

BAPTISM OF JESUS– 8 th January 2017

**WHEN JESUS WAS BAPTIZED.... HE SAW THE SPIRIT OF GOD DESCENDING....TO REST ON HIM.
Biblical Commentary by Father ALBERTO MAGGI OSM**

Matthew 3,13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus' activity starts with the baptism. With the baptism of Jesus, Jesus becomes the visual manifestation of the Father. Jesus' last words will be to tell his disciples to go and baptize, to become themselves visible manifestation of the Father. Let's see what the evangelist Matthew writes in chapter 3, 13-17.

"Then Jesus came from Galilee.. " and here the evangelist uses the same words that he used for indicating the works of John the Baptist in chapter 3. This is to say that Jesus brought to fulfillment and realizes the tasks of the Baptist, *"...to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him."* : the fact that Jesus went to be baptized, has always caused problems, even in the early church. There is a gospel called the Gospel of the Hebrews, where even Jesus himself protests and says: "what sin have I done for me to go and be baptized?". Here the difficulty instead comes from John the Baptist.

" John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" To understand John's reaction and all the paragraph, the baptism must first be understood, which for us has now assumed that of a liturgical rite, a sacrament. The verb "to baptize" means only to immerse. It was a well known ritual, that meant the death of the person who was. So, John the Baptist had invited the people to go and be baptised, in sign of a conversion, to immerse oneself, leaving behind the person that was and to emerge a completely new person. It was a rite that was adopted, for example, to give freedom to slaves: the slave dies and a new free person emerges. Therefore the baptism gives a sign of death. So what is the significance of the baptism? If for the people it meant the death of an unjust sinful past, for Jesus no, for Jesus the baptism, this immersion meant the acceptance of death in the future, to which he will face, to be faithful to this mission to witness the love of the Father. This is the meaning of the baptism to Jesus, it is so true that in other gospels, Jesus will use the very image of the baptism, to indicate his own death, he will say: *"Are you ableto be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"* (Mark 10 , 38) So here is the refusal on the part of John the Baptist. John the Baptist preached a winning messiah, a judge messiah, a messiah who comes to punish. He cannot imagine or tolerate the image of a defeated messiah, a messiah who goes to his death.

"But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." The word "righteousness " In the book of Deuteronomy 6,25 it is written; *"..it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us."* Therefore in the Bible righteousness means being faithful to the alliance.

And here the evangelist inserts a phrase of ambiguous significance: *"Let it be so now,"* Why? The phrase will appear again in chapter 4, when the devil will tempt Jesus. So, the evangelist, with this indication wants to say, at the moment in which Jesus appears on the scene, difficulties and temptations begin. What is the temptation? Everyone wants to prevent Jesus' death, because a Messiah cannot die, the Messiah cannot finish. The proof that Jesus is not the Messiah is that he dies, therefore this we can call the first temptation, the temptation that, naturally, does not come from enemies, but from the very people who are closest.

"And when Jesus was baptized," therefore immediately Jesus emerges from the water. This phrase that the evangelist uses is important: water is the symbol of death, but death cannot hold back one who is full of life. It is typical of the evangelists that, every time they mention Jesus' death, immediately they give the image of his resurrection. So as soon as Jesus immerses into the water, immediately he emerges .

"...and behold, the heavens were opened to him," the heavens were thought to be closed because God was offended, angry with his people. From the moment that Jesus, with the baptism, accepts the visible manifestation of His love, the mercy for all humanity, the heavens, that is God, open: the communication between God and mankind, through Jesus, will be continues.

"...and he saw the Spirit of God" Here the evangelist avoids using the expression the "Holy Spirit". The work of the Holy Spirit is to sanctify, that is to separate the people from sin, and Jesus, when in his last words will say to his disciples ,go and baptise in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, this means the Holy Spirit that sanctifies the people. On Jesus no, on Jesus the Spirit descends: the Spirit is the strength and energy of God. In Jesus there is all that there is in God, the completeness, the fullness of His love.

"...descending like a dove.." why the image of a dove? The evangelist refers to the book of Genesis, already Matthew had presented Jesus like a new creation, where the Spirit hovers over the water, and in the comments of the Rabbis, this Spirit was imagined like a kind of dove. Jesus is the nest of the Spirit of God, and in the nest is where this "dove", Spirit, descends and remains.

".. and behold, a voice from heaven.." meaning an experience divine, it is God himself, the heavens indicate God *"...said,."* And here the evangelist, probably an accomplished scribe, combines three texts from the Old Testament together; Psalm 2, the book of Genesis and the prophet Isaiah in three very important texts. *"This is my beloved Son,"* It is the Psalm that indicates the consecration of the king like Messiah, therefore God in Jesus sees the son, son means not only the one who is generated, but he who is similar in comportment, therefore the evangelist is saying: who sees Jesus sees God, seeing and understanding who Jesus is, one understands who is God. *"..my beloved Son,"* Here it refers to the book of Genesis, Isaac was the beloved son of Abraham; *"..with whom I am well pleased."* the Messiah who is Jesus, who has decided to visibly manifest the tenderness, the Father's love for all humanity, he has the approval and the blessing from the Lord.