



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF OUR LORD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Square

26th World Youth Day

Sunday, 17 April 2011

(Video)

Photo Gallery

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Dear young people!

It is a moving experience each year on Palm Sunday as we go up the mountain with Jesus, towards the Temple, accompanying him on his ascent. On this day, throughout the world and across the centuries, young people and people of every age acclaim him, crying out: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

But what are we really doing when we join this procession as part of the throng which went up with Jesus to Jerusalem and hailed him as King of Israel? Is this anything more than a ritual, a quaint custom? Does it have anything to do with the reality of our life and our world? To answer this, we must first be clear about what Jesus himself wished to do and actually did. After Peter's confession of faith in Caesarea Philippi, in the northernmost part of the Holy Land, Jesus set out as a pilgrim towards Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. He was journeying towards the Temple in the Holy City, towards that place which for Israel ensured in a particular way God's closeness to his people. He was making his way towards the common feast of Passover, the memorial of Israel's liberation from Egypt and the sign of its hope of definitive liberation. He knew that what awaited him was a new Passover and that he himself would take the place of the sacrificial lambs by offering himself on the cross. He knew that in the mysterious gifts of bread and wine he would

give himself for ever to his own, and that he would open to them the door to a new path of liberation, to fellowship with the living God. He was making his way to the heights of the Cross, to the moment of self-giving love. The ultimate goal of his pilgrimage was the heights of God himself; to those heights he wanted to lift every human being.

Our procession today is meant, then, to be an image of something deeper, to reflect the fact that, together with Jesus, we are setting out on pilgrimage along the high road that leads to the living God. This is the ascent that matters. This is the journey which Jesus invites us to make. But how can we keep pace with this ascent? Isn't it beyond our ability? Certainly, it is beyond our own possibilities. From the beginning men and women have been filled – and this is as true today as ever – with a desire to “be like God”, to attain the heights of God by their own powers. All the inventions of the human spirit are ultimately an effort to gain wings so as to rise to the heights of Being and to become independent, completely free, as God is free. Mankind has managed to accomplish so many things: we can fly! We can see, hear and speak to one another from the farthest ends of the earth. And yet the force of gravity which draws us down is powerful. With the increase of our abilities there has been an increase not only of good. Our possibilities for evil have increased and appear like menacing storms above history. Our limitations have also remained: we need but think of the disasters which have caused so much suffering for humanity in recent months.

The Fathers of the Church maintained that human beings stand at the point of intersection between two gravitational fields. First, there is the force of gravity which pulls us down – towards selfishness, falsehood and evil; the gravity which diminishes us and distances us from the heights of God. On the other hand there is the gravitational force of God's love: the fact that we are loved by God and respond in love attracts us upwards. Man finds himself betwixt this twofold gravitational force; everything depends on our escaping the gravitational field of evil and becoming free to be attracted completely by the gravitational force of God, which makes us authentic, elevates us and grants us true freedom.

Following the Liturgy of the Word, at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer where the Lord comes into our midst, the Church invites us to lift up our hearts: “*Sursum corda!*” In the language of the Bible and the thinking of the Fathers, the heart is the centre of man, where understanding, will and feeling, body and soul, all come together. The centre where spirit becomes body and body becomes spirit, where will, feeling and understanding become one in the knowledge and love of God. This is the “heart” which must be lifted up. But to repeat: of ourselves, we are too weak to lift up our hearts to the heights of God. We cannot do it. The very pride of thinking that we are able to do it on our own drags us down and estranges us from God. God himself must draw us up, and this is what Christ began to do on the cross. He descended to the depths of our human existence in order to draw us up to himself, to the living God. He humbled himself, as today's second reading says. Only in this way could our pride be vanquished: God's humility is the extreme form of his love, and this humble love draws us upwards.

Psalm 24, which the Church proposes as the “song of ascent” to accompany our procession in today’s liturgy, indicates some concrete elements which are part of our ascent and without which we cannot be lifted upwards: clean hands, a pure heart, the rejection of falsehood, the quest for God’s face. The great achievements of technology are liberating and contribute to the progress of mankind only if they are joined to these attitudes – if our hands become clean and our hearts pure, if we seek truth, if we seek God and let ourselves be touched and challenged by his love. All these means of “ascent” are effective only if we humbly acknowledge that we need to be lifted up; if we abandon the pride of wanting to become God. We need God: he draws us upwards; letting ourselves be upheld by his hands – by faith, in other words – sets us aright and gives us the inner strength that raises us on high. We need the humility of a faith which seeks the face of God and trusts in the truth of his love.

The question of how man can attain the heights, becoming completely himself and completely like God, has always engaged mankind. It was passionately disputed by the Platonic philosophers of the third and fourth centuries. For them, the central issue was finding the means of purification which could free man from the heavy load weighing him down and thus enable him to ascend to the heights of his true being, to the heights of divinity. Saint Augustine, in his search for the right path, long sought guidance from those philosophies. But in the end he had to acknowledge that their answers were insufficient, their methods would not truly lead him to God. To those philosophers he said: recognize that human power and all these purifications are not enough to bring man in truth to the heights of the divine, to his own heights. And he added that he should have despaired of himself and human existence had he not found the One who accomplishes what we of ourselves cannot accomplish; the One who raises us up to the heights of God in spite of our wretchedness: Jesus Christ who from God came down to us and, in his crucified love, takes us by the hand and lifts us on high.

We are on pilgrimage with the Lord to the heights. We are striving for pure hearts and clean hands, we are seeking truth, we are seeking the face of God. Let us show the Lord that we desire to be righteous, and let us ask him: Draw us upwards! Make us pure! Grant that the words which we sang in the processional psalm may also hold true for us; grant that we may be part of the generation which seeks God, “which seeks your face, O God of Jacob” (cf. *Ps* 24:6). Amen.