

XXVII ORDINARY TIME – October 2nd, 2016

IF YOU HAD FAITH! – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Lk 17.5-10

At that time the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

"Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'?"

Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

Jesus wants to lead his disciples from the religion to the faith, from a relationship with God based on submission, obedience of his laws, a relationship that makes the believer a servant before his Lord, to a relationship with the Father based on the similarity and the practice of his love. A relationship that makes the believer son of God.

To make this possible – and Jesus many times in Luke's gospel that we are reading has invited his disciples to be like the Father, that is to be completely good - the disciples love must reach the same quality as that of the Father. And what is the quality of the Father's love? That which is expressed in a forgiveness without conditions.

Here is why..... we are at Luke's gospel chapter 12, 3..... Jesus states: "*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,..*" "And Jesus already anticipating the objection says: "*...and if he sins against you seven times in the day*", numbers do not indicate a quantity, but a quality "*.. and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him.*"

This last expression the evangelist uses with the imperative verb. So it is imperative to have to forgive those who commit any fault. The number, as I have said, does not indicate a quantity, but the quality. The quality of your pardon, states Jesus, must be similar to that of God.

And it is at this point that the disciples intervene with a question, with a statement completely out of place. “ *The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”* But the faith cannot be increased, it cannot be given because faith is not given by God. Faith is the response of mankind to God's gift of love to all humanity.

The one that answers: this is faith. Whether it grows or not does not depend on God, but depends on the response of man. That's why Jesus answers: “*If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed,..*” The mustard seed is probably the smallest seed, tiny, therefore next to nothing. “*...you could say to this mulberry tree...*” or sycamore, here the translation can be mulberry or sycamore tree, a plant that was so deeply rooted that it was thought difficult to uproot it, it was a plant which, once planted, lasted for six hundred years.

‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” So Jesus is saying that these disciples have no faith at all, because it would be enough a pinch of this faith. Still they have not responded to the gift of love that God had given them. For this Jesus suggests an alternative. If his offer to become a son of God is not accepted, to have a relationship with the Father based on the similarity of his love, they remain in the condition of servants of God, servants of their Lord, based on submission.

In this gospel, Jesus states that in the Last Supper: “..I am among you as the one who serves.”(Luke 23,27) The novelty that Jesus brings is that God does not ask to be served by mankind, but it is God that puts himself to the service of mankind. And just before, in chapter 12, almost like the image of the Eucharist, Jesus had spoken of that man that returning to his house during in the night and found the servants still awake, what does he do? He does not let them serve him, serve, but it is he himself that serves the servants.

Here it is all on the contrary.

“Will any one of you who has a servant ploughing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’?” Exactly the contrary of what Jesus had said in chapter 12, There it was the man that had his servants sit at table and he went and served them. Here it says the contrary.

“Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’?” What is this contradiction? Well Jesus proposes an alternative. Either you welcome this offering of God's love and this will set you free, and this love is expressed through unconditional forgiveness, or remain in the condition of servants towards your Lord.

So here is the conclusion of this passage that has often been misinterpreted as if to signify the uselessness of acting as a Christian. “*So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded,*” this verb command refers to the observing of the laws. “*...say, ‘We are unworthy servants;’*” Here the translation is not exact because they are not useless servants, they did what they had to do, it is not

true that they are useless. It's better to translate with " We are simple servants, " *we have only done what was our duty.*"

So, Jesus offers an alternative, he does not impose, but offers. Or become sons of God, therefore fully free to love to serve, or remain in the condition of servants. But those who remain in the condition of a servant will never experience the freedom, the fullness and the joy that the communion of God who reveals himself as a Father to his children, can manifest.