

HE SET HIS FACE TO GO TO JERUSALEM. I WILL FOLLOW YOU WHEREVER YOU GO. – Biblical commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Lk 9.51-62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

In order to understand the message provided by the evangelists, culture and languages of that time shall be considered. There's an expression in the Old Testament, "set one's face against", which means a sort of hostility. For example the prophet Jeremy writes "*I set my face against this city*", that is Jerusalem.

Or in the book of Ezekiel, which the evangelist refers to, the Lord says, "*Son of Man, set your face against Jerusalem and you shall prophesy against the city*". Being aware of this, let's try and understand what the evangelist means by this passage.

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up”, the evangelist is already announcing his death, but Jesus glorification as well, *“he set his face to ...”,* literally from Greek the evangelist wrote *“his face was hardened”*. He’s recalling the expression we mentioned before *“to set one’s face against someone”*; therefore the attitude of Jesus is that of hostility. Not only this, the evangelist says that his face is also set against something.

What is he referring to? The prophet Ezekiel said the Son of Man set his face against Jerusalem. *“His face was set towards Jerusalem”*; Jerusalem is quoted as *Jerusalem*, which refers to the sacred city, seat of religious institution, not as *Ierosolima*, the geographical place.

Jesus took the decision to go and face the centre of Judaic religious institution. *“And he sent messengers”,* the Greek term is ‘angel’, which means messenger, *“ahead”,* not ‘ahead of him’ as it is translated. The evangelist literally writes *“ahead of his face”,* the hardened one, the one that is going to confront with the religious institutions.

“Who went and entered a village of the Samaritans”, we know that there was bad blood between Samaritans and Jews, they even clashed with each other, but in Luke’s gospel they are always presented as positive characters.

“To make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him”. Why didn’t they? The evangelist answers the question. *“Because his face was set toward Jerusalem”*. But messengers didn’t state he was set against Jerusalem, but just he was going towards Jerusalem; he seems like being the triumphant Messiah, the one acclaimed as the Son of David, to catch the power and submit all nations; in this case also Samaritans.

That’s why Samaritans did not receive him, *“You’re going to Jerusalem to take the power and use it against us, we definitely don’t receive you!”*

But messengers didn’t state Jesus is setting against Jerusalem; they used the expression *“harden his face”*. *“And when his disciples James and John saw it...”*, John and James are cited by the evangelist because of their fanaticism, their zeal – in Mark’s gospel they’re called *“the sons of thunder”* – *“... they said, «Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?»”*

This is a quote from the prophet Elijah. He’s the one who had such a zeal for God, the terrible prophet who made rain and fire fall down from heaven in order to punish enemies. *“But he turned and rebuked them”*. This verb *“to rebuke”* is the one used for demons; therefore Jesus thinks they’re possessed by their fanatical, religious and nationalist ideology, preventing them from understanding God’s plan.

“And they went on to another village”, we’re in Samaria. Jesus’ reaction towards disciples’ behavior is calling Samaritans among his suite for they will be announcing his message properly.

His reaction is that of calling Samaritans, on whom John and James wanted to draw fire from heaven. And here the evangelist introduces three anonymous characters – number three

according to Luke represents the whole –whom Jesus calls for a radical break with the past, home, family, but especially with their father, who used to represent tradition.

They were *“going along the road”* and Jesus asks to the first Samaritan who accepts to follow him, *“«Foxes and birds»”*, who were considered as the most insignificant and useless animals. Well those useless beings *“«have a nest, but the Son of Man»”*, that is a man displaying in himself the divine plan, *“«has nowhere to lay his head»”*, meaning the total exclusion and incomprehension.

To another one Jesus addresses the same call, by saying *“«Follow me»”*. Why? Because his father, who represented tradition, died. But to this individual who wants to bury his father, that is tradition, Jesus replies, *“«Leave the dead to bury their own dead»”*; tradition is therefore a world of dead that has to be managed by dead, but the one who receives Jesus has to completely open to novelty.

The same is for the last one who says, *“«I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home»”*. Jesus said to him, *«No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God»”*.

This new reality of the kingdom does not allow nostalgia of the past. New wine requires new wineskins.