



BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 26 October 2011*

Prayer in preparation of the Meeting in Assisi
Pilgrims of Truth, Pilgrims of Peace

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today the usual appointment of the General Audience assumes a special character, because we are on the eve of the *Day of Reflection, Dialogue and Prayer for Peace and Justice in the World*, which will take place tomorrow in Assisi, 25 years after the first historic meeting Blessed John Paul II convened. I chose to give this Day the name of “Pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace”, to stress the commitment that we desire to solemnly renew, together with the members of different religions, and also with men and women, non-believers who sincerely search for the truth, in promoting the authentic good of humanity and in building peace. As I have already mentioned, “Whoever is on the path to God cannot but transmit peace, whoever builds peace cannot but come closer to God”.

As Christians, we believe that the most precious contribution we can make to the cause of peace is that of prayer. That is why we are here today, as the Church of Rome, together with the pilgrims who have come to the City, to listen to the word of God, to invoke with faith the gift of peace. The Lord can enlighten our minds and hearts and guide us to be builders of justice and reconciliation in our daily lives and in the world.

In the passage from the Prophet Zechariah that we just listened to, a proclamation full of hope and light resounds (cf. 9:10). God promises salvation, he invites us to “rejoice greatly” because this salvation is coming true. He speaks of a King: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he” (v. 9), but the one who is announced is not a king invested with human power, the force of arms; he is not a king who dominates by political or military might; he is a gentle king, who reigns with humility and meekness before God and men, a king different from the great sovereigns of the world: “riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass”, says the Prophet (*ibid.*). He appears mounted on the animal of the common man, of the poor, as opposed to the war chariots of the hosts of the earth’s powerful. Indeed, he is a king who will cut off these chariots of war, break the bow of battle, command peace to the nations (cf. v. 10).

But who is this king of whom the Prophet Zechariah speaks? Let us go for a moment to Bethlehem and listen again to what the Angel says to the shepherds who keep watch in the night guarding their flock. The Angel announces to them a great joy which will come to all the people, tied to a humble

sign: a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (cf. Lk 2:8-12). And a multitude of the heavenly host sings “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased” (v. 14), to people of good will. The birth of that babe, who is Jesus, brings a proclamation of peace for the whole world. But let us now go to the final moments of Christ’s life, when he enters Jerusalem greeted by a cheering crowd. The Prophet Zechariah’s message of the coming of a humble and meek king comes back to mind of Jesus’ disciples in a special way after the events of the passion, death and resurrection, of the Paschal Mystery, when they look with the eyes of faith to that joyful entry of their Master into the Holy City. He rides a borrowed ass (cf. Mt 21:2-7): he is not in a rich carriage, not on a horse like the great ones. He does not enter Jerusalem accompanied by a powerful host of chariots and horsemen. He is a poor king, the king of those who are the poor people of God. In the Greek text the word *praeîs* appears, meaning the meek, the mild; Jesus is the king of the *anawim*, of those whose hearts are free from the longing for power and material riches, the desire and quest for domination over others. Jesus is the king of those who have that interior freedom that makes one capable of overcoming greed, the selfishness that is in the world, and know that God alone is their wealth.

Jesus is the poor king among the poor, meek among those who desire to be meek. In this way he is the king of peace, thanks to the power of God, who is the power of goodness, the power of love. He is a king who cuts off the chariots and war horses, who breaks the bows of war; a king who realizes peace on the Cross, joining earth and heaven and building a bridge of brotherly love among all people. The Cross is the new *bow of peace*, the sign and the instrument of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of understanding, the sign that love is stronger than any violence and oppression, stronger than death: evil is conquered by good, by love.

This is the new kingdom of peace of which Christ is king; and it is a kingdom that encompasses the whole earth. The Prophet Zechariah announces that this meek king, a peaceful one, shall rule “from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zech 9:10). The kingdom that Christ inaugurates has universal dimensions. The horizon of this poor meek king, is not that of a territory, of a State, but the ends of the world; beyond every barrier of race, language, culture, he creates a communion. He creates unity. And where do we see this message being realized today? In the great network of Eucharistic communities that covers the whole of the earth, Zechariah’s shining prophecy surfaces anew. It is a vast mosaic of communities in which this gentle and peaceful king’s sacrifice of love is made present; it is a vast mosaic which constitutes the “Kingdom of peace” of Jesus from sea to sea to the ends of the earth; it is a multitude of “islands of peace”, radiating peace. Everywhere, in every situation, in every culture, from big cities with their sky-scrapers to little villages with their humble dwellings, from massive cathedrals to small chapels, he comes, he makes himself present; and by entering into communion with him men too are united among themselves in one single body, overcoming division, rivalry, grudges. The Lord comes in the Eucharist to take us out of our individualism, away from our particularities that exclude others, in order to form us into one single body, one single kingdom of peace in a divided world.

But how can we build this kingdom of peace in which Christ is king? The commandment which he leaves his Apostles and, through them, each of us is: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:19). Like Jesus, the messengers of peace of his kingdom must set out, they must respond to his invitation. They must go, but not with the might of war or the force of power. In the Gospel passage that we listened to Jesus sends 70 disciples out into the great harvest, which is the world, inviting them to pray the Lord of the harvest that there may be no lack of labourers in his harvest (cf. Lk 10:1-3); but he does not send them with powerful means, but “as lambs in the midst of wolves” (v. 3), without purse,

bag, or sandals (cf. v. 4). St John Chrysostom, in one of his homilies, comments: “For so long as we are sheep, we conquer: though ten thousand wolves prowl around, we overcome and prevail. But if we become wolves, we are worsted, for the help of our Shepherd departs from us” (*Homily 33, 1: PG 57, 389*). Christians must never yield to the temptation to become wolves among wolves; it is not with might, with force, with violence that Christ’s kingdom of peace grows, but with the gift of self, with love carried to the extreme, even towards enemies. Jesus does not conquer the world with the force of arms, but with the force of the Cross, which is the true guarantee of victory. The consequence of this for those who want to be disciples of the Lord, his envoys, is to be prepared for the passion and martyrdom, to lose their own life for him, so that in the world goodness, love and peace may triumph. This is the prerequisite needed to say, upon entering into every situation: “Peace be to this house” (Lk 10:5).

In front of St Peter’s Basilica, these are two large statues of Sts Peter and Paul, easily identifiable: St Peter holds in his hand the keys, St Paul holds in his hands a sword. Those unfamiliar with the history of the latter might think that this was a great leader who led powerful armies and subdued peoples and nations by the sword, obtaining fame and wealth for himself by the blood of others. Instead it is exactly the opposite: the sword held between his hands is the instrument by which Paul was put to death, with which he was martyred and that shed his blood. His battle was not one of violence, of war, but that of martyrdom for Christ. His only weapon was the message: “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). And his preaching was not based on “plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power” (v. 4). He dedicated his life to spreading the Gospel message of reconciliation and peace, spending all of his energy to make it vibrant to the ends of the earth. And this was his strength: he did not seek a tranquil, comfortable life, free from hardships, from opposition, but was consumed by the Gospel, he gave himself unreservedly, and so became the great messenger of Christ’s peace and reconciliation. The sword that St Paul holds in his hands is a reminder, too, of the power of truth, that can often wound, it can hurt; the Apostle remained faithful to this truth to the end. He served it, suffered for it, he gave up his life for it. This same logic holds true also for us, if we want to be bearers of the kingdom of peace proclaimed by the Prophet Zechariah and fulfilled by Christ: we must be willing to pay in person, to suffer misunderstanding, rejection, persecution in the first person. It is not the sword of the conqueror that builds peace, but the sword of the suffering, of whoever gives up his/her own life.

Dear brothers and sisters, as Christians let us ask God for the gift of peace, let us pray to him that he may make us instruments of his peace in a world still torn by hatred, by divisions, by selfishness, by war. Let us ask him that the meeting tomorrow in Assisi may encourage dialogue between people of different religious confessions and bring a ray of light capable of illuminating the minds and hearts of all men, so that bitterness may give way to forgiveness, division to reconciliation, hatred to love, violence to gentleness, and that peace may reign in the world. Amen.

Before the end of the General Audience, the Holy Father stopped for a moment in St Peter’s Basilica to greet the pilgrims gathered as there was not enough space in the Paul VI Audience Hall.

I am pleased to receive you in Saint Peter’s Basilica and to extend a warm welcome to all of you who could not be accommodated in the Audience Hall. Always stay faithfully united to Christ and bear joyful witness to the Gospel. To all of you I cordially impart my Blessing.

The Pope then returned to the Paul VI Audience Hall, where the celebration took place and where then he made an appeal and greeted the various language groups.

Dear brothers and sisters, before greeting you in the different languages, I will start by making an Appeal. In this time, my thoughts go out to the peoples of Turkey severely hit by an earthquake, causing a grave loss of human life, many missing and extensive damage. I invite you all to join me in prayer for those who have lost their lives and to be spiritually close to the many people so harshly tried. May the Most High sustain those engaged in relief efforts. And now I shall greet you in the different languages.

To special groups

I am happy to welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today. I ask you to accompany me in prayer as I journey tomorrow to Assisi for the celebration of the Day of Reflection, Dialogue and Prayer for Peace and Justice in the World, together with representatives of different religions. I extend special greetings to the pilgrims from the Diocese of Niigata in Japan celebrating their centenary. I also welcome those present from England, Denmark, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, Vietnam and the United States. May Almighty God bless all of you!

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. May the example of St Francis of Assisi, at whose tomb we will pray tomorrow, sustain you, dear *young people*, in your commitment of daily fidelity to Christ; encourage you, dear *sick people*, always to follow Jesus on the path of trial and suffering; help you, dear *newlyweds*, to make your family a place of constant encounter with the love of God and of neighbour. Thank you all. Good day.