

## A Sign of God's Kingdom in the World

*„The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the good news.“*  
(Gospel 1. Sunday of Lent, Mk 1:12-15)

*In the person of Jesus of Nazareth the kingdom of God has entered human history and the life of every person. In him something of the boundless love and mercy of God has become visible. In him we begin to understand our own dignity and beauty as human beings when we are, like Jesus, guided by the Spirit of God.*

*What Jesus lived and taught, we, the community of his disciples, are called to take into the world in which we live in. The Church is meant to be a “sign and instrument” of this kingdom of justice, love and peace on earth. Through us, Christians, people should be able to see and experience the loving, liberating and healing power of God.*

*Yet, the reality of the Church often was and is quite different. Most people see in the Church an authoritarian institution, which has frequently abused its power and acted as an enemy of human freedom. Even committed Christians sometimes have their difficulties with the Church's bureaucracy, with the incomprehensible language of the liturgy and scandals among some Church leaders.*

*Yet, in spite of human weakness and sinfulness among her members, the Church holds a precious hidden treasure, which is worth discovering anew. These “thoughts for Lent” are an invitation to deepen our understanding of the Church's mystery starting from texts from the Sunday liturgies of Lent. We will recall what the Second Vatican Council had to say about the Church as the pilgrim people of God. We will listen to Pope Francis who has given us many powerful images to grasp what the Church really is and what she strives to become.*

- The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a **sign and instrument** both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race... The Church, or, in other words, the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly through the power of God in the world...The Church receives the mission... to be, on earth **the initial budding forth of that Kingdom**. (Lumen Gentium 1.3.5.)
- This is the Church, the vineyard of the Lord, the fertile Mother and the caring Teacher, who is not afraid to roll up her sleeves **to pour oil and wine on people's wounds**; who doesn't see humanity as a house of glass to judge or categorize people. This is the Church, One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and composed of sinners, needy of God's mercy. (Pope Francis, Bishop's Synod 2014)
- **Being Church means being God's people**, in accordance with the great plan of his fatherly love. This means that we are to be **God's leaven in the midst of humanity**. It means proclaiming and bringing God's salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope and strengthened on the way. The Church must be **a place of mercy** freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel. (Evangelii Gaudium 114)



- What do I feel when I think of the Church?
- Recall moments in your life when you experienced God's Kingdom happening within yourself or in communion with others?
- How and where can I be a true sign and witness of God's love for others in my daily life?

*We are grateful for the holy, catholic Church,  
when she strives to make the kingdom of God present in our world.*

## A blessing for all nations

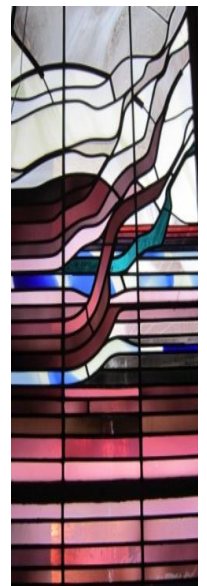
*„Because you did not withhold from me your own beloved son... in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing“* (1st Reading, 2nd Sunday of Lent, Gen 22:1-18)

*The sacrifice, which God demands of Abraham, seems absurd, inhuman, even scandalous. In spite of that, Abraham is willing to obey God's wish and to give away what is most precious to him: his only child, Isaac. His only son is the fulfillment of God's promise and the only hope for his own future. Through his heroic obedience, he become the "father in faith" for the three Abrahamic religions and a blessing for all peoples of the world. The same sacrifice, God asks of Abraham, God will offer Himself, when he allows Jesus to suffer death in order to give life to the world.*

*We live a time in the history of humanity when its very future is threatened by climate change, when massive inequality splits societies and endangers global peace, when the future of the church, of religious communities, of the next generation is uncertain. Worries about the future can easily turn us into anxious, narcissistic and egocentric persons.*

*As for Abraham, the challenge for the church today is to give witness to a life of dedicated commitment out of a total trust in God's promise. It is not through position papers, pastoral programs and restructuring processes, but through a selfless service to the poor, the sick and marginalised, that the church will become a source of blessing and hope. The time of lent invites us to be less concerned about ourselves and to ask ourselves how we can become a blessing for others.*

- The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the **desolation and anguish** born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes **caught up in its own interests and concerns**, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. (Evangelii Gaudium 2)
- In a world, which all too often is merciless to the sinner and lenient to the sin, we need to **cultivate a strong sense of justice**, to discern and to do God's will. Amid a culture of indifference, which not infrequently turns ruthless, our style of life should instead **be devout, filled with empathy, compassion and mercy**, drawn daily from the wellspring of prayer. (Pope Francis, Christmas Homily 2015)
- **I do not want a Church concerned with being at the center...** If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. (Evangelii Gaudium 49)



- For whom am I a blessing? How can I become for others a source of joy, hope and love?
- Do I try to see and encourage what is good in the people I meet every day?
- When did I experience in my life that letting go and giving away something of myself, freely and joyfully, became a great blessing?

*We are grateful for the holy catholic Church  
because she shows me ways how to make my life fruitful for others.*

## A house of prayer for all nations

*„Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!“* (Gospel, 3rd Sunday of Lent, Jo 2:13-25)

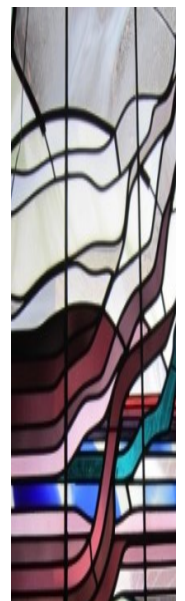
*“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’?”* (Mk 11,17)

*For the people of Israel the temple was the center of religious, economic and political life. Jesus wants to free religion from the influence of economic and political interests and rededicate the temple to its original purpose: to be a house of prayer and encounter with God. And he opens the purified temple not only to Israel, but to all nations who in the vision of the prophet Isaiah will one day go up to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of the God of Jacob.* (cf. Jes 2.3)

*Many people are disappointed by the superficiality and the emptiness of our “throw away culture”. In their search for spirituality they often look to other religions and esoteric groups. They appreciate the churches for their social services, but do not see Christianity anymore as a way and a school to live a spiritual life. Liturgy and prayer often seem to be a lifeless routine. Christian communities give the impression of being a closed society where people who think and live differently are not welcome.*

*And yet Christians proclaim their faith “in the one, holy, catholic Church”. To become truly a holy Church would mean making God the center of our personal and of our community life and allowing us to be guided by God’s Word and God’s Spirit. To become truly catholic, in the original sense of the word, means to be turned toward the whole of reality, to be open to people of other cultures and religions, to think and act worldwide, universally, globally.*

- In virtue of this **catholicity** each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church. Through the common sharing of gifts and through the common effort to attain fullness in unity, the whole and each of the parts receive increase... All men are called to be part of **this catholic unity of the people of God** which in promoting universal peace presages it... (LumenGentium 13)
- The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression, but rather, “remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also **reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples** in which it is received and takes root... In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth **the beauty of her varied face**.” (EG 116)
- There is no greater **freedom** than that of **allowing oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit**, renouncing the attempt to plan and control everything to the last detail, and instead letting him enlighten, guide and direct us, leading us wherever he wills. The Holy Spirit knows well what is needed in every time and place. (Evangelii Gaudium 280)



- What are my feelings when I encounter people of other cultures and religions? Fear? Interest? Respect?...
- How open is our parish, our community, our family to strangers and marginalised people? How concerned about the problems of our times? How open to new ideas?
- Do we regularly take the intentions of the universal Church and of the human family into our prayer and thanksgiving to God?

***We are grateful for the holy, catholic Church  
which strives for unity in diversity  
among the nations and cultures of the world.***

## Judgment and Renewal

*„The leaders, the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful... until there was no remedy...” “God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.”*

(1st Reading, Gospel - 4th Sunday of Lent, 2 Chr 36:14-23; Jo 3:14-21)

*The prophets saw the destruction of the temple and the exile as a consequence of Israel's betrayal of her true vocation. Jesus, too, wept over the fate of Jerusalem, because it did not recognise „what brings her peace.“ Yet, he saw that his own mission was not to condemn, but to save.”*

*Could it be that the empty churches and convents and the exodus of so many people from the church is a consequence of a long historical development of a church, which was unfaithful to her mission, when she blessed arms of war, made deals with dictators and tolerated abuse?*

*Following the example of Jesus who harshly criticized the religious authorities of his time, Pope Francis used strong prophetic language to denounce the “diseases” of the Church. His diagnosis could serve us as an examination of conscience during the time of Lent:*

- The disease of thinking we are “immortal”, “immune” or downright “**indispensable**”; **excessive busy-ness**: immersing ourselves in work, neglecting: sitting at the feet of Jesus; mental and **spiritual “petrification”** losing our interior serenity and alertness.
- The disease of **excessive planning** and of functionalism; **poor coordination**: losing communion among ourselves, the spirit of fellowship and teamwork.
- The disease of “**spiritual Alzheimer's disease**”: losing the memory of our personal “salvation history”, our past history with the Lord and our “first love”; the disease of rivalry and vainglory: when appearances and titles of honour become the primary object in life; **existential schizophrenia**: living a double life; **gossiping**, grumbling and back-biting; **indifference** to others: thinking only of himself and losing the sincerity and warmth of human relationships.
- The disease of **hoarding**: filling an existential void in his heart by accumulating material goods; the disease of **closed circles**, belonging to a clique becomes more powerful than belonging to the Body and to Christ himself.

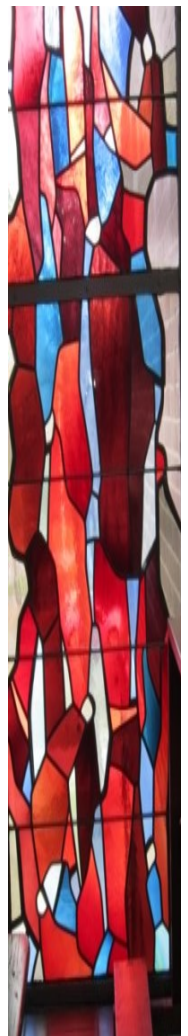
(From the address of Pope Francis to the Roma Curia, Christmas 2014)

*Pope Francis does not only diagnose the diseases of the Church. He encourages us to see and live Church differently and contribute to her renewal.*

- I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is **the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful**; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a **field hospital** after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. (Interview with Antonio Spadaro SJ 21.09.2013)
- Nobody can be excluded from the mercy of God. The Church is **the house, which receives everybody** and rejects nobody. (Twitter 17. March 2016)
- A Church with wounds can understand the wounds of today's world and make them her own, suffering with them, accompanying them and seeking to heal them. **A wounded Church does not make herself the centre of things**, does not believe that she is perfect, but puts at the centre the one who can heal those wounds, whose name is Jesus Christ. (Pope Francis, Santiago 16.01.2018)

- Can we find traces of these „sicknesses of the Church“ in our own lives and in our communities?
- What motivates us when we criticize the church? A cynical and pessimistic attitude or genuine love and compassion for the church?

*We are grateful for the holy, catholic Church,  
which continuously renews herself and opens up for us new horizons.*



## The pilgrim people of God

*„This is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel... Deep within them I will plant my law... I will be their God and they shall be my people.”*

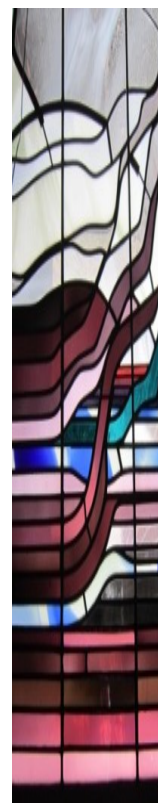
*(1st Reading, 5th Sunday of Lent, Jer 31:31-34)*

*The Church is the new people of God, called out of all nations, peoples and cultures, united with each other and with God through a “new and eternal covenant”, committed to the “new law” to love God and neighbour. As she goes through history as a „pilgrim Church“ she is confronted with dramatic changes and new challenges.*

*We live in a time of profound changes and are caught up in many contradictions. Often we are unable to grasp their true dimensions. Yet we are forced to take decisions without understanding their long-term consequences and may feel inadequate and ill at ease. These uncertainties cause anxiety. There are different way of dealing with it. Some try to suppress their fears through constant, hectic activity or the pursuit of superficial pleasure. Others withdraw into the past and seek security by clinging to the traditions of the “good old times”.*

*The documents of the II. Vatican Council as well as Pope Francis describe very accurately the upheavals and challenges of our time. They encourage us to trust in God, the Lord of history, to live radically the Gospel message of Jesus and to allow ourselves to be guided by his Spirit. In this way the whole people of God in dialogue with all people of good will are able to search and find new ways of creating a more just and peaceful world.*

- Today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history. **Profound and rapid changes** are spreading by degrees around the whole world... we can already speak of a **true cultural and social transformation**, one which has repercussions on people's religious life as well. As happens in any crisis of growth, this transformation has brought serious difficulties in its wake... Influenced by such a variety of complexities, many of our contemporaries are kept from accurately identifying permanent values and adjusting them properly to fresh discoveries. As a result, **buffeted between hope and anxiety** and pressing one another with questions about the present course of events, they are burdened down with uneasiness. (Gaudium et Spes 4)
- **Our societies are changing**... New and different cultural expressions are being born which do not fit into our familiar patterns. We have to realize that many times **we do not know how to deal with these new situations**... Whether we like it or not, we are called to face reality as it is – our own personal reality and the reality of our communities and societies. (Pope Francis, Santiago 16.01.2018)
- (Christ) is for ever young and a constant source of newness... With this newness he is always able to renew our lives and our communities, and even if the Christian message has known periods of darkness and ecclesial weakness, it will never grow old. Jesus can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose him and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to **return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel**, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world. (Evangelii Gaudium 11)



- What are my feelings when I am faced with the confusing complexities of our society?
- Nobody can foresee the future of our world, our Church or our communities? How do I live with this uncertainty? Retreat into my own little world or live in the memories of the past?
- How can a prayerful listening to the Word of God give us new energy and new hope as individuals and as community? How do we discern the next possible step?

*We are grateful for the holy, catholic Church,  
who renews herself and the world through the power of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit.*