

IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF..

Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 16,21-27

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done

Peter recognized Jesus as the Son of the living God - the one who communicates life - but also as the Christ and Jesus forbid his disciples to announce this message, that of "the Christ"; why? Christ with the definite article indicates the messiah of tradition, the one who would have conquered power, so in today's passage – Matthew 16, 21-27 - the evangelist writes that *“Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem...”* - this was the holy city - but he should have gone to conquer the power. But here is a surprise” *.. and suffer many things..*” this was also foreseen because he would have to fight, but with whom? On the part of the highest representatives of the religious institution, the entire Sanhedrin. In fact Jesus says *“.. from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed,..*” and he adds *“.. and on the third day be raised.”*

And here is the incident: Peter, who had been proclaimed a stone on which to build upon the rock that is Jesus, his community, in an instant from a stone given for construction turns into a stone of scandal. In fact, the evangelist writes; *“And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him,...”* The evangelist uses for Peter's reaction the verb that is used for exorcisms, for the possessed, therefore for Peter Jesus is saying something contrary to God. And even here he shows a condemnation, horror, repugnance of what Jesus said ; *“..saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”*

Then Jesus turns to Peter and here the evangelist uses the same refusal he has used in the episode of temptations for Satan *“Get behind me, Satan!”* Jesus does not reject Peter, as Satan had been rejected by him, but he offers this disciple a chance *“ Get behind me,Satan!”* calling him Satan God's rival.

And Jesus adds *“You are a hindrance to me.”* So he who was a stone with which to build becomes a stumbling block *“ For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”* that is, through the thoughts of success.

Jesus, since Peter is basically nothing other than the spokesman for the thoughts of others, now addresses all his disciples and renews the condition he has already made to follow him *“If anyone would come after me,..”* Jesus had already said this to Peter *“..come after me..”* now he makes it clear what the significant is in following him *“..let him deny himself..”* Self-denial does not mean renounce one's life and aspirations, but these ideals of success, glory and ambition *“.. and take up his cross and follow me.”* Here Jesus is not talking about the final torture of death on the cross, but the precise moment in which the accused was sentenced to this torture and had to carry the horizontal axis of his cross on his shoulders and bring it to the place of martyrdom, of death. It was the most terrible moment because the whole crowd felt authorized to insult, offend and bully. So, Jesus to Peter and the disciples who follow ideas of ambition and success, they think they are going to Jerusalem to share the glory of the king - just think of James and John's mother's request *“Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”* (Matthew 20, 21) Jesus invites them to accept that they are the worst of society, like the condemned man, to be despised.

“..and follow me.” So the condition that Jesus puts to follow him is that - translate into modern and more understandable terms – is to lose one's reputation, accept to not being considered important because this is the only way to be fully free and Jesus needs people fully free.

And then Jesus concludes, *“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”* Man is valued for the life he has lived, not for the religious ideas he has professed, and whoever makes the gift of his own existence is the one who has fully realized it.