



The Holy See

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

COMMEMORATION OF ABRAHAM

Wednesday, 23 February 2000

1. *"I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess... On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying: "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great River, the river Euphrates' " (Gn 15: 7, 18).*

Before Moses heard Yahweh's well-known words on Mount Sinai: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage"* (Ex 20: 2), the Patriarch Abraham had already heard these other words: *"I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans"*. Therefore, our thoughts must turn to that important place in the history of God's People, to seek there the origins of God's covenant with man. This is why, during this year of the Great Jubilee, as our hearts return to the beginnings of God's covenant with humanity, *we turn our gaze to Abraham*, to the place where he heard God's call and responded to it with the obedience of faith. Together with us, Jews and Muslims also look to the person of Abraham as a model of unconditional submission to the will of God (cf. *Nostra aetate*, n. 3).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go" (*Heb 11: 8*). Behold: Abraham, whom the Apostle calls "our father in faith" (cf. *Rom 4: 11-16*), believed in God, *trusted in the One* who called him. *He believed in his promise*. God said to Abraham: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.... by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (*Gn 12: 1-3*). Are we talking about the route taken by one of the many migrations typical of an era when sheep-rearing was a basic form of economic life? Probably. Surely though, *it was not only this*. In Abraham's life, which marks the beginning of salvation history, we can already perceive

another meaning of the call and the promise. The land to which human beings, guided by the voice of God, are moving, *does not belong exclusively to the geography of this world*. Abraham, the believer who accepts God's invitation, is someone heading towards a promised land that is not of this world.

2. In the *Letter to the Hebrews* we read: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (11: 17-18). *This is the climax of Abraham's faith*. Abraham is tested by that God in whom he had placed his trust, that God from whom he had received the promise about the distant future: "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (*Heb* 11: 18). He is called, however, to offer in sacrifice to God precisely that Isaac, his only son, on whom his every hope is based, in accordance moreover with the divine promise. How could God's promise to him of numerous descendants come true if Isaac, his only son, were to be offered in sacrifice?

Through faith Abraham emerges victorious from this test, a dramatic test that challenged his faith directly. "He considered", writes the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, "that God was able to raise men even from the dead" (11: 9). At that humanly tragic moment, when he was ready to inflict the mortal blow on his son, Abraham never stopped believing. Indeed, his faith in God's promise reached its climax. He thought that "God was able to raise men even from the dead". This is what this father, tested humanly speaking beyond all measure, thought. And his faith, his total abandonment to God, did not disappoint him. It is written: "hence he did receive him back" (*Heb* 1: 19). Isaac was given back to him because he believed in God completely and unconditionally.

The author of the Letter seems to express something more here: all of Abraham's experience appears to him as *an analogy of the saving event of Christ's Death and Resurrection*. This man, placed at the origins of our faith, is part of God's eternal plan. There is a tradition that the place where Abraham was to have sacrificed his own son is the very same place where another father, the eternal Father, would accept the offering of his Only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Thus Abraham's sacrifice can be seen as a prophetic sign of Christ's sacrifice. St John writes: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (*Jn* 3: 16). The Patriarch Abraham our father in faith unknowingly brings all believers, in a certain sense, into God's eternal plan in which the world's redemption is accomplished.

3. One day Christ said: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham I was, I am" (*Jn* 8: 58), and these words astonished his listeners, who objected: "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" (*Jn* 8: 57). Those who reacted so reasoned in a merely human way, and therefore did not accept what Christ said. "Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you claim to be?" (*Jn* 8: 53). Jesus answered them: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad" (*Jn* 8: 56). Abraham's vocation seems entirely directed to the day of which Christ is speaking. Here human calculations

fail; *God's measure must be applied*. Only then can we understand the proper meaning of the obedience of Abraham who "believed against hope" (*Rom 4: 18*). He hoped to become the father of many nations, and today he is certainly rejoicing with us because God's promise is fulfilled down the centuries, from generation to generation.

His believing, hoping against hope, was "reckoned to him as righteousness" (*Rom 4: 22*), not only in his regard, but in view of us all, his descendants in faith. We "believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord" (*Rom 4: 24*), put to death for our sins and raised for our justification (cf. *Rom 4: 25*). Abraham did not know this, but through the obedience of faith he directed his steps towards the fulfilment of all the divine promises, motivated by the hope that they would come to pass. Is there any greater promise than that fulfilled in Christ's paschal mystery? In the faith of Abraham almighty God truly made an eternal covenant with the human race, and its definitive fulfilment is Jesus Christ. The Only-begotten Son of the Father, one in substance with him, became Man to lead us through the humiliation of the Cross and the glory of the Resurrection into the land of salvation that God, rich in mercy, had promised humanity from the very beginning.

4. Mary, "who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (*Lk 1: 45*), is an unsurpassable model of the redeemed people on their way to the fulfilment of this universal promise.

Daughter of Abraham in faith as well as in the flesh, Mary personally shared in this experience. Like Abraham, she too accepted the sacrifice of her Son, but while the actual sacrifice of Isaac was not demanded of Abraham, Christ drank the cup of suffering to the last drop. Mary personally took part in her Son's trial, believing and hoping at the foot of the Cross (cf. *Jn 19: 25*).

This was the epilogue of a long wait. Having been taught to meditate on the prophetic texts, Mary foresaw what awaited her and in praising the mercy of God, faithful to his people from generation to generation, she gave her own consent to his plan of salvation; in particular, she said her "yes" to the central event of this plan, the sacrifice of that Child whom she bore in her womb. Like Abraham, she accepted the sacrifice of her Son.

Today we join our voice to hers and with her, Virgin Daughter of Zion, we proclaim that God has remembered his mercy, "as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever" (*Lk 1: 55*).

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