Back to the earth of our religions

01/04/2021 | Pope Francis

Address of Pope Francis at the interreligious meeting during the apostolic journey to Iraq, Plain of Ur, Saturday, 6 March 2021.

Dear brothers and sisters,

This blessed place brings us back to our origins, to the sources of God's work, to the birth of our religions. Here, where Abraham our father lived, we seem to have returned home. It was here that Abraham heard God's call; it was from here that he set out on a journey that would change history. We are the fruits of that call and that journey. God asked Abraham to raise his eyes to heaven and to count its stars (cf. Gen 15:5). In those stars, he saw the promise of his descendants; he saw us. Today we, Jews, Christians and Muslims, together with our brothers and sisters of other religions, honour our father Abraham by doing as he did: *we look up to heaven and we journey on earth.*

We look up to heaven. Thousands of years later, as we look up to the same sky, those same stars appear. They illumine the darkest nights because they shine *together*. Heaven thus imparts a message of unity: the Almighty above invites us never to separate ourselves from our neighbours. The *otherness* of God points us towards *others*, towards our brothers and sisters. Yet if we want to preserve fraternity, we must not lose sight of heaven. May we – the descendants of Abraham and the representatives of different religions – sense that, above all, we have this role: to help our brothers and sisters to raise their eyes and prayers to heaven. We all need this because we are not self-sufficient. Man is not omnipotent; we cannot make it on our own. If we exclude God, we end up worshiping the things of this earth. Worldly goods, which lead so many people to be unconcerned with God and others, are not the reason why we journey on earth. We raise our eyes to heaven in order to raise ourselves from the depths of our vanity; we serve God in order to be set free from enslavement to our egos, because God urges us to love. This is true religiosity: to worship God and to love our neighbour. In today's world, which often forgets or presents distorted images of the Most High, believers are called to bear witness to his goodness, to show his paternity through our fraternity.

From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that *God is merciful* and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters. Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion. We believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion; indeed, we are called unambiguously to dispel all misunderstandings. Let us not allow the light of heaven to be overshadowed by the clouds of hatred! Dark clouds of terrorism, war and violence have gathered over this country. All its ethnic and religious communities have suffered. In particular, I would like to mention the Yazidi community, which has mourned the deaths of many men and witnessed thousands of women, girls and children kidnapped, sold as slaves, subjected to physical violence and forced conversions. Today, let us pray for those who have endured these sufferings, for those who are still dispersed and abducted, that they may soon return home. And let us pray that freedom of conscience and freedom of religion will everywhere be recognized and respected; these are fundamental rights, because they make us free to contemplate the heaven for which we were created.

When terrorism invaded the north of this beloved country, it wantonly destroyed part of its magnificent religious heritage, including the churches, monasteries and places of worship of various communities. Yet, even at that dark time, some stars kept shining. I think of the young Muslim volunteers of Mosul, who helped to repair churches and monasteries, building fraternal friendships on the rubble of hatred, and those Christians and Muslims who today are restoring mosques and churches together. Professor Ali Thajeel spoke too of the return of pilgrims to this city. It is important to make pilgrimages to holy places, for it is the most beautiful sign on earth of our yearning for heaven. To love and protect holy places, therefore, is an existential necessity, in memory of our father Abraham, who in various places raised to heaven altars of the Lord (cf. Gen 12:7.8; 13:18; 22:9). May the great Patriarch help us to make our respective sacred places oases of peace and encounter for all! By his fidelity to God, Abraham became a blessing for all peoples (cf. Gen 12:3); may our presence here today, in his footsteps, be a sign of blessing and hope for Iraq, for the Middle East and for the whole world. Heaven has not grown weary of the earth: God loves every people, every one of his daughters and sons! Let us never tire of *looking up to heaven*, of looking up to those same stars that, in his day, our father Abraham contemplated.

We journey on earth. For Abraham, looking up to heaven, rather than being a distraction, was an incentive to journey on earth, to set out on a path that, through his descendants, would lead to every time and place. It all started from here, with the Lord who brought him forth from Ur (cf. Gen 15:7). His was a *journey outwards*, one that involved sacrifices. Abraham had to leave his land, home and family. Yet by giving up his own family, he became the father of a family of peoples. Something similar also happens to us: on our own journey, we are called to leave behind those ties and attachments that, by keeping us enclosed in our own groups, prevent us from welcoming God's boundless love and from seeing others as our brothers and sisters. We need to move beyond ourselves, because *we need one another*. The pandemic has made us realize that "no one is saved alone" (Fratelli Tutti, 54). Still, the temptation to withdraw from others is never-ending, yet at the same time we know that "the notion of 'every man for himself' will rapidly degenerate into a free-for-all that would prove worse than any pandemic" (ibid., 36). Amid the tempests we are currently experiencing, such isolation will not save us. Nor will an arms race or the erection of walls that will only make us all the more distant and aggressive. Nor the idolatry of money, for it closes us in on ourselves and creates chasms of inequality that engulf humanity. Nor can we be saved by consumerism, which numbs the mind and deadens the heart.

The way that heaven points out for our journey is another: *the way of peace*. It demands, especially amid the tempest, that we row together on the same side. It is shameful that, while all of us have suffered from the crisis of the pandemic, especially here, where conflicts have caused so much suffering, anyone should be concerned simply for his own affairs. There will be no peace without sharing and acceptance, without a justice that ensures equity and advancement for all, beginning with those most vulnerable. There will be no peace unless peoples extend a hand to other peoples. There will be no peace as long as we see others as *them* and not *us*. There will be no peace as long as our alliances are *against* others, for alliances of some against others only increase divisions. Peace does not demand winners or losers, but rather brothers and sisters who, for all the misunderstandings and hurts of the past, are journeying from conflict to unity. Let us ask for this in praying for the whole Middle East. Here I think especially of neighbouring war-torn Syria.

The Patriarch Abraham, who today brings us together in unity, was a prophet of the Most High. An ancient prophecy says that the peoples "shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Is 2:4). This prophecy has not been fulfilled; on the contrary, swords and spears have turned into missiles and bombs. From where, then, can the journey of peace begin? From the decision not to have enemies. Anyone with the courage to look at the stars, anyone who believes in God, has no enemies to fight. He or she has only one enemy to face, an enemy that stands at the door of the heart and knocks to enter. That enemy is *hatred*. While some try to have enemies more than to be friends, while many seek their own profit at the expense of others, those who look at the stars of the promise, those who follow the ways of God, cannot be

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against someone, but *for* everyone. They cannot justify any form of imposition, oppression and abuse of power; they cannot adopt an attitude of belligerence.

Dear friends, is all this possible? Father Abraham, who was able to hope against all hope (cf. Rom 4:18), encourages us. Throughout history, we have frequently pursued goals that are overly worldly and journeyed on our own, but with the help of God, we can change for the better. It is up to us, today's humanity, especially those of us, believers of all religions, to turn instruments of hatred into instruments of peace. It is up to us to appeal firmly to the leaders of nations to make the increasing proliferation of arms give way to the distribution of food for all. It is up to us to silence mutual accusations in order to make heard the cry of the oppressed and discarded in our world: all too many people lack food, medicine, education, rights and dignity! It is up to us to shed light on the shady maneuvers that revolve around money and to demand that money not end up always and only reinforcing the unbridled luxury of a few. It is up to us preserve our common home from our predatory aims. It is up to us to remind the world that human life has value for what it is and not for what it has. That the lives of the unborn, the elderly, migrants and men and women, whatever the colour of their skin or their nationality, are always sacred and count as much as the lives of everyone else! It is up to us to have the courage to *lift up our eyes and look at the stars*, the stars that our father Abraham saw, the stars of the promise.

The journey of Abraham was a blessing of peace. Yet it was not easy: he had to face struggles and unforeseen events. We too have a rough journey ahead, but like the great Patriarch, we need to take *concrete steps*, to set out and seek the face of others, to share memories, gazes and silences, stories and experiences. I was struck by the testimony of Dawood and Hasan, a Christian and a Muslim who, undaunted by the differences between them, studied and worked together. Together they built the future and realized that they are brothers. In order to move forward, we too need to achieve something good and concrete together. This is the way, especially for young people, who must not see their dreams cut short by the conflicts of the past! It is urgent to teach them fraternity, to teach them to look at the stars. This is a real emergency; it will be the most effective vaccine for a future of peace. For you, dear young people, are our present and our future!

Only with others can the wounds of the past be healed. Rafah told us of the heroic example of Najy, from the Sabean Mandean community, who lost his life in an attempt to save the family of his Muslim neighbour. How many people here, amid the silence and indifference of the world, have embarked upon journeys of fraternity! Rafah also told us of the unspeakable sufferings of the war that forced many to abandon home and country in search of a future for their children. Thank you, Rafah, for having shared with us your firm determination to stay here, in the land of your fathers. May those who were unable to do so, and had to flee, find a kindly welcome, befitting those who are vulnerable and suffering.

It was precisely through hospitality, a distinctive feature of these lands, that Abraham was visited by God and given the gift of a son, when it seemed that all hope was past (cf. Gen 18:1-10). Brothers and sisters of different religions, here we find ourselves at home, and from here, together, we wish to commit ourselves to fulfilling God's dream that the human family may become hospitable and welcoming to all his children; that looking up to the same heaven, it will journey in peace on the same earth.

PRAYER OF THE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

Almighty God, our Creator, you love our human family and every work of your hands:

As children of Abraham, Jews, Christians and Muslims, together with other believers and all persons of good will, we thank you for having given us Abraham, a distinguished son of this noble and beloved country, to be our common father in faith.

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We thank you for his example as a man of faith, who obeyed you completely, left behind his family, his tribe and his native land, and set out for a land that he knew not.

We thank you too, for the example of courage, resilience, strength of spirit, generosity and hospitality set for us by our common father in faith.

We thank you in a special way for his heroic faith, shown by his readiness even to sacrifice his son in obedience to your command. We know that this was an extreme test, yet one from which he emerged victorious, since he trusted unreservedly in you, who are merciful and always offer the possibility of beginning anew.

We thank you because, in blessing our father Abraham, you made him a blessing for all peoples.

We ask you, the God of our father Abraham and our God, to grant us a strong faith, a faith that abounds in good works, a faith that opens our hearts to you and to all our brothers and sisters; and a boundless hope capable of discerning in every situation your fidelity to your promises.

Make each of us a witness of your loving care for all, particularly refugees and the displaced, widows and orphans, the poor and the infirm.

Open our hearts to mutual forgiveness and in this way make us instruments of reconciliation, builders of a more just and fraternal society.

Welcome into your abode of peace and light all those who have died, particularly the victims of violence and war.

Assist the authorities in the effort to seek and find the victims of kidnapping and in a special way to protect women and children.

Help us to care for the earth, our common home, which in your goodness and generosity you have given to all of us.

Guide our hands in the work of rebuilding this country, and grant us the strength needed to help those forced to leave behind their homes and lands, enabling them to return in security and dignity, and to embark upon a new, serene and prosperous life. Amen.

Source: Vatican.

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