

UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU WILL ALL LIKEWISE PERISH – Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke 13,1-9

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Every time that Jesus tries to liberate someone there immediately appears they that are contrary to this way of liberation. This is what emerges of chapter 13 of Luke’s gospel – it is an episode that has only this evangelist - the first 9 versus.

The evangelist writes: “... *at that very time*” What time? Jesus had said to the crowd : “*And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?*”(Luke 12,57) Jesus tries to emancipate the people from the influence and doctrine of the scribes and the Pharisees. They are the religious authority that determine what the people must believe in and how to believe and what they must practice.

So Jesus invites the people to grow, and be mature. To reason with their own minds and walk by themselves. This is unacceptable to the religious power that must always control the people, treating them as children. And here is the reaction.

“*There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans.*” To say “Galileans”, in Jesus’ time, did not only mean that region. Galileans meant “revolutionary” and meant the zealots, the

terrorists of that time. Remember the great revolt of Judas the Galilean that is written in the Acts of the Apostles. Therefore *"...about the Galileans.."* - Jesus was a Galilean - *".. whose blood Pilate had mingled(literally mixed) "...with their sacrifices."*

So Jesus is trying to liberate the people from the influence of the religious authority and threats begin to arrive, a clear mafia-style warning: " Watch out Galilee here with us the Galileans come to a nasty end." Well, Jesus does not only refuses to be intimidated, but passes to the attack, responding. *"And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?"*

Jesus denies the connection with the punishment as an action on the part of God to punish the sinners of the people. *"No, I tell you; but unless you repent..."* meaning if you do not change your life. Repentance in the gospel indicates the well being of others as a principal value in one's own existence. *"...you will all likewise perish."*

Therefore Jesus says " No, attention! You are the ones that if you do not change life that will come to a nasty end" But not only. Now Jesus continues. If first he had made an general example, indicating the Galileans, he now finds himself at Jerusalem and speaks of that very city.

"Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell ..." Siloam is a district of Jerusalem, even today the remains of this tower can be seen, *"... and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders.."* (literally worse debtors) *"... than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?"* If the first example was for the Galileans, Jesus now takes it right there and speaks of Jerusalem.

" No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Jesus confirms again what he first said. So, Jesus excludes in a definite manner the divine punishment and he invites them again to repent. And then Jesus broadens the theme and here there is reply to John that was the last heir of this tradition that saw God as he who punished the sinners. Remember that John the Baptist had said: "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."(Luke 3, 9)

Here Jesus broadens the discourse and continues. *"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard,.."* The fig tree and the vine in the Old Testament are the images of Israel, the people of Israel. *"..and he came seeking fruit on it and found none."* Here we have seen that John the Baptist had said that if there was no fruit, cut it down and throw into the fire. Jesus does not agree. *"And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now.. "' (this represents the complete time) "...I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?"* But he replied to them..... this is Jesus' reaction. He did not come to destroy and punish. He did not come to destroy, but to bring life, a new life..*"And he answered him, 'Sir,"* (it is a relation with God) *"..let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure."*

Jesus' reaction in front of the sinners, in front of sterile people, those that do not bear fruit, is not a punitive action, but life-giving. He still offers new possibilities to bear fruit, to give life and it is not only this offer of possibilities, but collaborating so this can be realized.

And then Jesus continues: “ *Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.*”

Jesus’ God that Luke presents us with, is the God for which nothing is impossible. As he had written at the moment of the annunciation: “*..and this is the sixth month with..* “ speaking of Elizabeth, Mary’s relation , “*..her who was called barren.*” So, a tree that seems sterile, with God’s action and for the collaboration of mankind, can product fruit

Luke’s teaching is very clear, very precise. The relationship between sin and punishment is seen very clearly, explicate and definite that God’s action with the sinners is not punitive or destructive, but life giving.