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General audience: forgiveness on the Cross

The words pronounced by Jesus during His passion culminate in forgiveness. Jesus forgives. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do". These are not merely words since, as the Pope explained in today's general audience, they become the concrete act of forgiveness granted to the "good thief", as St. Luke narrates in his Gospel.

The apostle tells us about the two thieves crucified with Jesus, who address Him with contrary attitudes. The first insults Him, as the people had done, as the governors of the people had done; but this "poor man", driven by desperation, says, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

This cry, said the Holy Father, "demonstrates the anguish of man before the mystery of death, and the tragic awareness that only God can be the liberating answer: therefore it is unthinkable that the Messiah, God's emissary, may stay on the cross without doing anything to save Himself. And he did not understand this; they did not understand the mystery of Jesus' sacrifice. And Yet Jesus saved us by remaining on the cross. We all know that it is not easy to stay on the cross, on our little crosses of everyday life. He, upon this great cross, in this great suffering, stayed there, and there He saved us; there He showed His omnipotence and there He forgave us. There He fulfilled his gift of love and from this there sprang, forever, our salvation. Dying on the cross, innocent between two criminals, He shows that salvation in God can be attained by any man in any condition, even the most negative or painful. God's salvation is for everyone, without exclusion. It is offered to everyone. Therefore, the Jubilee is a time for grace and mercy for all, good and bad, those who are healthy and those who suffer".

As in the parable of the wedding banquet of the son of a powerful man who, when the invitees did not want to come, sent his servants out to call all those they could find to the feast, "we are all called, good and bad. The Church is not only for the good, or for those who seem good or believe themselves good. The Church is for everyone, and even preferably for the wicked, because the Church is mercy. And this time of grace and mercy reminds us that nothing can separate us from Christ's love. To those who are stuck in a hospital bed, those who live shut away in prison, those who are trapped by wars, I say: look to the Crucified. God is with you, He remains with you on the cross and offers Himself as a Saviour to all of us. To you who suffer so much, I say ... let the power of the Gospel enter into your hearts and comfort you, give you hope and the intimate certainty that no-one is excluded from His forgiveness".

“But you might say to me”, he said to the faithful in St. Peter’s Square, “But tell me, Father, those who have done the worst things in life, do they have the chance of being forgiven?’. Yes! No-one is excluded from God’s forgiveness. He or she must simply come to Jesus, repentant and with the desire to be embraced by Him”.

The Pope went on to describe the other so-called “good thief”, whose words are “a wonderful model of repentance, a concentrated catechesis for learning to ask Jesus’ forgiveness. First, He turns to his companion: ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’, thus bringing into focus the starting point for repentance: fear of God. But not dread of God; no: filial reverence towards God. It is not fear, but rather that respect that is due to God because He is God. It is a filial respect, because He is our Father. The good thief recalls that fundamental attitude that opens us up to trust in God: the awareness of His omnipotence and His infinite goodness. It is this trustful respect that helps to make space for God and to trust in His mercy”.

“Then, the good thief also declares Jesus’ innocence and openly confesses his own guilt, commenting that are condemned ‘justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong’. So Jesus is there on the cross to stay with those who are guilty; through this closeness, He offers them salvation. What is a scandal for the leaders and for the first thief, is instead the foundation of his faith. And in this way the good thief becomes a witness of Grace: the unthinkable has happened, and God has loved me to the point of dying on the cross for me. The very faith of this man is fruit of Christ’s grace: his eyes contemplate in the Crucified the love of God for him, a poor sinner. It is true, he was a thief ... he had stolen all his life. But at the end, repentant for what he had done, looking upon Jesus, so good and merciful, he managed indeed to steal heaven too! He was a good thief, this one!”

Finally, the good thief addresses Jesus directly, imploring His help. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”. “He calls Him by name, ‘Jesus’, with confidence, and in this way confesses what that name indicates: ‘the Lord saves’. This is the meaning of the name Jesus. This man asks Jesus to remember him. How much tenderness there is in this expression: how much humanity! It is the need of the human being not to be abandoned, for God always to be close to him. In this way, a man condemned to death becomes a model of the Christian who entrusts himself to Jesus ... and also a model of the Church who in the liturgy very often invokes the Lord, saying ‘remember Your love’”.

“While the good thief speaks about the future – ‘when you come into your Kingdom’ – Jesus’ answer does not make him wait. He says, ‘today you will be with me in paradise’. In the hour of the cross, Christ’s salvation reaches its apex; and His promise to the good thief reveals the fulfilment of His mission: that is, to save sinners. At the beginning of His ministry, in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus had proclaimed ‘liberty to the captives’; in Jericho, in the house of the sinner, the tax collector Zacchaeus, he had declared that ‘the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost’. On the cross, his last act confirms the fulfilment of this salvific plan. From the beginning to the end He showed Himself to be Mercy, the definitive and unrepeatable incarnation of the Father’s love. Jesus is truly the face of the merciful Father”.

“And this good thief called Him by name: Jesus”, concluded the Holy Father. “It is a brief invocation, and we can all do this during the day many times: ‘Jesus’, ‘Jesus’, simply. And do this throughout the day”.
