

“Do not be afraid, you are not alone. I experienced all your desolation in order to be ever close to you.”

Here is a Vatican translation of pope Francis’ homily from the Palm Sunday Mass.

Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2:7). Let us allow these words of the Apostle Paul to lead us into these holy days, when the word of God, like a refrain, presents Jesus as servant: on Holy Thursday, he is portrayed as the servant who washes the feet of his disciples; on Good Friday, he is presented as the suffering and victorious servant (cf. Is 52:13); and tomorrow we will hear the prophecy of Isaiah about him: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold” (Is 42:1).

God saved us by serving us. We often think we are the ones who serve God. No, he is the one who freely chose to serve us, for he loved us first. It is difficult to love and not be loved in return. And it is even more difficult to serve if we do not let ourselves be served by God.

But how did the Lord serve us? By giving his life for us. We are dear to him; we cost him dearly. Saint Angela of Foligno said she once heard Jesus say: “My love for you is no joke.” His love for us led him to sacrifice himself and to take upon himself our sins.

This astonishes us: God saved us by taking upon himself all the punishment of our sins. Without complaining, but with the humility, patience, and obedience of a servant, and purely out of love. And the Father upheld Jesus in his service. He did not take away the evil that crushed him, but rather strengthened him in his suffering so that our evil could be overcome by good, by a love that loves to the very end.

The Lord served us to the point of experiencing the most painful situations of those who love: betrayal and abandonment.

Betrayal. Jesus suffered betrayal by the disciple who sold him and by the disciple who denied him. He was betrayed by the people who sang hosanna to him and then shouted: “Crucify him!” (Mt 27:22). He was betrayed by the religious institution that unjustly condemned him and by the political institution that washed its hands of him. We can think of all the small or great betrayals that we have suffered in life. It is terrible to discover that a firmly placed trust has been betrayed. From deep within our heart a disappointment surges up that can even make life seem meaningless. This happens because we were born to be loved and to love, and the most painful thing is to be betrayed by someone who promised to be loyal and close to us. We cannot even imagine how painful it was for God who is love.

Let us look within. If we are honest with ourselves, we will see our infidelities. How many falsehoods, hypocrisies and duplicities! How many good intentions betrayed! How many broken promises! How many resolutions left unfulfilled! The Lord knows

our hearts better than we do. He knows how weak and irresolute we are, how many times we fall, how hard it is for us to get up and how difficult it is to heal certain wounds. And what did he do in order to come to our aid and serve us? He told us through the Prophet: "I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them deeply" (Hos 14:5).

He healed us by taking upon himself our infidelity and by taking from us our betrayals. Instead of being discouraged by the fear of failing, we can now look upon the crucifix, feel his embrace, and say: "Behold, there is my infidelity, you took it, Jesus, upon yourself. You open your arms to me, you serve me with your love, you continue to support me... And so I will keep pressing on."

Abandonment. In today's Gospel, Jesus says one thing from the Cross, one thing alone: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46). These are powerful words. Jesus had suffered the abandonment of his own, who had fled. But the Father remained for him. Now, in the abyss of solitude, for the first time he calls him by the generic name "God." And "in a loud voice" he asks the most excruciating question "why": "Why did you too abandon me?" These words are in fact those of a Psalm (cf. 22:2); they tell us that Jesus also brought the experience of extreme desolation to his prayer. But the fact remains that he himself experienced that desolation: he experienced the utmost abandonment, which the Gospels testify to by quoting his very words: *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*

Why did all this take place? Once again, it was done for our sake, to serve us. So that when we have our back to the wall, when we find ourselves at a dead end, with no light and no way of escape, when it seems that God himself is not responding, we should remember that we are not alone. Jesus experienced total abandonment in a situation he had never before experienced in order to be one with us in everything. He did it for me, for you, to say to us: "Do not be afraid, you are not alone. I experienced all your desolation in order to be ever close to you."

That is the extent to which Jesus served us: he descended into the abyss of our most bitter sufferings, culminating in betrayal and abandonment. Today, in the tragedy of a pandemic, in the face of the many false securities that have now crumbled, in the face of so many hopes betrayed, in the sense of abandonment that weighs upon our hearts, Jesus says to each one of us: "Courage, open your heart to my love. You will feel the consolation of God who sustains you."

Dear brothers and sisters, what can we do in comparison with God, who served us even to the point of being betrayed and abandoned?

We can refuse to betray him for whom we were created, and not abandon what really matters in our lives. We were put in this world to love him and our neighbours. Everything else passes away, only this remains. The tragedy we are experiencing summons us to take seriously the things that are serious, and not to be caught up in those that matter less; to rediscover that life is of no use if not used to serve others. For life is measured by love.

So, in these holy days, in our homes, let us stand before the Crucified One, the fullest measure of God's love for us, and before the God who serves us to the point of giving his life, and let us ask for the grace to live in order to serve. May we reach out to those

who are suffering and those most in need. May we not be concerned about what we lack, but what good we can do for others.

Behold my servant, whom I uphold. The Father, who sustained Jesus in his Passion also supports us in our efforts to serve. Loving, praying, forgiving, caring for others, in the family and in society: all this can certainly be difficult. It can feel like a *via crucis*. But the path of service is the victorious and lifegiving path by which we were saved.

I would like to say this especially to young people, on this Day which has been dedicated to them for thirty-five years now. Dear friends, look at the real heroes who come to light in these days: they are not famous, rich, and successful people; rather, they are those who are giving themselves in order to serve others.

Feel called yourselves to put your lives on the line. Do not be afraid to devote your life to God and to others; it pays! For life is a gift we receive only when we give ourselves away, and our deepest joy comes from saying yes to love, without ifs and buts. As Jesus did for us.