

JESUS CAME AND TOOK THE BREAD AND GAVE IT TO THEM, SO WITH THE FISH – Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

John 21,1-19

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

When the risen Jesus had manifested himself to his disciples he sent them away. He had said: *“ As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”* Go and witness a love of God for humanity, full, total and unconditioned.

It seems that the disciples had not understood and had not any wish to go and manifest this love, in fact they return to their occupation as before. Let's read chapter 21 of John's gospel.

“After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberius,..” It is the third time that the risen Jesus manifests himself. The number is not a matter of arithmetic and mathematics, but signifies the completeness, the fullness of the apparitions, the experiences of the risen Jesus.

“And he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael (the last disciple called by Jesus) of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together..” The evangelist wants to arrive at number 7 to indicate the totality of the disciples.

“Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” Peter continues in his desire to be a leader. He is the one to decide. *“They said to him, “We will go with you.”* It is a characteristic of the gospel that the disciples in the difficult moments, in moments of crisis, rather than being with Jesus they are with Simon Peter. And the results are disastrous. *“They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing”* Jesus had said: *“ Without me you can do nothing”* and he had said *“ when the night comes no one can work”* But the disciples still had not understood.

Here then is the patient action of Jesus who renews his invitation to the mission. *“Just as day was breaking,..”* Just as light was beginning. *“Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children...”,* an expression full of kindness, tenderness, delicacy, *“...do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity (literally multitudes) of fish.*

It is important this term “multitudes” because the evangelist had used it in chapter 5 in the episode of the healing in Jerusalem, in the pool of Bethesda, when there were a multitude of blind, lame and paralytics that were excluded, the outcasts. What is it that the evangelist wants to say? That the mission of Jesus' group must turn to the excluded, the outcast and the rejected. It is there that the fish will be abundant.

“That disciple whom Jesus loved...” - the anonymous disciple who continues his presence in all this gospel - *“..said to Peter, “It is the Lord!”* He had the experience of the lord and knew him immediately. *When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, (a sign of service, as Jesus had done at the washing of the feet of the disciples.) “.. for he was stripped for work..”* He was naked. It is strange the disciple that was naked puts on his clothes for throwing himself into the water. The evangelist is naturally giving a figurative significance to all this. Naked because he had not any distinctive of the service of Jesus, because it is service that makes Jesus' disciples. *“....and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.*

“When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.” This fact of the bread and fish recalls the division of the bread and fish that is the image of the Eucharist.

“Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” “ It is the kindness of Jesus that wants to be the one who gives life, as the one who offers this life.

“Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord.” In the love that becomes a gift one feels the presence of the Lord. *“ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.”* - the same gesture that the evangelist put into the last supper – *“This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.”* The Eucharist is the food that restores and communicates strength. And it is at this point that the evangelist finally resolves the problem of Simon Peter. Jesus when he meet Simon he did not invite him to follow him, in this gospel. So here is the last dramatic encounter between Jesus and this disciple

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John,.” Son, meant disciple, of John the Baptist. He had remained with the idea of John the Baptist. *“...do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”* Jesus accepts the reply. *“ He said to him, “Feed my lambs.”* That is, the weaker elements of the community. Then he turns again to him. *“He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.””* Twice Jesus asks him if he loves him and twice Peter replies that he does.

“He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time,...” (the number three for poor Simon recalls his betrayal with the cocks crow.) *“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”* Twice Jesus had asked *“do you love me?”* and twice Simone had replied *“Yes, Lord;...”*, now the third time Jesus presses him and asks him *“do you love me?”* Here Simone finally collapses. *“ Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”* He that thought to know himself better than Jesus. When Jesus had said *“Everyone will betray me, and abandon me.”*, he had said *“No, I am ready to give my life for you”* He thought to know himself better than Jesus, now he finally admits: *“Lord, you know everything;”*

“Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” And the evangelist comments. *“This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.”* Peter had followed Jesus thinking to follow a victorious leader, a triumphant Messiah, and Jesus makes it clear that following him means to pass through shame, through contempt and through the cross. Now finally this disciple has understood and welcomes Jesus' invitation. *“And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.””*

For the first time, at the end of the gospel, Jesus invites Simon to follow him. When finally he understood that following Jesus did not include a road to honour, successes and power, but love and service, also humiliation and sufferance, only at this point Jesus says to the disciple *“Follow me”*

