

POPE FRANCIS

The Gospel of Mark

A Spiritual and Pastoral Reading

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The Beginning of the Public Life



THE "GOOD NEWS" (1:1)¹

The key to interpreting life and history

Life is not simply a bare succession of events, but a history, a story waiting to be told through the choice of an interpretative lens that can select and gather the most relevant data. In and of itself, reality has no one, clear meaning. Everything depends on the way we look at things, on the lens we use to view them. If we change that lens, reality itself appears different. So how can we begin to "read" reality through the right lens?

The Gospel of Jesus, Son of God

For Christians, that lens can only be the good news, beginning with the Good News par excellence: "the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God" (Mark 1:1). With these words, the evangelist, Mark, begins his story not by relating "good news" about Jesus, but rather *the good news that is Jesus himself*. Indeed, in reading the pages of Mark's Gospel, we learn that its title corresponds to its content and, above all else, that this content is the very person of Jesus.

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The Easter mystery

This good news—Jesus himself—is not good because it has nothing to do with suffering, but rather because suffering itself becomes part of a bigger picture. It is seen as an integral part of Jesus’s love for the Father and for all humanity. In Christ, God has shown his solidarity with every human in every situation. He has told us that we are not alone, for we have a Father who is constantly mindful of his children. “Fear not, for I am with you” (Isa 43:5): these are the comforting words of a God who is immersed in the history of his people. In his beloved Son, the divine promise—“I am with you”—embraces all our weakness, even to dying and death. In Christ, even darkness and death become a point of encounter with Light and Life. Hope is born, a hope accessible to everyone, at the very crossroads where life meets the bitterness of failure. That hope does not disappoint, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5) and makes new life blossom, like a shoot that springs up from the fallen seed. Seen in this light, every new tragedy that occurs in the world’s history can also become a setting for good news, inasmuch as love can find a way to draw near and to raise up sympathetic hearts, resolute faces, and hands ready to build anew.

JESUS THE CENTER AND END OF HISTORY (1:2–4)²

It is interesting that when the apostles proclaim Jesus Christ they never begin by saying, for example: “Jesus Christ is the Savior!” Rather, the apostles introduce their testimony by presenting “the history of the people.” We see it in today’s passage from the Acts of the Apostles (cf. 13:13–25)...

One cannot understand Jesus Christ apart from the history that prepares for him. Consequently, one cannot understand a Christian apart from the people of God, for a Christian is not a

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monad, someone who exists alone. No, he belongs to a people, to the Church, so much so that a Christian without the Church is an abstract idea, not a reality!

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS (1:9–11)³

All four Gospels testify that Jesus, before taking up his ministry, wanted to be baptized by John the Baptist (Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:29–34). This event gives decisive direction to Christ's entire mission. Indeed, he did not present himself to the world in the splendor of the temple; he could have done so. He did not announce himself with the sounding of trumpets; he could have done so. And he did not come vested like a judge; he could have done so. Instead, after thirty years of a hidden life in Nazareth, Jesus went to the River Jordan, together with many other people, and there waited in line with sinners. He wasn't ashamed; he was there with everyone, with sinners, to be baptized. Therefore, from the very beginning of his ministry, he manifested himself as the Messiah who takes upon himself the human condition, moved by solidarity and compassion. As he said in the synagogue of Nazareth when he identified with the prophecy of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18–19). Everything that Jesus accomplished after his baptism was the realization of that initial design: to bring to all people the saving love of God. Jesus did not bring hatred, did not bring hostility; he brought us love! A love that saves!

He came close to the lowliest, communicating to them God's mercy that is forgiveness, joy, and new life. Jesus, the

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Son sent by the Father, is truly the start of the time of mercy for all humanity! Those present on the banks of the Jordan did not immediately understand the full extent of Jesus's gesture. John the Baptist himself was stunned by his decision (cf. Matt 3:14). But not the Heavenly Father! He let his voice be heard from on high: "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). In this way, the Father confirmed the path that the Son had taken as Messiah, as the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. Thus, Jesus's heart beats, so to speak, in unison with the heart of the Father and of the Spirit, showing to all that salvation is the fruit of God's mercy.

We can contemplate even more clearly the great mystery of this love by directing our gaze to Jesus crucified. As the Innocent One is about to die for us sinners, he prays to the Father: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). It is on the cross that Jesus presents the sin of the world to the mercy of the Father: the sin of all people, my sins, your sins, everyone's sins. There, on the cross, he presents them to the Father. And with the sin of the world, all our sins are wiped away. Nothing and no one is left out of this sacrificial prayer of Jesus. Therefore, we must not be afraid of acknowledging and confessing ourselves as sinners. How many times have we said: "Well, this one is a sinner, he did this and that . . .," and judge someone else? And you? Everyone should ask oneself: "Yes, he is a sinner. And I?" We are all sinners, but we are all forgiven. We all have the opportunity to receive this forgiveness—the mercy of God. Therefore, we mustn't be afraid to acknowledge that we are sinners, to confess that we are sinners, because every sin was borne by the Son on the Cross. When we confess it, repenting and entrusting ourselves to him, we can be certain of forgiveness. The sacrament of reconciliation makes present to each one of us the power of forgiveness that flows from the cross and renews in our life the grace of mercy that Jesus pur-

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chased for us! We must not be afraid of our defects: we each have our own. The power of the love of the Crucified One knows no bounds and never runs dry. This mercy wipes away our defects.

We ask God for the grace to experience the power of the Gospel: the Gospel of mercy that transforms, that lets us enter the heart of God and makes us capable of forgiving and looking at the world with more goodness. If we accept the Gospel of the Crucified and Risen One, our whole life will be formed by his renewing love.

WE ARE CONSECRATED BY THE SPIRIT (1:9–11)⁴

The word “Christian” means that we are consecrated like Jesus, in the same Spirit in which Jesus was immersed throughout his earthly existence. He is the “Christ,” the Anointed One, the Consecrated One; we, the baptized, are “Christian,” meaning consecrated, anointed. Therefore, dear parents, dear godfathers and godmothers, if you want your children to become true Christians, help them to grow up “immersed” in the Holy Spirit, that is, in the warmth of the love of God, in the light of his Word. Do not forget to invoke the Holy Spirit often, every day.

“Do you pray, Ma’am?”

“Yes.”

“To whom do you pray?”

“I pray to God.”

But “God” does not exist like this: God is person, and as person the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist.

“To whom do you pray?”

“The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit.”

We usually pray to Jesus. When we pray the “Our Father,” we pray to the Father. But we do not often pray to the Holy Spirit. It is very important to pray to the Holy Spirit who

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teaches us how to raise the family, the children, so that these children may grow in the living presence of the Holy Trinity. It is precisely the Spirit who leads them forward. For this reason, do not forget to invoke the Holy Spirit often, every day. You can do so, for example, with this simple prayer: “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.” You can say this prayer for your children, and, of course, also for yourselves!

When you recite this prayer, you feel the maternal presence of the Virgin Mary. She teaches us to pray to the Holy Spirit, and to live in accordance with the Spirit, like Jesus.

THE VOICE OF THE FATHER (1:10–11)⁵

Scripture and Tradition give us access to a knowledge of the Trinity, which is revealed with the features of a family. The family is the image of God, who is a communion of persons. At Christ’s baptism, the Father’s voice was heard, calling Jesus his beloved Son, and in this love we can recognize the Holy Spirit (cf. Mark 1:10–11).

DRIVEN BY THE SPIRIT (1:12–15)⁶

The trial and victory of Jesus

The Gospel recalls the themes of temptation, conversion, and the Good News. Mark the Evangelist writes: “The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan” (cf. Mark 1:12–13). Jesus goes into the desert to prepare himself for his mission in the world. He does not need conversion, but as a man, he must go through this trial both for himself, to obey the Father’s will, and for us, to give us the grace to overcome temptation. Jesus’s

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preparation consists in the battle against the evil spirit, that is, against the devil. For us too, Lent is a time of spiritual “contest,” spiritual struggle: we are called to confront the Evil One through prayer in order to be able, with God’s help, to overcome him in our daily life. We know that evil unfortunately is at work in our existence and around us, where there is violence, rejection of the other, building walls, war, injustice. All of these are the work of the Evil One, of evil.

Immediately following the temptations in the desert, Jesus begins to preach the Gospel, that is, the Good News, the second word. The first was “temptation,” the second, “Good News.” And this Good News demands our conversion—the third word—and faith. He proclaims: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand”; and then he cautions, “Repent and believe in the gospel” (v. 15), that is, believe in this Good News that the kingdom of God is at hand. In our lives, we always need to convert—every day! And the Church invites us to pray for this. In fact, we are never sufficiently oriented toward God, and we must continually direct our minds and our hearts toward him. To do this, we need to have the courage to reject all that takes us off course, the false values that deceive us by subtly flattering our ego. Furthermore, we must entrust ourselves to the Lord, to his goodness and to his project of love for each of us. Lent is a time of repentance, yes, but it is not a time of sorrow! It is a time of penance, but it is not a time of sadness, of mourning. It is a time of joyous and serious commitment to strip ourselves of our selfishness, of our “old self,” and to renew ourselves according to the grace of our baptism.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GALILEAN MINISTRY (1:14–15)⁷

The Gospel today presents the beginning of Jesus’s preaching ministry in Galilee. Saint Mark stresses that Jesus began to

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preach “after John [the Baptist] was arrested” (1:14). Precisely at the moment in which the prophetic voice of the Baptist, who proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God, was silenced by Herod, Jesus begins to travel the roads of his land to bring to all, especially the poor, “the gospel of God” (v. 14). The proclamation of Jesus is like that of John, with the essential difference that Jesus no longer points to another who must come. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises; He is the “good news” to believe in, to receive, and to communicate to all men and women of every time that they too may entrust their lives to him. Jesus Christ is the Word living and working in history: whoever hears and follows him may enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus is the fulfillment of divine promises, for he is the One who gives us the Holy Spirit, the “living water” that quenches our restless heart, thirsting for life, love, freedom, and peace—thirsting for God. How often do we feel or have we felt that thirst in our hearts! Jesus revealed it to the Samaritan woman, whom he met at Jacob’s well and to whom he said: “Give me a drink” (John 4:7).

PLACING JESUS AT THE CENTER (1:14–20)⁸

The liturgical season that we just experienced centered on the wait for Jesus and then the coming of Jesus: his birth and the mysteries of his birth until his baptism. Thus, today begins a new liturgical season, and the Church shows us that Jesus is also at the center of this beginning. Indeed, the center of today’s liturgy is Jesus: Jesus as the first and last word of the Father. In fact, God, who often and in different ways in ancient times spoke to our fathers through the prophets, recently, in these days, has spoken to us through the Son whom he established as heir of all things and through whom he also created the

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world: Jesus the Son, the Savior, the Lord: he is the Lord of the Universe.

It was a long journey to this moment of the manifestation of Jesus whom we celebrated in the Christmas season. But he continues to be the center of Christian life: Jesus Christ, Son of the Father, Savior of the world. There is no other; he is the One. And this is the center of our life: Jesus Christ, who manifests himself and shows himself, and we are invited to know him, to recognize him in life, in the many circumstances of life.

The point is to recognize Jesus, to know Jesus. And although it is good to know about the life of this or that saint or about the apparitions to that person here or there, one must never lose sight of the fact that the center is Jesus Christ; without Jesus Christ there are no saints. Of course, the saints are saints. They are great; they are important, but not all apparitions are true.

In this perspective, we should ask: Is the center of my life Jesus Christ? What is my relationship with Jesus Christ? At the start of the celebration of Mass, in the oration of the collect prayer, we asked for the grace to see, the grace to know what we have to do, and the grace to have the strength to do it. But the first thing we must do is look to Jesus Christ. There are three tasks, three things we can do to assure ourselves that Jesus is at the center of our life.

Know and recognize Jesus

First, we need to know and recognize Jesus. At the beginning of his Gospel the apostle John says that many did not recognize Jesus: the doctors of the law, the high priests, the scribes, the Sadducees, some Pharisees. Furthermore, they persecuted him; they killed him. This makes clear that we must first know and recognize Jesus, discover who Jesus is. Does this interest me? It is a question that all of us must ask ourselves: Does it interest me to know Jesus, or am I perhaps more interested in soap

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operas or gossip or ambitions or knowing about other people's lives?

Indeed, to know Jesus, one must first be able to recognize him. And to know Jesus, there is prayer, there is the Holy Spirit, yes, but it is also a good practice to pick up the Gospel every day. . . . It is important to always take with you a copy of the Gospel, such as the pocket version, which is small and can be carried in a pocket or purse, so it is always with you. It is said that Saint Cecilia had the Gospel close to her heart: close, close! By keeping it always close at hand, you can read a passage of the Gospel every day. It is the only way to know Jesus—to know what he did, what he said.

Reading the story of Jesus is essential. The Gospel is the story of Jesus, the life of Jesus; it is Jesus himself. The Holy Spirit shows us that Jesus there. Please, do this: each day read a passage of the Gospel, a small one—for three, four, or five minutes. It is precisely in reading it that the Gospel is understood and works within us; it is the Holy Spirit who then does his work. This is the seed. It is the Holy Spirit who makes the seed sprout and grow.

Adore Jesus

While the first task is to recognize and to know Jesus, the second task is to adore Jesus; he is God! It is important to adore Jesus. In the responsorial psalm we prayed: "Let us adore the Lord with the angels" (cf. Psalm 96). And if "the angels adore him" truly, then we should ask ourselves whether we adore him as well. Most often we pray to Jesus to ask or thank him for something, which is all well and good. However, the real question is whether we adore Jesus.

Let us consider the two ways of adoring Jesus. First, there is the prayer of silent adoration: "You are God; you are the Son of God; I adore you." This is "adoring Jesus." But then we must also remove from our heart the other things that we

“adore”—those things that interest us more. There must be God alone. Other things are helpful only if they direct us to God; they are useful if they help us to adore God alone. Therefore, we must adore God, adore Jesus, and know Jesus through the Gospel.

There is a little prayer that we pray—“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit . . .”—but we often say it mechanically, like parrots. Instead, this prayer is adoration, glory: I adore the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Adore, then, with little prayers. In silence before the grandeur of God, adore Jesus and say: “You are the only One, you are the beginning and the end, and I want to be with you for all my life, for all eternity. You are the only One.” And in this way, banish the things that prevent you from adoring Jesus.

Follow Jesus

The third task in order to have Jesus at the center of our life is what today’s Gospel reading tells us: follow Jesus. When the Lord saw Simon and Andrew working—they were fishermen—he said to them, “Follow me.” We must, therefore, follow Jesus, the things he taught us, the things we find each day when we read a section of the Gospel. And we must ask: “Lord, what do you want me to do? Show me the way.”

In conclusion, it is essential always to keep Jesus at the center. This involves knowing and recognizing Jesus; adoring and following Jesus. Christian life is very simple, but we need the grace of the Holy Spirit so he may awaken in us this will to know, to adore, and to follow Jesus. For this very reason, we asked the Lord at the beginning in the collect prayer that we might know what we have to do and have the strength to do it. And, in the simplicity of every day—because to be Christians, the unusual, difficult, and superfluous things are not necessary—may the Lord give us the grace to know Jesus, to adore Jesus, and to follow Jesus.

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A DIVINE THREAD (1:15)⁹

God is close

A divine thread emerges, a thread that passes through human history and weaves together the history of salvation. . . . God is near, his kingdom is at hand (cf. Mark 1:15). The Lord does not want to be feared like a powerful and aloof sovereign. He does not want to remain on his throne in heaven or in history books, but rather he wants to come down and be among us in our everyday affairs, to walk with us. As we think of the gift of a millennium so filled with faith, we do well before all else to thank God for having walked with his people, having taken us by the hand, as a father takes the hand of his child, and accompanied us in so many situations. That is what we too, as members of the Church, are constantly called to do: to listen, to get involved, and to be neighbors, sharing in people's joys and struggles, so that the Gospel can spread ever more consistently and fruitfully, radiating goodness through the transparency of our lives.

God is real

Finally, God is real. Everything about God's way of acting is real and concrete. Divine wisdom "is like a master worker" and one who "plays" in the world (cf. Prov 8:30). The Word becomes flesh, is born of a mother, is born under the law (cf. Gal 4:4), has friends, goes to a party. The eternal is communicated in spending time with people and through concrete situations. Your own history, shaped by the Gospel, the cross, and fidelity to the Church, has seen the contagious power of a genuine faith, passed down from family to family, from fathers to sons, and above all from mothers and grandmothers, whom we need so much to thank. In particular, you have been able to touch with your hand the real and provident tenderness of the Mother of

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all, whom I have come here [to Poland] as a pilgrim to venerate and whom we have acclaimed in the psalm as the “great pride of our nation” (Jud 15:9).

THE INVITATION TO CONVERSION (1:15)¹⁰

Jesus made conversion the first word of his preaching: “Repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). With this proclamation, he presents himself to the people, asking them to accept his word as God’s final and definitive word to humanity (cf. Mark 12:1–11). With regard to the preaching of the prophets, Jesus insists even more on the interior dimension. In fact, conversion involves the whole person—heart and mind—to become a new creature, a new person. Change your heart and you will be renewed.

When Jesus calls one to conversion, he does not set himself up as a judge, but he calls from a position of closeness. Because he shares in the human condition, he therefore calls from the street, from the home, from the table. . . . Mercy toward those who needed to change their lives came about through his loving presence, involving each person in the history of salvation. Jesus persuaded people with his kindness, with his love, and with his way of being. He touched the depths of people’s hearts, and they felt attracted by the love of God and were moved to change their lifestyle. For example, the conversion of Matthew (cf. Matt 9:9–13) and of Zacchaeus (cf. Luke 19:1–10) happened in exactly this manner, because they felt loved by Jesus and, through him, by the Father. True conversion happens when we accept the gift of grace, and a clear sign of its authenticity is when we become aware of the needs of our brothers and sisters and are ready to draw near to them.

How many times have we also felt a need to change that involves our entire person! How often do we say to ourselves:

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“I need to change, I can’t continue this way. . . . My life on this path will not bear fruit; it will be a useless life and I will not be happy.” How often these thoughts come, how often! And Jesus, who is near us, extends his hand and says, “Come, come to me. I’ll do the work: I’ll change your heart. I’ll change your life. I will make you happy.”

Jesus who is with us invites us to change our lives. It is he, with the Holy Spirit, who sows in us this restlessness to change our life and be better. Let us follow, therefore, this invitation of the Lord and let us not resist, because only if we open ourselves to his mercy will we find true life and true joy. We have only to open wide the door and he will do the rest. He does everything, but we must open our heart so that he can heal us and enable us to go forward. I assure you that we will be much happier.

JESUS CALLS THE FIRST DISCIPLES (1:17–18)¹¹

In looking at your faces, the Mexican people have the right to discover [in their bishops] the signs of those “who have seen the Lord” (cf. John 20:25), of those who have been with God. This is essential. Do not waste time or energy, then, on secondary things, on gossip or intrigue, on conceited schemes of careerism, on empty plans for superiority, or on unproductive groups that seek their own interests. Do not allow yourselves to be dragged into gossip and slander. Foster in your priests a correct understanding of sacred ministry. For us ministers of God, it is enough to have the grace to “drink the cup of the Lord,” the gift of protecting that portion of the heritage that has been entrusted to us, though we may be unskilled administrators. Let us allow the Father to assign the place he has prepared for us (cf. Matt 20:20–28). Can we really be concerned with affairs that are not the Father’s? Away from the “Father’s

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affairs” (Luke 2:48–49) we lose our identity and, through our own fault, empty his grace of meaning.

If our vision does not witness to having seen Jesus, then the words with which we recall him will be rhetorical and empty figures of speech. They may perhaps express the nostalgia of those who cannot forget the Lord, but who have become, in some sense, mere babbling orphans beside a tomb. Finally, they may be words that are incapable of preventing this world of ours from being abandoned and reduced to its own desperate power.

I think of the need to offer a maternal place of rest to young people. May your vision be capable of meeting theirs, loving them and understanding what they search for with that energy that inspired many like them to leave behind their boats and nets on the other side of the sea (cf. Mark 1:17–18), to leave the abuses of the banking sector so as to follow the Lord on the path of true wealth (cf. Matt 9:9).

I am concerned about those many persons who, seduced by the empty power of the world, praise illusions and embrace macabre symbols to commercialize death in exchange for wealth that, in the end, “moth and rust consume” and “thieves break in and steal” (Matt 6:19). I urge you not to underestimate the moral and antisocial challenge that the drug trade represents for the youth and for Mexican society as a whole, as well as for the Church.

THE MAN WITH AN UNCLEAN SPIRIT (1:21–28)¹²

In the Gospel, it says that “they were astounded” (Mark 1:22). Why this “astonishment”? Because of the way in which Jesus taught. Furthermore, he taught them as one who has authority, and not as the scribes, that is, the doctors of the law. Indeed, all those people did teach, “but they did not enter the heart of the people” and therefore had no authority.

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Authority is a recurring theme in the Gospel. In particular, we see this when Jesus finds himself “questioned, many times” by the doctors of the law, the Pharisees, the priests, and the scribes: “But by what authority do you do this? Tell us! You have no authority to do this! We have the authority.” The essence of this question has to do with the difference between *formal authority and real authority*. While the scribes and Pharisees enjoyed “formal authority,” Jesus had “real authority.” But not because he was a seducer. In fact, if it is true that Jesus brought a “new teaching,” it is also true that Jesus himself said he was teaching the law down to the last detail. The difference, compared to the doctors of law, lay in the fact that Jesus was teaching the truth, but with authority.

Thus, it is important to understand the nature of this authority. First, Jesus’s authority was a humble authority. Jesus taught with humility. His authority was characterized by service, so much so that he advised his disciples to act in the same way: “Those who rule nations lord it over them, but it shall not be so among you. Let the greatest be the one who serves: he shall become the least, and he shall be the greatest” (cf. Matt 20:25–27). Jesus, therefore, served the people. He explained things so that the people could clearly understand. He was at the service of the people. He had the manner of a servant and this gave him authority.

In contrast, the doctors of the law “had the mindset of princes,” and they thought: “We are the teachers, the princes, and we teach you. We do not serve; we command; you obey.” Therefore, even if people listened to and respected them, they did not feel that the doctors of the law had authority over them. Jesus, however, never acted like a prince; he was always the servant of all, and this gave him authority.

A second characteristic of Jesus’s authority was closeness. The Gospel states: “Jesus was close to the people, was among the people,” and the people themselves “would not let him

leave." The Lord was not allergic to the people. Touching lepers, the sick, did not disgust him. And his being close to the people gave him authority.

The comparison with the doctors, scribes, and priests is evident. They distance themselves from the people. In their hearts they despise those who are poor, those who are uneducated. They love to set themselves apart, walking in the squares, well dressed, in luxurious robes. They have a clerical mindset, and they teach with clerical authority. Jesus, instead, was very close to the people, and this gave him authority.

In this regard, we recall how close Blessed Paul VI was to the people. An example can be found in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (48), which recognizes the heart of the pastor who is close to his people. Therein lies the authority of that pope: closeness.

Jesus overturned everything, as if it were an iceberg. When we look at an iceberg we generally see its tip. Jesus instead overturned it, so that the people are at the top, and he who commands is below, and commands from below. Second, there is "closeness."

And last, there is a "third distinction" with respect to the doctors of law: "consistency." Jesus was consistent; he lived as he preached. There was a unity, a harmony, between what he thought, felt, and did—something that cannot be found in the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees. Their personality was split to the point that Jesus advised his disciples: "Do as they say, but not as they do." They would say one thing and do another. Jesus often described them as hypocrites. And one who feels like a prince, who has a "clericalist" attitude, who is a hypocrite, does not have authority. He will speak the truth, but without authority. Instead, Jesus, who is humble, who serves, who is close, who does not despise people, has authority. This, said the pontiff, is the kind of authority that the people of God can sense.

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The authority that astonishes and wins over hearts is like that of the Good Samaritan, who is an “image of Jesus.”

There’s that man there: knocked down, beaten, left half dead in the middle of the street by bandits. And when the priest passes by, he goes around him because he sees blood and he thinks: “The law says that if I touch blood, I will be unclean. . . . No, no, I will leave.” Later, when the Levite passes by, he probably thinks: “If I become involved in this, I will need to go to court tomorrow, to testify, and tomorrow I have many things to do. I must. . . . no, no, no. . . .” And so he goes away. Later, the Samaritan arrives. He is a sinner, from a different people. Unlike the others, has pity for this man, and he acts to take care of the man.

But in the parable, there is a fourth character: the innkeeper, who was astonished. He was astonished, not by the poor man’s injuries, since he knew there were bandits on that path, on that road; and not by the behavior of the priest and the Levite, since he knew them and knew that this was their way of acting. The innkeeper was astonished by the Samaritan, since he did not understand why he would choose to stop and help. Perhaps the innkeeper thought: “This man is crazy! But he is also a foreigner. He is not Jewish; he is a sinner. But he is crazy. I do not understand!”

This was the astonishment—the same astonishment of the people before Jesus, because his authority was a humble authority, one of service. It was an authority close to the people and it was a consistent authority.

JESUS HEALS THE SICK (1:29–34)¹³

The Gospels tell us often of Jesus’s encounters with the sick and of his commitment to healing them. He presents himself publicly as one who fights against illness and who has come

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to heal humanity of every evil: evils of the spirit and evils of the body. The Gospel scene just referenced from the Gospel of Mark is truly moving. It says: "That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons" (1:32).

When I think of today's great cities, I wonder: Where are the doors to which the sick are brought hoping to be healed? Jesus never held back from caring for them. He never passed by, never turned his face away. When a father or a mother or even just friends brought a sick person for him to touch and heal, he never let time be an issue; healing came before the law, even a law as sacred as that of resting on the Sabbath (cf. Mark 3:1–6). The doctors of the law reproached Jesus because he healed on the Sabbath; he did good work on the Sabbath. But the love of Jesus was in giving health, in doing good. This always takes priority!

GOD REACHES US THROUGH THE WORD (1:27, 45)¹⁴

God seeks to reach others through the preacher and displays his power through human words. Saint Paul speaks forcefully about the need to preach, since the Lord desires to reach other people by means of our word (cf. Rom 10:14–17). By his words Our Lord won over the hearts of the people. They came from all parts to hear him (cf. Mark 1:45); they were amazed at his teachings (cf. Mark 6:2), and they sensed that he spoke to them as one with authority (cf. Mark 1:27). By their words the apostles, whom Christ established "to be with him and to be sent out to preach" (Mark 3:14), brought all nations to the bosom of the Church (cf. Matt 16:15, 20).

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JESUS'S HEALING SIGNS (1:21–39)¹⁵

Today's gospel reading continues the narrative of Jesus's day in Capernaum. It was a Saturday, the Jewish weekly holy day (cf. Mark 1:21–39). Here, Mark highlights the relationship between Jesus's healing work and the awakening of faith in the people he meets. Indeed, with the healing signs that he performs, the Lord wants to arouse faith as a response.

Jesus's day in Capernaum begins with the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and ends with the scene of a crowd of townspeople who gathered outside the house where he was staying to bring all the sick people to him. Marked by physical suffering and by spiritual wretchedness of those who are sick, the crowd comprises, so to speak, "the living environment" in which Jesus's mission takes place. Jesus did not come to bring salvation in a laboratory; he does not preach from a laboratory, detached from people. He is in the midst of the crowd! In the midst of the people! Most of Jesus's public ministry took place on the streets, among the people: preaching the Gospel, healing physical and spiritual wounds. This crowd of which the Gospel often speaks is a humanity marked by suffering. It is to this poor humanity that Jesus's powerful, liberating, and renewing action is directed. . . .

Miracles, in fact, are "signs" that encourage faith as a response, signs that are always accompanied by words that enlighten. Taken together, the signs and words arouse faith and conversion through the divine power of Christ's grace.

The conclusion of today's passage (vv. 35–39) indicates that Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God finds its most rightful place on the streets. . . . This was the journey of the Son of God and this will be the journey of his disciples. And it must be the journey of each Christian. The street, as the place for the Good News of the Gospel, places the mission of the Church

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under the sign of “going forth,” of journeying under the sign of “movement” and never of idleness.

JESUS IS CLOSE IN TIMES OF SUFFERING (1:30–31)¹⁶

Jesus himself was born into a modest family that soon had to flee to a foreign land. He visits the home of Peter, whose mother-in-law is ill (cf. Mark 1:30–31), and he shows sympathy upon hearing of deaths in the homes of Jairus and Lazarus (cf. Mark 5:22–24, 35–43; John 11:1–44). He hears the desperate weeping of the widow of Nain for her dead son (cf. Luke 7:11–15), and he heeds the plea of the father of an epileptic child in a small country town (cf. Mark 9:17–27). He goes to the homes of tax collectors like Matthew and Zacchaeus (cf. Matt 9:9–13; Luke 19:1–10), and he speaks to sinners like the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee (cf. Luke 7:36–50). Jesus knows the anxieties and tensions experienced by families and he weaves them into his parables: children who leave home to seek adventure (cf. Luke 15:11–32), or who prove troublesome (Matt 21:28–31) or fall prey to violence (Mark 12:1–9). He is also sensitive to the embarrassment caused by the lack of wine at a wedding feast (John 2:1–10), the failure of guests to come to a banquet (Matt 22:1–10), and the anxiety of a poor woman over the loss of a coin (Luke 15:8–10).

VICTORY AND DEFEAT (1:40–45)¹⁷

The passage taken from the First Book of Samuel (4:1–11) tells us that the people of God “are defeated in battle, in a war against the Philistines,” while the Gospel of Mark (1:40–45) instead speaks about the victory over the disease of the leper

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who trusted in Jesus. Two opposite outcomes resulted from the protagonists' difference in faith.

The defeat of Israel

The Israelites were defeated and everyone fled to his tent. There was a great slaughter: thirty thousand of Israel's foot soldiers fell. Thirty thousand! Furthermore, the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain. The people lost everything, even their dignity. . . .

Why did this happen? The Lord was always with his people, so what led them to this defeat? The fact is that the people, step by step, had slowly distanced themselves from the Lord. They were living in a worldly manner and they even made idols for themselves. It is true that the Israelites went up to the sanctuary at Shiloh, but they did so as if it were a cultural custom: they had lost their filial relationship with God. Here, then, is the crux of the matter: they no longer worshiped God. Therefore, the Lord left them on their own. They had distanced themselves, and God left them to do as they pleased.

That is not all. After they lost the first battle, the elders asked: "Why has the Lord put us to rout today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord." In that time of trouble, in other words, they remembered the Lord, but once again without true faith. Indeed, they went to get the ark of the covenant as if it were something—excuse me if I use the word—somewhat "magical." They said: "Let's bring the ark, it will save us! It will save us!" But in the ark was the law, the law that they did not observe and from which they had distanced themselves. In other words, there was no longer a personal relationship with the Lord. They had forgotten the God who had saved them.

Thus it happened that the Israelites brought the ark. The Philistines were afraid at first, but then they said: "We are men, let us go forth!" And they won. The slaughter was total: thirty

thousand soldiers. Moreover, the ark of God was captured by the Philistines; the two sons of Eli, the delinquent priests who had exploited the people in the sanctuary at Shiloh, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain. It was a disaster. The people were left without soldiers, without young men, without God, and without priests. A total defeat!

A lesson for everyone

In the responsorial psalm (taken from Psalm 44[43]), we find the reaction of the people when they realized what had happened: “Lord, thou hast cast us off and abased us.” The Psalmist prays: “Awake! Do not cast us off forever! Why dost thou hide thy face? Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression?” This is the defeat: a people that distances itself from God ends up like this. It is a lesson that applies to everyone. Even today. We too, seemingly, are devout, we have a shrine, we have many things. . . . But is your heart with God? Do you know how to worship God? If you believe in God, but a somewhat nebulous, distant God, who does not enter your heart and whose commandments you do not obey, then this means that you are facing “defeat.”

The victory of the leper

The Gospel, however, speaks of a victory. “A leper came to Jesus, and kneeling—precisely in this act of worship—said to him, ‘If you will, you can make me clean.’”

The leper, in a certain sense, challenged the Lord, saying: “I am one defeated in life.” Indeed, he was defeated, because he could not take part in common life; he was always “cast off,” set aside. But he pressed on: “You can turn this defeat into victory!” Then, standing before this man, and moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, “I will; be clean.” Thus another battle, but this one ended in victory; within two minutes, while that of the Israelites lasted all

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day and ended in defeat. The difference lies in the fact that that man had something that spurred him to go to Jesus and pose that challenge. In other words, he had faith!

Faith is victory

In the First Letter of John, it says: “This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.” Faith always overcomes. Faith is victory. This is precisely what happened to the leper: “If you will, you can do it.” The defeated ones described in the first reading instead prayed to God, brought the ark, but did not have faith; they had forgotten it.

When one asks with faith, as Jesus himself told us, it can move mountains. Recall the words of the Gospel: “Whatever you ask of the Father in my name, you will be given. Ask and it will be given you; knock and [the door] will be opened to you.” Everything is possible, but only with faith. This is our victory.

Ask for faith

Thus, let us ask the Lord that our prayers may always be rooted in faith. Let us ask for the grace of faith. Faith, indeed, is a gift and it is not learned from books. It is a gift to be asked of the Lord. “Give me faith.” Indeed, “I believe, Lord,” said the man who asked Jesus to heal his son: “I believe, Lord, help my feeble faith.” We must therefore ask the Lord for the grace to pray with faith, so as to be sure, with the certainty that faith gives us, that everything we ask of him will be given us. This is our victory: our faith.

MISSIONARY FAMILIES (1:40–45)¹⁸

The work of handing on the faith to children, in the sense of facilitating its expression and growth, helps the whole family in its evangelizing mission. The faith then naturally begins to

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spread to others, even those outside of the family circle. Children who grow up in missionary families often become missionaries themselves. Growing up in warm and friendly families, they learn to relate to the world in this way, without giving up their faith or their convictions. We know that Jesus himself ate and drank with sinners (cf. Mark 2:16; Matt 11:19), conversed with a Samaritan woman (cf. John 4:7–26), received Nicodemus by night (cf. John 3:1–21), allowed his feet to be anointed by a prostitute (cf. Luke 7:36–50), and did not hesitate to lay his hands on those who were sick (cf. Mark 1:40–45; 7:33). The same was true of his apostles, who did not look down on others, or cluster together in small and elite groups, cut off from the life of their people. Although the authorities harassed them, they nonetheless enjoyed the favor “of all the people” (Acts 2:47; cf. 4:21, 33; 5:13).