

HIS FACE SHONE LIKE THE SUN – Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 17,1-9

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

In Matthew's gospel there are four mountains, each related to one another. The mountain of the beatitudes corresponds to the mountain of the resurrection, that is, by practicing the message of Jesus, one experiences the risen Christ and the indestructible life; the mount of temptations corresponds to the mount of the transfiguration. The divine condition, according to the evangelist, is not obtained through the adoration of power, but through the gift of Jesus himself. This is what the evangelist expresses in chapter 17 of his gospel. Let's read.

“*After six days..*” the dating is precious and important: the sixth day, in biblical tradition, is the day of man's creation, and it is also the day on which God, the Lord, on Sinai manifested his glory. In Jesus the glory of God is manifested, in the fullness of his creation. “*Jesus took with him...*” Jesus takes with him three disciples, the most difficult, those whom he will then have as companions, even at the moment of his passion. The first, Simone, who is presented with his negative nickname, Peter, meaning stubborn, “... *James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.*” evangelist gives us this precious indication that: whenever Matthew uses the formula “*by themselves*”, it is to indicate of incomprehension or hostility, obtuseness towards Jesus and his teaching, therefore we already know how the passage ends. “... *up a high mountain by themselves.*” here this mountain is the answer to the highest mountain, on to which the devil brought Jesus, offering him all the kingdoms of the world, on condition of worshiping power, that is, the divine condition is obtained through power. Jesus disagrees, Jesus shows his tempter, and we remember that it was Peter, in this gospel, who received from Jesus the epithet Satan, his tempting devil, (that) the divine condition is not obtained through power, but through the gift of self-love.

“...*he was transfigured ...*” literally had a metamorphosis “...*before them.*” the evangelist shows what is the condition of man who passes through death. In the previous passage Peter had turned against Jesus because he did not accept the idea of a messiah who was going to die. Well Jesus shows them that death is not an end, but a fullness of life, death does not destroy the person, but strengthens him. “*His face shone like the sun, ...*” the sun is the image of the fullness of the divine condition “... *and his clothes became as white as the light.*” it is the image in the divine condition, as when Jesus says that the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father, and these

white robes are those of the resurrection. So Jesus shows that, passing through death, his figure was not only not destroyed, but even empowered.

“Just then there appeared before them Moses..” Moses is the great legislator *“.. and Elijah,..”* Elijah is the great prophet who, through the use of violence, imposed the observance of the divine law, *“.. talking with Jesus.”* this clarification is important. Elijah and Moses, that is what we call the Old Testament, the law and the prophets, have nothing to say to Jesus’ community, they converse with Jesus; as are the characters who have conversed with God, now they converse with Jesus.

Peter then said to Jesus, *“Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters..”* what Peter wants to do is important. Peter, once again in this gospel, continues in the work of Satan, Jesus’ tempter, what is the temptation? According to tradition, the Messiah would appear suddenly, during the most important holiday of Israel. Of the great feasts of Israel, there was one, which was simply called the feast, there was no need to indicate or name it. It was the festival par excellence, it was the festival of the huts: between September and October, for a week, the Jews lived in huts, in memory of the liberation from Egyptian slavery. During this festival commemorating the liberation, the new liberator would appear *“—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”* For Peter, Jesus is not in the middle. When there are three personages, the most important is always in the centre. But not for Jesus, for Peter it is not Jesus the most important personage, but it is Moses. What is the temptation that Peter makes to Jesus? Here is the Messiah I want: a Messiah who observes the law of Moses, with the prophetic and violent zeal of the prophet Elijah.

“While he was still speaking, ...” but apparently God disagrees with what Peter says, *“.. a bright cloud covered them, ...”* an image which, in the book of Exodus, indicates the liberating presence of God, *“.. and a voice from the cloud said,..”* naturally the voice of God *“This is my Son, ...”* son does not mean only the one who was born, but the one who is like the father in behaviour, *“.. whom I love;”* he who inherits all *“..with him I am well pleased.”* the same words that God expressed on Jesus, at the moment of baptism, and then an imperative verb: exactly *“Listen to him!”* You must not listen to Moses or Elijah, but it is in Jesus that there is the fullness of the divine will, of the divine revelation, he must be listened to.

“When the disciples heard this, ...” this divine intervention causes despair and desolation, and a sign of defeat, *“..they fell facedown to the ground,..”* it is an image that indicates the sense of defeat, of destruction *“...terrified.”* Why? The messiah they are following in Jesus is not the one they hoped for, the victorious Messiah, who will impose the law, the violent Messiah, but a completely different one, and therefore it is a defeat of their dreams of ambition and of their desires of supremacy. *“But Jesus came and touched them..”* Jesus must touch them exactly as he touches the sick and the dead, *“Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.”* But again the reaction of the disciples is negative *“When they looked up, they saw no one...”* they are still looking, for the reference points of the tradition of the past, they are still looking for Moses, the law that gives security, they are still looking for Elijah the prophet, who, with his zeal, makes this law observed, there is no longer anyone. There is neither Moses nor Elijah, and, almost reluctantly, the evangelist writes: *“they saw no one except Jesus.”* Jesus alone is not enough for them, they want Jesus, according to the line of Moses and Elijah.

“As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”..” They have experienced what is the condition of man who goes through death, but do not delude each other, they have yet to see what kind of death Jesus will face, the death that the Bible reserved for the cursed by God, an infamous death, the death of the cross. So, to avoid misplaced feelings of enthusiasm, do not say anything to anyone, until he is risen, that is, first I have to go through death, and this type of death.

