



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

The great and the least

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(by <http://www.osservatoreromano.va>)

The “apostolic courage to always say things truthfully”, the “pastoral love” to welcome people with “what little one can give”, and the ability to question one’s own vocation: these are the characteristics of the true faithful who wish to follow in the Lord’s footsteps.

In the Mass celebrated in the Santa Marta chapel on Thursday, 15 December, Pope Francis paused to meditate on these characteristics in the figure of Jesus’ cousin, “the great John” the Baptist of whom we are reminded in the Advent liturgy. John, the Pope reflected, was “great” because “he was the least in the kingdom of heaven”. The Pope returned again to the theme of “littleness” when, towards the end of the Homily, a child began crying in the chapel. “When a baby cries at Mass”, he said, “we must not kick him out”, because his crying “is the best sermon”: it is “the tenderness of God who visits us”. At the end of Mass, he added that the cry of the Child Jesus was the first sermon of Christ.

It was John’s attention to the least of men, to the humble and the meek, that made him a “shepherd” of men, Francis affirmed. Everyone sought out John the Baptist, “the man who was in the desert”, the Pope said. Everyone was “attracted by his witness”. Indeed, “the Pharisees and the doctors of the law also came to see him, but with an air of detachment”. The Gospel, he stressed, emphasizes that they too were present, but were “not getting baptized by him — that is, not listening with the heart, only with their ears, to judge him — they thwarted God’s plan for

them". This same behaviour can be found in the indifference with which the doctors of the law received the prophets: they "listened to the prophets but did not follow" them.

Taking up the Gospel of Luke (7:24-30), the Pope recalled how Jesus, alluding to John, said to the people: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A show? A reed shaken by the wind? What did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings' courts". And such men, Francis noted, are also found "among the bishops". The crowd in Luke's Gospel however, was seeking a prophet. In fact, the Pope explained, they were seeking "the last of the prophets, the last of that group of people who began the journey, with our father Abraham", up until the time of Jesus. (In this regard, the Pope recommended also reading Chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews).

Thus, here we speak of "the last" prophet, because after him comes the Messiah. And Jesus refers to John as "more than a prophet", a great man. Indeed, the Pope emphasized, Jesus said: "I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John". And it was "this great man" who attracted the people.

"Where was John's greatness in preaching to and attracting the people"? the Pope asked. Above all, he reflected, it can be found in "his faithfulness to his mission". John, he noted, "was a man faithful to what the Lord had asked of him". Therefore, he was "great because he was faithful". And this faithfulness could also be seen in the way he preached. In fact, John boldly said "harsh things to the Pharisees, to the doctors and teachers of the law. He didn't say to them: 'Gentlemen, behave yourselves'. No. He simply called them a 'brood of vipers'". With those who came to him, "but never with with an open heart", John never minced his words: he was always forthright: "Brood of vipers"! the Pope exclaimed. This meant "he was risking his life, yes, but he was faithful". He treated King Herod in the same way, calling him "to his face": 'Adulterer! It is not right to live thus, adulterer!'".

Of course, the Pope continued, "if in today's Sunday homily, a pastor says: 'among you there are a brood of vipers and many adulterers'", his bishop "would receive letters of concern: 'You're sending us this priest who insults us!'"'. In reality, John insulted people because he was "faithful to his vocation and to the truth".

But John's attitude toward the people was completely different, the Pope observed, saying he "was very understanding". And to those who asked: "What must we do to convert?", he simply replied: "he who has food, share it with the one who has none. Whoever has two cloaks should share with the one who has none". In other words, stressed Francis, "he began with the least"; "he behaved like a true shepherd, a "great pastor and prophet".

So, "to the tax collectors, who were the public sinners, because they exploited the people", he simply suggested: "Do not demand more than what is just". He began with "a small step" and he

baptized them. In the same way, he advised the soldiers: “do not threaten, nor denounce anyone; be content with your wages, your salary”. Simply put, the Pope explained, we must be careful “not to enter the world of bribes”, as happens when a policeman is bribed to overlook a fine. John, therefore, “was concrete, but measured” and, to baptize “all these sinners”, in return, he only asked for a “minimal step forward, because he knew that with this step, the Lord would do the rest”. And they “would convert”. This “great prophet” was a “shepherd who understood the situation of the people and helped them to move forward with the Lord”. But despite being “great, strong, sure of his vocation”, Francis observed, John “also had dark moments, he doubted, he had his doubts”. The Pontiff pointed to the Gospel passage in which John, “in prison, began to doubt”. In fact, the Pontiff said, in John’s eyes, Jesus “was a saviour, not as he had imagined him. And maybe someone whispered in his ear: ‘He is not [a saviour]! Look, he does not do this, this, this...’. And in prison, with anguish, the great man, so sure of his vocation, doubted”. Moreover, he added, “the great can afford to doubt, because they are great”.

Jesus’ response to John the Baptist was repeated “in the synagogue of Nazareth: ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who does not take offense at me’”.

What Jesus did with the least of men, the Pope explained, “John also did in his preaching, with the soldiers, with the crowds, with the tax collectors”. Nevertheless, “in prison, he began to doubt”. And this, he stressed, is “beautiful”: namely, that “the great can afford to doubt”. In fact, they “are confident in their vocation, but each time the Lord shows them a new path along the journey, they begin to doubt”. And then the questions begin: “But this is not orthodox; this is heretical, this is not the Messiah that I was expecting.... The devil does this work and some friends also help, right”? Right here is “the greatness of John, a great man, the last of that group of believers that began with Abraham, the one who preaches repentance; who does not mince words in condemning the proud, who at life’s end permits himself to doubt”. Francis concluded: “This is a beautiful programme of Christian life”.

With this, the Pontiff invited the faithful to ask “John for the grace of apostolic courage to always say things truthfully”; that of “pastoral love”. This, he noted, means “to receive people with what little one can give, the first step”; and “even the grace to doubt”. Because it can happen that “at life’s end”, one can ask himself: “is everything that I believed in true or was it just fantasy”? It is “the temptation against faith, against the Lord”. It is important, then, that “the great John, who is the least in the kingdom of heaven — for this he is great —, may he help us on this road in the Lord’s footsteps”.