



JUBILEE OF THE DISABLED

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 3 December 2000

1. *"Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near"* (Lk 21: 28). In the Gospel text offered for our meditation on this First Sunday of Advent, St Luke highlights *the fear that terrifies human beings* before the final upheaval. In contrast, however, the Evangelist presents with far greater emphasis *the joyful prospect of Christian expectation*: "Then", he says, "they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Lk 21: 27). This is the message which gives hope to the believer's heart: the Lord will come "with power and great glory". This is why the disciples are asked not to be afraid, but to look up and raise their heads, *"because your redemption is drawing near"* (Lk 21: 28).

Every year at the beginning of Advent the liturgy has us listen once again to this "good news" which rings out in the Church with extraordinary eloquence. It is the news of our salvation: it is the announcement that the Lord is near. Indeed, that he is already with us.

2. Dear brothers and sisters! I can feel this invitation to serenity and hope echoing in my heart especially today, as I celebrate the *Jubilee of the Disabled* with you. We are celebrating it on the day dedicated to you by the United Nations, which exactly 25 years ago published the "Declaration on the Rights of the Disabled".

I greet you with affection, dear friends, who have one or more disabilities and wanted to come to Rome for this meeting of faith and brotherhood. I thank your representatives and the director of Italian Caritas for their addresses to me at the beginning of this Holy Mass. I extend my cordial greetings to all the disabled, to their families and to the volunteers who are celebrating their Jubilee with their Pastors in the various local Churches on this same day.

In your bodies and in your lives, dear brothers and sisters, you express an intense hope of redemption. In all this is there not an implicit expectation of the "redemption" that Christ won for us by his death and resurrection? Indeed, every person marked by a physical or mental difficulty lives a sort of existential "advent", waiting for a "redemption" that will be fully manifest, for him as for everyone, only at the end of time. Without faith, this waiting can be tinged with disappointment and discouragement; supported by Christ's word, it becomes a living and active hope.

3. *"Watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man"* (Lk 21: 36). Today's liturgy tells us of the Lord's *"second coming"*; that is, it speaks of Christ's glorious return, which will coincide with what, in simple terms, is called "the end of the world". It is a mysterious event which in apocalyptic language appears for the most part as an immense cataclysm. Like the end of the individual, that is death, the end of the universe causes anguish at the unknown, fear of suffering, along with questions filled with anxiety about the "afterlife".

The season of Advent, which begins today, spurs us to prepare ourselves to welcome the Lord who will come. But how should we prepare? This important celebration we are holding highlights the fact that a concrete way to prepare ourselves for this meeting is by *closeness and sharing with those who, for whatever reason, are in difficulty*. By recognizing Christ in our brethren, we are preparing to be recognized by him at his final return. This is how the *Christian community prepares for the Lord's second coming*: by focusing on those persons whom Jesus himself favoured, those who are often excluded and ignored by society.

4. This is what we have done today by gathering in this basilica to live the grace and joy of the Jubilee with you, who are disabled, and with your families. By this action we intend *to make your worries, your expectations, your gifts and your problems our own*.

In Christ's name, the Church is committed to making herself more and more a "welcoming home" for you. We know that the disabled person - a unique and unrepeatable person in his equal and inviolable dignity - needs not only care, but first of all love which becomes recognition, respect and integration: from birth to adolescence, to adulthood and to the delicate moment, faced with trepidation by so many parents, of separation from their children, the moment of "after us". Dear friends, we would like to feel that we share in your efforts and in the inevitable moments of discouragement, in order to brighten them with the light of faith and the hope of solidarity and love.

5. By your presence, dear brothers and sisters, you reaffirm that disability is not only a need, but also and above all a stimulus and a plea. Of course, it is a request for help, but even before that it is a challenge to individual and collective selfishness; it is an invitation to ever new forms of brotherhood. By your situation you call into question those conceptions of life that are solely concerned with satisfaction, appearances, speed and efficiency.

The Ecclesial Community also listens respectfully; it senses *the need to question itself* about the strain in so many of your lives, mysteriously marked by suffering and by the discomfort of harmful events, whether congenital or acquired. It would like to draw *closer to you and to your families*, knowing that inattentiveness sharpens suffering and loneliness, whereas faith shown in love and generosity gives strength and meaning to life.

On this solemn occasion, I would like to ask those who have political responsibilities at every level to work towards ensuring living conditions and opportunities such that *your dignity*, dear disabled brothers and sisters, *is effectively recognized and protected*. In a society rich in scientific and technical knowledge it is possible and necessary to do more in the various ways required by civil coexistence: from biomedical research for preventing disabilities, to treatment, assistance, rehabilitation and new social integration.

If your *civil, social and spiritual rights* must be protected, it is nevertheless even more important to safeguard *human relations*: relations of aid, friendship and sharing. That is why it is necessary to encourage forms of treatment and rehabilitation which take into account a complete vision of the human person.

6. "*May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men*" (1 Thes 3: 12).

Today St Paul shows us *the way of charity as the high road* to meeting the Lord who will come. He stresses that only through sincere and disinterested love *will we find ourselves ready* "at the coming of the Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thes 3: 13). Love is once again the decisive criterion, today and always.

In offering himself on the cross for our redemption, Jesus delivered the judgement of salvation and revealed the Father's merciful plan. He anticipates this judgement in the present time: by identifying himself with "the least of these my brethren", Jesus asks us to welcome him and to serve him with love. On the last day he will say to us: "*I was hungry, and you gave me food ...*" (cf. Mt 25: 35), and he will ask us if we have proclaimed, lived and borne witness to the Gospel of love and life.

7. How eloquent are your words for us today, Lord of life and hope! Every human limitation is ransomed and redeemed in you. Thanks to you, disability is not the last word on life. *Love is the last word*; it is your love that gives meaning to life.

Help us to turn our hearts to you; help us to recognize your face shining in every human creature, however tried by toil, hardship and suffering.

Make us understand that "the glory of God is man fully alive" (Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adv. Haer.*, 4, 20, 7), and grant that one day we will be able to enjoy in the divine vision, together with Mary, Mother of humanity, *the fullness of life redeemed by you*. Amen!