

THE GOSPEL OF LIFE ON THE TREE OF THE CROSS

FROM THE GOSPEL OF LIFE (EVANGELIUM VITAE), 50 & 51

IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON OF GOOD FRIDAY, “THERE WAS darkness over the whole land...while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (Lk 23:44, 45). This is the symbol of a great cosmic disturbance and a massive conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil, between life and death. Today we too find ourselves in the midst of a dramatic conflict between the “culture of death” and the “culture of life.” But the glory of the Cross is not overcome by this darkness; rather, it shines forth ever more radiantly and brightly, and is revealed as the center, meaning and goal of all history and of every human life.

Jesus is nailed to the Cross and is lifted up from the earth. He experiences the moment of his greatest “powerlessness,” and his life seems completely delivered to the derision of his adversaries and into the hands of his executioners: he is mocked, jeered at, insulted (cf. Mk 15:24-36). And yet, precisely amid all this, having seen him breathe his last, the Roman centurion exclaims: “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mk 15:39). It is thus, at the moment of his greatest weakness, that the Son of God is revealed for who he is: on the Cross his glory is made manifest.

By his death, Jesus sheds light on the meaning of the life and death of every human being. Before he dies, Jesus prays to the Father, asking forgiveness for his persecutors (cf. Lk 23:34), and to the criminal who asks him to remember him in his kingdom he replies: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:43). After his death “the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Mt 27:52). The salvation wrought by Jesus is the bestowal of life and resurrection. Throughout his earthly life, Jesus had indeed bestowed salvation by healing and doing good to all (cf. Acts 10:38). But his miracles, healings and even his raising of the dead were signs of another salvation, a salvation which consists in the forgiveness of sins, that is, in setting man free from his greatest sickness and in raising him to the very life of God.

On the Cross, the miracle of the serpent lifted up by Moses in the desert (Jn 3:14-15; cf. Num 21:8-9) is renewed

and brought to full and definitive perfection. Today too, by looking upon the one who was pierced, every person whose life is threatened encounters the sure hope of finding freedom and redemption.

But there is yet another particular event which moves me deeply when I consider it. “When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, ‘It is finished’; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (Jn 19:30). Afterwards, the Roman soldier “pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (Jn 19:34).

Everything has now reached its complete fulfillment. The “giving up” of the spirit describes Jesus’ death, a death like that of every other human being, but it also seems to allude to the “gift of the Spirit,” by which Jesus ransoms us from death and opens before us a new life.

It is the very life of God which is now shared with man. It is the life which through the Sacraments of the Church—symbolized by the blood and water flowing from Christ’s side—is continually given to God’s children, making them the people of the New Covenant. From the Cross, the source of life, the “people of life” is born and increases.

The contemplation of the Cross thus brings us to the very heart of all that has taken place. Jesus, who upon entering into the world said: “I have come, O God, to do your will” (cf. Heb 10:9), made himself obedient to the Father in everything and, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1), giving himself completely for them. He who had come “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45), attains on the Cross the heights of love: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). And he died for us while we were yet sinners (cf. Rom 5:8).

In this way Jesus proclaims that life finds its center, its meaning and its fulfillment when it is given up.

We too are called to give our lives for our brothers and sisters, and thus to realize in the fullness of truth the meaning and destiny of our existence. ■



Pope St. John Paul II on his Encyclical *The Gospel of Life* (1995): “...[it] is meant to be a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability, and at the same time, a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life! Only in this direction will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness!”