRAYING, THE APPEARANCE FO HIS FACE WAS ALTERED  
Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Link video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SptFkFzPYw>

**Luke 9,28-36**

**Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.**

Jesus had told his disciples that at Jerusalem he would be put to death. Naturally this causes grievance and disillusion

Now here is that passage in Luke’s gospel chapter 9, 28-36. It is important the indication of the location and time. In fact the evangelist writes “*..about eight days after these sayings..*” that is after being told of Jesus’ death.

Why number eight ? It is typical of the evangelists never to mention Jesus’ death without giving an indication also of his resurrection . The eighth day is the day of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus now shows the effects of the person passing through death. It is not destruction or annihilation, but a strengthening

“*..he took with him Peter...*” This disciple is presented only with his negative nickname that indicates his stubbornness, “*... and John and James..*” They will be the most difficult disciples that Jesus takes with him in the important moments of his life. “*..and went up on the mountain..*” with the definite article, it is not an ordinary mountain, but it is not indicated. The evangelist does not want to indicate a topographical but a theological place. The mountain is the place of the divine sphere, of the divine condition.

“*..to pray.*” Typical of Luke to present Jesus in the important moments in prayer. “*And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white.*” Shows the effects of death announced in the previous chapter. Death does not plunge the

person into darkness, but envelops him in light. Death, as we have said, does not destroy the person, but frees all his energies of love and life.

*“And behold,..”* a typical expression of the evangelists to indicate something unexpected. *“..two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah,”* Why Moses and Elijah? They were the characters who, in the Old Testament had spoken with God, but above all Moses was the great legislator and Elijah was the prophet who with zeal, and even with violence, had practiced Moses’ law.

*“..who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, ..”* This is a typical characteristic of the evangelist Luke, using this word “departure” indicating the liberation that Jesus has come to bring, *“..which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.* “ Jerusalem, the holy city, Jesus will be killed by the highest representatives of God, the religious institution.

And here the evangelist mentions something incomprehensible to us: *“Now Peter and those who were with him...”* now they are no more companions of Jesus, but followers of Peter *“..were heavy with sleep,”* Well, in the face of such a revelation the evangelist presents these disciples oppressed by sleep. Why? Sleep means misunderstanding about what is happening.

*“..but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, “ – so Moses and Elijah separate themselves from Jesus - “ Peter ..”* and it is the third time, the number three in the language of the evangelists, always means it is definite, therefore Peter insists in his stubbornness - *“..said to Jesus,”* and he does not call him teacher as is seen in the tradition, the word used is *“Master”*, someone to submit to. It is this idea that Peter has of Jesus *“.. it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents...”*

Why these tents? Of the three most important religious festivals of Israel, the festival of Easter, Pentecost and that of the Tabernacles ( Booths or *Sukkot*), the last was the most important. So important that there was no need to name it, it was enough to say “the festival” and it was understood to be the festival of the Tabernacles. It was the festival that remembered the liberation of the slaves from Egypt, and for a week – still today in Israel – the people lived under temporary shelters or booths.

Well the tradition said that the Messiah would arrive during this festival of the Tabernacles. In remembrance of the old liberation the new liberation would begin. Therefore the long waited Messiah, that of the tradition would manifest himself during this festival. This is why Peter asks to make three booths. He wants Jesus to manifest himself as the Messiah.

*“..one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah”*—When there are three people, normally the most important is placed in the middle. Here for Peter the most important is not Jesus, in the middle for Peter there is Moses, the great legislator. Then Jesus like Elijah at his side, like those who practice this law. But for Peter the most important is Moses.

And the evangelist comments: *"—not knowing what he said. As he was saying these things,"* therefore Peter had not yet finished to speak in his ramblings, *".. a cloud came.."* The cloud, in the Old Testament means the active presence of God *"..and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud."* Therefore having this experience with God. It is strange. Peter the first time that he finds himself in front of Jesus during the miraculous catch of fish he had asked to keep his distance for him because he was a sinner and this time, that he has an experience with God, he is afraid, so the evangelist makes us understand how a religious tradition, a religious ideology, can be an obstacle to understanding the true God.

*"And a voice came out of the cloud,.. "* – the voice of God – *"..saying, "This is my Son..",* a son does not necessarily mean one born to a father, but he who is the same in comportment . So God says that in Jesus there is all of himself. *".. my Chosen One; listen to him!"* it is an imperative, so *"Listen to him"*

Then Moses disappears, Elijah disappears and it is only Jesus to listen to, this is a very precious indication that the evangelist gives to his community. We must listen to the message of Jesus, and what is written in the texts of Moses or in the prophetic books must be compared with the teaching of Jesus: if it is in harmony with Jesus' teaching accept it, if not, it will not be accepted by the Christian community.

*"And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent.."* this silence is typical of Jesus' enemies. *"... and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen."* Why don't they report anything? Because they don't agree. They remain in disagreement. They want a Jesus according to the law of Moses and according to the violent zeal of Elijah, they do not accept Jesus without Moses and without Elijah. So they disagree with Jesus and they are silent.

So the journey of Jesus' community, the understanding of his reality is still long.