



The Holy See

PILGRIMAGE

OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

TO THE HOLY LAND

(8-15 MAY 2009) HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Josafat Valley - Jerusalem

Tuesday, 12 May 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

“Christ is risen, alleluia!” With these words I greet you with immense affection. I thank Patriarch Fouad Twal for his words of welcome on your behalf, and before all else I express my joy at being able to celebrate this Eucharist with you, the Church in Jerusalem. We are gathered beneath the Mount of Olives, where our Lord prayed and suffered, where he wept for love of this City and the desire that it should know “the path to peace” (Lk 19:42), and whence he returned to the Father, giving his final earthly blessing to his disciples and to us. Today let us accept this blessing. He gives it in a special way to you, dear brothers and sisters, who stand in an unbroken line with those first disciples who encountered the Risen Lord in the breaking of the bread, those who experienced the outpouring of the Spirit in the Upper Room and those who were converted by the preaching of Saint Peter and the other apostles. My greeting also goes to all those present, and in a special way to those faithful of the Holy Land who for various reasons were not able to be with us today.

As the Successor of Saint Peter, I have retraced his steps in order to proclaim the Risen Christ in your midst, to confirm you in the faith of your fathers, and to invoke upon you the consolation which is the gift of the Paraclete. Standing before you today, I wish to acknowledge the difficulties, the frustration, and the pain and suffering which so many of you have endured as a result of the conflicts which have afflicted these lands, and the bitter experiences of displacement which so many of your families have known and – God forbid – may yet know. I hope my presence here is a

sign that you are not forgotten, that your persevering presence and witness are indeed precious in God's eyes and integral to the future of these lands. Precisely because of your deep roots in this land, your ancient and strong Christian culture, and your unwavering trust in God's promises, you, the Christians of the Holy Land, are called to serve not only as a beacon of faith to the universal Church, but also as a leaven of harmony, wisdom and equilibrium in the life of a society which has traditionally been, and continues to be, pluralistic, multiethnic and multireligious.

In today's second reading, the Apostle Paul tells the Colossians to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1). His words resound with particular force here, beneath the Garden of Gethsemani, where Jesus accepted the chalice of suffering in complete obedience to the Father's will, and where, according to tradition, he ascended to the right hand of the Father to make perpetual intercession for us, the members of his Body. Saint Paul, the great herald of Christian hope, knew the cost of that hope, its price in suffering and persecution for the sake of the Gospel, yet he never wavered in his conviction that Christ's resurrection was the beginning of a new creation. As he tells us: "When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, you too will be revealed with him in glory!" (Col 3:4).

Paul's exhortation to "set our minds on the things that are above" must constantly echo in our hearts. His words point us to the fulfilment of faith's vision in that heavenly Jerusalem where, in fidelity to the ancient prophecies, God will wipe away the tears from every eye, and prepare a banquet of salvation for all peoples (cf. Is 25:6-8; Rev 21:2-4).

This is the hope, this the vision, which inspires all who love this earthly Jerusalem to see her as a prophecy and promise of that universal reconciliation and peace which God desires for the whole human family. Sadly, beneath the walls of this same City, we are also led to consider how far our world is from the complete fulfilment of that prophecy and promise. In this Holy City where life conquered death, where the Spirit was poured out as the first-fruits of the new creation, hope continues to battle despair, frustration and cynicism, while the peace which is God's gift and call continues to be threatened by selfishness, conflict, division and the burden of past wrongs. For this reason, the Christian community in this City which beheld the resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit must hold fast all the more to the hope bestowed by the Gospel, cherishing the pledge of Christ's definitive victory over sin and death, bearing witness to the power of forgiveness, and showing forth the Church's deepest nature as the sign and sacrament of a humanity reconciled, renewed and made one in Christ, the new Adam.

Gathered beneath the walls of this city, sacred to the followers of three great religions, how can we not turn our thoughts to Jerusalem's universal vocation? Heralded by the prophets, this vocation also emerges as an indisputable fact, a reality irrevocably grounded in the complex history of this city and its people. Jews, Muslims and Christians alike call this city their spiritual home. How much needs to be done to make it truly a "city of peace" for all peoples, where all can come in pilgrimage in search of God, and hear his voice, "a voice which speaks of peace" (cf. Ps 85:8)!

Jerusalem, in fact, has always been a city whose streets echo with different languages, whose stones are trod by people of every race and tongue, whose walls are a symbol of God's provident care for the whole human family. As a microcosm of our globalized world, this City, if it is to live up to its universal vocation, must be a place which teaches universality, respect for others, dialogue and mutual understanding; a place where prejudice, ignorance and the fear which fuels them, are overcome by honesty, integrity and the pursuit of peace. There should be no place within these walls for narrowness, discrimination, violence and injustice. Believers in a God of mercy – whether they identify themselves as Jews, Christians or Muslims – must be the first to promote this culture of reconciliation and peace, however painstakingly slow the process may be, and however burdensome the weight of past memories.

Here I would like to speak directly to the tragic reality – which cannot fail to be a source of concern to all who love this City and this land – of the departure of so many members of the Christian community in recent years. While understandable reasons lead many, especially the young, to emigrate, this decision brings in its wake a great cultural and spiritual impoverishment to the City. Today I wish to repeat what I have said on other occasions: in the Holy Land there is room for everyone! As I urge the authorities to respect, to support and to value the Christian presence here, I also wish to assure you of the solidarity, love and support of the whole Church and of the Holy See.

Dear friends, in the Gospel we have just heard, Saint Peter and Saint John run to the empty tomb, and John, we are told, “saw and believed” (Jn 20:8). Here in the Holy Land, with the eyes of faith, you, together with the pilgrims from throughout the world who throng its churches and shrines, are blessed to “see” the places hallowed by Christ's presence, his earthly ministry, his passion, death and resurrection, and the gift of his Holy Spirit. Here, like the Apostle Saint Thomas, you are granted the opportunity to “touch” the historical realities which underlie our confession of faith in the Son of God. My prayer for you today is that you continue, day by day, to “see and believe” in the signs of God's providence and unfailing mercy, to “hear” with renewed faith and hope the consoling words of the apostolic preaching, and to “touch” the sources of grace in the sacraments, and to incarnate for others their pledge of new beginnings, the freedom born of forgiveness, the interior light and peace which can bring healing and hope to even the darkest of human realities.

In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, pilgrims in every century have venerated the stone which tradition tells us stood before the entrance to the tomb on the morning of Christ's resurrection. Let us return frequently to that empty tomb. There let us reaffirm our faith in the victory of life, and pray that every “heavy stone” that stands before the door of our hearts, blocking our complete surrender to the Lord in faith, hope and love, may be shattered by the power of the light and life which shone forth from Jerusalem to all the world that first Easter morn. Christ is risen, alleluia! He is truly risen, alleluia!

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