

V ORDINARY TIME – February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014

**YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM**

**Mt 5.13-16**

***At that time Jesus said to his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?"***

***It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.***

***In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.***

After having proclaimed the beatitudes Jesus turns to His disciples that have welcomed them and says to them: "*You are the salt of the earth,..*" What is the meaning of this salt? Since ancient times salt had the significance of that which conserved food. The food, fridges did not exist, was put under salt and this permitted it to be conserved.

From this fact of conserving food, salt goes on, in a figurative manner, to represent that which renders the covenant valid and real. For example to give value and continuous validity to a document, salt was sprinkled over it.

So, this salt, in the Old testament, actually becomes the sign of God's covenant with his people. In the book of Leviticus 2,13, for example, one reads: "*You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing..*", therefore salt renders valid and continuous the covenant between God and His people. Jesus in the beatitudes had proclaimed the new covenant between God and His people; well then, who welcomed them, the disciples, they must be, with their behavior and with their lives, the guarantee of all this.

Therefore the faith of the disciples to the beatitudes renders valid the new covenant and permits the beginning of the kingdom. So, Jesus says "*«You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste...»*", the evangelist in reality uses a verb that does not apply to 'things', but to 'man', because he literally writes "if the salt goes crazy". What does this 'go crazy' mean?

It refers to the word 'foolish' that we find in chapter 7 of this Gospel. In verse 26, where Jesus speaks of a foolish man that went and built his house on the sand; when the flood came the house was washed away. And this foolish man that constructs on the sand is he that listens to the words of the Lord, but

then does not put them into practice. So this salt that is foolish or crazy indicates the comportment of these disciples that welcome with enthusiasm the message of Jesus, but then do not practice it. Therefore Jesus says: “*...but if salt has lost its taste,..*»” that is if my words are not put into practice, nothing else will make them ‘salted’.

“*It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out..*»” Literally the evangelist writes ‘thrown out’, that in Matthew’s Gospel always means at a distance from God, therefore it is always a negative meaning, “*...and trampled..*»”, Matthew adopts a verb that gives the idea of something that is shredded, trampled “*... under people's feet.* »” literally.

That is , Jesus is saying to His disciples, if you are not faithful to this new covenant, to the beatitudes, you who follow me, you merit only the disdain of the people; the people that expect from you an alternative to this society, that expect from you a different way of life, if they see that you have welcomed the message with only words, but then you do not practice them, remain disillusioned and loose themselves. Therefore you merit disdain.

Then Jesus gives another example, “*You are the light of the world..* »”. Light of the world at that time was considered Jerusalem, Israel. The Prophet Isaiah in chapter 60,3 writes “*And nations shall come to your light,...*” So now the light of the world is no more something static, but something dynamic, the group of disciples that now, at the end of the Gospel, Jesus will send to announce this good news.

And here Jesus makes examples regarding this light. He says that “*Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket*»”. Why does the evangelist use the word ‘basket’ ( the original word was ‘bushel’)? The ‘bushel’ was the container that was used to measure or conserve cereals, in particular grain. So then the ‘bushel’ is the image of that which is given as a gift. The ‘bushel or basket’ then does not hide the light, but it must become the expression.

This light manifests itself in the gift, in the same giving. In fact He says “*...but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.*»” Then He says “*...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works..* »”. Here then, the light is the good works. They are the works that show this light. Therefore Jesus does not invite to teach the doctrine, but the practice: the practice of the beatitudes will visibly manifest who is God, who is mankind and it will be this light that will inundate society.

But these works that are the light of the world, Jesus adds “*...and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* »” Therefore not their glory, their admiration. Jesus then, in chapter 6, 1-8, will reproach the hypocrites. That is actors, comedians, and will say “*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them,...*” this is the sin of idolatry.

The admiration and the glory of these works are diverted, and for the first time in Matthew’s Gospel, God is presented as Father. Father, in the culture of the time, it is he that generates and he who communicates life, “*...to your Father who is in heaven* »”. Therefore the invitation of Jesus is that the practice of the beatitudes will be this light that slowly will flood society that is in darkness and that has a thirst for the good news.