

## Mercy and Service

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!* We are approaching the celebration of Easter, the central mystery of our faith. The Gospel of John — which we just heard — recounts that, before dying and rising for us, Jesus made a gesture that was carved into the memory of his disciples: the washing of feet. That gesture was so unexpected and unsettling that Peter didn't want to accept it. I would like to reflect on Christ's concluding words: "Do you know what I have done to you? [...] If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:12, 14). In this way Jesus indicates to his disciples that *service* is the way to live out their faith in him and to bear witness to his love. Jesus applied to himself the "Servant of God" image used by the Prophet Isaiah. He, who is Lord, makes himself servant!

By washing the feet of the Apostles, Jesus wished to reveal God's mode of action in regard to us, and to give an example of his "new commandment" (Jn 13:34) to love one another as He has loved us, that is, laying down his life for us. John repeats this in his First Letter: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. [...] Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth" (3:16, 18).

Love, therefore, is the *practical service* that we offer to others. Love is not a word, it is a deed, a service; *humble service, hidden and silent*, like Jesus said himself: "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Mt 6:3). It entails putting at others' disposal the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given us, so that the community might thrive (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-11). Furthermore, it is expressed in the *sharing* of material goods, so that no one be left in need. This sharing with and dedication to those in need is the lifestyle that God suggests, even to non-Christians, as the authentic path of humanity.

Finally, let us not forget that by washing the feet of his disciples and asking them to do the same, Jesus invites that we too confess our failings and pray for one another in order to learn how to forgive with the heart. In this sense, let us remember the words of Bishop St Augustine, when he wrote: "Nor should the Christian think it beneath him to do what was done by Christ. For when the body is bent at a brother's feet, the feeling of such humility is either awakened in the heart itself, or is strengthened if already present. [...] Let us therefore forgive one another his faults, and pray for one another's faults, and thus in a manner wash one another's feet (*In Joh* 58:4-5). Love, charity is service, helping others, serving others. There are many people who go through life like this, in service to others. Last week I received a letter from a person who thanked me for the Year of Mercy; she asked me to pray for her, that she might be able to grow closer to the Lord. The life of this person is caring for her mother and her brother: her mother is bedridden, elderly, lucid but unable to move; and her brother is disabled, in a wheelchair. This person, her life, is serving, supporting. And this is love! When you can forget yourself and think of others, this is love! And with the washing of feet the Lord teaches us to be servants, and more: to serve as he has served us, each and every one of us.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, *being merciful like the Father means following Jesus on the path of service*. Thank you.

## **Mercy and consolation**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,* In the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 30 and 31 are called the “Book of Consolation”, because God’s mercy is presented with his great capacity to comfort and open to hope the heart of the afflicted. Today we too want to hear this message of consolation.

Jeremiah addresses the Israelites who have been deported to a foreign land and he foretells their return to the homeland. This return is a sign of the infinite love of God the Father who never abandons his children, but who takes care of them and saves them. Exile was a devastating experience for Israel. Their faith had wavered because in a strange land, without the Temple, without worship, after seeing their homeland destroyed, it was difficult to continue to believe in the goodness of the Lord. What comes to mind is nearby Albania and how, after so much persecution and destruction, it has managed to rise up in dignity and in faith. This is how the Israelites suffered in exile.

We too can experience a sort of exile at times, when loneliness, suffering, death make us think we have been abandoned by God. How often have we heard these words “God has forgotten me” said by people who suffer and feel abandoned. Yet how many of our brothers and sisters at this time are living out an actual and dramatic situation of exile, far from their homeland, still shocked by the ruins of their homes, with fear in their heart and often, sadly, mourning the loss of loved ones! In these cases you might ask yourself: where is God? How is it possible that so much suffering can afflict innocent men, women and children? When they try to enter by some other route, the door is closed to them. They are there, at the border because so many doors and so many hearts have closed. Today’s migrants who suffer the cold, are without food. They cannot enter. They do not feel welcome. It really pleases me when I hear and see that nations and authorities open hearts and open doors! The Prophet Jeremiah gives us a first response. The exiled people are able to return to see their land and to feel the Lord’s mercy. It is the great message of consolation: God is not absent, not even today in these tragic situations, God is near, and he does great works of salvation for those who trust in him. One must not succumb to desperation, but continue to be certain that good conquers evil and that the Lord will dry every tear and free us from all fear.

Thus Jeremiah lends his voice to God’s words of love for his people: “I have loved you with a love everlasting; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall adorn yourself with timbrels, and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers (31:3-4). The Lord is faithful, he does not leave one to despair. God loves with boundless love, which not even sin can restrain, and thanks to him the heart of man is filled with joy and consolation. The consoling dream of returning to the homeland continues in the words of the prophet who, turning to those who shall return to Jerusalem, says: “They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more” (31:12).

In joy and in gratitude, the exiled will return to Zion, climbing the holy mountain toward the House of God, and in this way they will be able once more to raise hymns and prayers to the Lord who has freed them. This return to Jerusalem and its bounty is described with a verb that literally means “to stream, to flow”. The people are seen, in a paradoxical movement, as a river in flood that flows toward the high ground of Zion, climbing back up toward the mountain’s summit. It is a bold image to describe how great the Lord’s mercy is! The land, which the people had to abandon, has been plundered by enemies and devastated. Now, however, it comes back to life and blossoms once more. The exiled themselves shall resemble a watered garden, a fertile ground. Israel, led back to its homeland by the Lord, takes part in the victory of life over death and of blessing over curse.

Thus the people are strengthened and comforted by God. This word is important: comforted! The repatriated receive life from a font that freely waters them.

At this point, the prophet announces the fullness of joy, and again in the name of God proclaims: “I will turn their mourning in to joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow” (31:13).

The psalm tells us that when they return to their homeland their lips will break into smile; it is such a great joy! It is the gift that the Lord also wants to give to each one of us, with his forgiveness which transforms and reconciles. The Prophet Jeremiah has given us the message, portraying the return of the exiled as a great symbol of consolation given to the heart which converts. The Lord Jesus, for his part, has brought this message of the prophet to fulfillment. The true and radical return from exile and the comforting light, after the dark crisis of faith, is experienced at Easter, in the full and definitive experience of God’s love, the merciful love that gives joy, peace and eternal life.