

REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND! - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 3,1-12

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Chapter 3 of Matthew’s gospel opens with words, that appears only here, the only time in all the gospel: “*In those days..*” With this the evangelist begins John’s work, that will be continued and completed by that of Jesus, like an exodus, liberation and we will see what else.

“*In those days John*” the name John means “the Lord of mercy,” “...*the Baptist..*” he is already known for his activity of baptizer, of which we will see the meaning, “.. *came preaching in the wilderness of Judea..*” The desert of Judea is that zone that reaches from Jerusalem to the Dead sea, it is not a sandy desert, it is mountainous and rocky. John the Baptist announces in the imperative: , “*Repent,*” Meaning a change of mentality which will then reflect on behaviour, John refers to that which had been already announced by the Prophet Isaiah: “*Stop doing evil and do good, and your sins will be forgiven*”

So John the Baptist calls for a change of mentality, to orient lives for the good of others.

“...*for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” For the first time this phrase appears in Matthew’s gospel, which is used exclusively by this evangelist . “Kingdom of heaven” not be mistaken with the “kingdom in heaven”, which means the kingdom of God. The evangelist Matthew, who wrote for a Jewish community, is careful with their sensibility, and every time that he can, avoids using the word God, that, as we know, is a name the Jews do not write or pronounce. So the kingdom of heaven does not mean the afterlife, but the Kingdom of God, God who governs his own.

“*For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,*” Here the evangelist quotes from the prophet Isaiah, but modifies it, because the chapter 40, 3 of the prophet Isaiah it says: “*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;*” and it was the announcement of the end of the deportation from Babylon, with the edict of Cyrus, and the beginning of the liberation, and then “... *make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*” The evangelist modifies the phrase: “*The voice of one crying in the wilderness:*”, then

from the desert, from breaking with society, comes this announcement: *"Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."*

Then the evangelist goes on to describe John, giving a clear description: *"John wore a garment of camel's hair..."* It was the typical dress of the prophets, but with a particular: *"...a leather belt around his waist,"*

The evangelists not often use examples, or annotations, when they use them it is because they have a clear theological meaning. The leather belt around his waist was the sign of what was considered the greatest prophet, the prophet Elijah, who, it was believed, would come to prepare the way of the Messiah. Therefore the evangelist is identifying John to the prophet Elijah. *"...and his food was locusts and wild honey."* That which was found in the desert, the typical food of the Bedouins.

It is clamorous what the evangelist writes: *"Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him,..."* John had preached a change of life, and all the expectation of the people was reflected by this "Jerusalem", "Jordan", and ran to him. They had understood that the means that the religious institution offered them, were inadequate, and they ran to him.

"..and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan," To be baptised was a known rite, it was an immersion, which meant the death of the previous life, for the beginning of a new life. *"..the river Jordan,"* is an important indication that the evangelist gives, and he repeats it. The Jordan had been the final leg of the Exodus to enter the promised land, now it is the first leg for the exit of the promised land, because the land of freedom, in the hands of the high priests, scribes, Pharisees, the whole priestly caste and the religious institution, had transformed into the land of oppression, from which it was necessary to leave, and then John proclaims the exodus which Jesus will lead to completion.

"..confessing their sins." The verb to confess must not be thought of as we intend confession. It was a gesture, to immerse oneself into the water, with which we admitted that we were sinners. At the arrival of the priestly caste of power, the religious elite represented by the Pharisees and Sadducees, John the Baptist does not receive them well, and receives them with words of fire, because he knows they come to do a rite. John says to them: *"Bear fruit in keeping with repentance."* Meaning it is a change of life that must be seen in conduct, but we will see later on in the gospel that these never believed in John the Baptist's actions.

At the end the reading, which is very rich, John says: *"I baptize you with water for repentance,..."* therefore John's gesture is a change of life, that is done through this immersion, but then the strength to carry on this change of life, he cannot give. He says that there will be someone else *"...mightier than I,He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit...."* The baptism in water means to be immersed in a liquid that is external to man. The baptism of the Spirit, the Spirit is the life of God, it is the love of God, means to be drenched, filled of the same life of God. It will be this that will give the strength to carry on with this conversion, this change. Only that John the Baptist says: *".. and fire"* The Holy Spirit is for all those who accept this invitation to repentance, and fire, according to the traditional mentality, was God's punishment for those who refused.

John concludes: *"His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* So John the Baptist, heir to the Old Testament tradition, presents a judgment of God, and this judgment of God will be corrected later by Jesus. When Jesus in the Acts will refer to this baptism, he will say: *"Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit"* . On Jesus' part, being the presence of God in humanity, there is only a statement , an offer of the fullness of life, in him any form of punishment is absent.