

9. “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

“But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:14–15).

When St. Peter asks us to give a reason for the hope that is in us, he does so because he knows that Christian hope is a reality founded on the presence of Christ who saves us. Hope is not a pretty sentiment, a virtue relying on ourselves, but on the rock that is Christ. For this reason, Peter emphasizes that the sign of a real and founded hope is a meekness that lets it be justified by itself, without needing to defend it with swords drawn: “Yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Pet 3:16).

It is always thus: the intolerance of fanaticism reveals that the reality that is the basis of the faith and hope is not truly solid, on account of which one sets about defending it rather than testifying to it for what it is, instead of letting it be illuminated by our person, not like arrows or bombs that go off to wound and eliminate enemies, but like light and fragrance that propose it and grant it to all.

To measure the necessity of a deep hope, then, we must in one way or another accept that our hope be put to the test, and so we need to experience a certain desperation. Not a desperation created by us, masochistic, or maybe Romantic, or capricious, but the real desperation in which each of us sooner or later finds ourself if we don’t censure the drama of life, which fundamentally is the confrontation with death. It is the experience in which so many poor people and sinners find themselves, and hence all of mankind.

But in this we must think above all to the cry of Jesus on the Cross: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Mt 27:46; Ps 22:2).

Perhaps Jesus, the Son of God, was lacking hope?

In his profound encyclical on hope, *Spe salvi*, Benedict XVI highlighted a phrase of St. Bernard’s that illuminates us about the mystery of Christ: “The Christian faith has shown us that truth, justice and love are not simply ideals, but enormously weighty realities. It has shown us that God—Truth and Love in person—desired to suffer for us and with us. Bernard of Clairvaux coined the marvelous expression: *Impassibilis est Deus, sed non incompassibilis*—God cannot suffer, but he can suffer with. Man is worth so much to God that he himself became man in order to suffer with man in an utterly real way—in flesh and blood—as is revealed to us in the account of Jesus’s Passion. Hence in all human suffering we are joined by one who experiences and carries that suffering with us; hence *con-solatio* is present in all suffering, the consolation of God’s compassionate love—and so the star of hope rises” (*Spe salvi*, n. 39).

We can say then that Jesus did not lack hope, but with us and for us he experienced desperation, a state in which man feels totally abandoned, totally deprived of aid, in which he no longer has anything or anyone to hold on to.

This state of abandonment is not a position against hope. On the contrary! This state is paradoxically the space in which hope is felt as indispensable and which permits us to live it out for what it is and must be. Desperation as Jesus lived it is an emptiness of hope that absolutely demands it. It's like someone who is drowning in the sea, like Peter in chapter 14 of Matthew, who when they feel themselves drowning await nothing but the ability to breathe. The drowning proves that the air exists, that it must necessarily exist, absolutely, even if it can no longer be taken for granted that one has it. The cry of Peter, "Lord, save me!" (Mt 14:30), is a desperate cry full of hope, full only of hope.

But both Jesus on the Cross and Peter drowning in the sea teach us a fundamental aspect of Christian hope: it is an outcry, but not a shout into the emptiness: it is a cry towards someone, a cry that calls upon someone: Jesus calls on the Father; Peter calls on Jesus.

How can a cry, like that of Jesus on the Cross, reawaken hope? Let's think for example of Psalm 88. It seems like a psalm on the brink of suicide; it seems like a psalm totally deprived of light and hope. It seems like almost the psalm of Judas who disappears in the dark: "You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness!" (Ps 88:19) – "And it was night" (Jn 13:30).

The expressions of this psalm can seem exaggerated. But when we read and listen to the stories of those who suffered in the concentration camps, of those who live in misery, of those who suffer incurable illnesses, physical or mental, of those who suffer from strong depressions, of those who lose dear ones, of those who live in solitude, of those who are abandoned, of those who are betrayed, of those who suffer abuse, of those with no work, of migrants, of those today who suffer war, the senseless bombardments that kill so many innocent people; or when we think of the darker moments of our own lives, then we do not find the expressions of this psalm to be exaggerated. This helps us intuit a little of the immense interior suffering of Christ, and to understand that He receives and assumes into himself, into his heart, into his soul, all the innocent and guilty suffering of humanity. He too could have shouted shortly before dying: "My companions have become darkness!" (Ps 88:19). There are saints, like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who passed almost their entire lives immersed in the darkness of deathly sadness, feeling abandoned by God like Jesus in Gethsemane and on the Cross.

But what is the constant of this psalm? What does it continually repeat, what does this psalm decline in all its forms, together with the lamentations? It repeats and declines "You"! In the depth of despair, the psalmist continues to say "You" to God, he calls him, implores him, and also accuses him, rebukes him, makes him responsible for every abandonment, even that of his friends. He does not accuse his friends of abandoning him, but accuses God of having distanced them from him! And yet, even to accuse him, he must say "You" to God, and hence confess that God is there, that he can be reached by his outcry. Just like Jesus: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Deep down, Jesus too does not accuse the Romans, the Jews, or his disciples of abandoning him: he feels and he says that he is abandoned by the Father, he cries out to the Father that he feels abandoned only by Him.