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IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mt 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. ²² 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 life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? 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.

The disciples that follow Jesus think that He is the triumphant messiah, the victor, the one announced by the tradition, that at Jerusalem He would conquer and taken power, Jesus for the first time speaks openly of that which awaits him in Jerusalem.

We are at Matthew's Gospel chapter 16, 21. "*From that time Jesus began..*," It means a series of teachings that continue for all of His journey "*..to show his disciples that he must*" the verb "*must*" is a technical verb to indicate the will of God, "*...go to Jerusalem and suffer*"

This verb is a creation of the evangelists because it is very similar to the word "Pasqua" (Easter), in fact the verb to suffer in Greek is "Pàsco" and has a assonance with the word *Pasca*, meaning Pasqua (Easter), because the evangelists have seen in Jesus the true Easter lamb. "*.. suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes*"; all these are part of the Sanhedrin, Israel's great legal body, "*..and be killed..*", therefore Jesus will not go to achieve power, but will be killed by the holders of the religious power. The maximum representatives of the religious institution will be the killers of Jesus. But He adds, "*...on the third day be raised*".

The third day is not a chronological indication, the number three indicate that which is full, that which is complete. Therefore He will be killed, but will return fully to life. So then, as soon as Jesus had said this, Peter comes into play. The evangelist presents Simon only with his nickname, a technical term with which Matthew indicates the opposition, the provocation of this disciple to what Jesus announces.

“Peter took him aside” he takes hold of Him and as soon as Jesus begins to explain, Peter begins his resistance. *“...and began to rebuke him”*, literally shout at Him, and it is the term that is used for sending away demons. Therefore for Peter that which Jesus had said does not correspond with the divine will, but is actually a satanic thought, an unholy thought.

“«Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you »”. For Peter that which Jesus is saying is something so far from God, for which God must forgive him, even an unholy thought.

“ But he turned and said to Peter, « Satan! »” They are the same words that Jesus had used in the desert to refuse the seduction of the tempter. Jesus says, as He said to the tempter, the devil, *“Get behind me,”* .but then gives His disciple another possibility;

As long as Peter is in front and wants to indicate the way, the road, he is the Satan, the enemy. So Jesus says *“«Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me»”*. That which Jesus had defined as a rock good for the construction of His *ecclesia*, that is the community of believers sent by the Lord, he who had been called to be a brick for that construction, now became a rock of inconvenience ,a rock of hindrance

Why? *“«For you are not setting your mind on the things of God,.. »”*, that of love and service, *“«but on the things of man. »”*, that is those of power and dominance. Jesus understands that it is not only Peter to have this mentality, but also all the disciples. Here then is when he turns to the rest of His disciples. *“Then Jesus told his disciples, «If anyone would come after me,..»”*, Jesus had told Peter to get behind Him and now He helps them to understand what the conditions are to be able to follow Him.

«If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself... »”, to deny oneself does not mean to mortify one’s own existence, but to renounce these thoughts of ambition, success, superiority and then follow Him, literally *“« ..and take up his cross.. »”*. God does not give the cross, but it is taken from mankind. The evangelist uses the term *“take up”*, that indicates the moment in which the condemned person must take up the gibbet from the ground and place it on his shoulders.

Then from there, from the law court, out of the gate of the city to the place where he must be executed. It was the most tremendous moment, the moment of solitude. The people had the religious duty to insult and mistreat this person.

“« .. take up his cross.. »”, the cross was the death sentence reserved for the dregs of society. Therefore Jesus is not talking of sufferance and pain, but is talking of the scandal that following Jesus will bring, a scandal that will make Jesus and His followers dregs of society, people that have refused God, because the cross was the torment for the cursed of God, *“«..and follow me.»”*.

Jesus therefore is not talking of the death on the cross, but of the path towards the torment, in solitude, and dishonor. If the disciples are not ready to lose their own reputation – because this is what it is all about –because following Jesus means to face the maximum dishonor. And then Jesus adds: “*«For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. »*”.

Who lives for others fully realizes their own existence, who lives centered exclusively on one’s own needs, on one’s own necessities, destroys it. Therefore this is alternative that Jesus offers. To life for others, to give, is not to lose, but to gain. It means to fully realize oneself.

And Jesus comments: “*« For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? »*” What is the need to earn a lot, conquest all and the to lose oneself? This is the meaning. It is a criticism that Jesus has of the people of power. Whatever the power. The people that have gained power, devoured by their ambition, are people that have everything, but they have nothing because they have completely lost themselves.

They are people that are drifting through life and happiness. “*«For the Son of Man..»*”, Son of Man means Jesus in the fullness of the divine condition, “*«...is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father..»*”. Jesus is in contrast with maximum dishonour, the death sentence with which he was condemned by the Sanhedrin, therefore the maximum dishonor of the religious institution, the maximum honour on the part of God.

Therefore “*«...with his angels in the glory of his Father..»*”. And here Jesus quotes chapter 24,12 of the book of Proverbs “*«..and will he not repay man according to his work? »*”, literally “the procedure ”. Mankind is valued for the life he has lived, for the work done, and not for the idea or the religious doctrine professed. It is what one does for others that determines one’s own existence.

There is another part that is not present in the liturgical version, but it is important. Jesus announces that “*«... there are some standing here who will not taste death¹ until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. »*”. It is in fact the announcing of the episode that will follow the transfiguration, in which Jesus demonstrates that death does not destroy the person, but fully strengthens him.