

ASCENSION OF THE LORD– 28th MAY 2017

“ALL AUTHORITY IN HEAVEN AND EARTH HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME” Biblical Commentary by Father . Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 28,16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The episode of Jesus' ascension is found only in Luke's gospel, and then in a final addition to Mark's gospel, but not in the other evangelists, neither Matthew nor John, but the message of the evangelist Luke gives is the same as the others; that from Jesus it is not a separation, but a nearness, it is not a withdrawal, but an even more intense presence, because Jesus is in the fullness of the divine condition. In the final five verses of Matthew's gospel the evangelist sums up all his gospel, let's see.

“Now the eleven disciples..”, the disciples are not twelve anymore, and the number, in this gospel, does not get reconstituted. Twelve meant the new Israel, eleven means that the new Israel has not been reconstituted, therefore Jesus' message is universal, it is for all humanity. *“...went to Galilee,”* for three times they have been invited to meet Jesus in Galilee – Jesus, resurrected in this gospel, will never manifest himself in Jerusalem.

“..to the mountain” therefore a particular mountain *“...to which Jesus had directed them.”* But Jesus in the gospel had not indicated any mountain. Why do the disciples go to “the” mountain? The meaning is not topographical, but theological. The mountain in this gospel, is the ‘mount of the beatitudes,’ where Jesus proclaimed his message. The beatitudes are eight, and the number eight is the figure of the resurrection in early Christianity, because Jesus rose on the first day after the week. So, the disciples clearly go ‘the’ mountain. The evangelist wants to say that the experience of Jesus' resurrection, is not a privilege given to a few people two thousand years ago, but it is a possibility for all believers of all times, it is enough to be on ‘the’ mount of the beatitudes, accept his message, that has been formulated and summed up in the beatitudes.

“And when they saw him..” here the meaning is not the physical seeing, but a deep inner experience

“.. they worshiped him,” so they recognised in Jesus the divine condition, and then, strangely, the evangelist says *“..but some doubted.”* But what did they doubt? Not that Jesus had been resurrected, they saw him, not that he is in the divine condition, they worshiped him; so what do they doubt? The evangelist uses this expression only once, in the well known episode, when Jesus walked on the water, that indicated the divine condition, and Peter, the disciple, wanted to walk on the water too, he wanted the divine condition also. Jesus said to him to walk, but when Peter saw the difficulty, he began to drown and asked for help. He thought that the divine condition would have been given as a gift from on high, and did not know what the difficulties would have been. Well Jesus scolds Peter that time with the words “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14, 31) So, what is this doubt that the evangelist writes here? They have seen Jesus in the divine condition, but now they know what Jesus has passed through: death, the most infamous, the most despised of a Jew, the curse of the cross. So what is it that they doubt? They doubt themselves: they are invited to reach the divine condition, but they do not know if they can affront the persecution and also death. This is why they are in doubt.

Earlier in the gospel it was the women that had moved closer to Jesus, here it is Jesus that must move closer to the disciples: *“And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* Here the evangelist refers to the prophet Daniel. Where the Son of man has been given every

power in heaven and earth, But Jesus, this power does not use it to be served, but as he will say “ the Son of man has not come to be served, but to serve” so it is a power of service.

Then comes the order: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,*” nations being the gentile nations, “*...baptizing them..*” the word baptize means to immerse, soak up ,”*.. in the name..* “ the name indicates the deep reality of a being, “*...of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*” to immerge them in God’s profound reality, let them make their own experience of who is God. “*..teaching them..* “ it is the only time that Jesus authorizes his disciples to teach “*.. to observe all that I have commanded you.*” The only time that the word ‘ command’ appears in this gospel, it is in reference to the beatitudes.

So, what is the significance of Jesus’ order? Jesus had invited his disciples to follow him to be fishers of men; meaning to take them out of water, that could have been their death, therefore a mortal situation, to give then their lives. Now Jesus indicates how and where: how does one become a fisher of men? Immerging oneself in the Spirit of the Lord, in a reality more profound of divine love, and where? Where the space is all humanity.

And then Jesus’ final assurance : “*And behold, I am with you...* “ this is the theme, the conducting thread through all the gospel. In the first chapter, verse 23, the evangelist had indicated Jesus as “the God with *us*”: Half way through the gospel he had said that Jesus was with his disciples: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matthew 18,20) and now, Jesus’ words, with the assurance of his presence “*...always, to the end of the age.*” There is no end of the world, it is an end of time, that does not indicate a deadline, but the quality of a presence therefore Jesus’ last words “ I am with you for always”

The evangelist, that had begun his gospel referring to the book of Genesis , closes it with the reference to the last book in the Jewish Bible, the second book of the Chronicles, where there is the invitation of Cyrus , the king of Persia, that says to the Jewish population, “*The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up.*” (2 Chronicles 36,23) Cyrus’ invitation to the Jews to leave his reign and return to Israel, and built a temple to the Lord. Jesus also invites his disciples to go , leave the religious institution, but do not built a temple, because the community of disciples will be the new temple where the love and mercy of the Lord will manifest itself.