

PALM SUNDAY– 28th March 2021

Biblical Commentary by Father. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mark 14, 3-9

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denari and given to the poor.” And they scolded her. But Jesus said, “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

For Palm Sunday the liturgy presents the passion by the evangelist Mark and this is the only episode that Jesus asked to be made known to the whole world. Yet this episode is never read in the Sunday liturgy, this is very strange; it is the anointing in Bethany. So let's read the Gospel of Mark chapter 14, 3-9.

There is an announcement that the authorities have decided to assassinate Jesus at Easter. When the people celebrate the ancient liberation, the authorities decide to eliminate the new liberator. Well, the evangelist now presents us what the reaction of the community is in the face of the announcement of the death of Jesus and Mark writes that “*And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper*” bet-ania means ‘the house of the poor’ which lets us understand that the poor leper is in a community of the marginalized . “*....as he was reclining at table...*” this quotation is important because it is taken from the first chapter of the Song of Songs where the king is at the table and the king's bride spreads her perfume which, as in this case, is of nard. In fact, Mark writes “*.. a woman came..*” she is anonymous, but represents a part of Jesus’ community, “*..with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly,..*” The nard, this precious perfume, is moreover genuine and the evangelist uses the Greek word that indicates faith, it expresses the faith of the woman, the woman who gives complete adherence to Jesus.

The woman breaks the flask, meaning a complete gift, keeping nothing and here is the surprise because she “*...poured it over his head.*” In the Gospels, there are two other anointing of Jesus but both on his feet: in Luke’s gospel it was the sinner in gratitude to Jesus for forgiving her sins, in John’s gospel it is Mary, Lazarus’ sister, in gratitude for the resurrection of the brother, but both the sinner and Mary anoint the feet; here instead the gesture of the woman is amazing and also bewildering, she anoints his head. Why his head? Anointing the head was reserved for priests and prophets with which the king was consecrated, the Messiah was consecrated. Then the evangelist is saying that the role of this woman of the community of Jesus is that of carrying out a priestly and prophetic function: she recognizes in Jesus the king Messiah, the crucified king and gives him all of herself, all of her love for him.

And here is the reaction of the community “ *There were some who...* ” we know they are the disciples, but the evangelist avoids defining them as disciples, they do not follow Jesus, they accompany him, they do not give adhesion, they are indignant towards him and speak of the waste. For them, giving life is a waste, they do not understand the value and take the excuse of the value of this perfume, saying “ *.. more than three hundred denari..* ” think, that the daily wage of a worker was one denarius a day, therefore almost years pay, “ *...this ointment could have been sold for and given to the poor.* ” *And they scolded her.* ” But it's not just for that reason, the pretext that they find poor people: they understand that this woman has done an action that is excluded to women, it is reserved not only to males, but for priests and prophets, that of anointing the head of Jesus, the prophetic priestly action.

Well, Jesus takes the defence of the woman, he says that she has done good work, the term is taken from the book of Genesis in the creation where God creates and his are good works, the woman completes the creative action in Jesus and says that the disciples have understood nothing of the poor. The poor are not elements external to the community that must be benefited, in short, they are part of the community. Almsgiving presupposes a benefactor and a beneficiary and is always humiliating, but Jesus invites us to share and sharing generates brothers and eliminates distances. There the primitive Christian community understood this so much that it spoke of the poor as vicar of Christ: the presence of the poor represents the figure of Christ in the community.

Jesus continues, speaking that this woman did what was in her power by anointing in advance his body, for his burial. What's the meaning? The effect of death, we know, is that it smells badly, the perfume is the effect of life. The evangelist makes it clear that his death, will be the victory of life, the perfume of victory over life. And then the words of Jesus, which unfortunately seem somewhat unheard, it is the only episode of his existence for which Jesus says " *And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.* ” because Jesus proposes a woman as the model of the follower, but this passage of the Gospel, as we said at the beginning, is never read in the liturgy.