

Merciful like the Father (cf Lk 6:36-38)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We have heard the passage from the Gospel of Luke (6:36-38) that inspired the motto of this extraordinary Holy Year: *Merciful like the Father*. The complete phrase reads: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (v. 36). It is not a catchphrase, but a life commitment. To understand this expression well, we can compare it with the parallel text from the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus says: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).

In the well-known Sermon on the Mount, which opens with the Beatitudes, the Lord teaches that perfection lies in love, the fulfillment of all the precepts of the Law. In this same perspective, St Luke specifies that perfection is merciful love: to be *perfect* means to be *merciful*. Is a person who is not merciful perfect? No! Is a person who is not merciful good? No! Goodness and perfection are rooted in mercy. Certainly, God is perfect. However, if we consider Him in this way, it becomes impossible for men to aim towards that absolute perfection. Instead, having Him before our eyes as merciful, allows us to better understand what constitutes his perfection, and this spurs us to be, as He is, full of love, compassion, mercy.

I ask myself: are Jesus' words realistic? Is it really possible to love like God loves and to be merciful like He is?

If we look at the history of salvation, we see that the whole of God's revelation is an unceasing and untiring love for mankind: God is like a father or mother who loves with an unfathomable love and pours it out abundantly on every creature. Jesus' death on the Cross is the culmination of the love story between God and man. A love so great that God alone can understand it. It is clear that, compared to this immeasurable love, our love will always be lacking. But when Jesus calls us to be merciful *like* the Father, he does not mean in quantity! He asks his disciples to become *signs, channels, witnesses* of his mercy.

The Church can be nothing other than a sacrament of God's mercy in the world, at every time and for all of mankind. Every Christian, therefore, is called to be a witness of mercy, and this happens along the path of holiness. Let us think of the many saints who became merciful because they allowed their hearts to be filled with divine mercy. They embodied the Lord's love, pouring it into the multiple needs of a suffering humanity. Within the flourishing of many forms of charity you can see the reflection of Christ's merciful face.

We ask ourselves: What does it mean for disciples to be merciful? Jesus explains this with two verbs: "forgive" (Lk 6:37) and "give" (v. 38).

Mercy is expressed, first of all, in *forgiveness*: "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven" (v. 37). Jesus does not intend to undermine the course of human justice, he does, however, remind his disciples that in order to have fraternal relationships they must suspend judgment and condemnation. Forgiveness, in fact, is the pillar that holds up the life of the Christian community, because it shows the gratuitousness with which God has loved us first.

The Christian must forgive! Why? Because he has been forgiven. All of us who are here today, in the Square, we have been forgiven. There is not one of us who, in our own life, has had no need of God's forgiveness. And because we have been forgiven, we must forgive. We recite this every day in the *Our Father*: "Forgive us our sins; forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". That is, to forgive offenses, to forgive many things, because we have been forgiven of many offenses, of many sins. In this way it is easy to forgive: if God has forgiven me, why do I not forgive others? Am I greater than God? This pillar of forgiveness shows us the gratuitousness of the love of God, who loved us first. Judging and condemning a brother who sins is wrong. Not because we do not want to recognize sin, but because condemning the sinner breaks the bond of fraternity with him and spurns the mercy of God, who does not want to renounce any of his children. We do not have the power to condemn our erring brother, we are not above him: rather, we have a duty to recover the dignity of a child of the Father and to accompany him on his journey of conversion.

Jesus also indicates a second pillar to us who are his Church: "to give". Forgiveness is the first pillar; giving is the second pillar. "Give, and it will be given to you.... For the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (v. 38). God gives far beyond our merits, but He will be even more generous with those who have been generous on earth. Jesus does not say what will happen to those who do not give, but the image of the "measure" is a warning: with the measure that we give, it is we who determine how we will be judged, how we will be loved. If we look closely, there is a coherent logic: the extent to which you receive from God, you give to your brother, and the extent to which you give to your brother, you will receive from God!

Merciful love is therefore the only way forward. We all have a great need to be a bit more merciful, to not speak ill of others, to not judge, to not "sting" others with criticism, with envy and jealousy. We must forgive, be merciful, and live our lives with love.

This love enables Jesus' disciples to never lose the identity they received from Him, and to recognize themselves as children of the same Father. In the love that they practice in life we see reflected that Mercy that will never end (cf. 1 Cor 13:1-12). Do not forget this: mercy is a gift; forgiveness and giving. In this way, the heart expands, it grows with love. While selfishness and anger make the heart small, they make it harden like a stone. Which do you prefer? A heart of stone or a heart full of love? If you prefer a heart full of love, be merciful!

Forgiveness on the Cross (cfr Lk 23:39-43)

Dear Brother and Sisters, Good morning! The words that Jesus pronounces during his Passion find their peak in forgiveness. Jesus forgives: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). These are not only words, they become a concrete act of forgiveness offered to the “good thief” who was beside Him. Saint Luke writes of the *two criminals* who were crucified with Jesus, who turn to Him with contradictory attitudes.

The first criminal insults Him as all the people had insulted Him, as the rulers of the people had done, but this poor man, driven by despair says: “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (Lk 23:39). This cry testifies to the anguish of man before the mystery of death and the tragic awareness that only God can be the liberating answer: it is therefore unthinkable that the Messiah, the One sent by God, can be on the cross and yet doing nothing to save himself. And they did not understand this. They did not understand the mystery of Jesus’ *sacrifice*. However, Jesus saved us by *remaining* on the Cross. We all know that it is not easy “to remain on the cross”, on our little everyday crosses. He remained this way, on this great cross, in this great suffering, and there he saved us; there, he showed us his omnipotence and there he has forgiven us. There, he carries out his gift of love, and gave rise to our salvation springs. By dying on the Cross, innocent between two criminals, He certifies that the salvation of God can reach any man in any condition, even in the most negative and painful condition. God’s salvation is for everyone, without exception. It is offered to everyone. This is why the Jubilee is a time of grace and of mercy for everyone, the good and the bad, those who are healthy and those who suffer.

Remember the parable in which Jesus speaks of the marriage feast of the son of a powerful man of the land: when the guests did not want to come, he said to his servants:

“Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find” (Mt 22:9). We are all called: *the good and the bad*. The Church is not only for those who are good or those who seem good or believe they are good; The Church is for everyone, and even preferably for those who are bad, because the Church is mercy. And this time of grace and mercy reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ! (cf. Rom 8:39). To the one who is nailed to a hospital bed, to one who lives locked in a prison, to those who are trapped by war, I say: look at the Crucifix; God is with you all, he remains with you on the cross and offers himself as Saviour to all of us. To those of you who are in great suffering I say, Jesus is crucified for you, for us, for everyone. Allow the power of the Gospel to penetrate your heart and console you, to give you hope and the intimate certainty that *no one* is excluded from his forgiveness. You might ask me: “Tell me, Father, does a man who has done the worst things in his life, have the chance of being forgiven?” — “Yes! Yes: no one is excluded from the forgiveness of God. One need only draw near to Jesus, penitently, with the desire to be embraced by Him”.

This was the first criminal. *The other is the one known as the “good thief”*. His words are a wonderful example of repentance, a catechesis centred on learning to ask Jesus for forgiveness. First, he turns to his companion: “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” (Lk 23:40). In this way he highlights the starting point of repentance: the fear of God. Not the *dread* of God, no: the filial fear of God. It is not dread, but that respect that is due to God because He is God. It is a filial respect because He is Father. The good thief recalls the fundamental attitude that opens the way for trusting in God: the awareness of his omnipotence and of his infinite goodness. It is this trusting respect that helps to make room for God and for trust in his mercy. Then the good thief declares Jesus’ innocence and openly confesses his own guilt: “And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Lk 23:41).

Therefore, Jesus is there on the cross to be with those who are guilty: through this closeness, He offers them salvation. That which was a scandal to the leaders and the first thief, to those who were there and those who mocked Jesus, is, on the other hand, the foundation of the good thief’s faith. Thus he becomes a witness of Grace; the unthinkable happened: God loved me so much that he died on the Cross for me. This man’s very faith is a fruit of Christ’s grace: his eyes contemplate, on the Crucifix, the love God has for him, a poor sinner. It is true, he was a thief, he was a crook, he had stolen things throughout his life. But in the end, he regretted what he had done, and, seeing Jesus, so good and merciful, he managed to *steal* Heaven: he is a great thief, this man!

The good thief finally addresses Jesus directly, invoking his help: “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power” (Lk 23:42). He calls him by name, “Jesus”, with confidence, and thus confesses what that name means: “the Lord saves”: this is what the name “Jesus” means. That man asks Jesus to remember him. There is so much tenderness in this expression, so much humanity! It is the need of the human being not to be forsaken; that God may be always near. In this way a man condemned to death becomes an example, a model for a man, for a Christian who trusts in Jesus; and also a model of the Church who invokes the Lord so often in the liturgy, saying: “Remember... Remember your love...”.

While the good thief speaks of the future, saying: “when you *come in your kingly power*”, Jesus’ answer does not leave him waiting; he speaks of the present: he says “*today* you will be with me in Paradise” (v. 43). In the hour of the cross, the salvation of Christ reaches its *height*; and his promise to the good thief reveals the fulfillment of his mission: that is, to save sinners. At the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus had proclaimed “release to the captives” (Lk 4:18); in Jericho, in the house of Zacchaeus, a public sinner, Jesus declared that “the Son of man”, that is, He Himself, has come “to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10). On the Cross, his last act confirms the fulfillment of this plan of salvation. From beginning to end, He revealed Himself as Mercy, He revealed Himself as the definitive and unrepeatable Incarnation of the Father’s love. Jesus is truly the face of the Father’s mercy. And the good thief called him by name: “Jesus”. It is a short invocation, and we can all make it several times during the day: “Jesus”. Simply, “Jesus”. Let us do so throughout the day.

APPEAL FOR PEACE IN SYRIA... My thoughts turn once again to the beloved and tormented Syria. Traumatic news regarding the fate of the people of Aleppo continues to reach me. I join in their suffering through prayer and spiritual closeness. I express my deep sorrow and deep concern for what is happening in this already battered city, where so many defenseless persons — among them children, young, elderly and sick people — are dying, so many ... I renew my appeal to all for their commitment to the protection of civilians as an imperative and urgent obligation. I appeal to the conscience of those responsible for the bombing, you will be accountable before God!