

## ASCENSION SUNDAY 2nd June 2019

### WHILE HE BLESSED THEM, HE PARTED FROM THEM AND WAS CARRIED UP INTO HEAVEN – Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

#### Luke 24,46-53

*He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."*

*And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.*

To understand the passage that the liturgy presents us on the feast of the Ascension, we need to go back to the cosmological conception, that is, how the relationship between the earth and the sky was understood at the time of the evangelists. God was situated on high in the heavens, men on earth, so that everything that came from God was said to descend towards men, and everything that went from men to God went up.

Let us read what the evangelist writes for us, is chapter 24, verses 46-53. First of all the evangelist wrote that Jesus "... opened their ( his disciples) minds to understand the Scriptures", It is not enough to read the scriptures, one must open one's mind, that is, open oneself to the new, otherwise they cannot be understood.

"He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead", Jesus has already risen, confirming that all this was part of God's plan, but above all that death did not hold Jesus back. Jesus has risen on the third day and the number three, we know by now, from the biblical symbolism means what is complete, what is definitive, therefore the definitive victory over death

"...and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations," the term used by the evangelist indicates gentile nations, so it is a message that is universal. Here the evangelist uses the same announcement as John the Baptist, slightly modified it. John the Baptist had announced a baptism of conversion for the forgiveness of sins, here baptism is omitted and the conversion is proclaimed to all peoples. Conversion means a change in the values that guide one's life. If you have lived for yourself so far, from now on you live for others.

"...repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The change of life, leaving behind the egoism that has oriented its existence and opening oneself to the new, gains the cancellation of the past sinner. And, underlines the evangelist, it seems a slight underlining, but in reality it has a great importance, "...beginning from Jerusalem." It is a challenge that Jesus launches because he was in Jerusalem, in the temple, the people had to go to obtain forgiveness of sins by bringing offerings and sacrifices to God. Well for Jesus there is no longer a need for a sacred space, there is no longer a need for a liturgical rite for the forgiveness of sins, but the change of one's life is necessary.

But not all, Jesus had said "... to all nations," indicating the gentile nations and he "begins with Jerusalem, the Holy city, the seat of the religious institution, it is equated by Jesus to the gentile peoples, "You are witnesses of these things."

*"And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you."* literally the promise of my Father *"But stay in the city."* Jesus is announcing the sending of his Spirit that will give strength to the disciples and to understand his message and above all to translate it into life-giving attitudes for others, but Jesus asks that until that moment they must remain, the evangelist uses the verb "remain seated", immobile and inactive, *"...until you are clothed with power from on high."* So it is the announcement of what will then be Pentecost.

*"And he led them out..."* and here the evangelist uses a technical verb, which is the one used in the book of Exodus, to indicate the liberating action of God to the Jewish people, slaves in Egypt. The Lord is the one who led his people out of the land of slavery. Well, the fact that the evangelist uses this same expression means that the promised land had actually turned into a land of slavery. It was the religious institution that had imprisoned God and had imprisoned his people for their own interest and convenience. And then Jesus' exodus ends bringing men out of this institution, making them fully free.

*"...out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands..."* this lifting up of the hands is a sign of victory. The evangelist here refers to the book of Exodus when Moses raises his hands in the battle against Amalek. When Moses raises his hands he wins, so the gesture of Jesus is one of victory. He triumphed over death, he triumphed over the religious institution.

So Jesus tries to bring the disciples out of all this. *"While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven."* As was said in the beginning what the evangelist wants to give us is not a scene of separation, but of closeness. It is not a distance, an absence that the evangelist is presenting to us, but an even more intense presence. Jesus is now in the fullness of the divine condition. That man whom the high priests had murdered considering him cursed, had in fact manifested the fullness of the divine condition.

The end of the gospel is disappointing: *"And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem..."*

Why? Jesus had led them out of Jerusalem and they return – *"...with great joy,"* – and here is the great surprise – *"...and were continually in the temple blessing God."* Why in the temple? Did they not realize that the veil of the temple was torn and that God was no longer in the temple? That temple that Jesus had denounced as a den of thieves, like a den of bandits, and for which he had hoped the disappearance, that temple which was the most dangerous place for Jesus, for the disciples is the place that gives them security. It will take the Holy Spirit and Pentecost to free them from all this.