

ALL FLESH SHALL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Lc 3,1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

When we read the gospel, to savour the richness we must put ourselves in the shoes of the first readers or with the first listeners that did not know how it would all finish. Let's see in the reading of this Sunday, 6th December, the second Sunday of Advent, the first six verses of the third chapter of Luke's gospel, how the evangelist creates the surprise.

The evangelist writes: "*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,..*" the beginning of this reading is effusive, solemn, because then the evangelist wants to arouse the surprise and it really will be a surprise. It begins with Tiberius Caesar. At that time the powerful considered themselves gods, therefore the evangelist begins with the person that is the nearest to God, and he is a god himself, the emperor.

"*Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis,...*" see how this beginning is solemn and pompous, the evangelist even brings in a certain Lysanias, a little known character "*...and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, "a country next to Lebanon "... during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,."*

Why “high priests”? The high priest was one. But the evangelist proposes two, Annas and Caiaphas. Why all this ? The evangelist wants to reach the number seven, in the language of the bible; it represents that which is complete, total. We could say with the language of today “ it was the G7 of the time”, the maximum leaders on earth.

Well, here is the surprise: “*..the word of God came...* “ To whom came the word of God? Here we have Tiberius Caesar, the emperor, himself God; we have also the high priests that represented God of earth. To whom did God turn to manifest his word? Well, when God must be included in the narration - this is the surprise - he carefully avoids sacred places and sacred and religious people because he knows that they are notoriously hostile and stubborn to his message.

Here then is the surprise, the word of God comes to... no one powerful, but to a certain “ *John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*” What is John doing in the wilderness? John, being the son of a high priest, at the age of eighteen he must present himself at the temple to be tested to see that there is on defect that will prevent him from practicing the priesthood and continue his father’s priesthood.

John no: John is a child that since from his mother’s womb has been filled with the Holy Spirit, he is a man of Spirit not a man of ritual.

For this he breaks with society and goes in the wilderness, away from Jerusalem and the temple. The word of God descended on him.

“*And he went into all the region around the Jordan,*” The Jordan reminds us of the river the Jews had to cross to enter into the Promised Land; now the promised Land is a land of slavery from which the population must escape. “*.. proclaiming a baptism..* “ the word “baptism” does not have our liturgical significance, it was a ritual that - the word means immersion - one is immersed completely in water and what one was, dies symbolically and emerges from the water a new person.

Therefore, John predicted this sign as an image of a change of conversion. In Greek the conversion is expressed in two ways: one is the religious conversion, a return to God, a return to religion and the evangelists carefully avoids this term. The other one, used by the evangelist, is the change in behavior, a radical change in one’s own life.

This is why this message of change could not to aimed at the priestly caste of power, that did not like change. What is the meaning of conversion? If until now you have lived for yourself, from now on you must live for others.

Well, this came “*.. for the forgiveness of sins.*” What John does is unheard of, it is a tremendous challenge, because sins were forgiven by going to the temple of Jerusalem and giving offerings to God. John does not agree. he, a man of Spirit, says that forgiveness of sins does not come through the liturgical rituals, offering gifts to the Lord, but through a radical change of life - living for others , it is this that obtains the forgiveness of sins.

“*As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,*” here the evangelist quotes what is called the “book of consolation”, the second part of the prophet Isaiah, and it was written by an anonymous

prophet, at the end of exile, and it is an invitation to leave the land of slavery. *"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"*

Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

The text of the Prophet Isaiah said: "every man will see the glory of God" the evangelist modifies: *".. all flesh shall see the salvation of God."* the glory of God will manifest itself in every man. The words "all flesh" are important. No one is excluded from God's love. No one is excluded from this invitation to conversion to realize the Kingdom of God. Every man is destined to experience the glory of the Lord, the love of the Lord.

Peter will say in the Acts of the Apostles, in connection of all this, that God had revealed to them that no one that was considered unclean, impure, was excluded from God's love. Here is this announcement of the good news: God's words to John for the invitation of a change of life are a message for all humanity.

No one must not feel himself excluded.