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DO YOU THINK I HAVE COME TO GIVE PEACE ON EARTH? NO, I TELL YOU, BUT RATHER DIVISION; - Biblical commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke12,49-53

“I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”

Luke is undoubtedly the evangelist who, more than anyone else, deals with the theme of peace. His gospel opens up with the image of peace in the angelic choir that proclaims "peace on earth to men loved by the Lord", and ends with the risen Jesus who, when he presents himself to his disciples, gives them peace, "Peace be with you", here peace means fullness of life, happiness, yet in this passage there seems almost to be a contradiction.

Let's read what the evangelist says to us. It is Luke chapter 12, 49-53.

Jesus says *“I came to cast fire upon the earth;”* For three times this theme of fire appears in this gospel. The first time it appeared was in the terrible words of John the Baptist who had announced the Messiah was the one who would baptize in the holy spirit and fire. The Holy Spirit, that is divine energy for those who welcome Jesus and his message, and fire, an image of destructive punishment for those who reject it and for the sinners. The second time the theme appeared was in the words of James and John who, seeing that a Samaritan village had not welcomed Jesus, they had asked the Lord: *“Let a fire come down from heaven and consume them ”*. So it was a destructive fire. The image of fire so far is presented as the punishment of God.

But this is not the fire that Jesus wants to bring. It will be understood from the rest of his words that this fire is the fruit of his death. We know that Luke presents Pentecost after the death of Jesus as the descent of the Spirit in the form of tongues of fire. It is the new reality of the new community, of the covenant between God and the people, no longer based on the observance of his laws, but on the acceptance of his spirit, that is, of his love.

So Jesus says: *“I came to cast fire upon the earth;”* this fire of the Spirit *“..and would that it were already kindled!”* Jesus cannot wait for the time when his disciples, his community, his people, establish with God a different relationship, which is not that imposed by Moses, but that of his, the Son, who proposes a relationship between children and their father.

And Jesus continues *“I have a baptism..”* naturally here baptism does not have the image of the rite, of the sacrament, of the liturgy, which it will have later, which means immersion, but has an image also negative, something that overwhelms and entices you. Therefore Jesus says *“..to be baptized with;”*

“..and how I am constrained ..” Here the word used by Luke indicates being pressed, dominated by a strong desire. So Jesus has just this passion for this event which is also negative, this situation that will overwhelm him. *“.. until it is accomplished!”*

So we could translate *"there is an immersion in which I will have to be immersed!"* And it is the an immersion of violence, in death that will sweep him away. And at this point here is the surprise; we started saying that Luke is the evangelist of peace, Jesus takes away some doubts about what this peace means and says: *“Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division;”*

It is surprising to hear these words from Jesus, but what does this division mean? This peace that Jesus came to bring, the fruit of a new relationship between mankind and God, like that of children with the father, will find the reaction and the aversion of so many forces that will be unleashed. And what are these forces? Jesus speaks of division, taking the image of a family, a normal family.” *.. for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three;”* and the division represents the old against the new. Jesus adds: *“.. they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”* The initiative of this division comes from the representatives of the past, the father, the mother and the mother-in-law, whom do not welcome this newness of Jesus’ message, which is welcomed by his disciples. Here is the cause of the division.

It must be kept in mind that Jesus is not talking about the division of a child against child, or brother against brother. No, the division in the community of believers in Jesus is not allowed, because where there is division the community is destroyed.

The evangelist here refers to a known image, that of the prophet Micah, who in chapter 7, 6, says *“... for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;”* and he had added *“..a man’s enemies are the men of his own house.”*

The enemies of this new reality, this new relationship with the Father will not come from those outside of religion, but precisely those who are within religion who will not accept this novelty. Yet Jesus is the God who came to do all things new. Whoever remains in the past can never understand the novelty that the Spirit proposes.