

MY EYES HAVE SEEN YOUR SALVATION – Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke 2,22-40

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Despite the extraordinary experience that Jesus' parents had, in particular His mother, they are still tied to the people's tradition of seeing the relationship with God based on observance and obedience of his laws.

The evangelist in this episode wants to anticipate and show the difficulty that Jesus will have in proposing to His people a different relationship with God no more based on the obedience of his laws, but on welcoming his spirit and his love.

So here is what the evangelist, in this episode known as Jesus' presentation at the temple, presents, two contrasting episodes. One shows Jesus' parents that take the child to fulfill a pointless ritual, because they intend to make the son of Abraham He that is already the son of God, on the other hand there is the man of spirit, Simeon, intending to prevent the unnecessary ritual.

The parents go for the purification of the mother – because the birth of a child makes the mother unclean and therefore the woman must cleanse herself with an offering, and here is the offering of the very poor, a couple of turtledoves – and above all to pay the redemption of their son.

Every eldest son that was born, the Lord wanted him for himself. If the parents did not want this they had to pay the equivalent of 20 days work, meaning five shekels. The evangelist, while Mary and Joseph go, with the child, towards the temple for the ritual, there is a surprise – the evangelist uses an expression that indicates wonder – “*Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon...* “. The name Simeon means “the Lord has heard”. He is the man of spirit, that tries to prevent the unnecessary ritual.

Simeon actually takes the child in his arms while the parents want to fulfill all the things of the law and utter the prophesy that leaves the parents bewildered. In fact, of Jesus it says that He will be “*.. the glory to your people Israel.*”, and this Mary and Joseph know, it was the Messiah's task, the Son of God, but, as new, “*.. a light for revelation to the Gentiles,*” meaning for other peoples. God's love, Simeon announces is universal, no more for the elite population, but for all humanity

Accordingly the enemies of Israel, that is the gentiles, must not be dominated anymore as they believed, as the tradition was presented, but accepted as brothers. Then Jesus gives a blessing to Mary, that ends in a somewhat strange way. Jesus is shown, with what Luke later on in the Gospel presents like “a stone”, used for construction or a stone that to trip up people, and they will say of Jesus “*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel...*”

And, as a sign of contradiction turning to Mary, Jesus' mother “*..and a sword will pierce through your own soul also,*” meaning your life. What does it mean this sword that pierces Mary's whole life? The sword, in both the New and Old Testament, represents God's word, that is effective as a sword, as the author of the Hebrew letters will say, “*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow,*” (Hebrews 4 12-18)

So Simeon to Mary, that represents the population of Israel, announces that the word of this son for her will be like a sword that will force her to make a choice, sometimes very painful. In the next episode the

evangelist will present, the return of Jesus to the temple, will ensure that the first words addressed to his mother will be of reproach.

It is still a long way to go for Mary. She must understand that the mother of this son must transform herself into a disciple. A long and painful journey, like a sword piercing the soul.