

The door of trust

Advent 2024 – II Meditation

We began the Advent meditations by allowing ourselves to be guided by the voice of the prophets, who can show us which doors to pass through in order to convert our hearts to the joy and responsibility of the Gospel. Having opened the door of wonder, today we will try to walk through the door of trust.

Trust is an essential attitude that builds and sustains human relationships. It fuels courage in daily struggles and opens one's gaze towards the future. It isn't a sense of certainty that is free of risks, but an act of openness that recognizes the possibility for good even in fragility and uncertainty. Trust is not a naïve sentiment, but a courageous choice that arises from a profound vision of reality. The prophets of the Old Testament teach us that to trust means to keep hope alive, even in moments of trial and desolation. Let us listen to two prophetic writings which invite us to look at some elements from the natural world: first, the leaves of trees, then, rain and snow.

1. Like trees, rain and snow

A proverb says, "To trust is good, not to trust is better". Paying close attention to reality and reading the sacred scriptures, we could perhaps rephrase it like this: "To trust would be best, but we often fail to do so".

In the scriptures we find an episode that shows us the mechanism of fear which often prevents us from performing the acts of trust we need. The setting is the so-called Syro-Ephraimite War (734-733 B.C.E.), when the King of Israel (E'phraim) and the King of Syria (Aram) make war on the King of Judah (Ahaz), to overthrow him and place one of their allies on the throne and in that way fortify themselves against the looming threat from Assyria.

One day, as the enemy kings advanced towards Jerusalem, it is said that Ahaz's heart was powerfully shaken, "as the trees of the forest shake before the wind" (*Isaiah* 7:2). In this circumstance of great anguish caused by an imminent threat, the Lord calls the prophet Isaiah to extend a unique invitation to the king.

"Go forth to meet Ahaz, you and She'ar-jash'ub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field, and say to him, 'Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remali'ah. Because Syria, with E'phraim and the son of Remali'ah, has devised evil against you, saying, 'Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Ta'be-el as king in the midst of it,' thus says the Lord God:

It shall not stand,

and it shall not come to pass.

For the head of Syria is Damascus,

and the head of Damascus is Rezin.

(Within sixty-five years E'phraim will be broken to pieces so that it will no longer be a people.)

*And the head of E'phraim is Samar'ia,
and the head of Samar'ia is the son of Remali'ah.
If you will not believe,
surely you shall not be established.'"* (Isaiah 7:3-9b)

The message is very clear: there is nothing to fear, because the two armies will not be able to conquer Jerusalem; it is only necessary to continue to trust in the Lord. The place where the prophet must announce this to the king is highly symbolic. It is at the end of the channel of the upper pool, that is, the far end of a conduit where the waters from the Gihon Spring, which was outside the walls, could enter into the city of Jerusalem and the Pool of Siloam.

The prophet is called to offer reassuring words precisely here, at Jerusalem's most vulnerable point. Built on the summit of Mount Zion, naturally protected from enemy attacks, the city had a weakness: the lack of water within its walls. The only source was located in the Kidron Valley, east of the temple. It was an intermittent spring which, every now and then, made water flow through an underground channel and into the city. If the enemies had found this spring, they would have been able to block it, depriving the city's inhabitants of a vital resource, and very easily place the city under siege. In this place, the message is clear but not completely reassuring: God will provide Jerusalem with His support, as already occurs with the water that enters from outside; however, this providence is not a resource which can be used at one's leisure but something in which one can only trust.

Unfortunately, the king does not trust the prophet's words and he decides to form an alliance with Assyria and become its vassal. The Lord God cannot avoid communicating to the king the consequences of his decision, which was dictated by fear.

"Because this people have refused the waters of Shilo'ah that flow gently, and melt in fear before Rezin and the son of Remali'ah; therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory; and it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks; and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck." (Isaiah 8:6-8)

The king was unable to trust in God's providence, which is so similar to the waters of Siloam that slowly flow from the spring to the heart of the city. Instead, he chose to rely on the strong, the king of Assyria. With his army, he conquered his enemies, sparing the king of Jerusalem and the city's inhabitants the risk of battle, but turning them into his slaves.

In his moment of trial, Ahaz refused to ask God for a sign that he should trust the prophetic voice. This behavior wearied God's heart, but He did not stop remaining faithful to his promises of good for the people. In this way, Ahaz's moment of mistrust becomes the opportunity for the famous prophecy of Emmanuel which, every Advent, we Christians hear as a mysterious presage of the birth of the Word of God in our human flesh.

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Imman'u-el." (Isaiah 7:14)

This trust with which God remains close to us, even when we prove unreliable, goes beyond simple optimism. In another prophetic passage, God Himself explains His attitude, showing how much His way of behaving differs from our thoughts and paths.

*"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and return not thither but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:10-11)*

It is one of the most emblematic texts in "Second Isaiah" (chapters 40-55), a work written in the context of the Babylonian exile (sixth century B.C.E.). These verses are placed in the section's final chapter, which celebrates the return from exile and the efficacy of God's word in carrying out His plans of salvation. God is convinced that His voice is like rain and snow: they do not fall from the sky without producing some effect on the earth.

How can God be so sure that His words will not fall in vain, given all our uncertainty and infidelity? Does God perhaps have enormous trust in His capacity to communicate what is important to Him, or in our readiness to comprehend and adhere to His invitations?

Probably neither: His motives must be sought out elsewhere. On the one hand, this optimistic vision arises from the fact that God never says anything of which He is not profoundly convinced and, above all, for which He is willing to pay the full price. Moreover, God is convinced that trust is always the gaze to prefer and adopt. Since from the beginning God is Word, He knows well the power, but also the weakness, of communication. Having chosen to use words to give life to all things and dialogue to nourish every relationship, God renounced a creation in which things happen in response to the mechanistic logic of an algorithm. Nevertheless, since from the beginning He is also Love, God is also well aware that esteem is the most necessary ingredient for people to be able to show the best of themselves. In fact, when we are struggling and unable to move forward, what else is able to unblock us if not a gaze of renewed trust, with which we rediscover hope, and thanks to which we set out again?

The words which Isaiah addresses to an exiled people, inviting them to remember the wonderful fruitfulness of rain and snow, is not a naïve or forcedly idealistic image. It simply expresses that gaze which God is capable of keeping fixed upon us. It is the same mystery of respect and benevolence that the early Christians learned to believe in, reflecting on the mystery of Christ.

*If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;
if we endure, we shall also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself. (2 Timothy 2:11-13)*

God respects our freedom and is happy when we use it to become similar to Him. He respects this freedom even when we choose to withdraw into ourselves and into selfishness. However, if we distance ourselves from His gaze, God cannot distance His gaze from us. He continues to recognize us as beloved sons and daughters, showing trust in our capacity to return to Him and to ourselves.

2. Knowing how to admire

Now we turn our gaze to two male figures who show surprising elements of trust and to whom we don't often dedicate enough attention. The first is that of a man who does not belong to the people of Israel. He manifests something so beautiful that Jesus offers him extraordinary praise, eliciting admiration and perhaps envy from those present.

"I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." (Luke 7:9)

It is a Roman centurion, a character we find among the daily readings during the Advent season. What did the Lord Jesus see in this man? From which signs did He recognize such great faith, worthy of this unique compliment?

After he ended all his sayings in the hearing of the people he entered Caper'na-um. Now a centurion had a slave who was dear to him, who was sick and at the point of death. (Luke 7:1-2)

The scene starts off with a fact: a slave is sick and about to die. His master, a centurion in the Roman army, makes an unexpected decision: he takes responsibility for the slave's condition, drawing from all the help available to him.

When he heard of Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his slave. And when they came to Jesus, they besought him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue." And Jesus went with them. (Luke 7:3-6)

Although he does not belong to the people of Israel, this centurion trusts in the Savior of whom he has only heard speak, and in the elders who could intercede for him and for his sick slave. The Jews reason according to a meritocratic mindset, and they try to convince Jesus to perform a miracle because this centurion needs it and almost has a right to it. The impromptu list of this pagan man's merits further enriches his profile, showing us additional details.

The centurion is a person who is used to caring for those around him: he built a synagogue, in which he can never set foot, to allow the Jewish community of

Capernaum to have an adequate place to worship God. More than a man worthy of receiving a favor, the centurion appears to be someone who is attentive to the life and needs of others. Jesus is struck and intrigued by this man: he walks towards his house without hesitation, where another surprise awaits. Knowing that a practicing Jew becomes unclean upon entering the house of a pagan, the centurion shows a final act of attentiveness towards Jesus.

When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed." (Luke 7:6-7)

This stranger's humanity reveals a beauty that deeply touches Jesus' heart. Although he wants to welcome the Master into his home, the centurion avoids putting Him in a difficult situation. That's why he entrusts a message to some friends, offering Jesus the possibility of performing the miracle without "getting His hands dirty" with him. He has no doubt that if Jesus is truly the one sent by God, a single word will be enough to change things. He utters a sentence so delicate and full of respect that it has been incorporated into our Christian liturgy.

Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.

Although the Gospel text has been adapted to fit the liturgy, the centurion's exclamation is recognizable with all its strength and beauty. Why did Church tradition hold this phrase to be so precious? Why was it chosen to express faith in Christ precisely during the Eucharistic communion?

First of all, these words express great trust in the Lord Jesus and in His being the definitive word of salvation from God. Asking God to address a word to us is, in fact, the antidote to Adam's sin. Not fearing God's voice but rather invoking it with strong desire, expresses that faith – rediscovered – which can save us, patching up the tear of sin.

We must not, however, neglect another aspect. The centurion expresses his faith in Jesus – thus, God – at the same moment in which he is worried about placing him in a difficult situation. Therefore, there is a profession of faith in God which is expressed through a delicate attention to man and his essential needs.

Perhaps these two attitudes – faith in God and attention to others – are not as mutually exclusive as we sometimes think. Neither can they be placed in an asymmetrical relationship, as we often tend to do: first there is faith in God, then, if we still have time, we show love to our neighbor. Our faith in God is authentic inasmuch as we believe that faith and kindness in our relationships are never superfluous. It is not a matter of showing cordiality so artificial that it becomes mawkish and phony. Rather, it is about always finding the time and way to put ourselves in the other person's shoes so as not to cause him or her trouble, when and if possible.

As for the rest, God is the first one to keep from inconveniencing others, even when we slip away from Him in the darkness of sin. It isn't just compassion for us, but an expression of His very essence. God is never inconvenienced, and He never inconveniences anyone, because He is not afraid to be that which He is: love that draws close to others, light that shines in darkness.

We also notice another detail. The centurion has a very positive opinion of Jesus because, in reality, he is used to thinking positively of everything and everyone. In his eyes, the world is a wondrous place, where things work and people listen to and obey each other.

"For I am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." (Luke 7:8)

Surely this Roman official is not naïve. As a soldier who works in the complicated outskirts of the Empire, he is well aware of life's discrepancies. He clashes every day with disobedient or treacherous subjects. He is just as aware of the fealty and loyalty of many others who humbly do their duty. And yet, although he knows that things don't always go smoothly, he does not fixate on the things that go wrong. This is also what God does, according to the prophet Habakkuk: "Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong" (*Habakkuk* 1:13). Faced with this way of looking at things, Jesus makes a gesture of uncontained admiration.

When Jesus heard this he marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude that followed him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." (Luke 7:9)

What elicited Jesus' admiration for this man? It was his capacity to nourish such great trust in everything and everyone to the point of creating a virtuous circle of friendship and solidarity. The centurion suspects of nothing and no one. Instead, he manages to have, in an extremely natural way, trusting openness towards every person with whom he interacts. Is this not perhaps what we need? Is this not the gaze with which God looks at each one of us? This is why Jesus does not simply define him as a "good person", but as a man gifted with great faith.

The centurion's faith is nothing other than the manifestation of a humanity that is clear, open, healthy, visible and perceptible, not through the forms of exterior religiosity, but simply in its way of being and presenting itself. It is a powerful invitation for us and for our faith journeys, in which we are often closed off and suspicious, selfish and indifferent. The choice to be believers can never lead to a reduction, but always and only to an expansion, of our humanity and to an increase in our amiability. Otherwise, it becomes the illusion that we can take refuge in God's shadow only to be authorized to place less trust in ourselves and others.

There is one final aspect to consider, in the epilogue of this narrative. Jesus does not enter the centurion's house, but his slave is healed nonetheless.

*And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave well.
(Luke 7:10)*

The centurion appears in the Gospel only through the voice of others, without ever making a first-person appearance. Jesus says something very beautiful about him, which generations of men and women have read and reflected upon, redefining the categories of true faith based on a parameter of splendid humanity. Moreover, these two people did not meet nor speak to each other directly. And yet, their relationship was established nonetheless, to the extent that it became good news for anyone in search of God's face. Perhaps we should also rediscover great trust in this possibility to be able to have a relationship with God without seeing or meeting Him.

3. Knowing how to adjust

Another icon of trust we would like to consider is that of Joseph, Mary's husband. His name itself is a presage of this capacity to entrust oneself to the Lord and his providence. It means: "God adds".

Joseph seems to be able to enter into God's plan gradually, from the outside. Whereas Mary experiences firsthand the event of the Incarnation of the Word, Joseph is constrained to decipher God's actions from their immediate consequences. The Lord behaves in the same way with us. Instead of explaining to us what is about to happen and telling us what we must do, God does things and then waits for us to realize it and to try taking charge of them responsibly and with a renewed intelligence of love.

In the scriptures, Joseph is presented as a person willing to redefine himself not starting from himself but from his circumstances. His appearance seems very clear from the start, when Matthew places his name at the end of the long and detailed genealogy of the Messiah.

Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. (Matthew 1:16)

In the scriptures, it was usually the woman who was defined based on her relationship with a man. Now, instead, a man is introduced based on his relationship with a woman: Joseph, the husband of Mary. This nuance in the text is not merely grammatical but reveals an anthropological and theological significance.

Joseph's reaction to Mary's inconceivable pregnancy shows the characteristics of a very unique masculinity. Although he is suddenly disoriented by a destiny he could not have in any way imagined, Joseph does not react with anger towards what is happening to him. Instead, from his humanity emerges a surprising tenderness which leads him to take the side of total defense of the weakest and the least who have been placed beside him: Mary and the child.

Unfortunately, in popular opinion Joseph appears to be a weak, secondary and defeatist person. To safeguard Mary's perpetual virginity, the apocryphal tradition

even portrayed him as an old man, harmless and passive. His role in salvation history would be presented as pure formality: to offer Christ the paternity necessary to tie his birth to the Messianic line of the House of David.

An intelligent reading of the texts shows that this is not the way things are, because, as the Holy Father reminded us in his Apostolic Letter, *Patris Corde*, “Joseph is certainly not passively resigned, but courageously and firmly proactive” (Pope Francis, *Patris Corde*, 4).

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)

When Joseph finds out that something great and mysterious is happening in Mary, something for which he is not responsible, he does not understand much. He only perceives one important thing: the time has come to love more, much more than he had imagined he ever would. This is the first effect of every one of God’s interventions in human history: to show us that exceeding is necessary, transcending the measures of prudence and convenience we had counted on. Joseph tries to be in this event that is so complicated and difficult to decipher. He does not scream, he does not flee, he does not protest. Rather, he ponders and reflects.

Her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly. (Matthew 1:19)

When we are in situations we do not know how to interpret or accept, it is not easy to stop and give space to reason. Grasped by panic or anger, we often just try to avoid the problem and the toil, to return as quickly as possible to our threatened equilibrium. We are afraid to look reality in the face, because we would not want to be constrained to recognize an appeal to get more involved in others’ lives.

Being a just man, knowledgeable in God’s Law, Joseph knows well that Mary risks being stoned, having become pregnant outside of marriage. Naturally the son also runs the risk of being killed with his mother. Joseph interprets the need to remain “just” in an extremely sensitive and intelligent way: instead of enacting justice, Joseph tries to adapt to the situation in which he is involved.

Whenever we are cornered, we tend first to seek to change others or our circumstances, taking refuge behind ideals of justice to avoid assuming the responsibility of taking small tangible steps. However, the most authentic act of justice never consists of fixing that which bothers us or which we don’t like, but in trying to change ourselves, remodeling our expectations based on the needs and difficulties of those beside us.

The decision not to expose Mary to the judge of the village elders, but to divorce her discreetly, is not a stratagem to get out of a difficult situation. It is a strong, brave and generous decision to take the side of the weakest, no ifs or buts. Joseph

has not yet understood God's plan – and how could he? – but he reacts in the most just way in a situation with no prepackaged solutions.

Although he embodies the characteristics of a masculine humanity, Joseph is able to act as a “womb” for Mary, creating within himself a space to welcome a fruit not born of his seed and yet in need of receiving his name. He tries to trust, embracing that which he neither chose nor imagined but which exists nonetheless. This is the path to discovering a secret joy hidden in the heart of the most difficult decisions.

Joseph found happiness not in mere self-sacrifice but in self-gift. In him, we never see frustration but only trust. His patient silence was the prelude to concrete expressions of trust. (Pope Francis, Patris Corde, 7)

Joseph has not yet fully understood how to support Mary without making the situation more difficult. However, he remains alert, trying to observe the situation with God's eyes.

But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:20-21)

Through the dream, the angel of the Lord does not contradict Joseph's plan, but helps him to more fully understand its implications. Revealing that this pregnancy is from the Holy Spirit, the angel confirms to Joseph that his decision to take Mary's and the baby's side is absolutely right. But he should not feel like an irrelevant part of this plan, or divorce Mary in secret. Joseph can still “take” Mary as his wife, establishing with her a relationship different from that which he had imagined, but just as authentic and profound.

To understand Joseph's experience, we can think of those times in which it seemed like we were about to lose something or someone immensely important. They are important moments, in which we feel like we are about to die, because that which we most love seems to be leaving us forever. And yet, sometimes things go in another direction, and we discover that we do not have to give up our dream, but learn to live it out in a way that is different from what we had imagined.

In the darkness in which Joseph finds himself, God kindles a splendid light: reality, as inconceivable as it may be, can be embraced. Joseph's creativity is unlocked before the announcement of a greatness in which he is called to participate. Fundamentally, there is no other way to free the energy we carry within us than by believing that God considers our life precious and indispensable to His plan of love. It is the trust someone places in us which stimulates all our creativity.

When he realizes that God is trying to save humanity by asking for hospitality not only in Mary's womb but also in his paternal heart, Joseph discovers that he wants to take a new path, which no one had ever taken: he realizes that he can take without possessing, that he can join his wife by staying on the threshold of the mystery that is taking place in her.

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:24-25)

This willingness to accept, without fully comprehending what was happening, is not a characteristic exclusive to Joseph's journey, but an attitude of trust that love requires of everyone. Tradition calls this way of loving "chastity", in which one renounces using the other for one's own ends and instead places oneself at the other's service, in a mutual exchange of care and attention.

Once, it was normal to associate this word with the path of those who, within religious life, choose not to take a wife or husband in order to dedicate themselves to God, in an ascetic life of prayer. Today we can acknowledge that chastity is the profound essence of every path, from the moment that its meaning does not immediately refer to sexuality but to the freedom of love.

Being chaste does not mean, above all, abstaining from sexuality, but from selfishness. In positive terms, chastity is nothing other than the capacity to remain in relationship with the other while respecting rhythms and times. This is why it is the art of knowing how to continuously adapt when the life, body, character, sensitivity and will of the beloved person begin to manifest themselves in ways different from how we could have imagined or desired. From this perspective, chastity lived out in marriage is no less intense or evangelical than that embraced in consecrated life.

Nowadays, love relationships are undergoing a difficult stage. It seems to have become impossible to bring them to fruition because we no longer know how to embody this gratuitousness of which Joseph is a luminous witness. There is something true in this consideration. In an era marked by more attention to ourselves, avoiding useless and harmful sacrifices of our humanity, the collective risk can be that of slipping into a selfishness in which the other becomes less important. This explains why many paths of love and consecration are easily interrupted. We have finally understood that love begins with a great descent and then transforms into a difficult ascent. Love strips us, it does not reclothe us. It does not allow us merely to take. Without a profound freedom from ourselves, love is not convenient.

And yet, precisely in this time so attentive to personal feelings, we cannot silence another sensation: that love not only exists, but is destined to fulfillment, despite its countless and painful setbacks. We all experience a profound desire for authentic relationships, rooted in a free and profound heart, like that with which Joseph was able to walk with trust together with his wife, Mary.

Conclusion

The door of trust, indicated by the prophets, witnessed to by the anonymous centurion and the righteous Joseph, introduces us into a space of great freedom. To cross it, it is not enough to show or feign a bit of optimism in the face of reality. One must direct one's gaze towards God and open one's heart to His Spirit's action. It is His trust in our regard that kindles the best resources we have. If we are able to rediscover trust not only in God, but also in ourselves and others, we will not see great changes around us. We will, however, find that we are capable of admiring others' lives without useless and false judgements, with great spontaneity. We will also know how to embrace reality even when it is uncomfortable and repellent, adapting our heart and reshaping our expectations. Happy to believe that reality, as it is, can be a space of happiness, because it is the place God has chosen to be with us, forever.

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To you God entrusted his only Son; in you Mary placed her trust; with you Christ became man. Blessed Joseph, to us too, show yourself a father and guide us in the path of life. Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage, and defend us from every evil. Amen.

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