

11. December 2021

The Elijah mission

Mt 17:10-13

The disciples put this question to Jesus, 'Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He replied, 'Elijah is indeed coming, and he will set everything right again; however, I tell you that Elijah has come already and they did not recognise him but treated him as they pleased; and the Son of man will suffer similarly at their hands. 'Then the disciples understood that he was speaking of John the Baptist.

Today's Gospel allows us to return to the meditation of 9 December, in which we spoke about John the Baptist and the mission of the Prophet Elijah.

The prophet Elijah is an outstanding figure of the Old Covenant. He can rightly be called the prophet par excellence of the Old Testament. In today's reading, taken from the book of Sirach, Elijah and his deeds are praised in glowing terms (Sir 48:1-4, 9-11). This prophet is especially venerated among the Orthodox faithful, and countless chapels are built in honour of the "Most Holy Elijah", as he is called in the Byzantine liturgy. This prophet is venerated in all three monotheistic religions: in Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Among the praises that today's reading addresses to the Prophet Elijah, there is one that stands out in particular and is worth meditating on in the context of today's Gospel. Thus says the book of Sirach: *"You were designated in the prophecies of doom to allay God's wrath before the fury breaks, to turn the hearts of fathers towards their children, and to restore the tribes of Jacob."* (Sir 4:10)

Jesus' words make it clear that the coming of Elijah, who was taken up to heaven, was fulfilled in the figure of John the Baptist. He prepared the way for the Lord, thus being the forerunner of the coming of Christ. With this, it is also clear that with the coming of Jesus, the End Times have been inaugurated.

This is a period of special grace for mankind, for in the Messiah, forgiveness of sins and a new life are offered. It is the Lord who turns the wrath of God away from us, for He Himself takes upon Himself the punishment that man has brought upon himself by his sin.

From John the Baptist onwards there is a direct way to Jesus, for he himself exclaimed: *"Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."* (Jn 1:29). He baptised with water, whereas Jesus will baptise with fire (cf. Mt 3:11). St. John the Baptist suffered death for upholding God's law; Jesus' death serves as atonement for the sins of the whole world.

According to the Lord's words, John the Baptist is not Elijah himself who has come down from heaven; he is someone else. Therefore, the Lord must have been referring to the mission of Elijah, which is still alive and continues in the Baptist. In fact, we can find similar elements between the two. Both Elijah and John lived for a time in the wilderness; and both had disciples. Elijah led the Jewish people back to the true God, when he offered on Mount Carmel a sacrifice pleasing to God and thus unmasked the falsehood of the idolatry of the priests of Baal (cf. 1 Kgs 18:21-40). St. John called for conversion in order to reconcile the people with God. Both were persecuted, and in both cases the main cause was a woman who lived with the king of their time.

Since both prophets foreshadowed the life of the Lord, we can ask ourselves whether with the coming of the Messiah the mission of Elijah has already been definitively and completely fulfilled.

The fact that Jesus speaks of St. John's coming in the mission of Elijah - although he was not the same person - leaves open the possibility that his mission will be present again in a special way at the approach of Christ's return.

In the Byzantine liturgy there is a prayer that names Elijah as the "Forerunner of Christ's Coming", while John is called the "Second Forerunner of His Coming". Could it be that a "third forerunner" may yet come, appearing at a time of great threat to the People of God and insistently calling humanity to conversion, inviting it to avail itself of divine mercy and to change its life? One who warns when an Antichrist arrives, or even when the last Antichrist appears, seeking to establish his dominion... Only God knows if and when this will happen!

Certainly, a mission in the spirit of Elijah would also be related to helping the Jewish People to recognise their Messiah, after such a long time. Perhaps the Jews will trust someone who comes "in the spirit of Elijah", so that he can warn them not to follow the Antichrist in believing that he is the Messiah, even though he promises them great things. How often they have been deceived by false Messiahs! Perhaps the one who comes in the spirit of Elijah can help Jews and Christians find themselves in the same Messiah, just as Elijah came to reconcile fathers to their children. Perhaps he can also help to overcome the divisions within Christianity, uniting all in the truth.

He will certainly bear witness to Christ with authority, and in no way mix religions. And despite the proclamation of mercy, he will point to sin by name and will not confirm people in their faults or relativise them. His mission will be totally different from that of the one who deceives and misleads mankind.

We are indeed in need of the coming of an Elijah! There is so much disorientation in the world that today it is even spreading in the Church. Perhaps the Lord will raise up people who are called to serve such a mission. It would be an enormous grace!