



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

Victory and defeat

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The power of prayer was at the heart of Pope Francis' homily during Mass at Santa Marta on Thursday morning. The Pontiff compared the First Reading to the Gospel passage for the day's liturgy, pointing out that these texts speak "of a victory and a defeat". The passage taken from the First Book of Samuel (4:1-11) reads 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 who trusted in Jesus. Two opposite outcomes resulted from the protagonists' difference in faith.

Francis began by reflecting on the events that led to disaster for the Israelites, who were "defeated, and they fled, every man to his home; and there was a very great slaughter, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers." — Thirty thousand! — 'And the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain'. The people "lost everything. Their dignity as well...". But why, the Pope asked, "did this happen?". The Lord was forever with his people, so "what led them to this defeat?". The fact is, Francis explained, that the people, "step by step, slowly distanced themselves from the Lord; they were living in a worldly manner", and even made idols for themselves. It is true that the Israelites went 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 worshipped 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. The Pontiff continued his analysis of the Israelites’ conduct. When 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, the Pope said, “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, Francis noted, “was the law”, that law “that they did not observe and from which they had distanced themselves”. All this means that “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, the Pope said, “was total: 30,000 soldiers. Moreover, the ark of God was captured by the Philistines; the two sons of Eli, the delinquent priests who 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!”.

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 for ever! Why dost thou hide thy face? Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression?”. This, the Pontiff said, “is the defeat: a people who distances itself from God ends up like this”. This lesson applies to everyone. Even today. We too, seemingly, are devout, “we have a shrine, we have many things...”. But, the Pope asked, “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 Gospel, on the other hand, speaks of a victory. In this case too, Francis recalled the Scripture passage which tells that “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, the Pope explained, 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, “before this man, 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 day” and ended in defeat. The difference lies in the fact that “that man had something which spurred him to go to Jesus” and launch that challenge. In other words, “he had

faith”.

To deepen the reflection, the Pontiff also quoted a passage from the fifth chapter of the First Letter of John, which reads: “this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith”. Faith, Francis said, “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”.

At this point the Pope got to the heart of his reflection, emphasizing that “when one asks with faith, Jesus himself told us that it can move mountains”. Francis then recalled 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”.

Thus, said Pope Francis, concluding his homily, “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 meagre faith”. We must therefore ask “the Lord for the grace to pray with faith, so as to be sure that everything we ask of him will be given us, with the certainty that faith gives us. This is our victory: our faith”.