

HE SET HIS FACE TO GO TO JERUSALEM....."I WILL FOLLOW YOU WHEREVER YOU GO". – Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke 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 plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Jesus' disciples accompany him but they do not follow him. Meaning, that even if they are near him physically they are distant because they follow the idea of a victorious and triumphant Messiah.

In Luke's Gospel chapter 9, from verse 51 there is an important passage which unfortunately is a little difficult to understand. In fact, if we read this gospel it is written that *"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,..."* And then we find him, in a village of Samaritans that don't welcome him. But why? So let's try to translate the text literally and we will see that this inconsistency is not really so.

"When the days drew near for him to be taken up,..." therefore Jesus is presented by the evangelist as already on his final journey towards the city that kills prophets, those that will kill him. And here the evangelist writes *".. he set his face to go to Jerusalem.."* This is an expression that also appears in the Old Testament which means going against someone.

For example in the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, chapter 21,10 one reads *"For I have set my face against this city for harm and not for good,..."* It is the Lord that speaks. Also in the Book of the prophet Ezekiel chapter 21,2 the Lord says *"Son of man, set your face toward Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuaries."*

So this expression that the evangelist uses: "he hardened his face towards Jerusalem", means that Jesus goes against Jerusalem, he goes to contest this city that claimed to represent God but in reality was the murderer of all the prophets sent by God.

But the disciples do not understand. Jesus *"...sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans,..."* we know the rivalry and enmity that existed between Samaritans and Jews, they hated each other, it was an age-old enmity. *".. to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem."* But it does

not say how Jesus felt towards Jerusalem, they say that Jesus went to Jerusalem, but the Samaritans think that, being this Jesus the Messiah, he goes to Jerusalem to take power and then subdue the pagan peoples and also subdue the Samaritans.

That's why they don't want to receive him. It was the disciples who did not understand the intention of Jesus. And if they did not understand it, one can see from the reaction of two disciples, the most fanatical, James and John, whom Mark in his gospel calls "the children of thunder" for their authoritarian character, and ask: "*Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*" It refers to the prophet Elijah who in an episode located right in Samaria, burns fifty at a time of the soldiers who had come to him.

So they believe that Jesus is a kind of Elijah, a man who, with violence, enforced the law and the will of God. But Jesus "*..turned and rebuked them .*" exactly as he had done with the demons. "*And they went on to another village.*" Always in Samaria. Therefore the incomprehension, the hostility of the Samaritans is due to the incomprehension on the part of the disciples. And always in Samaria there are three individuals - one of them is invited directly by Jesus - who he asks to follow him. The number three is not only a number but indicates the totality, the completeness. Then they are rules for the following of Jesus, valid for all.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus... " gives conditions, to make them understand: "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests,...* " Foxes and birds are the most insignificant animals in existence, "*.. but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*"

Then Jesus says: "Careful! Do you want to follow me? But don't think about honour, career or success. But, worse than the most useless and insignificant animals, I don't even have a home, I have nothing to lay my head on. Right the middle the evangelist presents an individual whom Jesus invites to follow him.

"To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus' reply may seem a little inhuman "*Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.*" Jesus' response is not inhuman. The father represents the past. Then to bury the father means to hold in great honour and respect the past.

Jesus does not ask for a radical break with the past. New wine cannot be put into old bottles, so "*Let the people who live in the past - the dead - bury their dead.*" You go and announce the news ". Finally the third. "*I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.*" In the Bible there was the known episode of Elijah that allowed Elisha to go and take leave of his family. Jesus did not. The urgency of the kingdom of God does not allow nostalgia for the past, but it is necessary to depart from it radically. "*Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

Jesus' words do not mean having a detached or inhuman relationship with one's family, none of this, but that the urgency of announcing the good news, the kingdom of God, is so important that one cannot have any nostalgia for that which appears only as the past.

