



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

God's lullaby

Thursday, 11 December 2014

(by L'Osservatore Romano, Weekly ed. in English, n. 51, 19 December 2014)

God, out of his love for us, is like a mother who tenderly sings us lullabies and isn't afraid to even act "foolish". Francis thus called attention to the "temptation to commodify grace", affirming that: "If we had the courage to open our heart to God's tenderness, how much spiritual freedom we would have!". To have this experience, the Pope recommended we open the Bible and read the passage from the Prophet Isaiah read during Mass at Santa Marta on Thursday: Chapter 41, verses 13-20.

"The Prophet Isaiah speaks of salvation, of how God saves his people, and returns to that image, to that reality that is precisely God's closeness to his people", the Pontiff began. After all, "God saves by drawing near; He doesn't save from a distance: He draws near and walks with his people". This is the salvation of God, Pope Francis explained. Similarly "in the Book of Deuteronomy, He said clearly to the people: 'tell me, what nation has a God as near to it as you?' None!".

Thus, "it's precisely God's nearness to those his people that makes salvation". It is a "nearness which advances, progresses up to taking on our humanity". And "in this verse there is something that might perhaps make us smile a bit, but it's wonderful", Francis explained. His nearness is so great "that God appears here as a mother, like a mother chatting with her child: a mother when

she sings a lullaby to her child, using a childlike voice and making herself little like the child and speaking with a childlike tone, to the point of acting foolish". The Scripture reads in part: "Fear not, you worm Jacob'. And how often does a mother say such things to a child while caressing him?". The Scripture continues: "Behold, I will make of you a threshing sledge, new...". In other words, Pope Francis said, "I'll make you big...!". And like this, the mother "caresses him, and brings him closer to her".

And God does this too. This is God's tenderness. "He is so close to us that He expresses himself with this tenderness, the tenderness of a mother". It's the same "even when the child doesn't want his mother and moves away, cries", as Jesus, seeing Jerusalem from the mountain, "cried, because his people had distanced themselves". God, however, "appears with a mother's approach: closeness".

Francis affirmed that "this is the grace of God". Indeed, he said, "when we speak of grace, we are speaking of this nearness". In other words, "when one says: I am in a state of grace, I am close to the Lord or I allow the Lord to draw near me: that is grace!". However, "often times, in order to be certain, we want to control this grace, as if a child were to say to his mother: be good, be quiet now, I know you love me". And "the mother continues to say those things, which are funny, but it's love, the love that is always expressed this way". Does the child make his mother stop? "No! He lets himself be loved, because he's a child. Similarly, when Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven, He is like a child allowing himself to be loved by God". And "this is grace!".

Francis then highlighted that in history and also in life, we often "have the temptation to commodify grace", meaning to change "this grace which is the closeness, the nearness of God's heart" into "a commodity or something controllable". Because "we want to control grace". Therefore, "when we speak of grace, we are tempted to say: I have so much grace, yes, I am in grace!' What does that mean, that you are close to the Lord? 'No, I also have a clean soul, I'm in grace!'"'. What happens though, is that "this most beautiful truth of God's closeness slips into spiritual bookkeeping: 'No, I'll do this because this will give me 300 days of grace...'"'. With this type of reasoning, grace is reduced to "a commodity".

Historically, the Pope explained, "God's closeness to his people was betrayed, through this selfish attitude of wanting to control this grace, to commodify it". Francis gave the examples of "the parties in the time of Jesus". He first drew on the example of the Pharisees, who believed that "grace lay precisely in making law, following law and when there was doubt, to make another in order to clarify that law". But in so doing, "they ended up with 300, 400 commandments". However, "when a mother caresses her child, she doesn't do this: it's freely given". The Pharisees, on the contrary, took what God had freely given and "carved out a path of holiness that enslaved them". This is why "Jesus reproached them: 'You who place such a burden on the shoulders of the people...', too many laws!". As a result, they rendered "God's grace, this nearness, commodified".

Then there were the Sadducees, the Pope continued, who believed that “the grace of God was to ‘coexist politically, the people with the occupiers, and to make political pacts’”, arguing that “we’re fine, the people are carrying on, let’s go this way.... This is a grace, we are in God’s grace since we are able to go on....”. But Jesus reproached them for this too.

There were also the Essenes, who “were good, truly exceptional, but they were so fearful, they took no risks and they went into the monastery to pray”. And thus “that grace which leads forward, that nearness of God became closure as monks in a monastery, but not with the grace of God”.

From their song, however, “the zealots thought that God’s grace was precisely that war of liberation, the freedom fighters of Israel”. This was “also another way of commodifying grace”. However, the Pope indicated, “God’s grace is something else: it’s nearness, it’s tenderness”. He then proposed a rule that’s always useful: “if, in your relationship with the Lord, you don’t feel that He loves you with tenderness”, this means that “you are still missing something, you still don’t understand what grace is, you still haven’t received the grace that is this closeness”.

Francis then shared one of his experiences in the field, recalling when, many years ago, a woman approached him and said: “Father, I have ask a question because I don’t know whether or not I have to make confession”. He continued, recounting the woman’s words: “My husband and I went to our friends’ wedding and there was a Mass, and we said: is it okay, this Mass, Saturday evening? Does it pass? Is it valid for Sunday? You know, Father, that the Readings weren’t Sunday’s, they were for the wedding and I don’t know if this was valid or if I mortally sinned because I didn’t go to another Mass on Sunday”. In asking this question, Pope Francis recalled, “that woman was suffering”. And so “I said to that woman: ‘the Lord loves you so much: you went, you received communion, you were with Jesus.... Yes, so be calm, the Lord is not a merchant, the Lord loves, He is near’”.

Francis then spoke of St Paul, who “reacted forcibly against this spirituality of the law”. The law read, “I’m righteous if I do this, this, this. If I don’t do this, I’m not righteous”. Instead, however, “you are righteous because God has come close to you, because God caresses you, because God says these beautiful things to you with tenderness: this is our justice, this nearness of God, this tenderness, this love”. And “our God is so good” that He runs the “risk of seeming foolish to us”. Indeed, the Pope affirmed, “if we had the courage to open our heart to this tenderness of God, how much spiritual freedom we would have! How much!”. He then concluded with some practical advice: “Today, if you have a little time at home, pick up the Bible: Isaiah, Chapter 41, from verse 13 to 20, seven verses. Read it!”, he said, “in order to enter more deeply into the experience of “this tenderness of God”, of “this God who sings to each one of us a lullaby, like a mother”.
