

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 5,13-16

And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

“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.

The new relationship, which Jesus had come to offer between men and God, could no longer be contained in Moses' ancient covenant, so Jesus needed to propose a new one, and had formulated it, in the gospel of Matthew, according to the beatitudes. At the conclusion of the beatitudes, here are the severe and also hopeful, confident words of Jesus addressed to his disciples: *“You are the salt of the earth,...”* What is the meaning of salt? It must be understood in the culture of the time: salt was a very, very precious element, we know that the word salary comes from salt, with which soldiers were paid; salt was used to store food. So, from this physical and material meaning, it had transfigured into a symbolic meaning, because, since salt was what preserved, it gave it a figurative value, which was what made it a current, concrete and perpetual agreement or contract. Then, when you shook hands for an agreement or when you wrote a contract, a pinch of salt was spread over these hands or contract; meaning: "this has value forever". Then Jesus after proclaiming the beatitudes, warns his disciples, he says *“You are the salt of the earth,...”* meaning with your loyalty to this program, you make it actual

But here is Jesus' warning *“..but if salt has lost its taste,”* the evangelist adopts a verb translated meaning to lose of flavour, which is not adopted for an element such as salt, but only for people, and it will be used later when Jesus will speak of the foolish man, who builds a house on the sand by the sea, rather than on a solid foundation of rock. And the image of the foolish man is he who hears the words of the Lord, but then does not put them into practice. Then Jesus admonishes his disciples, after having proclaimed the beatitudes: if you, these beatitudes, accept them, listen to them, but then do not put them into practice, you are like this foolish man; here is the salt loses its flavour. With what will it regain its saltiness? There is no more possibility.

And here is Jesus' severe warning: *“ It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.”* Humanity expected from their community God's response to humanity's needs, to the sufferings, but if you, who have received and accepted this message, then don't practice it or, worse, you are, with your behaviour, a contradiction to the message you believe in, Jesus says, you deserve people's contempt, you deserve to be thrown aside.

Then the positive side *“You are the light of the world.”* Jesus says that his disciples, welcoming the beatitudes, here is the positive side, that they become the light that illuminates the world, *“ A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”* This city that stands on the mountain, which was the light of the world, in the culture of the time was Jerusalem, the city of God. Well with Jesus there is no longer a city, a sanctuary, where people must go, but a community who must bring light where there is darkness.

And Jesus continues “ *Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket..*” At that time, a special basket or bushel was used to measure or to collect cereal. Then Jesus says: this lamp is not put under a basket, if it is placed under a basket its light goes out, but in a candlestick, it sheds light on all those who are in the house. The basket means the ability of the community of generosity, of giving, the basket must not hide the light, but must be the expression of this light. So Jesus is indicating that there is light of the world how? Through the generous gift of one's life, of what one is and of what one has, confirming the invitation that Matthew had made at the beginning of chapter 5, with the proposal to welcome the first beatitude.

Jesus continues “*..let your light shine..*” it is no longer the light of Jesus, it is the light of people. Jesus invites each person, through the practice of generosity, which comes from fidelity to the beatitudes, to be a splendid person. When we say that a person is good, we use this expression: he is splendid. Meaning he radiates light.

So Jesus asks the community that, “*...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works..*” here then is a connection between "your light" and "your works" - the light comes from good works, from the communication of life, from giving life to others – “*..and give glory..*” note that here the evangelist says “*.. to your Father..*” because then, in the controversy with the Pharisees, Jesus will say to be careful of these pious, religious people, who do their works to be admired by the people. No, says Jesus: people, seeing your good works, give glory to your Father who is in heaven. It is the first time that the term Father appears in Matthew's gospel. Father will be the name of God within the Christian community, father in the culture of the time was the one who communicates life. Therefore, through the communication of life to others, through the gift of oneself, of what one is and of what one has, the presence of God is made manifest within the community and society.