

BAPTISM OF THE LORD – 10 th January 2016

**WHEN JESUS ALSO HAD BEEN BAPTIZED AND WAS PRAYING, THE HEAVEN WAS OPENED-
Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM**

Luke 3,15-16.21-22

As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, John answered them all, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

In the desert, John the Baptist had announced a baptism as a sign of conversion, which is a change of life, for the forgiveness of sins. The answer is unexpected: all the people rushed to him. The people had understood that the forgiveness of sins did not come from the temple anymore, with a liturgical act, with a sacrifice to the Lord, but through a change of life.

While the people had believed and rushed to John the Baptist the religious authorities, the leaders, on the contrary were always against any call for change.

So, let us read this Sunday's lesson, Luke's gospel chapter 3, 15. "*As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ,..*" meaning the Messiah

The people think that they have identified, in this prophet in the desert, the awaited savior of Israel. But John makes it clear straight away that it is not him. He replies to all saying "*I baptize you with water;*" the immersion in a liquid external to mankind, that is a sign of the change of the way of life to obtain the forgiveness of sins. "*..but he who is mightier than I is coming*" and here the evangelist uses an expression, understood only by knowing the culture of that time "*..the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie;*"

What does John the Baptist want to say with this expression? There was a law in the matrimonial institution at that time, called "the levirate law". What does this law consist of? When a woman became a widow without children, the brother-in-law was obliged to marry her and any children she might have would take the name of the defunct husband. It was a way of continuing the name of that person. If the brother-in-law refused, the next in line after him had the right to the ceremony of "untying his sandals ",

taking them and spitting on them. It was a symbolic sign that meant, "it is my right now to take this woman"

Here then is the meaning of John the Baptist's words, found in the Old Testament in the story of Ruth and in other books. "*..the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie;*" I am not the one to take this woman" Israel was considered as a widow, " but he that comes after me. "

Because, "*he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit..*" Whilst I have immersed you in water, the sign of the change in the way of life, he will immerse you with the same divine life, "*.. and with fire.*"

Then here the liturgy leaves out verses, which indicate the elimination of John the Baptist. It is the reply of the powerful to the conversion. The powerful never want change. It is the stupidity of the powerful because the persecution always makes life flourish, not extinguish. Every time the powerful want to silence a voice, there comes another more powerful and more strong.

So, let us continue our reading from verse 21. "*Now when all the people were baptized,..*" therefore the people had understood, between Jerusalem, the temple where, with a sacrifice to the Lord the forgiveness of sins was obtained, and in the desert through a rite of immersion, the people had understood that there is the truth.

Here Jesus appears he also goes to be baptized. But why is Jesus baptized ? The baptism was a symbolic sign of the death of a person. The death of the past, to what had been, to begin a new life. Also for Jesus it is a sign of death, he does not have a sinful past, but the acceptance of the future death.

It is his death. Therefore, for Jesus to go and be baptized means: for faithfulness in the love of God to accept persecution and even death. "*...when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,..*" What is the significance of this opening of heaven? It is the final and permanent communication between man and God. The sky indicates the divine reality.

When there is a man that is faithfully committed to the manifestation of God's love, the communication between God and man is continual. With Jesus, this communication will be interrupted .

"*..and the Holy Spirit descended upon him..*" the Holy Spirit is the strength, the energy of God's love, that descended on Jesus. Why does the evangelist say "*..in bodily form,*" ? To say really and fully ;"*.. as a dove,*" The image of the dove invokes various elements, the creation when the Spirit of God hovered over the water and in the rabbinical interpretation it was said like a dove, therefore Jesus is the new creation. It refers above all to the dove that leaves the arc, after the flood, in a sign of pardon.

Jesus is God's pardon. But it refers also to the Palestine proverb that says: "*..like the love of a dove for her nest*". The dove is an animal that remains affectionate, very attached to her original nest. They can change her nest, make a new one, but she does not what to know. Therefore, Jesus is the "nest" of the Spirit; it is there that the fullness of God's love manifests itself.

"*..and a voice came from heaven,*" therefore from God. Here the evangelist unites various passages from the Old Testament, from the prophet Isaiah, a psalm and the book of Genesis: "*Thou art my beloved Son;*" meaning inheriting everything from the father - "*..with thee I am well pleased.*"

So, God confirms that in Jesus there is his own reality, and the people must only welcome him.