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General audience: Judith, the courage of a woman restores hope to a people

Judith, the heroine of the Hebrew people, as an image of hope, was the protagonist of the Holy Father's catechesis during this Wednesday's general audience, held in the Paul VI Hall. Francis contextualised this figure by recalling that the impressive military campaign of King Nebuchadnezzar who, reigning in Nineveh, extends the frontiers of the empire defeating and enslaving all the peoples around. He is a great, invincible enemy who sows death and destruction and endangers the life of Israel, especially when his general, Holofernes, besieges the city of Bethulia, cutting off its water supply and thus weakening the resistance of the population.

"The situation becomes dramatic, to the point that the inhabitants of the city turn to the elders, asking them to surrender to the enemy", the Pope continued. "Theirs are desperate words: 'Now there is no-one to help us. God has delivered us into their hands to be prostrated before them in thirst and utter helplessness'. They arrived at the point of saying this: 'God has sold us'. The desperation of these people was great. 'Call them in at once; hand the whole town over to be sacked by Holofernes' men and all the army' (Judith 7:25-26). The end by now seems inevitable, the capacity for trust in God is exhausted. How often we find ourselves in situations when we reach our limit, when we no longer feel we have even the capacity for trust in the Lord. It is an ugly temptation. And, paradoxically, it seems that in order to escape death, they can only deliver themselves into the hands of those who would kill them. They know that these soldiers will enter and sack the city, take the women as slaves and then kill all the others. This is truly the limit".

Faced with such desperation, the leader of the people tries to offer a foothold for hope: to resist five more days, awaiting God's salvific intervention. "But it is a weak hope, that leads him to conclude, 'At the end of this time, if no help is forthcoming, I shall do as you have said' (7:31). Poor man – he had no way out. Five days are granted to God to intervene – and this is the sin, five days were granted to God to intervene, five days of waiting, but already with the prospect of the end. They concede five days to God to save them, but they no they no longer have hope, and they expect the worst. In reality no-one, among the people, is still capable of hope".

"It is in this situation that Judith appears on the scene. A widow, a woman of great beauty and wisdom, she speaks to the people with the language of faith. She directly rebukes the people, saying 'You put the Lord Almighty to the test. ... No, brothers, do not provoke the anger of the Lord our God. Although it may not be His will to help us within the next five days, He has the power to protect us for as many days as He pleases, just as He has the power to destroy us before our enemies. ... Rather, as we wait patiently for Him to save, let us plead

with Him to help us. He will hear our voice if such is His good pleasure' (8: 13, 14-15,17). It is the language of hope. We knock at the door of God's heart. He is the Father, He can save us. This woman, a widow, risks giving a poor account of herself in front of the others. But she is brave and goes ahead. This is my opinion: women are more courageous than men!" the Pope commented, to applause from those present.

"With the strength of a prophet, Judith calls together the men of her people to restore their trust in God; with the gaze of a prophet, she sees beyond the rigid confines proposed by the elders and which fear renders even more limited. God will certainly act, she affirms, while the proposal of a five days' wait is a way to tempt Him and to escape from His will. The Lord is the God of salvation – and she believes in this - whatever form that may take. It is salvation that liberates from enemies and lets live, but in His impenetrable plans, it may be salvation also to deliver to death. A woman of faith, she knows. Then we know the end, how the story ends: God saves".

"Dear brothers and sisters, let us never place conditions on God and instead let us allow hope to defeat our fears. Trusting in God means entering into His plans without claiming anything, even accepting that our salvation and His help may reach us in a way that differs from our expectations. We ask the Lord for life, health, affection, happiness, and it is right to do so, but in the awareness that God knows how to draw life even from death, that peace can be experienced even in sickness, and that there may be serenity even in solitude and beatitude even in tears. It is not for us to teach God what He should do, or what we need. He knows better than we do, and we must trust Him, because His ways and His thoughts are different from ours".

"The path that Judith shows is that of trust, of waiting in peace, of prayer and obedience. It is the path of hope. Without resigning ourselves easily, doing every that is in our power, but always remaining in accordance with the will of the Lord, because, as we know, she prayed a lot, she spoke at length to the people and then bravely went, she found a way of getting close to the head of the army, and she managed to cut off his head, to cut his throat. She is courageous in faith and in works. And she always seeks the Lord! Judith, in fact, has a plan of her own, she implements it successfully, and brings victory to the people, but always with the attitude of faith of one who accepts everything from the hand of God, sure of His goodness".

"In this way, a woman full of faith and courage restores strength to her people in mortal danger, and leads them on the paths of hope, indicating them to us too. And, if we recall, many times we have heard wise and brave words, from humble people, from humble women that one might think, without disrespect, were ignorant. But they are words of God's wisdom. The words of grandmothers. How often grandmothers know how to say the right word, the word of hope, because they have experience of life, they have suffered greatly, they have trusted in God and the Lord gives us this gift of the counsel of hope. And, going along that way, it will be joy and Paschal light to entrust oneself to the Lord with Jesus' words: 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done' (Luke 22:42). And this is the prayer of wisdom, trust and hope", the Holy Father concluded.
