



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** *Saint Peter's Square*

Wednesday, 2 March 2016 [\[Multimedia\]](#)

9. Mercy and correction

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

In speaking about divine mercy, we have often evoked the figure of the father of a family, who loves his children, helps them, cares for them, forgives them. As father, he teaches them and corrects them when they make mistakes, helping them to develop and grow in goodness. This is how God is presented in the first chapter of the Book of Prophet Isaiah, in which the Lord, a loving but also a careful and strict father, turns to Israel, accusing them of disloyalty and corruption, in order to lead them back to the path of justice. This is how our text begins: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; / for the Lord has spoken: / ‘Sons have I reared and brought up, / but they have rebelled against me. / The ox knows its owner, / and the ass its master’s crib; / but Israel does not know, / my people does not understand’” (1:2-3).

Through the prophet, God speaks to the people with the bitterness of a disappointed father, who raised his children, and now they have rebelled against him. Even animals are loyal to their master and recognize the hand that feeds them; yet, the people no longer recognize God, they refuse to understand. Although wounded, God lets love speak, and he appeals to the conscience of these degenerate children, that they may mend their ways and allow themselves to be loved again. This is what God does! He comes to meet us so that we may allow him, our God, to love us.

The father-son relationship, to which the prophets often refer in speaking about the Covenant relationship between God and his people, has been distorted. A parent’s mission to educate aims to raise children in freedom, teaching them how to be responsible, able to do good things for themselves and for others. But, because of sin, freedom becomes the pretext of autonomy, the pretext of pride, and pride leads to opposition and the illusion of self-sufficiency.

Thus God reprimands his people: “You have lost your way”. Lovingly and bitterly he says “my” people. God never disowns us; we are his people. Even the worst of men, the worst of women, the worst of people are his children. This is God: he never ever disowns us! He always says: “Come,

son, come daughter". This is the love of our Father; this is the mercy of God. Having such a Father gives us hope, gives us confidence. This belonging should be lived out in trust and obedience, with the knowledge that everything is a gift that comes from the Father's love. Instead, there is vanity, stupidity and idolatry.

This is why the prophet now directly addresses this people with severe words in order to help them to understand the gravity of their fault: "Ah, sinful nation, / [...] sons who deal corruptly! / They have forsaken the Lord, / they have despised the Holy One of Israel, / they are utterly estranged" (v. 4).

The consequence of sin is a state of suffering, of which the country also feels the effects, devastated and rendered desolate, to the point that Zion — that is, Jerusalem — becomes uninhabitable. Where God and his paternity are rejected, life is no longer possible, existence loses its roots, everything appears depraved and annihilated. However, even this painful moment is in view of salvation. The purpose of trial is that the people may experience the bitterness of those who abandon God, and thus confront the distressing emptiness of choosing death. Suffering, the inevitable consequence of a self-destructive decision, must make sinners reflect in order for them to be open to conversion and forgiveness.

This is the way of divine mercy. God does not deal with us according to our faults (cf. Ps 103[102]:10). Punishment becomes an instrument to spur reflection. Thus, one can understand that God forgives his people, he forgives and does not destroy all, but always leaves the door open to hope. Salvation entails the decision to listen and allow oneself to convert, but it is always freely given. Therefore the Lord, in his mercy, indicates a path that is not that of ritual sacrifices, but rather of justice. Worship is criticized not because it is useless in itself, but because, instead of expressing conversion, it puts itself forward; and it thus becomes a quest for one's own justice, creating the misleading conviction that it is the sacrifices that save, not divine mercy that forgives sin.

To understand this clearly: when a person is sick he goes to the doctor; when a person feels he is a sinner he goes to the Lord. If, instead of going to the doctor, he goes to a sorcerer, he is not healed. So often we do not go to the Lord, but prefer to take the wrong path, seeking justifications, justice or peace without him. God, says the prophet Isaiah, does not delight in the blood of bulls and of lambs (1:11), particularly if the offering is made by hands stained with our brothers' blood (v. 15).

I am thinking of several benefactors of the Church who come with an offering — "Take this offering for the Church" — which is the fruit of the blood of so many exploited, mistreated, enslaved people and their poorly paid work! I would say to these people: "Please, take back your cheque, burn it". The People of God, namely, the Church, does not need dirty money. They need hearts open to the mercy of God. It is important to approach God with clean hands, avoiding evil and practising goodness and justice. The way the prophet concludes is beautiful: "cease to do evil, / learn to do

good; / seek justice, / correct oppression; / defend the fatherless, / plead for the widow” (vv. 16-17).

Think of the many refugees who land in Europe and do not know where to go. Now, the Lord says, your sins, though they be scarlet, shall become white as snow, pure white like wool, and the people will be able to eat the good of the land and live in peace (cf. v. 19).

This is the miracle of forgiveness that God — the forgiveness that God as Father — wants to give to his people. God’s mercy is offered to everyone, and the prophet’s words are valid today for all of us, who are called to live as Children of God.

Special greetings:

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors at today’s Audience, including those from Ireland, Cameroon and the United States of America. With prayerful good wishes that the current Jubilee of Mercy will be for you and your families a moment of grace and spiritual renewal, I invoke upon all of you joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you all!

I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and *newlyweds*. The day after tomorrow, the First Friday of the month, is dedicated to devotion to the Heart of Jesus. Dear *young people*, may you spend the day in which Jesus’ death is commemorated, with particular spiritual intensity; dear *sick people*, look to Christ’s Cross as a support in your suffering; dear *newlyweds*, in your marital home, may you abstain from vice and practice virtue.