



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 5 July 2006

John, son of Zebedee

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Let us dedicate our meeting today to remembering another very important member of the Apostolic College: John, son of Zebedee and brother of James. His typically Jewish name means: "the Lord has worked grace". He was mending his nets on the shore of Lake Tiberias when Jesus called him and his brother (cf. Mt 4: 21; Mk 1: 19).

John was always among the small group that Jesus took with him on specific occasions. He was with Peter and James when Jesus entered Peter's house in Capernaum to cure his mother-in-law (cf. Mk 1: 29); with the other two, he followed the Teacher into the house of Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue whose daughter he was to bring back to life (cf. Mk 5: 37); he followed him when he climbed the mountain for his Transfiguration (cf. Mk 9: 2).

He was beside the Lord on the Mount of Olives when, before the impressive sight of the Temple of Jerusalem, he spoke of the end of the city and of the world (cf. Mk 13: 3); and, lastly, he was close to him in the Garden of Gethsemane when he withdrew to pray to the Father before the Passion (cf. Mk 14: 33).

Shortly before the Passover, when Jesus chose two disciples to send them to prepare the room for the Supper, it was to him and to Peter that he entrusted this task (cf. Lk 22: 8).

His prominent position in the group of the Twelve makes it somewhat easier to understand the

initiative taken one day by his mother: she approached Jesus to ask him if her two sons - John and James - could sit next to him in the Kingdom, one on his right and one on his left (cf. Mt 20: 20-21).

As we know, Jesus answered by asking a question in turn: he asked whether they were prepared to drink the cup that he was about to drink (cf. Mt 20: 22). The intention behind those words was to open the two disciples' eyes, to introduce them to knowledge of the mystery of his person and to suggest their future calling to be his witnesses, even to the supreme trial of blood.

A little later, in fact, Jesus explained that he had not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (cf. Mt 20: 28).

In the days after the Resurrection, we find "the sons of Zebedee" busy with Peter and some of the other disciples on a night when they caught nothing, but that was followed, after the intervention of the Risen One, by the miraculous catch: it was to be "the disciple Jesus loved" who first recognized "the Lord" and pointed him out to Peter (cf. Jn 21: 1-13).

In the Church of Jerusalem, John occupied an important position in supervising the first group of Christians. Indeed, Paul lists him among those whom he calls the "pillars" of that community (cf. Gal 2: 9). In fact, Luke in the Acts presents him together with Peter while they are going to pray in the temple (cf. Acts 3: 1-4, 11) or appear before the Sanhedrin to witness to their faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 4: 13, 19).

Together with Peter, he is sent to the Church of Jerusalem to strengthen the people in Samaria who had accepted the Gospel, praying for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 8: 14-15). In particular, we should remember what he affirmed with Peter to the Sanhedrin members who were accusing them: "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4: 20).

It is precisely this frankness in confessing his faith that lives on as an example and a warning for all of us always to be ready to declare firmly our steadfast attachment to Christ, putting faith before any human calculation or concern.

According to tradition, John is the "disciple whom Jesus loved", who in the Fourth Gospel laid his head against the Teacher's breast at the Last Supper (cf. Jn 13: 23), stood at the foot of the Cross together with the Mother of Jesus (cf. Jn 19: 25) and lastly, witnessed both the empty tomb and the presence of the Risen One himself (cf. Jn 20: 2; 21: 7).

We know that this identification is disputed by scholars today, some of whom view him merely as the prototype of a disciple of Jesus. Leaving the exegetes to settle the matter, let us be content here with learning an important lesson for our lives: the Lord wishes to make each one of us a disciple who lives in personal friendship with him.

To achieve this, it is not enough to follow him and to listen to him outwardly: it is also necessary to live with him and like him. This is only possible in the context of a relationship of deep familiarity, imbued with the warmth of total trust. This is what happens between friends; for this reason Jesus said one day: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.... No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15: 13, 15).

In the apocryphal *Acts of John*, the Apostle is not presented as the founder of Churches nor as the guide of already established communities, but as a perpetual wayfarer, a communicator of the faith in the encounter with "souls capable of hoping and of being saved" (18: 10; 23: 8).

All is motivated by the paradoxical intention to make visible the invisible. And indeed, the Oriental Church calls him quite simply "the Theologian", that is, the one who can speak in accessible terms of the divine, revealing an arcane access to God through attachment to Jesus.

Devotion to the Apostle John spread from the city of Ephesus where, according to an ancient tradition, he worked for many years and died in the end at an extraordinarily advanced age, during the reign of the Emperor Trajan.

In Ephesus in the sixth century, the Emperor Justinian had a great basilica built in his honour, whose impressive ruins are still standing today. Precisely in the East, he enjoyed and still enjoys great veneration.

In Byzantine iconography he is often shown as very elderly - according to tradition, he died under the Emperor Trajan - in the process of intense contemplation, in the attitude, as it were, of those asking for silence.

Indeed, without sufficient recollection it is impossible to approach the supreme mystery of God and of his revelation. This explains why, years ago, Athenagoras, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the man whom Pope Paul VI embraced at a memorable encounter, said: "John is the origin of our loftiest spirituality. Like him, 'the silent ones' experience that mysterious exchange of hearts, pray for John's presence, and their hearts are set on fire" (O. Clément, *Dialoghi con Atenagora*, Turin 1972, p. 159).

May the Lord help us to study at John's school and learn the great lesson of love, so as to feel we are loved by Christ "to the end" (Jn 13: 1), and spend our lives for him.

* * *

My prayerful greetings go to the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth assembled in Rome for

their General Chapter. I also greet the members of the pilgrimage "in the footsteps of St Columban", and the School Sisters of Notre Dame celebrating their Silver Jubilees. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially the pilgrims from England, Ireland, Malta, New Zealand, Indonesia, Canada and the United States, I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I address an affectionate thought to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*.

Yesterday, we celebrated the liturgical memorial of Bl. Piergiorgio Frassati. May his example of fidelity to Christ awaken in you, dear *young people*, resolutions of courageous Gospel witness.

May it help you, dear *sick people*, to offer up your daily sufferings, so that the civilization of love may be established in the world. May it support you, dear *newly-weds*, in the commitment to founding your family on intimate union with God.

My good wishes go to all those who will be taking part in the Symposium on the safeguard of creation scheduled to take place in the next few days in Brazil. I hope this important event organized by Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople will help to foster ever greater respect for nature, entrusted by God to hard-working and responsible human hands.

© Copyright 2006 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana