

**WHAT SHALL WE DO?– Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM**

**Luke 3, 10-18**

***And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”***

***As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”***

***So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.***

John the Baptist's invitation to conversion was received by the population, with the exception of the religious institution. Crowds flocked, to his baptism, the publicans and soldiers but the scribes, priests and Pharisees are absent. They are part of and represent the religious institution that are always stubborn or hostile to any invitation of change.

The crowd that receive John's invitation, "... asked him, "What then shall we do?" The reply to John the Baptist's announcement, "...do deeds worthy of conversion and change" In his reply he says nothing regarding religion or cult. In his reply he does not say " go to the temple, give an offering, and pray, more", but suggests a just behavior, of solidarity, of sharing towards mankind.

Already with John the Baptist the great change that Jesus will bring, is announced: sin is not that which offends God, but that which offends mankind. Let's see now John's reply. "And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none,..." therefore the conversion put into practice, "...and whoever has food is to do likewise."

So, John invites an attitude of solidarity towards others. The publicans also appear surprised. The publicans are impure for excellence, they are those that - so they believed – even if one day maybe they were converted, they could not save themselves, because they would not be able to give back all the swindled earnings of their whole existence.

So, they were damned for excellence. Well, they also go to be baptized, shyly, saying : "Teacher, what shall we do?" meaning, is there hope, something also for us? John does not send them away, nor threaten them – anyway for them there is no salvation – and he gives them this surprising

reply: *“Collect no more than you are authorized to do”*. Meaning they can continue with their activity, that was considered dishonest, but doing it honestly.

It is an amazing opening of John the Baptist towards this category. God accepts people as they are. Soldiers also intervene, probably the occupants, *“Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”*

So, he invites the soldiers to avoid injustice and to not give themselves up to looting and robbery – as was the usual practice of soldiers. There is great expectation on behalf of the population, that think there may be in this prophet that appeared from the desert, the awaited liberator of the people, that is the Messiah. *“As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ,…”*

The Greek word “Cristo”(Christ) translated in Hebrew “Messiah”, one sent from God, the Lord's anointed. *“John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water,..”* John's rite was an external rite, water is an external element, a sign of change, of conversion. To understand John's next expression, one must know the matrimonial practice of that time, called “the law of levirate”, from *Levir*, meaning “brother-in-law”.

What did this practice consist of? When a woman remained a widow without sons, the brother-in-law was obliged to make her pregnant. The baby when born would have the name of the father, so his name continued forever. When a brother-in-law refused it, the next in line had the right. And to continue this was the ceremony called “untying of the laces”, the laces of the sandals and it was a way of saying: “I will take your right to make this woman pregnant.”

This we can find in the Bible, in the Book of Deuteronomy chapter 25, also in the story of Ruth. So, understanding this matrimonial ritual, one understands better the expression of John the Baptist: *“..but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”* It is not a lesson of humility that of John, he is talking of He who must ‘impregnate’ this population, I am not he who must give sons to this population, but He who comes after me.

Therefore it is the announcement of Jesus as the bridegroom of the people. *“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit..”* meaning internal immersion, to impregnate the people with the strength and energy of God, *“...and fire.”* Spirit, life for he who receives it and fire for he who refuses it.

And here is John's image, *“His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

Then poor John the Baptist will be in a crisis with the coming of Jesus because Jesus will announce a message of life, not of punishment and destruction. And when Jesus must recite that which John had said, He will censor the fact of the fire, in fact Jesus in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 1, 5 says: *“..John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”*

There is no fire. On God's behalf there is only the offer of love and there is no sign of punishment for the wicked. *“So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.”* the good news that later will manifest itself in the person of Jesus that will present the good side of a God not only good, but exceptionally good, a God that also pours his love over the ungrateful and wicked.