

HE LIVED IN CAPERNAUM SO THAT WHAT WAS SPOKEN BY THE PROPHET ISAIAH MIGHT BE FULFILLED – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mt 4.12-23

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles- the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them.

Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

The evangelist Matthew presents in this passage the beginning of Jesus' activity. Once Jesus heard of John's arrest, the air around Judea became difficult, He went north, into Galilee, into a region that was rather despised, « *And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum..*” It is interesting the fact that neither Nazareth nor Capernaum are never mentioned in the Old Testament, however Capernaum was a frontier city, an important customs post.

The evangelist then writes, “.. *by the sea,*”, but really it is a lake. Why does the evangelist talk of sea? Because with this pretence, substituting lake with sea, the evangelist wants to give an theological indication; the sea was that which separated Israel from the pagans, but above all it was that which the

people of Israel had crossed to flee from the Egyptian slavery. Therefore it indicated the full liberation. The whole basic theme of the evangelist is in key with the Exodus and Jesus is the new Moses that comes to free his people.

Therefore the evangelist sees, in the activity and in the choice to go to Galilee of Jesus, the realization of the promise of the messianic liberation from an oppressive situation to one of salvation, from a territory that was devastated by the Assyrians and refers the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 8,23 where it speaks of the people's Galilee. While Judea owes its name to Judah, a most important leader, this region of the north was so despised - it was a region inhabited by the poor, by peasants, by violent people - the people of Judea were so disgusted by those of the north, that Isaiah himself did not know how to define this region and used disparaging terms, he called it 'the province or district of the non Jews'

The district in Hebrew is Galil from which comes the word Galilee, therefore while Judea comes from Judah, Galilee comes from this disparaging word with which the prophet indicates this region in the north. So, right in this disparaging region of the north, where the people live in darkness, right there rises the light. And here the evangelist anticipates what will be Jesus' activity, light of the world, to communicate to His own disciples the possibility to be the light of the world

And Jesus begins His activity. *"From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, «Repent..»"*. The verb 'repent' or as in the original Greek Gospel text sometimes translated as 'convert', is found in two versions, one that indicates a religious return to God, the other, that is used here by the evangelist, means a change of mentality that indicates behavior. The evangelists, Matthew in particular, avoids the first meaning, that which indicates a religious return to God.

With Jesus, God with us, there is no need to return to God, but to welcome this and with Him and like Him go towards the others, for this repent means to orientate our own existence differently. If up until now one has lived for oneself, from now on one lives for others. This repent is finalized in the fact that *"«...for the kingdom of heaven is at hand»"*.

It is not yet reality because the kingdom of heaven is realized with the acceptance of the beatitudes. The first beatitude will permit the realization of the kingdom of heaven. But what is meant by the 'kingdom of heaven'? Jesus does not speak of the kingdom of heaven, that is the hereafter. The kingdom of heaven, an expression found only in Matthew's Gospel, indicates the kingdom of God. Matthew, writing for a community of Jews, avoids using the word 'God' as much as possible, so as not to offend the sensibilities of his readers and where possible uses substitutes.

One of these was 'heaven', therefore the Kingdom of heaven does not mean the hereafter, but the Kingdom of God, that is God who becomes the king of the people, this allows God to govern His people. So then to the repent, the change of one's own existence, is to allow this realization of the kingdom, that will become reality with the acceptance of the first beatitude.

The kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, does not fall from on high but asks for the collaboration of mankind. Well then *"While walking by the Sea of Galilee.."*, again this word sea, the evangelist writes

that Jesus sees Simon and Andrew. These two personages have Greek names, therefore it means that they come from a quite open family. Simon in particular is known for his stubbornness, in fact he has a nickname 'Peter' (from Greek word Petra, translated 'stone') which means his obstinacy, the hardness, that will be uncovered throughout all the Gospel.

"... casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen". The reference of the evangelist is to the prophecy in the Book of Ezekiel, chapter 47, 10 where "time of Messiah will be a time of abundance for fishermen". Well then, " And he said to them, «Follow me,.. »" It is interesting, that Jesus to begin his community, the group with which to launch this Kingdom of God, does not go in search of monks - there were the Essene - he does not call pious people, the Pharisee, nor does he call the clergy, the priests, neither powerful people, the well-off, those were the Sadducees, not even the theologians, the scribes, but normal people, fishermen.

He says, "«..and I will make you fishers of men»." It is interesting this phrase , the mission to which Jesus calls his followers will be soon abandoned by the church. They prefer to be called shepherds, a title that Jesus gave to no one - He is the only shepherd - instead fishers of men, that is what Jesus asks His followers to do.

What does fishers of men mean? While to fish for fish means to take the fish out of its natural habitat for it to die, to fish for mankind means to take them out of the water, symbol of evil, symbol of death, to save them, to give them life. Therefore the proposal of Jesus is to follow Him to communicate life to all humanity.

"Immediately they left their nets and followed him". There is the call of the other two brothers ,James and John, these have Judaic names, Jewish names, and it will be seen in the course of the Gospel that their behavior reflects their names and here the evangelist emphasizes that there is the presence of the, father, Zebedee. Jesus calls them, "Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him".

To follow Jesus, the father must be abandoned. The father means the authority and to follow Jesus the father must be abandoned, because the only Father that is in the community of believers is the Father that is in heaven, that does not govern mankind giving out laws that they must observe, but communicating to them His own capacity of love.

"And he went throughout all Galilee..", therefore in this despised region, "...teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom,..". the evangelist uses two different verbs for the actions of Jesus. In the synagogues teach, and to teach means to take the patrimony of the Old Testament to present it. So in the synagogues Jesus takes what is the richness of the people, continuing the Old Testament, and presenting it to them.

But, for proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, Jesus does not teach, but proclaims or preaches. Therefore they are two different verbs. When Jesus talks to the Jews He teaches, when He talks to a non-believer or criminal, non-Jews, Jesus proclaims or preaches. And this means to gather the new without the need to recover the old.

And, for the first time in this Gospel appears the word 'gospel' which means 'good news'. And what is the good news? The good news is that of the Kingdom. And in fact Jesus does not only speak of it, but acts. How? "*..healing every disease and every affliction among the people.*" Note that they are not 'of' the people, but 'in' the people, that is Jesus frees them of that which obstructs them into welcoming His message of the fullness of life in the people, and so begins the expanding activity of Jesus and begins the new, unstoppable exodus.