

BAPTISM OF JESUS – 7 th January 2018

YOU ARE MY SON, WHOM I LOVE, WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Mark 1, 7-11

And this was his (John the Baptist) message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

All the evangelists are agreed on Jesus' work, as he who baptises in the Holy Spirit. And this is possible because in Jesus lives the fullness of the Holy Spirit, that is the force, capacity and power of God's love. This welcoming of the Spirit on the behalf of Jesus is indicated by the evangelists in the episode of the baptism. Let us read what Mark writes.

“At that time.. “ this expression that appears for the first time in this gospel, indicates the fulfilment of God's promise – “ Jesus” – the name is the same as Joshua, in Hebrew, meaning he who enters into the promised land –but then the credentials of this Jesus are not good. Because it is written “..that (he)came from Nazareth in Galilee....”

Galilee is the despised region, the region of troublemakers and revolutionaries – in Jesus' time to say “galileo” meant to say “a hot head”, a fanatic - well, Jesus comes from Galilee. But it was believed that the Messiah should come from Judea, from the holy region, and not from Galilee

And moreover he comes from Nazareth, which was a wild village, with a bad reputation, which was a den where the Zealots, the revolutionaries against Rome, took refuge. It should not be forgotten that the memory of Judah the Galilean, who came from Galilee, was still alive: he had proclaimed himself Messiah and had begun a revolt against Rome, that ended in a bloodbath.

“..and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” John had announced that the baptism of conversion was for the forgiveness of sins. Why does Jesus go to be baptised? The baptism is a symbol of death: you are immersed in water and the past dies.

Also for Jesus the baptism will be a symbol of death, but not for an unjust past of sin – that he has no need of forgiveness – but of an acceptance of death in his future a donation of his love for humanity, that can reach the point of welcoming death, he will speak of it like a baptism: *“But I have a baptism to undergo,..”* (Luke 12,50)

And let's see how this evangelist describes for us this baptism of Jesus, inserting the same terms into the scene of baptism, those that he will use at the moment of death, to indicate that the baptism and the death of Jesus are one.

“Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water..” the immersion in water is the death, but death does not keep Jesus – he immediately comes out of the water. *“...he saw heaven being torn open....”* – it is important this *“torn open”* because it was believed that God was so angry with humanity that he had sealed heaven, there was no more communication between God and his people – as Isaiah writes in his book *“O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down,...”* (Isaiah 64, 1)

So, there was this waiting for God to cut through the heavens: but heaven was closed, it was sealed. Well, in the moment in which Jesus commits himself to manifesting the love of God without limits, there is a reply from God of a unlimited love. And the heavens do not open: something that opens can be closed. The heavens are torn open, ripped apart and therefore cannot be recomposed. With Jesus’ God’s communication with humanity will be, from this moment, continuous, growing and uninterrupted.

This verb *“to be torn open”* is found at the moment of Jesus’ death, when *“At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”* (Matthew 27, 51) the curtain hid the secret room where it was believed that there was God’s presence. In the moment that Jesus died on the cross, the curtain was torn open and revealed who God was. Who is God? He is the man that for love had donated his own life.

“..and the Spirit..” the definite article "the", indicates the totality - "... the Spirit ..." - and Jesus’ work will be to baptize in the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit does not come down on Jesus, because "Holy" not only indicates the quality of this Spirit but the activity of consecrating, of separating man from evil - and Jesus does not need to be separated from evil.

“..and the Spirit..”- therefore the totality of God’s love- *“... descending on him...”* at the moment that Jesus came out of the water, there was movement in heaven, and the Spirit descended on Jesus.

This word *“spirit”* – we find it also in the death of Jesus, when Jesus *“... gave up his spirit.”* (Matthew 27,50) the Spirit that he had received in the moment of his baptism, which he communicates to those who welcome him, and with him and like him will dedicate their lives for the good of mankind.

This spirit descended on him *“...like a dove”* Why this image of a dove? It was proverbial the love of the dove for its nest: to the dove even if the nest is changed, she always returns to her original nest.

Therefore, Jesus is the nest, the dwelling place of the Spirit. There is also in the book of Genesis, that the Spirit of the Lord hovered – at the moment of the creation – over the water, was interpreted by the Rabbi as a dove hovering over its nest. So, this reference to the creation shows that in Jesus the fulfilment of God's plan for humanity is realized, the project of creation.

“And a voice came from heaven:...” – while Jesus sees the heavens torn apart, therefore it was his experience –here the voice from heaven, a demonstration for all. Well, the same word *“voice”*- in Greek *“fonè”*- we find at the moment of Jesus’ death, when- *“Jesus cried out in a loud voice,..”* (Matt.27.46)

It is a cry of victory because love is stronger than death, love is stronger than sin: when Peter had betrayed Jesus, the cock crowed and the word is the same as cry, in Greek. So, Jesus’ love is stronger than the sin of his own disciple, therefore it is a cry of victory.

And here the voice from heaven – the evangelist refers to Psalm 2,7 - *“You are my son;”* Here it does not indicate so much who Jesus is, but who is God. If God is beginning to dedicate all his own existence to communicating life to mankind – the son is he who is like his father in behaviour – meaning that this is the work of God.

God’s work is to communicate life to mankind so that they have it in abundance.

“You are my Son,” – and this expression we find also at the moment of Jesus’ death *“Truly this man was the Son of God!”*(Mark 15, 39) On his death only one person understood who Jesus was, not his family, his disciples, not even the high priests and the Pharisees, but a gentile, a stranger, the centurion, the executioner present at the crucifixion

The evangelist writes *“And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last,..”* in that moment full of love *“..he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”* (Mark 15, 39) So we have seen how phrases at the moment of the baptism, the evangelist proposes them again at the moment of Jesus’ death. This is to indicate that, for Jesus, the baptism is the acceptance of death in the future: to be faithful to the love of God and for the liberation of mankind Jesus will be put to death.

Then this passage concludes with the expression *“...whom I love;..”*

Meaning the son heir, the one who inherits all of the Father: you cannot divide Jesus from God, God and Jesus are the same thing.

In Jesus, God manifests that which he is- Love without end for all humanity

“...with you I am well pleased.” The complacency of the Father is the communication of the fullness of life – the Spirit - which Jesus will then communicate to those who welcome him.