

LENT II – February 24th, 2013

**AS JESUS WAS PRAYING, THE APPEARANCE OF HIS FACE WAS ALTERED -
Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM**

Lk 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.

In last Sunday's Gospel, the first of Lent, we stated that temptations in the wilderness on behalf of the devil didn't pertain to a limited period of Jesus' existence, but his entire life was subject to temptations, or better call them 'seductions', made by scribes, Pharisees, people, but also by members of his community, namely his disciples.

This is what the evangelist states in the episode we are going to analyze today, that from Luke, chapt. 9, verse 28.

"*Now about eight days after*", this dating is very specific. There had been the first announcement of Jesus' passion and the evangelist indicates effects of passion, death and raising. Number eight refers to the day of Resurrection. Jesus rose early the first day of the week.

So, the figure 'eight' indicates a life which is not interrupted by death. "*After these sayings*", thus referring to the announcement of passion, "*he took with him Peter and John and James*", the

three most difficult disciples, those who tend to become leaders of the group. *“And went up on the mountain”*, it’s not any given mountain, but a specific one, a known one.

Which one is it? It’s the one of the divine sphere. Jesus is thus introducing them his divine condition. *“To pray”*, this is typical of Luke’s work; delicate and difficult events of Jesus’ life are marked by praying. Well then, *“As he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white”*, dazzling just like those of the two men announcing Jesus’ rising to the women by saying *“Why do you seek the living among the dead”*?

Jesus is showing the condition of a man who passes through death. Death doesn’t debase him, but develops him, instead. *“And behold”*, the evangelist is recalling a surprising event, *“two men”*, just like those two at the tomb, *“were talking with him”*.

They didn’t talk either with Peter or James or John. Who are they? They’re Moses, the great legislator, Elijah, the great prophet, those who recall the Old Testament, regarding the law and the prophets. *“Who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure”* – Luke is the one who depicts Jesus’ path as an exodus – *“which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem”*.

The statement made by the evangelist is dramatic: Jerusalem, the Holy City, became the place of enslavement, just like Egypt. And just like Moses set his people free from Egyptian slavery, so Jesus has to carry people away from religious and priestly caste holding the power in Jerusalem.

“Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep”, this means that they are not listening and following him, not being sympathetic with Jesus. The same scene is found in the moment of his passion when Jesus will be seen praying on the Mount of Olives and his disciples will be heavy with sleep, too. This means total incomprehension of what Jesus is saying.

“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”, here comes the dramatic moment when Moses and Elijah, those who inspire a sense of security to the group, representing the law and the prophets, *“were parting from him”*. Here Peter acts as Satan, the tempter, being thus named with his negative nickname, and tries to prevent this separation.

“Peter said to Jesus, «Chief»”, not ‘Master’ as the Greek word *Epistata* is translated here, meaning ‘chief, owner, landlord’. The term ‘Master’ would have been *Didaskalos* in Greek; this shows how Peter thought he was submitted to Jesus. *“It is good that we are here. Let us make three tents”*. Why making three tents? There was a feast in Israel, of such an importance as not needing to be named, simply called ‘the feast’.

It was the feast of Tents, the one recalling the liberation of Jews from slavery in Egypt, and lasted one week during which people used to live in tents. Tradition said that, as in the ancient covenant people lived in tents, during that feast the liberating Messiah would have revealed. So Peter exhorts Jesus to act as the Messiah of tradition, the long awaited. That’s why making three tents.

But let's pay attention to the name order, "*«One for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah»*". When three names are provided, the most important is the one in the middle. Well, in this case, according to Peter, the one in the middle is not Jesus, but Moses. He's the one providing the securing of the law and Jesus is put aside as Elijah. In the middle there's the law, then come the prophets along with Jesus.

What Peter is saying is "Here is the Messiah I want. The one leading people towards law's observance, with the violent and prophetic zeal of Elijah". And the evangelist comments on "*not knowing what he said*".

"As he was saying these things, a cloud came", which is the symbol of divine action, "*overshadowed them, and they were afraid*", namely they were afraid of the divine sign, "*And a voice came out of the cloud, saying: «This is my Son»*", whereas 'son' not only refers to the one who is born, but to the one who looks like God, "*«the Chosen One»*"; and the verb is imperative "*«Listen to him!»*" not to Moses, nor to Elijah, he is the one you have to listen to.

"And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent", this silence being negative. They were silent just like Jesus' opponents in chapt. 20, where the evangelist writes "*and they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent*".

Becoming silent means disagreeing with what is happening. "*And told no one in those days*", the evangelist uses the verb 'to announce', as they were called to announce this reality that was able to overcome death, but they kept silent, not telling "*anything of what they had seen*".

They do not agree with this new reality, that Jesus is the one to listen to. Moses and Elijah have to be considered just with reference to the message of Jesus, and are not absolute teachings any longer for believers.