

CELEBRATION OF PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF OUR LORD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Saint Peter's Square
24th World Youth Day
Sunday, 5 April 2009*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Dear Young People,*

Together with a growing multitude of pilgrims, Jesus had gone up to Jerusalem for the Passover. In the final stage of the journey, near Jericho, he had healed blind Bartimaeus, who called upon him as Son of David, pleading for mercy. Now – having received his sight – he had gratefully joined the group of pilgrims. At the gates of Jerusalem, when Jesus sat upon a donkey, an animal symbolizing the Davidic kingship, there spontaneously arose among the pilgrims the joyful conviction: It is He, the Son of David! Accordingly, they greet Jesus with the messianic acclamation: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”, and they add: “Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!” (*Mk*11:9f.). We do not know exactly what the enthusiastic pilgrims imagined the coming kingdom of David would be like. But what about us, have we truly understood the message of Jesus, the Son of David? Have we grasped what is meant by the Kingdom of which He speaks during his interrogation with Pilate? Do we understand what it means to say that this Kingdom is not of this world? Or would we actually prefer that it were of this world?

In Saint John’s Gospel, after the account of the entry into Jerusalem, there follows a series of sayings in which Jesus explains the essential content of this new kind of Kingdom. On a first reading of these texts, we can distinguish three different images of the Kingdom in which the same mystery is reflected in a number of different ways. John recounts, first of all, that during the feast there were some Greeks among the pilgrims who “wanted to adore God” (cf. 12:20). Let us note the fact that the true intention of these pilgrims was to adore God. This corresponds perfectly to what Jesus says on the occasion of the cleansing of the Temple: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations” (*Mk* 11:17). The true purpose of the pilgrimage must be that of encountering God; adoring him, and thus rightly ordering the fundamental relationship of our life. The Greeks are searching for God, their lives are a journey towards God. Now, through the two Greek-speaking Apostles, Philip and Andrew, they convey this request to the Lord: “We wish to see Jesus” (*Jn* 12:21). These are stirring words. Dear friends, we have gathered here for the same reason: we wish to see Jesus. With this end in view, thousands of young people travelled to Sydney last year. No doubt they will have had many different expectations in making this pilgrimage. But the essential objective was this: we wish to see Jesus.

Concerning this request, what did Jesus say and do at the time? It does not emerge clearly from the Gospel whether any meeting took place between those Greeks and Jesus. Jesus takes a much longer view. The essence of his response to those people's request is this: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (*Jn* 12:24). In other words: what matters here is not a brief conversation with one or two people who then return home. I will come, like a grain of wheat that has died and is risen, in a manner that is totally new and beyond the limits of the moment, to encounter the world of the Greeks. Through the resurrection, Jesus surpasses the limits of space and time. As the Risen One, he is journeying towards the vast horizon of the world and of history. Yes indeed, as the Risen One he goes to the Greeks and speaks with them, he shows himself to them in such a way that they who are far away become near, and it is in their language, in their culture, that his word is carried forward in a new way and understood in a new way – his Kingdom comes. Thus we can recognize two essential characteristics of this Kingdom. The first is that it comes by way of the cross. Since Jesus gives himself completely, then as the Risen One he can belong to all and become present to all. In the holy Eucharist, we receive the fruit of the grain of wheat that died, the multiplication of the loaves that continues to the end of the world and throughout all time. The second characteristic is this: his Kingdom is universal. The ancient hope of Israel is fulfilled: this Davidic kingship no longer has boundaries. It extends "from sea to sea" – as the prophet Zechariah says (9:10) – in other words, it embraces the whole world. Yet this is possible only because it is not a kingship of political power, but is based solely on the free adherence of love – a love which, for its part, is a response to the love of Jesus Christ who gave himself for all. I think that above all we must learn these two things over and over again – universality and catholicity. This means that no-one can propose himself, his culture, his generation and his world as an absolute. It means that we all have to accept one another, renouncing something of ourselves. Universality includes the mystery of the cross – going beyond ourselves, obeying the communal word of Jesus Christ in the communal Church. Universality is always a transcending of ourselves, a renunciation of something that is ours. Universality and the cross go together. Only thus is peace created.

The saying about the grain of wheat that dies is still located within Jesus' response to the Greeks, in fact it is his response. Then, however, he goes on to formulate once again the fundamental law of human existence: "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (*Jn* 12:25). In other words, the one who wants to have his life for himself, living only for himself, keeping everything to himself and exploiting all its possibilities – is actually the one who loses his life. Life becomes boring and empty. Only by self-abandonment, only by the disinterested gift of the "I" in favour of the "you", only in the "yes" to the greater life, the life of God, does our life also become broad and great. Thus this fundamental principle established by the Lord is ultimately identical to the principle of love. Love, in fact, means letting go of oneself, giving oneself, not wanting to possess oneself, but becoming free from oneself: not retiring into oneself – (what will become of me?) – but looking ahead, towards the other – towards God and towards the men that he sends to me. And once again, this principle of love, which defines man's path, is identical to the mystery of the cross, to the mystery of death and resurrection that we encounter in Christ. Dear friends, perhaps it is relatively easy to accept

this as the fundamental great vision of life. In practice, however, it is not a question of simply recognizing a principle, but of living according to the truth that it contains, the truth of the cross and resurrection. Hence, once again, a single great decision is not enough. It is certainly important, it is essential to dare to take the great fundamental decision once, to dare to utter the great “yes” that the Lord asks of us at a certain moment of our lives. But the great “yes” of the decisive moment in our life – the “yes” to the truth that the Lord puts before us – must then be won afresh every day in the situations of daily life when we have to abandon our “I” over and over again, placing ourselves at the Lord’s disposal when deep down we would prefer to cling to our “I”. An upright life always involves sacrifice, renunciation. To hold out the promise of a life without this constant re-giving of self, is to mislead. There is no such thing as a successful life without sacrifice. If I cast a glance back over my whole life, I have to say that it was precisely the moments when I said “yes” to renunciation that were the great and important moments of my life.

At the end of the passage, Saint John uses a modified form of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Olives in his redaction of our Lord’s “Palm Sunday” sayings. First comes the statement: “my soul is troubled” (12:27). Here we see Jesus’ fear, amply illustrated by the other three evangelists – his fear before the power of death, before the whole abyss of evil that he sees and into which he must descend. The Lord suffers our fears together with us, he accompanies us through the final anguish into the light. Then, in John’s narrative, Jesus makes two petitions. The first, expressed only conditionally, is this: “What shall I say – Father, save me from this hour?” (12:27). As a human being, even Jesus feels impelled to ask that he be spared the terror of the passion. We too can pray in this way. We too can grumble before the Lord, like Job, we can present him with all the pleas that arise within us when we are faced with the injustice of the world and the difficulty of our own “I”. When we come before him, we must not take refuge in pious phrases, in a world of make-believe. Praying always also means struggling with God, and like Jacob, we can say to him: “I will not let you go, unless you bless me!” (*Gen* 32:26). But then comes Jesus’ second petition: “Glorify your name!” (*Jn* 12:28). In the Synoptics, it is expressed in another way: “Not my will, but yours be done!” (*Lk* 22:42). In the end, God’s glory, his lordship, his will, is always more important and more true than my thought and my will. And this is the essential point in our prayer and in our life: learning this right order of reality, accepting it intimately; trusting in God and believing that he is doing what is right; that his will is truth and love; that my life becomes good if I learn to adhere to this right order. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are for us the guarantee that we can truly trust God. It is in this way that his Kingdom is realized.

Dear Friends! At the end of this liturgy, the young people of Australia will hand over the World Youth Day Cross to their counterparts from Spain. The Cross is on a journey from one side of the world to the other, from sea to sea. And we are accompanying it. With the Cross, we move forward along its path and thus we find our own path. When we touch the Cross, or rather, when we carry it, we touch the mystery of God, the mystery of Jesus Christ. The mystery that God so loved the world – us – that he gave his only-begotten Son for us (cf. *Jn* 3:16). We touch the marvellous mystery of God’s love, the only genuinely redemptive truth. But we also touch the

fundamental law, the constitutive norm of our lives, namely the fact that without this “yes” to the Cross, without walking in communion with Christ day by day, life cannot succeed. The more we can make some sacrifice, out of love for the great truth and the great love, out of love for the truth and for God’s love, the greater and richer life becomes. Anyone who wants to keep his life for himself loses it. Anyone who gives his life – day by day in small acts, which form part of the great decision – that person finds it. This is the challenging, but also profoundly beautiful and liberating truth that we wish to enter into, step by step, as the Cross makes its journey across the continents. May the Lord bless this journey. Amen.