

THE HOLY FAMILY– 31st December 2017

AND THE CHILD GREW AND BECAME STRONG... - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke 2,22-40

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord" and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons.")

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Despite the extraordinary experience of the Spirit that Jesus' parents had experienced, especially his mother, they are still attached to the traditions of the people that see the relationship with God based on the observance of his law.

The evangelist in this episode wants to anticipate the difficulty Jesus will have in proposing to his people a different relationship with God, no more based on obedience to his laws, but on the welcoming of his Spirit, of his love.

Here then the evangelist, in the episode known as the presentation of Jesus to the Temple, presents two contrary groups. One showing the parents of Jesus that take the child to fulfill a useless ritual, because

they intend to make him the son of Abraham he who is already is the Son of God. On the other hand, the man of Spirit, Simeon, who wants to prevent this useless ritual. The parents go for the purification of the mother – because the birth of a child makes a woman impure and therefore she must purify herself with an offer, and here is the offer of the most poor, a pair of doves – and above all to pay the ransom of the child.

Every first born male the Lord wanted for himself. If the parents wanted, they must pay the equivalent of 20 days work, that is five shekels. Well, while Mary and Joseph with the child head for the temple to buy this ritual, there is a surprise - the evangelist uses an expression that indicates wonder “*..there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon,..*” Simeon (meaning “ hearing the Lord”) is the man of the Spirit, that hopes to prevent the useless ritual.

Simeon takes the child in his arms while the parents wanted to fulfill everything in the law and pronounces a prophecy that leaves his parents baffled. Of Jesus he says what will be “ *....the glory of your people Israel.*” this Mary and Joseph knew, it was the work of the Messiah, the Son of God, but the novelty “*...a light for revelation to the Gentiles,*” the pagans. The love of God announced by Simeon is universal, it is not for one population – the elect people - but for all humanity.

Therefore the enemies of Israel, the pagans, will be no longer - like they believed, as the tradition was presented –to be dominated, but welcomed as brothers. Then Simeon, gave Mary a blessing, which ended in a rather sinister manner.

He said that Jesus - and he depicts him to what Luke later in his gospel will present as “ a stone”, a stone that can be a corner, that serves for the construction, or a stone that trips up people, it makes them stumble _ and will say of Jesus that “*This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel,*” and as a sign of contradiction “ *And a sword will pierce your own soul too.*” turning to Mary, Jesus’ mother. What is the meaning of this sword that pierces the life of Mary?

The sword, in both the new and old testaments, is the figure of the Word of God, that is as effective as a sword, the author of the letters to the Hebrews will say that “*..the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*” (Hebrews 4, 12-16)

So Simeon to Mary, who depicts the people of Israel, announces that the word of this Son for her will be like a sword that will force her to make choices, and very painful choices. In fact, in the next episode that the evangelist will present, that of the finding of Jesus in the temple, the first and only words that Jesus will address to his mother, will be words of reproach. It is a long way for Mary. She must understand that as mother of the Son, she must transform herself into a disciple. The way is long and painful, like a sword that pierces the soul.