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General audience: God is near, we must not give in to despair

Vatican City, 16 March 2016 – Mercy and consolation were the theme of the catechesis in this Wednesday's general audience, which took place in St. Peter's Square and was attended by around twenty-five thousand people. As usual, the Pope explained the selected theme in the light of the Bible readings, in this case chapters 30 and 31 of the book of the prophet Jeremiah, known as the "book of consolation" because it presents God's capacity for comforting the afflicted and opening up the heart to hope.

The prophet, Francis explained, addresses the Israelites who were deported to a foreign country, and announces their return to the homeland. This return "is the sign of the infinite love of God the Father, Who does not abandon His children, but rather cares for and saves them. Exile was a devastating experience for Israel. The faith wavered as, in a foreign country, without the temple, without worship, after having seen the country destroyed, it was difficult to continue to believe in the goodness of the Lord". The Pope added, "I think of nearby Albania, and of how after so many persecutions and so much destruction, she continues to rise up in dignity and faith. In this way the Israelites suffered in exile".

"We too can live, at times, in a sort of exile, when loneliness, suffering and death make us think we have been abandoned by God. And how many of our brothers live in this time a real and dramatic situation of exile, far from their homeland, with the rubble of their homes still before their eyes, fear in their hearts and, unfortunately, the pain for the loss of loved ones. In these cases, one might ask: where is God? How is it possible that so much suffering may befall innocent men, women and children? And when they try to enter another place, the doors are closed to them. And they are there, at the border because there are so many closed doors and closed hearts. Today's migrants suffer from the cold, without food, and are unable to enter, they receive no welcome. I like to hear of nations and governments who open their heart and open the doors".

The prophet gives us an answer. The exiled people may return to see their homeland again and experience the Lord's mercy. "It is the great announcement of consolation: God is not absent, and neither is He absent today in these dramatic situations", exclaimed Francis. "God is near, and He carries out great works of salvation in those who trust in Him. We must not give in to despair, but instead continue to be sure that good conquers evil, and the Lord will dry every tear and free us from every fear. Jeremiah lends his voice to the words of God's love for His people: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt. Again you will take up your timbrels and go out to dance with the

joyful'.

"The Lord is faithful; He does not abandon us to desolation. God's love for us is limitless, that not even sin can diminish, and thanks to Him the heart of man fills with joy and consolation", reiterated the Holy Father. The exiled therefore return full of joy and gratitude, and this return to Jerusalem and the goods they had left behind is described with a verb that means, literally, "to pour, to flow". "The people are seen, in a paradoxical movement, like a river in full flow rushing up to the heights of Zion, climbing to the peak of the mountain. A bold image to how the greatness of the Lord's mercy. The land, that the people had been compelled to abandon, had fallen prey to their enemies and was desolate. Now, instead, it returns to life and flourishes again. The exiles themselves will be like an irrigated garden, like fertile ground. Israel, restored to the homeland by her Lord, witnesses the victory of life over death and of blessing over curse. In this way the people are fortified and consoled by God".

At this point the prophet announces the fullness of joy, and again in the name of God proclaims, 'I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow'.

This is the gift that the Lord also wishes to give to each one of us, with His forgiveness that converts and reconciles", concluded the Holy Father. "The prophet Jeremiah gave us the announcement, presenting the return of the exiles as a great symbol of the consolation given to the heart that converts. Jesus Christ, for His part, fulfilled this message of the prophet. The true and radical return from exile and the comforting light after the dark of the crisis of faith is realised at Easter, in the full and definitive experience of God's love, merciful love that gives joy, peace and eternal life".
