

## **Lent 4 - Saturday**

### ***Ad Limina Visit***

Santa Maria Maggiore

1 April 2017

Dear brother bishops, and brothers and sisters in Christ:

#### ***Introduction***

This morning the Lord gathers us in this magnificent basilica dedicated to Mary as Mother of God – and Mother of the Church – to give him thanks for the fruitfulness of our *ad limina* visit. This past week has been filled with encouragement and challenge and, above all, with the sense of being fraternally strengthened and confirmed in our ministry by the Holy Father and his co-workers in the Roman Curia.

And how fitting it is that our song of praise be offered here in St. Mary Major, a favourite church of Pope Francis, and, I must say, to me as well; for it was in the Chapel of the Assumption that 41 years ago I offered my first Mass of Thanksgiving after ordination the previous day. As we get ready to leave Rome, refreshed in faith, we pray that that Mary will come with us. Like the beloved disciple, we are to take her into our homes, into our dioceses and eparchies, so that she will accompany us, inspire us and guide us in the evangelizing mission that lies before us and our people.

In making a profession of faith with the Italian Bishops, Pope Francis prayed:

Mother of the beauty that blossoms from faithfulness to daily

work,

Lift us from the torpor of laziness, pettiness, and defeatism.

Clothe Pastors in the compassion that unifies, that makes whole;

let us discover the joy of a humble, brotherly, serving Church.

Mother of tenderness who envelops us in patience and mercy,

Help us burn away the sadness, impatience and rigidity of those who do not know what it means to belong.

Intercede with your Son to obtain that our hands, our feet, our hearts be agile: let us build the Church with the Truth of love.

Amen.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Reflection on the Readings***

Now allow me to offer a reflection on today's Readings.

No one likes to hear a tough message. It sticks in our craw. It can either prod our conscience to do good or make us angry and bitter. The effect that Jeremiah's preaching had on the people when he confronted them with their infidelity to the Covenant was resentment. They wanted to kill the Prophet with the news of repentance.

In today's First Reading we hear the cry of Jeremiah in a bold and frank dialogue with God as he confronts those who plotted evil against

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Profession of Faith with the Bishops of the Italian Episcopal Conference (23 May 2013).

him. By his enemies' words and actions a very old story is repeated: that the just person is persecuted unjustly; that the power of evil seems to triumph over the good.

In this lament, Jeremiah tells the Lord exactly what is on his mind, not dressing it up in any pious language. Such is our prayer when it comes from the depths of our heart: prayer which expresses how we *truly* feel, not how we think we *ought* to feel. Jeremiah can do this freely because he trusts in God's promises. Despite all that he suffers, he knows that is not abandoned, concluding his lament with "for to you have I committed my cause" (Jer 11:20).

### ***Jeremiah Entrapped***

What we have before is Jeremiah's Gethsemani. He is confronting a real plot of his would-be murderers. He uses a image that would be taken up in Isaiah's Suffering Servant and later in the New Testament and applied directly to Jesus: "I was like a gentle lamb led to slaughter" (Jer 11:19). Those who knew him were plotting his demise: "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living" (Jer 11:19).

Jeremiah, like Jesus after him, experienced betrayal, loneliness and misunderstanding. The drip of original sin which has stained all of history manifests itself in its desire to uproot goodness. And so the righteous suffer.

## *Jesus Entrapped*

Jeremiah is a precursor, a type; he prefigures Jesus' later fate. That is how the Church has read this Scripture and why she places it to be read alongside today's Gospel.

In this selection, Jesus fulfills Simeon's prophecy to Mary that he will be "a sign that will be opposed" (Lk 2:34). The people are divided. Some thought he was a prophet or even the Messiah (cf. Jn 7:40-41); but others, especially the religious leaders, believed him to be an imposter who was fooling them: "Surely you have not been deceived, too, have you?" (Jn 7:47), they chided the temple police. The reaction of the officers was bewildered amazement. They had been sent to arrest him and returned empty-handed because they never heard anyone speak as he did (cf Jn 7:46). The reaction of Nicodemus, on the other hand, was perhaps more like our own. He knew something was up, but he was timid, lacking courage. His heart told him to defend Jesus, but his head told him not to take the risk.

There are often times, and we know this only too well, when we have to take a stand for Christ and for his Gospel. To stand up for Jesus may provoke mockery or unpopularity. It may even entail hardship, sacrifice, and suffering. At some point, even if we would rather not choose but try to straddle the fence, we *must* choose: to accept God's wise rule and Kingdom or to follow the standards of a worldly kingdom

opposed to God: to be servants of Jesus our Master or slaves of Satan.

### *Seeing Below the Surface*

The Sanhedrin authorities were convinced of their interpretation of Scriptures, of where the Prophet could – and should! – come from. So convinced, that they were blind to what the Lord was accomplishing in their midst.

The Scriptures had foretold the divine plan of salvation through the death of “the righteous one.” The Suffering Servant was to be the ransom for sin. Jesus was led like a lamb to the slaughter: innocent, without blemish, offered up for us. He did not resist the path set out for him. It is crucial that, if we are to understand the real depth of meaning in Christ’s Death for us that we must see it both as brought about by human wickedness and yet voluntarily embraced. We can’t let go of either truth.

Our redemption was brought about by an act of love. It did not just “happen” to Jesus. Jesus’ violent death on the cross was not the result of chance, of an unfortunate coincidence of circumstances. His death was not just the running out of good luck, but belongs to the mystery of God’s saving plan. “He entered willingly into his Passion”; Jesus accepted his death voluntarily. Those who handed him over were not merely passive players in a scenario written in advance by God. Choice and deliberation were involved by all participants.

Salvation, after all, could hardly be an accident. Indeed, God “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32), so that we might be reconciled to him.

### ***Service and Redemption***

In Sacred Scripture, there is a clear link between service and redemption, as well as between service and suffering, between the *Servant* and *Lamb of God*. The Messiah is the Suffering Servant who takes on his shoulders the weight of human sin. He is the lamb “led to the slaughter” (Is 53:7) to pay the price of the sins committed by humanity, and thus render to us the service that we need the most.

The Servant is also the Lamb who “was oppressed, and was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth” (Is 53:7), thus showing an extraordinary power: the power not to respond to evil with evil, but to respond to evil with good. In this, Jesus is contrasted with Jeremiah. The Prophet hoped for retribution, for the punishment of his enemies (cf. Jer 11:20), but Jesus begged for their forgiveness, for “they know not what they do” (Lk 24:34).

In a mysterious manner, the vocation to service – and certainly of the episcopal service entrusted to our weakness – is invariably a vocation to take part personally in the *ministry of salvation* – a sharing

that will, among other things, be costly and painful.<sup>2</sup> This is what happens when we journey with and among the flocks entrusted to our care. We set out with the faithful and with all those who turn to us, “sharing in their joys and hopes, their difficulties and sufferings, as brothers and as friends, but especially as fathers who can listen, understand, help and guide. Walking together demands love and ours is a service of love, *amoris officium*, as St Augustine used to say (*In evangelium Johannis tractatus*, 123, 5: PL 35, 1967).”<sup>3</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

As we prepare to enter the final weeks of Lent, when the Cross confronts us head-on, calling us to account for our ministry, let’s recall that, although Jesus was killed in an act of brutal violence, “instead of falling heavily to the ground, he paradoxically stands very firmly on his own feet because, with the Resurrection, he overcame death once for all. . . . On this earth, Jesus, the Son of God, is a defenceless, wounded and dead Lamb. Yet he stands up straight, on his feet, before God’s throne and . . . has the history of the world in his hands.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> St. John Paul II, Message for the 40<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for Vocations (16 October 2002), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Francis, Address to Recently Appointed Bishops (19 September 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience (23 August 2006).

It is this victory we now celebrate in the Eucharist.

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