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General audience: Abraham's hope against all hope

Abraham's hope against all hope was the theme of the Holy Father's catechesis during this Wednesday's general audience in the Paul VI Hall. The Pope explained that St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, tells us of the faith in God of the patriarch, to whom He had promised a descendant even though he was almost a hundred years old and his wife, Sara, was barren. "This is a powerful concept", said Francis. "Even when there is no hope, I hope. ... There was no human hope ... but he hoped".

Trusting in this promise, Abraham sets out on his journey, agrees to leave his land and become an outsider, hope in this 'impossible' son that God would have given him even though by then it was as if Sara's womb was dead. Abraham believed, his faith opened him up to a seemingly irrational hope; it is the capacity to go beyond human reason, wisdom and the prudence of the world, beyond what is normally considered to be common sense, to believe in the impossible. Hope opens up new horizons, making us capable of dreaming of what is not even imaginable. ... The virtue of hope is that it gives us great strength to go on in life".

But it is a difficult journey. And even for Abraham there arrives the moment of the crisis of despair. He had trusted, he left his home, his land, his friends ... everything. He arrived in the land that God had indicated to him, time passed. but the son did not come, and Sara's womb remained closed in its barrenness. And", continued the Pope, "Abraham, I don't say that he lost his patience, but he lamented with the Lord. This too we can learn from our father Abraham: complaining with the Lord is a way of praying. At times I hear, when I confess, 'I complained to the Lord', and I say, 'No, go ahead, complain! He is our Father!' And this is a way of praying: lamenting with the Lord, this is good. Abraham laments with the Lord, saying 'Lord God ... I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus' (Eliezer was the one who ran everything). Abraham continued, 'Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir'. And the Lord answered, 'This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir. And He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them". Then He said to him, "So shall your offspring be"'. And once more Abraham believed the Lord.

"The scene takes place at night; outside it is dark, but also in the heart of Abraham there is the darkness of disappointment, discouragement, the difficulty of continuing to hope for something impossible. By this point the patriarch is elderly, and it seems that there is no longer times for a son, and it will be a servant who will inherit everything. Abraham addresses the Lord, but God, even though He is present and speaks with him, seems

distant now, as if He had not been true to His word. Abraham feels alone; he is old and tired. ... How can he continue to trust? And yet”, continued Francis, “this lament of his is a form of faith, it is a prayer. Despite everything, Abraham continues to believe in God and to hope that something might still happen. Otherwise, why call upon the Lord, complain with Him, remind Him of His promises? Faith is not only the silence that accepts everything without replying; hope is not the certainty that shelters you from doubt and perplexity. Often hope is dark, but it is then that hope carries you forward. Faith is also struggling with God, showing Him our bitterness, without pious pretences. ‘I got angry with God, and I told him this, this and this...’ – but He is our Father, He understands you: go in peace! We must have this courage! And this is hope. And hope is also not being afraid of seeing reality for what it is and accepting its contradictions”.

Abraham, with faith, asks God to help Him to continue to hope. It is curious: he does not ask for a son. He says, ‘Help me continue to hope’, he prays for hope. And the Lord responds, insisting with His unlikely promise: it will not be the servant who is his heir, but a son of his own, born of Abraham, begotten by him. Nothing changes, on God’s part. He continues to repeat what He had already said, and does not offer reassurances to Abraham. His only security is to trust in the word of the Lord and to continue to hope”.

“And that sign that God gives Abraham is a request to continue to believe and to hope: ‘Look toward heaven and number the stars ... So shall your offspring be’. ... God takes Abraham outside his tent, in the reality of his limited point of view, and shows him the stars. To believe, we must see with the eyes of faith: they are only stars, everyone can see them, but for Abraham they must become the sign of God’s fidelity”.

“This is faith, this is the journey of hope that every one of us must make”, Francis concluded. “If for us, too, the only chance remaining is that of looking to the stars, then it is time to trust in God. There is nothing more beautiful. Hope never disappoints”.
