



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

A grandmother's lesson

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“God forgives everything; otherwise the world would not exist”: these words, spoken by an elderly Portuguese woman to Jorge Bergoglio in 1992, provide a real “lesson” at the beginning of the Holy Year of Mercy. Warning against falling into “clerical rigidity”, the Pope suggested instead choosing without hesitation the road of hope and mercy that makes us “free”. At Mass on Monday morning in the Chapel of Santa Marta, Pope Francis again recommended letting your “eyes be opened”, so as to go beyond in order to see and to speak the truth.

“In the First Reading”, the Pope noted immediately, “we heard a passage from the Book of Numbers” (24:2-7, 15-17) about the “story of Balaam: he was a prophet, but he was also a man, who had defects. He too sinned”. Francis remarked that “we all have sins, everyone, we are all sinners”. But “do not be afraid”, he reassured, “God is greater than our sins”.

The Pope explained that Balaam “is ‘hired out’ to a certain Balak, a general and king, who wants to destroy the people of God”, and who sends Balaam “to prophesy against the people of God”. However, “on the journey, Balaam meets the angel of the Lord and his heart is changed, he sees the truth”. Nevertheless, “he does not change parties: today I belong to this political party and then go over to this other one. He changes from error to truth and tells what he sees”.

“It is beautiful”, Pope Francis added, “the way the Book of Numbers tells this story: ‘The oracle of Balaam, the oracle of the man whose eyes are opened’”. In fact, the Pope explained, “when his heart is changed he converts, his eyes are opened and he sees afar, he sees the truth, with an open heart, with the heart — with good will you always see the truth — and he speaks the truth”.

“It is a truth that gives hope, because he has the desert before him, the desert is right in front of him, and he sees the tribes of Israel: ‘How fair are your tents, your encampments, O Israel! Like valleys that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the Lord has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters’”. Thus, “beyond the desert he sees fruitfulness, beauty and victory”.

But “what has happened in Balaam’s heart?”. The fact, Pope Francis said, is that “he opened his heart and the Lord gave him the virtue of hope”. And “hope is that Christian virtue that we have as a great gift from God that lets us see far beyond, beyond the problems, beyond the pain and difficulties, beyond our sins”. It shows us “the beauty of God”.

“Hope”, therefore, is the key word, he said. And “when I am with a person who has the virtue of hope and is in a difficult moment in his life — be it a disease, concern for a son or daughter or someone in the family, or anything. But he has this virtue, in the midst of pain his eyes have been opened. He has the freedom to see beyond, always beyond”. This is precisely “the hope, the prophecy that the Church gives us today: she needs men and women of hope, even in the midst of problems”. Because “hope opens horizons, hope is freeing, it does not enslave and it always finds a way to set a situation straight”.

In the passage from the Gospel of Matthew (21:23-27) from the day’s Liturgy, the Pope continued, “we see instead men who do not have this freedom, who have no horizons, men who are closed in their calculations”. Such that the chief priests and elders of the people ask the Lord: “By what authority are you doing these things?”. When Jesus poses his next question, they make their calculations. “If I say this I have this danger, and if I say that...”. Then they answer “we do not know”. However, the Pope remarked, “human calculations close the heart, they block freedom”. It is “hope” that “lightens” our load. Therefore, it is “this hypocrisy of the doctors of the law that we see in the Gospel, which closes the heart: it enslaves us. These men were slaves”.

For his part, “Balaam had the freedom to say to the one who had ‘hired him out’: ‘I see this, if you do not like it, that’s your problem; but I tell you what I see’”. Instead, “they do not have freedom, they are slaves to their rigidity”. Pope Francis affirmed that we can say “that both, not technically, are close to the Church, they are men of the Church: Balaam, a prophet; and these doctors of the law”.

“How beautiful is the freedom, magnanimity and hope of a man and a woman of the Church”, the Pope affirmed. And “how awful and how much harm is done by the rigidity of a woman and man of the Church: clerical rigidity, which has no hope”.

“In this Year of Mercy”, the Pope said, “there are these two paths”. On one side there are “those who have hope in the mercy of God and know that God is Father”, that “God always forgives”, and that he forgives “everything”. That “beyond the desert there is the embrace of the Father, forgiveness”. However, on the other hand “there are also those who take refuge in slavery, in its very rigidity, and they know nothing of God’s mercy”. The doctors mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew “had studied, but their knowledge did not save them”.

“I would like to conclude”, the Pope said, “with a story that happened to me in 1992. An image of Our Lady of Fatima had arrived in the diocese. In a large mass for the sick — it was immense, held in a big field, with so many people — I went to confess there. I heard confessions from noon until almost six, when Mass had ended. There were many confessors”. Right “when I got up to go to celebrate a confirmation elsewhere”, Pope Francis said, “I was approached by an elderly woman; she was 80 years old, with eyes that saw beyond, eyes full of hope”. And “I said to her: ‘Grandma, have you come to confess? But you have no sins!’”. The woman responded: “Father, we all have sins!”. Fr Bergoglio continued the conversation: “Will the Lord, perhaps, not forgive them?”. The woman, strong in her hope, said: “God forgives everything, because if God did not forgive everything, the world would not exist”.

In considering “these two types of people” — those who are “free” in their “hope, that which brings you the mercy of God”; and those who are “closed, the legalistic, the truly selfish, slaves to their rigidity” — Pope Francis recommended we take the lesson he received from the elderly Portuguese woman: “God forgives everything, he is only waiting for you to draw close to him”.