



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 16 February 2000

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. After the opening of the Holy Doors at the four Roman basilicas, we are now advancing at a great pace in the ecclesial journey of conversion and reconciliation offered by the Jubilee. As you know, one of the most significant and profoundly spiritual aspects of the Jubilee is a pilgrimage, a sign of every individual's condition as *homo viator*. As I stressed in the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee, a pilgrimage is "an exercise of practical asceticism, of repentance for human weaknesses, of constant vigilance over one's own frailty, of interior preparation for a change of heart" (cf. *Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 7).

This inner meaning of pilgrimage is further deepened and complemented by the elements of faith and spirituality stemming from sacred places, which by ancient tradition are the destination of individual and community pilgrimages. Indeed, like time, *space may also bear the stamp of particular saving actions of God*, and for precisely this reason there are some places where the encounter with the divine may be experienced more intensely (cf. *Letter Concerning Pilgrimage*, n. 2).

2. Aware of this basic spiritual meaning of pilgrimage, I decided to visit, in connection with the Jubilee celebrations, the land that was uniquely marked by God's interventions in salvation history. Therefore in the coming weeks I will go on pilgrimage, please God, to some of the places particularly linked to the Incarnation of the Word of God.

I would have liked first to visit *Ur of the Chaldees* (cf. *Letter Concerning Pilgrimage*, n. 5), the present day Tell el-Muqayyar in southern Iraq, the native land of Abraham, who later moved with

his family to *Haran* (cf. *Gn 11: 31*), where, according to the biblical account, he heard the Word of the Lord inviting him to leave his country for the land that God would show him (cf. *Gn 12: 1-3*).

With this invitation, Abraham became the instrument of a plan of salvation which embraced the future people of the Covenant and indeed all the peoples of the world. He obeyed and set out on his journey. With him *God's salvation began to travel the paths of human history*.

3. It is therefore important "*to follow Abraham's footsteps*", to rediscover the signs of God's loving presence to man and to relive the faith experience of the person St Paul described as the father of all believers, whether circumcised or uncircumcised (cf. *Rom 4: 11-12*). With his faith expressed in concrete and at times even dramatic decisions, such as abandoning the safety of his own land or the sacrifice of his only son Isaac, Abraham attained that righteousness which made him a friend of God; he fully accepted the divine plan for himself and his descendants, and became the father of a multitude of believers.

Walking "*in Abraham's footsteps*", therefore, teaches us to appreciate in practical terms the demands of a genuine attitude of faith and to experience *the dynamism of God's initiative*, which will culminate in Christ.

Aware of their own indissoluble bond with the ancient people of the Covenant, Christians acknowledge Abraham as their "*father in faith*" *par excellence* and are happy to imitate his example by walking "*in his footsteps*".

4. It is for these reasons that I would have liked to go, in the name of the whole Church, to pray and reflect in that place, *Ur of the Chaldees*, from which Abraham set out. Since this has not been possible for me, *I would like at least spiritually to make a similar pilgrimage*. Therefore, next Wednesday at a special celebration in the Paul VI Hall, together we will relive *the key events of Abraham's experience*, knowing well that it is not only those who boast physical descent from the great Patriarch who look to him, but also all those who regard themselves as his spiritual offspring. After this it will be possible to continue with grateful hearts on to the other places where salvation history unfolded, beginning with Mount Sinai, where Moses received the revelation of God's Most Holy Name and first came to know his mystery.

I invite you now to accompany me in prayer on my pilgrimage to the places linked to salvation history, which will begin next Wednesday with the special celebration dedicated to Abraham, father of all believers.

The Pope also prayed for the unity and reconciliation of the Congolese nation.

Worrying news continues to come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A few days ago

Archbishop Emmanuel Kataliko of Bukavu was prevented by the local authorities from returning to his Archdiocese. This is a grave violation that painfully wounds all Catholics!

As I express my solidarity with the clergy and faithful of Bukavu, I hope that this worthy prelate can return without delay to the flock entrusted to his care.

At the same time, I make a heartfelt appeal that the Lusaka Peace Accords be implemented as quickly as possible, as I pray the Lord for the unity and reconciliation of that beloved nation.

* * *

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

Today I extend a special welcome to the many pilgrims from Scotland, led by Cardinal Thomas Winning, as well as to the staff and students of the English College in Valladolid. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Great Britain, Ireland, Sweden, Japan and the United States, I invoke the blessings of Almighty God.

© Copyright 2000 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana