

XIX ORDINARY TIME– 9th August 2020

COMMAND ME TO COME TO YOU ON THE WATER– Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 14,22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

God's universal love for all humanity that Jesus came to manifest with his life and his message finds resistance precisely in the group of disciples who do not accept that this love is for all humanity, including the gentiles; they think the privilege belongs to Israel.

It is what Matthew writes in his gospel chapter 14, 22-33. "*Immediately..*" it is after the sharing of the loaves and fishes in the land of Israel, "*.. he made..*" why did Jesus make his disciples? Because it goes against their resistance, they don't want to know, he must force them to do what? "*.. get into the boat.*" -the boat is the image of the Christian community and therefore also of the Church – "*..and go before him..*" and now we understand why this resistance "*..to the other side..*" indicating the eastern shore of the lake of Galilee, that is, the land of the gentiles. The disciples have no intention to go there and, whenever Jesus invites them or urges them to go there, an accident always happens. "*And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain...*" the mountain has the definite article and indicates the mountain that appeared previously, that is, the mount of beatitudes where Jesus, in fact, announced this message of his universal love; "*.. by himself..*" the evangelists use this expression to indicate that there is resistance, opposition or misunderstanding on the part of the disciples. "*.. to pray.*" it is the first time that Jesus prays - he prays twice in this gospel - and always in situations of difficulty and danger for his disciples, here and in Gethsemane.

"*When evening came..*" it is strange that the evangelist repeats this phrase already said in verse 15, why does he do it? "*When evening came..*" is the same term that indicates the last supper; therefore this universal love is what Jesus manifested with the gift of himself for all humanity. "*.. he was there alone, ..*" we know that he is alone: the disciples are not there, the crowd has been dismissed,

but the evangelist underlines not only physical but spiritual solitude of Jesus. The disciples are accompanying him, but they do not follow him.

“..but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them.” This wind is the resistance of the disciples to Jesus’ invitation to go to the land of the gentiles; they do not want to know to take this universal love to the gentiles, where Jesus will then share the loaves again, they think that this should be and remain a privilege of Israel. That’s why the wind was against them, they are the same disciples.

“And in the fourth watch of the night..” the detail refers to a psalm, psalm 46, where it is indicated that God helps at the break of dawn, *“..he came to them, walking on the sea.”* Why does the evangelist write to us that Jesus walks on the sea? The sea was the image of chaos and only God could control it; in the book of Job, God is the one who walks on the waves of the sea. Then walking on the sea indicates the manifestation of the divine condition, of the fullness of the divine condition on the part of Jesus *“ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea,..”* therefore seeing him in the divine condition *“..they were terrified,..”* why are they terrified? Because religion had dug an abyss between God, distant, inaccessible, and man; it was unthinkable, unimaginable that God could manifest himself in a man and that a man could have the divine condition; for this *“..said, “It is a ghost!”* so for them it was impossible that a man could also be God. *“.. and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I.”* This expression is the answer that God gave to Moses in the famous episode of the burning bush, Jesus claims the fullness of the divine condition *“Do not be afraid.”*

“And Peter..” this disciple is presented only with the negative nickname, which indicates his stubbornness, making it clear that he is doing something not in harmony with Jesus, *“..answered him, “Lord, if it is you,..”* here, exactly as the devil in desert said to Jesus: *“if you are”*, Peter plays the role of the tempting satan, so much so that later on Jesus will reproach him by calling him “satan”. *“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”* Peter also wants the divine condition *“He said, “Come.”* The divine condition is not exclusive to Jesus, it is for all that welcome him.

So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink... why does the evangelist tell us this? Jesus at the very end of the Sermon on the Mount, when he had announced this universal love of God for humanity, he had spoken of a house that had been built on sand; when raging winds and waters came, the house collapsed. This is because the words had not taken root in the person; so, this is the figure of Peter, that’s why he sinks. *“..he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him,..”* it is interesting that he had called Simone, had invited him to be a fisher of man, and instead it is he who must be fished out of the water. *“.. saying to him, “O you of little faith,..”* it is the second time that he is reproached for his lack of faith *“.. why did you doubt?”* He believed that the divine condition came by a divine command, the divine condition is obtained only through persecution, opposition and often the sacrifice of one’s life.

“And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.” this contrary spirit ends, when the community

welcomes Jesus again. “*And those in the boat worshiped him...*” this verb we will find again on the mountain of the resurrection, which is the same mountain of the Beatitudes, where the disciples meet the resurrected one. “*.. those in the boat worshiped him... , saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”*” Jesus is the son of God, a completely new way of manifesting God and his sonship, what is it? That of a universal love from which no one can be excluded.