

**HE WHO IS NOT AGAINST US IS FOR US. IF YOUR HAND CAUSES YOU TO STUMBLE, CUT IT OFF – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM**

*Mk 9. 38-43.45.47-48*

*[At that time], John said to Him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not hinder him, for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. "For he who is not against us is for us. "For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he will not lose his reward.*

*"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.*

*"If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell, where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED. "If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.*

Jesus gave his disciples the ability of casting demons out, that is setting people free from all ideologies that prevent them from receiving the message of Good News. Well, not only they seem not to be able to do it, but arrogantly try to stop those who are.

Indeed, the evangelist introduces John – John, together with his brother, have been dubbed “The Sons of Thunder”, in Aramaic “Boanerges” (3.17), which really depicts the idea of a thunder, because of their fanaticism, intemperance and violence – who addresses to Jesus by saying: “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name”. “In the name of Jesus” doesn’t mean using a particular formula in the name of Jesus, but identifying with Jesus.

*“And we tried to prevent him”* – and here comes the explanation – *“because he was not following us”*. He cannot say *“because he was not following you”*, as he was acting in the name of Jesus, but *“was not following them”*. They demand that all Jesus’ followers be part of the group of disciples. Well Jesus widens the horizon of his community and says *“Do not hinder him”*, and he seems commanding, *“for there is not one who will perform a miracle”*, but the meaning of the terms used by the evangelist is *“acting with strength”*, (lit. from Greek), no miracle is named *“in my name”*, that is identifying with me, *“and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me”*.

*“For who is not against us is for us”*. Jesus acknowledges that there might be disciples who don’t belong to the group which claims to hold the monopoly of his teaching. And Jesus exhorts all disciples to identify with him, by saying *“for whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ”* – he’s exhorting them to identify with him, as they didn’t yet – *“he will not lose his reward”*.

The presence of Jesus and the Father is the reward for those who welcome him.

Immediately after John interrupting his speech on service and attacking him, Jesus warns them, *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble”*. Who are those little ones? The Greek text uses the term Micron. It doesn’t refer to children, but to nonentities, the outcasts, the insignificant ones of society. *“Who believe”*, that means they’re not children, but adult persons who adhered to Jesus, but those of slight importance.

Jesus’ words are terrible: whoever causes those people who believe in me to stumble - those people have heard speaking of this message of love and see rivalry among you, those persons who heard speaking of this message of brotherhood but realize that there are internal divisions among you – *“it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea”*. Well, a stone might be enough, but Jesus specifies *“a millstone”*.

There were two types of stones; one is a domestic one and is used by women, and one is that of a mill, that was really heavy, *“he had been cast into the sea”*. Why does Jesus provide such an indication? Jesus states that this individual has to definitively disappear and, in order to be sure he disappears forever, he has to be cast into the sea with a heavy millstone around his neck. Why? Jews were terrified at the idea of dying by drowning because they believed that there was no hope of resurrection.

So Jesus states that casting him into the sea is not enough because his corpse might come to surface and then be buried. Jesus’ words are really dreadful.

Afterwards Jesus provides a series of announcements to his community by saying: *“if your hand”*, and subsequently he will speak about the foot and the eye; the hand represents the activity, the foot, the behavior, and the eye represents the criterion by which one observes facts of life, *“causes you to stumble”*, that means is on your way, causing you to stumble, Jesus is radical *“Cut it off! It is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having two hands, to go into hell”*.

The word that has been translated with “hell”, should have been translated with “Gehenna” (lit. “*Gêhinnôm*”, Valley of Hinom), instead, which is a valley, situated South of the temple of Jerusalem and was used as a rubbish dump. Those waste were piled up and burnt in order to be completely eliminated. Jesus means that “it is better to cut off something that prevents you from reaching the fullness of life, rather than ending up in the rubbish dump of Jerusalem”.

In the same way he speaks about the foot and the eye. And the final statement recalls a sentence from the Book of Isaiah (66,24) “*where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched*”. **Jesus is not referring to a punishment after death, not at all. The passage from the Book of Isaiah describes the penalty imposed to unfaithful Jews.** There were two different ways of eliminating corpses: putrefaction and cremation. Well then, the Prophet puts them together, “*their worm does not die*”, that is the putrefaction is total, “*and the fire is not quenched*”, that is cremation is complete.

Thus meaning that destruction is total. You may enter fullness of life with Jesus or, when physical death occurs, it might find a body without any kind of life, that is the one that Revelations define (2.11; 20.6.14; 21.8) “the second death”, the complete ending of an individual.