



# Lenten peregrinations in Jerusalem

The texts of the homilies  
Year 2024

*Meditations of Fr. Paolo Messina*

## Introduction



In this eBook we are collecting the homilies given by fr. Paul Messina, OFM Cap. (pictured), on the occasion of the Lenten Peregrinations 2024 of the Franciscan friars of the Custody of the Holy Land.

The Peregrinations are the “titular” feasts of the Franciscan shrines, linked to their dedication. The Lenten Peregrinations touch the places in Jerusalem linked to the Passion of Jesus and prepare for the mystery of Christ in Holy Week.

With this publication, we believe we are providing a useful tool for prayer and personal reflection for those who wish to deepen their understanding of the mysteries of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

*“In this Lenten journey we will reflect together on silence, manifested in different facets. Silence can be the most powerful language. It can express joy and serenity. There is silence that becomes the contemplation of beauty. But there is also a silence that hides deep pain and acute suffering: there is the silence experienced by those who are unjustly condemned and are unable to make their voices heard; the silence of those who are alone, which becomes almost an impenetrable wall to others and difficult to break down.”*

# The silence of those who suffer

## Peregrination at Dominus Flevit 28th February, 2024



In this place that recalls Jesus weeping as He enters Jerusalem, I would like to reflect on the silence of those who suffer. Suffering, in fact, sometimes wraps itself in a cloak of muteness. Those who suffer fear that they will not be understood, welcomed in their pain, and, often, are unable to express the very meaning of their suffering.

But Jesus, the true teacher, from this very place teaches us how to experience suffering. Almost in a synthetic way, this sanctuary enables us to relive Jesus' gaze over the city. On the one hand, the great Jerusalem, immersed in its ordinary life, in its daily noises, unaware of the future that awaits it, unaware of the suffering it will have to experience after a few years.

These are the same suffering and desolation that the prophet Jeremiah recounts in the first reading (Jer. 14:17-21). He speaks of it as a great calamity, describing something destroyed, now shattered; he speaks of a plague, a deep wound. Outside and inside the city the same devastation: in the outer space - unguarded and dangerous - but also in the inner space - shared and protected by the city walls - there is a starving humanity, tormented by the sword, unable to find a safe place to protect itself and escape from that horror. Horror of then, but horror of today as well. In a crescendo, Jeremiah, at the climax of his narrative, narrates the bewilderment of even the prophet and the priest, representatives of God's word and presence among the people. They too do not know what to say, how to act. They look for an answer to understand what is happening, but they do

not find it. All their expectation of God's protection and prosperity vanishes in the face of a stark reality, which stands implacably before them. And this answer will not come. Where man closes his heart, God finds no room. When a person is too wrapped up in him or herself and does not lift his or her gaze to God's plan, sooner or later he or she will have to come to terms with this closure and his inability to say "yes" to God.



On the one hand there is Jerusalem and on the other is Jesus. Luke places this brief passage we read within the account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Lk. 19:41-44). The evangelist has just recounted the joy of the people who sing hosanna to Him, but also the envy of the Pharisees who ask Jesus to silence the crowd.

In this festive atmosphere, with the disciples close to Him, Jesus lifts His eyes to the city of Jerusalem, and only then does He speak the words we have heard. In that time when Jesus' gaze remains fixed on Jerusalem, the silence of those who suffer finds space.

We, perhaps, imagine the suffering brother or sister as an isolated, lonely person, with no one near, living his or her worries alone. Often, however, it is the person next to us whom we celebrate. It is my brother and sister, near whom I live distracted, whose silence I do not notice, whose suffering I do not perceive. Sometimes, indeed, I raise my voice, in songs of celebration, to distract myself, not to be overwhelmed by the silence of those who are now suffering. Yet, that silence is there. It is the silence that pervades the destroyed cities of Ukraine, while so many gazes are turned away. It is the silence that inhabits the deserted streets of Gaza, which we cannot even imagine, because we do not even see it. It is the silence of the many innocents who find themselves suffering because of the closure of the human heart, when he absolutizes his own life project and looks no one in the face to realize it. It will be the desolation of Jerusalem on the day Jesus enters the city.

From where does this pain and suffering of Jesus, of which the Gospel tells us? They arise from an awareness of the spiritual blindness that prevents the inhabitants of Jerusalem - then but perhaps now as well - from perceiving what is to come. The future of that city is hidden from their eyes, and not because the signs are not there:

the Messiah is coming, He has come near, Luke says. Jesus expresses all his closeness and connection to the city: "if you had understood"; "your eyes"; "for you days will come." With obstinacy he repeats "you," "your." A language that betrays closeness, affection.

The same sentiment is manifested in Jesus' weeping. That weeping is the same weeping of the widowed mother of Nain, who has lost her son; it is the weeping of the sinful woman at the feet of Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee; it is the weeping of those in Jairus' house who think that not even the arrival of Jesus can change the fact that the young girl is now dead. Luke uses the same term to describe their affliction.



What, however, changes their suffering? What makes their weeping cease? Unlike Jerusalem, those people recognized the graced time of Jesus' visitation. They knew and recognized who they had before them. Not so Jerusalem. The widow of Nain, the sinner, the relatives of Jairus will leave being consoled. Jesus, on the other hand, in His own weeping and silence, will enter Jerusalem. He will utter no other words. We will find Him in the Temple driving out the merchants and, later teaching, carrying with Him, in silence, the suffering of that entrance.

It is true what Mother Anna Maria Canopi says: "Suffering is suited to silence. Silence of humility before a mystery that infinitely surpasses us; silence of compassion that becomes one with those who suffer; silence of faith that casts one's affliction into the Lord."

Beloved, like Jesus we are called to be compassionate listeners to this silence, to the silence of those who suffer, even at the cost of shedding our tears. Solidarity, which the Gospel teaches us, urges us to seek this silence, not to run from it. It induces us to care for it and turn it into an opportunity for love and inner healing.

Today we are called to realize this time of grace of God's visitation, as His disciples, as his envoys, as His servants. This journey of sharing and empathy will console the suffering brother and sister and will also make that love grow in us that, following the example of the Father's love, is capable of not closing its gaze on those who suffer.



# The silence of those who are alone

## Peregrination to Gethsemane 6th March, 2024



**T**his beautiful and “nocturnal” basilica allows us how we may relive the experience of Jesus on that night of choices: a choice of obedience; the choice of renouncing His own will; to surrendering and abandoning Himself into the hands of the Father.

There are moments when we are all called to make equally personal and fundamental choices in our lives. We are called to do it alone. It is in the silence that envelops these moments that I want to reflect this evening.

Matthew describes the solitude of Jesus through small, almost imperceptible notes in his account. Jesus comes with His disciples to this place. Two groups are visually discernible: Jesus on one side and His disciples on the other. Immediately after, Jesus leaves eight of them a little distance away and “takes with Him” Peter, James, and John (Mt 26:37). Once again, the expression is of two distinct groups. Finally, Jesus continues along this path of detachment and moves away from the three.

Contrary to the journey toward deeper solitude, there is an ever-greater opening of His heart. To the group of disciples, Jesus reveals His intention to go and pray. He shows the need for time alone. Matthew had already reported Jesus’ recommendations to every good disciple about prayer performed in a personal way and in a secluded place: “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen” (Mt 6:6). He also narrated Jesus withdrawing to pray (Mt 14:23). Jesus,

therefore, reveals to the disciples His intimate need at that moment. But only with the three, with Peter, James, and John, does He fully open His heart: “My soul is sorrowful, even unto death; remain here, and watch with me” (Mt 26:38). Once again, in these words, Jesus shows His loneliness. The three must pray with Him, together on one side, and He alone a little ahead.

In those words, there is a revelation of a loneliness that spreads over His soul like a shadow as night falls, enveloping Him even more. In His request for support in prayer, there is an awareness of a strength that risks failing Him, and, at least until that moment, Jesus continues to seek comfort and the presence of others.

He seeks this closeness from both people and God. Jesus’ first prayer begins with the invocation “My Father” (Mt 26:39) and ends with a “You.” In between are words that evoke suffering, a cup to drink, a difficult choice to make, a “yes” difficult to pronounce. Jesus knows that He must say it, alone. The Father has shown Him the way. The disciples have gone with Him. But that “yes” is entirely His own; it is with His voice that He must pronounce it.



After this first prayer, Jesus still seeks the disciples’ proximity, He wakes up Peter, James, and John, and with a word between acknowledging a sad reality and reproach, encourages them to continue watching with Him. He invites the disciples to experience this moment of waiting together - “Stay awake!”, “Pray!” (Mt 26:41) - while He alone continues His prayer. He prays to fulfill the Father’s will; praying not to fall into temptation. What is the supreme test of the mission of Jesus, becomes one of the most difficult moments for the disciples in their existence: the risk of seeing everything they have spent their lives on in recent years fail.

Jesus again moves away, but this time with a different awareness. If He must drink from that cup, He cannot rely on the proximity of His disciples; their spirit is ready,



but their flesh is weak. Once again, His prayer begins with a heartfelt invocation “My Father” and concludes, again, with a “You” (Mt 26:42). But this time, there is no reference to His own will.



His prayer expresses even greater obedience and emphasizes a further step toward accepting His destiny in accordance with the Father’s will. Jesus begins to understand that the cup cannot pass without Him drinking it, and He accepts the Father’s decision, not passively: Jesus must drink

it and chooses to do so. His decision is conscious, consistent with His entire life, during which He always taught with His words and actions the filial obedience.

However, there is still one more step to take. The choice is His; He made it personally, but He must also accept to live the consequences of that choice in profound solitude. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus goes back to the disciples, finds them once again asleep. But this time, He does not wake them up. He returns to pray “for the third time, saying the same words” (Mt 26:44). The words are the same, but Jesus’ awareness is different. To obedience is added the decision to face it all alone. Matthew tells us “He left them” (Mt 26:44), not in the sense of abandonment but of detachment. Jesus lets them go their way. They will follow in their own time. They will be frightened that night but will return to Him. They will deny Him but will later confess Him, even unto death. Jesus is not in a hurry, and He does not hasten their choices, our choices. He knows that the time for decision, for those choices so difficult to make in our lives, is entirely personal. Moreover, He knows how to be patient, like the Father.

Jesus moves away again to pray for the third time that night. Jesus' third prayer, His perfect prayer, becomes the one in which He stands alone in silence before the Father. In that solitary silence, Jesus finds Himself again after the initial anguish. Thus, He teaches us not to run away from this silence but rather to seek it. In the decisive moments of our lives, sometimes we may feel the warmth of a friendly presence, and at other times, the absence of all support. But ultimately, Jesus’ experience in Gethsemane reveals a truth, perhaps challenging to accept, but nonetheless real.

Entering that silence alone is the only way to find ourselves, to rediscover an inner strength we sometimes think is lost, to accept a destiny that can be frightening or difficult. Only by facing the fear of this silence alone will we discover that there, we will encounter the Father, and, like Jesus, we will learn to say, “Not my will but yours be done.”



# The silence of those who are abandoned

## Peregrination to the Flagellation 13th March, 2024



**T**here is a great paradox in the Gospel passage we have heard today. On the one hand, Pilate twice and publicly affirms: “I find no fault in Him” (Jn 18:38; 19:4). He pronounces this phrase with a special emphasis on the fact that “not one” fault can be imputed to Jesus. On the other hand, Jesus is rejected by the people, who prefer Barabbas to be free; He is mocked by the soldiers, He is scourged.

Jesus is facing a range of physical, psychological, and spiritual sufferings, yet all the while He doesn't say a word. John records the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate, which took place shortly before the condemnation. Jesus' last words concern the truth: “Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (Jn 18:37). He will speak again from the Cross to His mother and to His beloved disciple. On the one hand, Pilate does not listen to the voice of Jesus, because his choices are not born of the truth, and he cannot act according to the truth. On the other hand, Mary and the disciple will obey Jesus' last will because they know the truth, follow it, and love the One who is Truth.

Between these two dialogues we find an abandoned man, in silence. The paradox I mentioned at the beginning, between an unjust condemnation and such acute suffering, is manifested in Jesus in all its cruelty. The righteous par excellence is not saved by the crowd, which wishes for Barabbas' freedom. The righteous man, in front of that crowd, does not even have a name. They will call him “this” or “evildoer,” “King of the Jews.” The righteous, through no fault of

their own, are not protected by God. A paradox, of course, but it is the paradox of the suffering of every man and woman, who lives those moments feeling abandoned by humankind and sometimes even by God.

Did Luisa deserve to lose her long-awaited baby? Did Matthew and Gabriel deserve to be born with such a serious brain disorder? Did John deserve the condemnation of that cancer at such a young age? The list could be long, and I'm sure each of you could write your own. Jesus' silent suffering confronts us with this complex question: "Why do the righteous suffer?"

Jesus accepts the suffering inflicted by other men in a silence that fills the whole story. John describes Him as totally abandoned, at the mercy of the decisions of others: first of Pilate and then of the crowd, and finally of the soldiers. To the condemnation of the scourging, imposed by Pilate, is added the mockery of the soldiers, the crown of thorns, the cloak and still other slaps, more gratuitous violence on a man already stricken and suffering. "He doesn't say anything, not even a word. He does not resist because he has opened his ear to God" (Is 50:5).



Jesus makes His own the experience of the servant who lives a daily relationship with God. This familiarity made him תלמיד, a disciple, able to learn from God, who listens to him every morning. Jesus is the disciple who knows the word to address to the discouraged, to the one who is exhausted and tired. But what word? What speech? There is no proclamation in the experience of the suffering servant, described by Isaiah. On the contrary, the rest of his life shows him as a victim of violence, of personal aggression, of being spat upon. However, he does not read this as an abandonment on God's part. On the contrary, it is precisely the intimate relationship he has built with him that makes the disciple certain of the Lord's protection. The disciple knows that the Lord "will help him" (Is 50:7), "that he who

does justice will be near him” (Is 50:8). These actions of God are described as future. But precisely because he is certain of God's intervention, the disciple has already handed over his back to the scourgers, his cheeks to those who plucked out his beard, and has not hidden his face from being spat upon. (Is 50:6). This bridge between past suffering and future salvation, this journey between the abandonment of men and the embrace of the Father, is sustained by trust in God, by certainty in His justice, by the awareness that He travels with us this distance, which is sometimes short, sometimes seems endless. It is the distance from here to Calvary, which Jesus will make with the same feeling of entrustment to the Father.



After the scourging, Pilate presents Jesus again to the crowd: “Behold the man” (Jn 19:5). No longer the King of the Jews, but a mere man. No acknowledgment of his messiahship, no reference to his being King, albeit of a different kingdom, but only a man. Yet, in that simple word “ὁ ἄνθρωπος,” “the man,” the

whole truth of Jesus is hidden. He is the man who had to die, because in the words of Caiaphas: “It is fitting that one man should die for the people” (Jn 18:14). He is the man who opened and listened to the Father’s words. He is the man who gave a word of comfort to the disheartened. He is this man, and he does not cease to be one even in that silence with which he presents himself to the crowd, before the people whom He had come to save and who, instead, abandoned Him.

“Why do the righteous suffer?” we wondered at the beginning. I don't have the answer, and I don't think I'm speaking heresy when I say that Scripture doesn't give us one either. However, in order to enter into this paradox by retracing the experience of the Servant of the Lord and that of Jesus, we can perhaps better understand the exhortation of Saint Peter, heard in the second reading: “To the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, rejoice, that in the revelation of his glory you may also rejoice and be glad” (1 Pt 4:13). That is, it is a matter of understanding not the “why” of suffering, but the “how” to live it. In the face of the man who suffers and who feels abandoned by everyone, even by God, there is only one way to go. He cannot escape from His trial. Each of us can decide to make this journey in despair, discouragement, fear, isolation, or we can decide to walk that same path knowing that we are sharers in the sufferings of Christ, not abandoned by the Father but sustained by Him.

In carrying His suffering in silence, Jesus manifests all His humanity, the paradox of a God who chose to be man, and to share in humanity's pain, sorrow and anguish. It is in that silence that we feel Him to be more human, closer to us. The silence of those who are abandoned is the silence that I learned from Luisa, from Matteo's parents, Gabriele, Giovanni. It is silence that reveals to us the way to be like Jesus, called to share, as an inheritance, being children, not because we are free from all suffering, from all evil, from all temptation, but because we share in His suffering. The silence of those who are abandoned is the silence of those who have had the courage to trust and entrust themselves to the Father in His suffering. Forsaken by men, but not by God because He is His son. Let us also walk that bridge that unites solitude and salvation. That bridge that is called abandonment means letting oneself fall into the arms of the Father, in whatever circumstances there might be and then to be forever His children.



# The silence of death

## Peregrination to Bethany 14th March, 2024



**T**o-day, in this place, I want to reflect on another sound of silence, perhaps the most anguished, disturbing, painful: the silence of death. So terrible that even today's liturgy somehow wants to protect us from all its cruelty. The two readings we have heard, in fact, both end with a "happy ending", with the return to life of the one who had died: the son of the Shunammite, in the account of the second book of Kings, and Lazarus, in the Gospel page.

Two parallel stories, in which the daily and serene life of two families is suddenly cut short by death. The pain of the mother and father of that child, like that of Martha and Mary, is described in tones and accents in which we can certainly find ourselves. Who amongst us hasn't had the same experience? The unexpected news of the sudden death of a young relative or friend, which came unexpectedly as our life proceeded according to its normal rhythm, as that morning for the father and mother of that only and long-awaited son, both caught up in field work or household chores, or the announcement of the death of a person we knew was sick, perhaps at the end of his life, as for Jesus, who knows that Lazarus is sick, so much so that after two days he announces his death to the disciples.

Which of the two experiences can we judge to be less painful? Which of the two silences - that of the child and that of Lazarus - hurts more? Which of the two could we be better prepared for? I believe that there is no answer to these questions. Personal experience tells us that we are always unprepared for death; that

despite our journey of faith, the silence of death wounds us, upsets us, knocks us down.

How can we fail to understand that mother who silently embraces her suffering son until the moment of death and then lays his lifeless body on the bed? The reading does not allow us to listen to her desperate journey to Elisha, through whose intercession she had finally conceived a son (2 Kings 4:16-17). We did not listen to the unsuccessful attempt of Giezi, Elisha's servant, sent to save the boy (2 Kings 4:31).



The word of God, which we have read today, does not describe the disappointment or grief of those two parents at that news, nor does it show us their anxiety when Elisha enters the room to see the child's body, leaving them outside. The silence of death is described by this wordlessness, because

there is no way to describe it. And yet, those parents wait outside, without screaming, because in the face of that silence there is always the hope, sometimes irrational, of something that can turn it into a cry of joy.

It is the same hope of Martha who, when she hears of Jesus' coming, goes to meet Him. Many had come to console her, John says, but Martha can only find comfort in Jesus and in her encounter with Him. His words, the same ones that Mary would repeat shortly after, are those that every man and woman wrapped in the silence of death finds themselves pronouncing: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Words that we can utter sometimes with anger, sometimes with calm resignation. Words that express our disappointed expectation for God's lack of intervention.

Martha, however, does not stop at a sterile recrimination: she goes beyond her pain and opens herself to trust in that friend who loved Lazarus so much. His is a true openness: "Whatever you may ask of God, he will certainly grant it to you." The possibility formulated in this expression is an indication of her faith in Jesus, and at the same time of the awareness that God will hear and fulfill every prayer of her Son. Martha's faith, in that tragic moment, was so strong that she herself became a witness and announcer to her sister Mary.



The encounter between Mary and Jesus is more intimate. It is the meeting of two people who know how to understand each other, to listen to each other. Jesus responds to Mary's words, the same as Martha's, with neither promises nor teachings on the Resurrection. John says that he saw her weeping and then he was moved and troubled (Jn 11:33); two particular terms. The first speaks of a strong feeling in the spirit, with the spirit, something that moves the soul inwardly. In other words, we could say that Jesus felt at that moment a deep empathy when He saw Mary's tears.



The second tells us of a tumult, an uproar that Jesus caused for Himself. Both terms tell us of Jesus' voluntary and conscious action. He chooses to enter the silence of death, that silence from which Mary could not emerge. Jesus shares that moment with her, with His whole being. The way to the tomb of Lazarus, the weeping in front of that tomb, his deep emotion are brushstrokes that outline this path towards the darkness of death.

Jesus prays to the Father before the lifeless body of Lazarus, just as Elisha "prayed to the Lord" (2 Kings 4:33) before the lifeless child. The only words capable of breaking that silence are, in fact, the words of prayer: a prayer of thanksgiving and praise, an invocation for help and support, a prayer that expresses trust in a Father who listens to what the Son asks of Him, an intercession for those who suffer, so that even in that tragic moment they may believe in the power of the Father's love, that is capable of restoring life.

I said at the beginning that today's readings almost seem to deceive us, because they are two distressing, sad stories, but with a happy ending: the return to life of the "dead man", as John calls him. In fact, they show us that beyond the silence in the house of the Shunammite, beyond the silence inside the tomb of Lazarus,

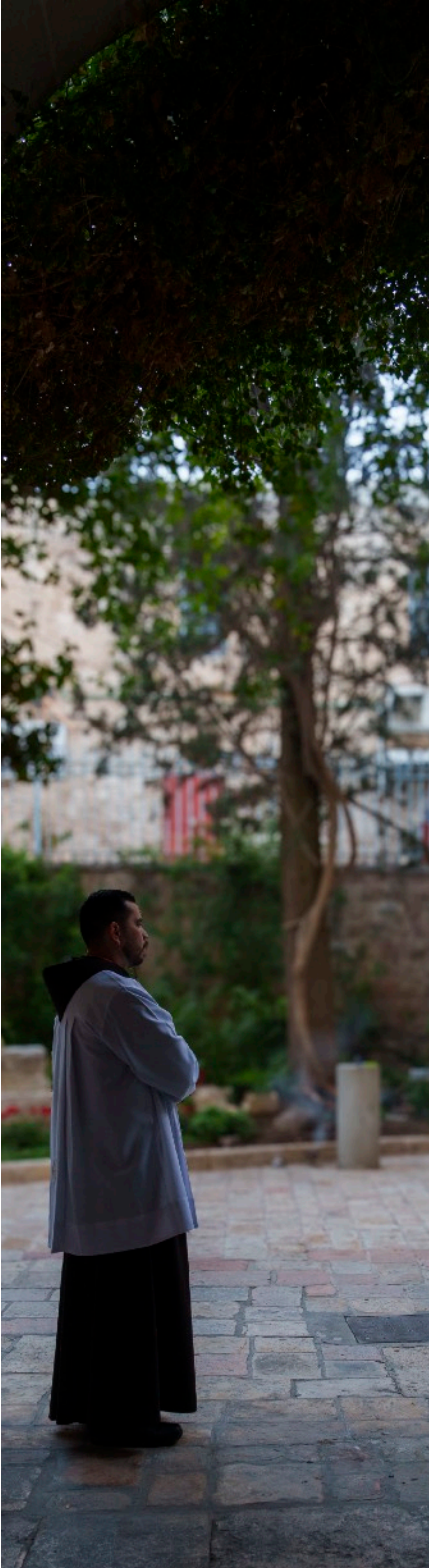
beyond the silence of death, there is a voice that speaks to us of life, that gives us hope, that proclaims eternal life.

As we pass through that silence, like Elisha, like Jesus, like that child, and Lazarus himself, we will hear that voice and return to life in all its fullness.



# The silence of those who are condemned

## Peregrination to the Lithostrotos 20th March, 2024



Let us take a moment to be silent, to lower our voices, even our inner voices. Can you hear the cry of Kfir Bibas, the one-year-old child, abducted on the 7th October by Hamas militants? Can you perceive the cry of Jamil, as I will call him, born in a tent city in Gaza last January, the fourth child of a woman who became a widow the previous month? Can you hear the screams of Tatiana and all the other Ukrainian children, who have been forced for over two years to seek refuge at the sound of anti-aircraft sirens? No, we do not hear their cries, their screams, their struggles. It is the silence of many innocents unjustly condemned; it is the silence that Jesus reminds us of in this place: He innocent, He righteous, He condemned for the political opportunism of a few.

It is the silence of the servant of the Lord, as we heard in the first reading. On this page, we do not hear his voice, but only a story about him and the sufferings he endured. Already, the initial description reveals the struggle of every person to turn their gaze, their attention to situations like the one described. How many times, faced with those conditions, do we cover our faces? How much effort do we exert to engage with such narratives? We want to move past them, erase that cruelty from before us, until we want to forget it, remove from our memory the face of that righteous sufferer, without form, majesty, or splendor.

Yet, this man from whom we distance ourselves is tied to us. The text speaks of "our" sufferings, "our" pains, "our" faults, "our" sins, but also of "our" salvation and "our" healing (Isaiah 53:4-5). The

prophet warns us not to think that the condemnation of an innocent, the punishment of the last and defenseless, does not concern us. We cannot turn away, we cannot pretend, endorsing attitudes of omertà that seek to hide and conceal the evil around us. History, after all, has taught us time and again: when men and women pretend not to see the unjust condemnation of the innocent, the forced deportation of the defenseless, the hopeless migration from wars, famines, only pain, suffering, and death arise.

Of that suffering servant, Isaiah twice emphasizes that he did not open his mouth. Throughout all the mistreatment endured, the humiliation received, he acts like one who is mute, someone who cannot speak, indeed in his case, as someone who chooses not to speak. Why this silence? Why not reaffirm his innocence? Why not proclaim it to the world? I believe we can read this silence from two opposing perspectives, yet both united by a sense of powerlessness in the face of such rampant, unheard-of violence. On one hand, silence can be resignation, giving up any struggle, any claim to justice. On the other hand, this silence is awareness of a greater justice, of protection and guardianship from God, the certainty that the more we place ourselves in God's hands, the more capable He will be of accomplishing His will and realizing His salvation.



The sign of this salvation is described in the Gospel with the inscription that John dwells on: “Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews.” Pilate could have written that Jesus was a wrongdoer, according to the accusation of the Jewish leaders (John 18:30). Instead, he decides to inscribe on that tablet what he himself recognized in Jesus, that title with which he had presented Him to the crowd (John 18:33,39). Pilate, in fact, in his dialogues with Jesus never calls him by name but addresses Him as the king of the Jews and refers to Him to the Jews in this way. But when Pilate then asks Jesus, “Where are you from?” (John 19:9), he receives no answer from Him. In his dialogues with Jesus, Pilate perceives all the authority of that condemned

man and summarizes in that inscription what he has understood about Jesus. Pilate, the judge of that trial, the highest authority of the empire in Jerusalem at that time, in a way expresses his verdict. Four simple words in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek to declare Jesus King of His people, even from the Cross.

“Yeshua Ha-Notri Melek Ha-Yehudim”: so that even the Jews could recognize who Jesus was. Despite their rejection and ours, Jesus is and remains the king of our existence. Despite their and our rejection, in that suffering face, we are called to recognize the one who took upon Himself our sins.

“Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum”: so that both the Romans, especially those soldiers under the cross, but also all of us today, can understand the consequences of a cruel power, incapable of promoting a justice that judges the guilty and the innocent without partiality.

“Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων”, Iēsoûs ho Nazōraîos o Basileûs tōn Ioudaîōn: so that, in the expression of that then-known language, every man and woman in every part of the world could know who Jesus was. Believers and non-believers, even today, can recognize themselves in His suffering, can look at that righteous Crucified One as one who shared the same ruthless fate, a silent victim of those who rule over peoples without justice.



In the face of Jesus’s silence, from the Cross that writing speaks, shouts, screams loudly what those men did not want to see before. That writing bothers the Jewish leaders so much that they return to Pilate asking him to change it. That writing bothers us because it reminds us that

sometimes we act like Pilate before the innocent oppressed of our days, and like the Roman procurator, we turn away. That writing bothers us because, like the Jewish leaders, sometimes we invent excuses not to help the innocent victims of our times.

“We cannot welcome everyone”; “they put themselves in dangerous conditions at sea knowing what they were getting into”; “the residual load,” that’s how a minister of a Western country referred to migrants stuck on a ship: words that sometimes

outrage us but other times leave us completely indifferent because we are too accustomed to thinking only of our interests and advantages.

That silence of the unjustly condemned innocent confronts us with a choice: act for him, cry out in his defense, or look away, pretending nothing is happening. There is no middle ground; even today, from this place, Jesus invites us to choose. What will you do?



# The silence that overflows into joy

## Peregrination to Bethphage 23rd March, 2024



*"I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out" (Luke 19:40).*

Beloved brothers and sisters, this is how today's Gospel, which we have just listened to, concludes in this final stage of our Lenten pilgrimage. Together, we have meditated on silence. This image has accompanied us through various moments of prayer, and we have grasped its different nuances. But today, this place, from which tomorrow a joyful and certainly noisy procession will depart, seems the least suitable to talk about silence.

The readings of this liturgy alternate between two opposing representations. The words of the prophet Zechariah are an invitation to joy. Yet, the people still live in a situation of great difficulty. Zechariah announces the arrival of a king, who will come and who will be just, and he will be saved, he will be humble. The first of these attributes is clear. He must administer justice without showing favoritism, in full fidelity to God's law. The second is more specific but ultimately underscores this king's relationship with God: he will indeed be saved before being the one who saves. The term specifies that this king has experienced God's salvation upon Himself, a salvation that is not based on chariots and horses (Psalm 33:16) but on the protection that comes from God. This is true for us as well. If we do not experience the salvation that comes from God firsthand, our joy will be fleeting. If we do not personally experience the redemption that God works in us, we cannot be instruments of salvation for others. Ultimately, this is what Paul proclaims in his letter to the Philippians.

Jesus is our Saviour because He has personally experienced the redemption that comes from the Father. “He did not seek his own way of salvation, he did not choose shortcuts, but He became a servant, humbling Himself even more to the point of death on the Cross” (Philippians 2:8).

Furthermore, the king described by Zechariah is “humble” or “poor” (Zechariah 9:9). The prophet does not refer, with that attribute, to an economic condition of God's envoy, but to his nature, capable of setting aside all pride, to fully trust in God. This is the same choice made by Jesus, who could have claimed his divine origin, his unique relationship with the Father, but instead willingly humiliated Himself, thus becoming a sign of God's glory. Seeing that man nailed to the Cross, people can know a new face of God, that of a suffering man but also of a God who gives His life. The coming of this long-awaited new king marks the beginning of an era of peace. “He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem; the bow of war shall be banished” (Zechariah 9:10). Joy, indeed, seems incompatible with war and death, and this time on this land reminds us of that in all its harshness.



Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, the crowd exalts Him, but after a few days, He will be crucified. What sense, then, is there in living the joy and exaltation of that day? Perhaps Jesus was not aware of what he was facing? Luke has presented Jesus's entire journey to Jerusalem as an itinerary in which He shows Himself fully aware of what is to come, ready to do what the Father commands Him. The joy of that day is not forgetting the future suffering or the preceding difficulties. It is instead an invitation to joyfully live even the complicated moments, even those situations that speak of death. There is a profound joy that arises from the certainty that the Lord travels with us on that road to Jerusalem and does so riding a colt, a symbol of a kingship that asserts itself not with weapons, not with oppression, not with hatred towards others. A new language is that image of a God who walks meekly toward Jerusalem. It is a language we must learn and are called to use especially in these



times of war and suffering. Meekness as a response to arrogance, a path of peace as a response to violence, songs of joy that overcome oppression.

To do this, we must untie that donkey waiting in the village across. Luke speaks of “loosing” a bond. He uses a term, “untie,” which also indicates liberation, as in the case of the woman held captive for 18 years by an unclean spirit (Luke 13:16). In that case too, Jesus “loosens” the woman to give her a new life, the beginning of a new existence.

“And if anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ you shall say this, ‘The Lord has need of it’” (Luke 19:31). What does the Lord need from you today? What do we need to untie in our lives to truly live as disciples? In this time, I believe we must learn to “untie,” that is, free ourselves from fear to face life courageously; from sadness to make room for joy in our lives. In this place, from this land in particular, I think we are called to untie, that is, to overcome resentment to release peace, the desire for domination to recognize the other as a brother or sister, hatred to forgive that brother or sister, even the one who has hurt us and done us harm. There is no other way. There is only one road that leads from Bethphage to Jerusalem. We can



walk it like the Pharisees, who do not participate and do not want to take part in the joy of that day, indeed oppose it, to the point of wanting to silence that praising crowd. Or we can descend along the Mount of Olives like the disciples or the crowd praising Jesus, but who have not fully understood where that road leads, and

in fact, shortly after, they will abandon Jesus at the first difficulties. Or, like Jesus, we can descend the Mount of Olives, letting the joy of salvation, the joy of forgiveness, the joy of that new life given by Him fill our hearts. Jesus knows where that road leads, and he walks it courageously, enjoying that festive day, because in his heart, he knows how to blend joy and suffering.

Jesus wanted to walk that path amidst shouts and festive hymns even knowing that he was giving his life. Similarly, may our songs, our joy be comforting to those who cannot speak, to those who are in silence. It is possible to rejoice even in difficulties, to experience happiness even in the midst of suffering. Certainly, it is a new path to tread, with new means, like that donkey on which no one had ever ridden. But Jesus

has shown us the way, how to embody it, how to give it substance, support, and concrete closeness to the least.

Let us untie, release the silence that has accompanied us in this Lenten time into a song of praise, into a hymn of rejoicing because the Lord has risen and still comes to free us, to untie for each of us the chains of sin and death, to give us freedom and life. Along that path, we must not forget the journey taken, we must not forget those who are alone, or suffering, or those who are crying. The joy of that journey is not to leave them behind us as something distant, but it is to give voice to all those who cannot make it heard. Let us ascend, therefore, towards Jerusalem.

