

The tents

Javier Álvarez-Ossorio ssc

INFO SSSC Brothers N° 71 – July 5, 2013

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents... for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God.

Heb. 11:8-10



FOTO: blogs.savethechildren.es

We continue the year of faith. There are only three months until the beatification of our brothers the Spanish martyrs of the Twentieth Century, who died as witnesses to the faith. Their lives ended when they were still relatively young, between 26 and 38 years of age. The martyrs remind us that we are "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Heb. 11:13). "They desired a better homeland, a heavenly one." (Heb. 11:16)

Faith has a lot to do with journeying, traveling, living precariously as in a tent, having no fixed abode, awaiting something surer that only God can build.

As the Good Father said in a letter of September 3, 1806 to Isidore David and Gabriel de la Barre, "*So do your best, my dear friends, we do not work for the earth but rather for heaven.*" Fixing one's eyes on heaven does not mean flight from the earth but rather being on earth knowing that you are a pilgrim and a citizen of a kingdom that is not of this world.

Let us make three tents (Lk. 9:33)

We usually interpret the transfiguration account as Peter being mistaken, he did not know what he was saying and that unrealistically he hoped to hang on to some pleasant experience with Jesus. However, Jewish exegesis shows us that just because someone does not know what they are saying does not mean they are talking nonsense. It's rather that the words they speak are beyond them and convey much more than the one who is speaking is capable of comprehending at the moment. In fact, without knowing it Peter is right; Jesus is the one who fulfills the Feast of Tents,¹ which is one of the three Jewish pilgrimage feasts by which the Jews remember the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the desert. Indeed Elijah and Moses speak with Jesus of "his exodus that he was going

¹ Feast of Sukkot, usually translated in English as the "Feast of Booths".

to accomplish in Jerusalem." (Lk. 9:31). For that reason the text also speaks of the "cloud (that) came and cast a shadow over them" (Lk. 9:34). This is a reference to the tent of meeting of Exodus (Ex. 40:34) and the tents that the Israelites used for shelter in the desert. (Cf. all of Psalm 91)

The Feast of Tents is a reliving of the time when the people were not settled but were living in huts that were fragile and portable, constantly on the move, trusting only in the word of God and his protecting providence. It is the feast of joy, of liberation from slavery in Egypt (where they had solid houses and pots of meat), of thanksgiving for the nearness of the Father who nourishes them and shelters them from danger. It is a celebration of the adventure of setting out toward the unknown.

Without the experience of the tents, the possession of the land (and of Jerusalem and the temple) is perverted and in the end the heart of the people turns away from the liberating Spirit.

His tent...not made by human hands (Heb. 9:11)

Jesus, in his humanity, is our true tent. He is the corner stone, the solid foundation of the building of God, of the Father's kingdom. His body allows the light of glory to shine through (Lk. 9:29), like the luminous cloud of Exodus. That body is the true temple and the true offering. To give oneself completely out of love: that is the new covenant, the perfect sacrifice.

The heart of Jesus is our refuge, our house, our home, our tent for the journey. He who lived an itinerant life, without a place to rest his head (Lk. 9:58), is the one who goes ahead and invites us to go with him outside the camp because here we have no lasting city. (Heb. 13:13-14)

He pitched his tent among us (Jn. 1:14)

The Greek term used by John is the same that was used to speak of the Feast of Tents. The Word becomes flesh in Jesus in order to be with us, but not in the form of a powerful lord well settled in his castle but rather as a pilgrim in the desert who sets up and takes down his tent as he continues his journey.

The mystery of the incarnation is revealed in shacks and huts not in palaces and great institutions. Jesus was born in a stable and died on a cross. Certainly the option for the poor, the marginal, the excluded, the displaced, refugees...has a Christological root. It is there Christ awaits us.

I know that I will soon have to put my tent aside. (2 Pet. 1:13-14)

Our earthly existence is like living in a tent. When we presented the orientations of this General Government (INFO 65) we said that we understood our life as a journey involving risks. It is a journey inward to the heart of Jesus, a journey with the brothers and toward the brothers and a journey toward the margins, toward the periphery of humanity. We cannot undertake that journey while remaining settled in solid and comfortable dwellings. The journey requires that we live in "tents" that are less secure and not that warm but that allow us to move, journey and get close to others and trust in God.

How do we measure the "success" of this journey? How can we evaluate our passage

through this world? What is the goal of such a life?

Remembering the martyrs' violent death in the flower of youth for reasons bound up in the contradictions of history, is an invitation to look with deeper faith, a faith that allows us to appreciate life as a pilgrimage. And on pilgrimage it is better to travel lightly than to be weighed down by heavy bulky burdens that rob us of freedom. I think of burdens like excessive concern for health, the desire to add many years to one's existence, attachment to works or projects considered unquestionable, the fear of a loss of relevance...And if life were taken from us today or tomorrow, what did we spend so much energy on?

It is only in faith, from the perspective of the death and rising of Jesus, that the death of these martyrs can be understood. What counts is not the number of things they accomplished, nor their public visibility, nor their immediate impact, nor a long life well lived, but the foolishness of the cross. What counts is the hidden fruitfulness of the grain of wheat that dies, so that others can gather the harvest. It is the logic of losing one's life to find it, the strange happiness that is found more in giving than in receiving.

Finally, let us not forget that our brother martyrs form part of a multitude of men and women, religious and laity that risked the same things for their faith. Their death brings us face to face with the tragedy always present of the many innocent people massacred anonymously and brutally. They remind us also in a special way of all those members of the Church and the Congregation who are risking their lives today for the proclamation of the Gospel.

The five brothers to be beatified, along with the other nine killed but about whose deaths we lack the details, are part of that "cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1) that inspires us to live dangerously and uncomfortably in the footsteps of Jesus.