



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 8 February 2012*

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to reflect with you on the prayer of Jesus when death was imminent, pausing to think about everything St Mark and St Matthew tell us. The two Evangelists record the prayer of the dying Jesus not only in Greek, in which their accounts are written but, because of the importance of these words, also in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic. In this way they have passed down not only the content but also the sound that this prayer had on Jesus' lips: let us really listen to Jesus' words as they were. At the same time, the Evangelists describe to us the attitude of those present at the crucifixion who did not understand — or did not want to understand — this prayer.

St Mark wrote, as we have heard: “when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*’” which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’. (15:33-34). In the structure of the account, the prayer, Jesus' cry, is raised at the end of the three hours of darkness that shrouded all the earth from midday until three o'clock in the afternoon. These three hours of darkness are in turn the continuation of a previous span of time, also of three hours, that began with the crucifixion of Jesus.

The Evangelist Mark, in fact, tells us that “it was the third hour, when they crucified him” (15:25). All the times given in the narrative, Jesus’ six hours on the Cross are divided into two parts of equal length.

The mockery of various groups which displays their scepticism and confirms their disbelief fits into the first three hours, from nine o’clock in the morning until midday. St Mark writes: “Those who passed by derided him” (15:29); “So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes” (15:31); “those who were crucified with him also reviled him” (15:32). In the following three hours, from midday until “the ninth hour” [three o’clock in the afternoon], the Evangelist spoke only of the darkness that had come down over the entire earth; only darkness fills the whole scene without any references to people’s movements or words. While Jesus is drawing ever closer to death, there is nothing but darkness that covers “the whole land”.

The cosmos also takes part in this event: the darkness envelops people and things, but even at this moment of darkness God is present, he does not abandon them. In the biblical tradition darkness has an ambivalent meaning: it is a sign of the presence and action of evil, but also of a mysterious presence and action of God who can triumph over every shadow.

In the Book of Exodus, for example, we read “The Lord said to Moses: “Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud” (19:9); and, further: “the people stood afar off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was” (20:21). And in his discourses in Deuteronomy, Moses recounts: “And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom” (4:11); you “heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire” (5,23). In the scene of the crucifixion of Jesus the darkness engulfs the earth and the Son of God immerses himself in the shadows of death in order to bring life, with his act of love.

Returning to St Mark’s narrative, in the face of the insults of various categories of people, in the face of the pall of darkness that shrouds everything, at the moment when he faces death, Jesus, with the cry of his prayer, shows that with the burden of suffering and death in which there seems to be abandonment, the absence of God, Jesus is utterly certain of the closeness of the Father who approves this supreme act of love, the total gift of himself, although the voice from on high is not heard, as it was on other occasions.

In reading the Gospels we realize that in other important passages on his earthly existence Jesus had also seen the explanatory voice of God associated with the signs of the Father’s presence and approval of his journey of love.

Thus in the event that follows the Baptism in the Jordan, at the opening of the heavens, the words of the Father had been heard: “Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11). Then in the Transfiguration, the sign of the cloud was accompanied with these words: “this is my

beloved Son; listen to him” (Mk 9:7). Instead, at the approach of the death of the Crucified One, silence falls, no voice is heard but the Father’s loving gaze is fixed on his Son’s gift of love.

However, what is the meaning of Jesus’ prayer, of the cry he addresses to the Father: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”: doubt about his mission, about the Father’s presence? Might there not be in this prayer the knowledge that he had been forsaken? The words that Jesus addresses to the Father are the beginning of Psalm 22[21], in which the Psalmist expresses to God his being torn between feeling forsaken and the certain knowledge of God’s presence in his People’s midst. He, the Psalmist, prays: “O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel” (vv. 3-4). The Psalmist speaks of this “cry” in order to express the full suffering of his prayer to God, seemingly absent: in the moment of anguish his prayer becomes a cry.

This also happens in our relationship with the Lord: when we face the most difficult and painful situations, when it seems that God does not hear, we must not be afraid to entrust the whole weight of our overburdened hearts to him, we must not fear to cry out to him in our suffering, we must be convinced that God is close, even if he seems silent.

Repeating from the Cross the first words of Psalm 22[21] “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*” — “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46); uttering the words of the Psalm, Jesus prays at the moment of his ultimate rejection by men, at the moment of abandonment; yet he prays, with the Psalm, in the awareness of God’s presence, even in that hour when he is feeling the human drama of death.

However a question arises within us: how is it possible that such a powerful God does not intervene to save his Son from this terrible trial? It is important to understand that Jesus’ prayer is not the cry of one who meets death with despair, nor is it the cry of one who knows he has been forsaken. At this moment Jesus makes his own the whole of Psalm 22[21], the Psalm of the suffering People of Israel. In this way he takes upon himself not only the sin of his people, but also that of all men and women who are suffering from the oppression of evil and, at the same time, he places all this before God’s own heart, in the certainty that his cry will be heard in the Resurrection: “The cry of extreme anguish is at the same time the certainty of an answer from God, the certainty of salvation — not only for Jesus himself, but for ‘many’” (*Jesus of Nazareth*, II, pp. 213-214 Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2011).

In this prayer of Jesus are contained his extreme trust and his abandonment into God’s hands, even when God seems absent, even when he seems to be silent, complying with a plan incomprehensible to us. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: “in the redeeming love that always united him to the Father, he assumed us in the state of our waywardness of sin, to the point that he could say in our name from the cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (n. 603). His is a suffering in communion with us and for us, which derives from love and

already bears within it redemption, the victory of love.

The bystanders at the foot of the Cross of Jesus fail to understand, thinking that his cry is a supplication addressed to Elijah. In the scene they seek to assuage his thirst in order to prolong his life and to find out whether Elijah will truly come to his aid, but with a loud cry Jesus' earthly life comes to an end, as well as their wish.

At the supreme moment, Jesus gives vent to his heart's grief, but at the same time makes clear the meaning of the Father's presence and his consent to the Father's plan of salvation of humanity.

We too have to face ever anew the "today" of suffering of God's silence — we express it so often in our prayers — but we also find ourselves facing the "today" of the Resurrection, of the response of God who took upon himself our sufferings, to carry them together with us and to give us the firm hope that they will be overcome (cf. Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, nn. 35-40).

Dear friends, let us lay our daily crosses before God in our prayers, in the certainty that he is present and hears us. Jesus' cry reminds us that in prayer we must surmount the barriers of our "ego" and our problems and open ourselves to the needs and suffering of others.

May the prayer of Jesus dying on the Cross teach us to pray lovingly for our many brothers and sisters who are oppressed by the weight of daily life, who are living through difficult moments, who are in pain, who have no word of comfort; let us place all this before God's heart, so that they too may feel the love of God who never abandons us. Many thanks.

APPEAL

In the past few weeks a wave of cold weather and freezing temperatures has hit some parts of Europe, giving rise to great hardship and immense damage, as we know. I would like to express my closeness to the peoples affected by this intense bad weather, while I ask for prayers for the victims and their families. At the same time, I encourage solidarity, so that those affected by these tragic events may be given generous help.

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I greet all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including groups from England, Ireland, Norway and the United States of America. I extend a special welcome to the many students who are here, and I pray that your studies may serve to deepen your knowledge and love of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Whatever darkness you experience in your lives, may you always remain firm in faith, hope and love. May God bless all of you!

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