

‘He will come and save you’ (Isa 35:4).

A literal translation could use the present tense. It would say: ‘he comes.’ For he is our certainty in this very moment. We do not have to wait till tomorrow, the end of time, or the next life. God will act immediately, as love has no room for hesitation or delay. The prophet Isaiah is speaking to a people anxiously waiting for the end of their exile and the return to their homeland. For us now waiting for Christmas, we cannot but recall a similar promise given to Mary: ‘The Lord is with you’ (Lk 1:28), as the angel announces to her the birth of the Lord.

The Lord does not come, as it were, for a casual visit. It is a decisive intervention, a matter of the greatest importance. He comes to save us! From what? Are we in grave danger? Yes. At times we are aware of it, at times not. He intervenes because he sees our selfishness, our indifference to those who suffer or who are in need, our hatred, our divisions. The heart of humanity is sick. Moved by pity, he comes towards the one he has made and who he does not want to be lost.

He offers his outstretched hand as if to the drowning victim of shipwreck. Sadly right now this image, brought to mind day by day by the refugees who try to cross the seas, is always before us, and we witness how quickly they grasp an outstretched hand or a life jacket. We too, in every moment, can grasp God’s outstretched hand and follow him with trust. He does not only heal our hearts from self-absorption, which closes us to others, but he makes us, in our turn, able to help those who in need, who are sorrowful, who are going through trials.

‘Certainly it is not the historical Jesus or Jesus as head of the Mystical Body who sorts out our problems,’ wrote Chiara Lubich. ‘It is done by Jesus-us, Jesus-me, Jesus-you... It is Jesus in human beings, in that specific human being (when grace is present in him or her) who builds a bridge, lays a road... [...] It is as another Christ, as a member of his Mystical Body, that each human being brings his or her characteristic contribution in all fields: in the sciences, in the arts, in politics, in communications and so on.’ The human being thus works together with Christ. ‘It is the incarnation that continues, a complete incarnation that involves all those who are Jesus in Christ’s Mystical Body.’<sup>1</sup>

This is exactly what happened to Roberto, an ex-convict who found someone who ‘saved’ him and who then, in his turn, became someone who ‘saved’ others. He told his experience on 14 April at the Mariapolis<sup>2</sup> in Villa Borghese in Rome. ‘When my long-term prison sentence came to an end, I thought I would start life again, but as usually happens, even if you have paid your debt to society, you still seem very suspect to people. I found the doors shut in my search for work. I had to beg on the streets and for seven months I lived as a tramp. But then I met Alfonso who, through the organization started by him, helps prisoners’ families. He said to me, ‘If you want to start again, come with me.’ For a year now I have been helping him prepare the pay packets for these families in whom I see a reflection of myself. I see the dignity of these women who are alone with little children, living in desperate situations, waiting for someone to give them a bit of comfort, a bit of

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<sup>1</sup> Chiara Lubich, *Gesù Abbandonato e la notte collettiva e culturale*, Message to the Gen 2 Girls’ Congress, Castel Gandolfo, Italy, 7 January 2007 (read by Silvana Veronesi).

<sup>2</sup> The Mariapolis is a meeting characteristic of the Focolare Movement. In it people of all ages and backgrounds live together for several days and share in the experience of being brothers and sisters according to the light of the Gospel. The name ‘Mariapolis’ means ‘City of Mary’ and Mary is seen as someone who lives the Gospel.

love. Giving myself I have rediscovered my own dignity as a human being, and my life has meaning. I have more strength because I have God in my heart, and I feel I am loved...'

*Fabio Ciardi*

### **His last wish**

"What is Francisco doing in our gift store?" my wife and I thought. We were a bit apprehensive because we knew the young man had a bad drug habit. "Do you need anything?" I asked him. "I'd like to buy a gift for my girlfriend, and I saw a crystal statue in your window."

I had to explain that it was a collector's item, and that we used it only for display. We could have ordered one but it would have taken six or seven weeks. "Oh, no, I can't wait that long. It's my Christmas gift for her!" he exclaimed, sounding disappointed. "Can't you get it sooner?" Christmas was two weeks away. Not wanting to sound impolite, I didn't give him a definite answer and told him to pass by the following day. I wondered where he would get the money for it.

I was troubled that evening, feeling I had not loved that young man enough. I could not forget the disheartened look on his face. It was as if Jesus himself was asking me the favor through him. I talked with my wife and we agreed to sell him that display piece.

The next morning Francisco returned. His face lit up when he heard our offer. There was but one problem: he had no money. His job would pay him only at the end of the week. "Don't worry, we can give it to you on credit," we assured him. Weeks passed and Francisco never reappeared.

We had just opened up our store one morning in January when Francisco's father came in. "My son apologizes for not being able to come sooner with the payment. He has been very sick. He was in the hospital since New Year's Eve, partially paralyzed." Seven days later Francisco died. His passing away made us sad and, at the same time, grateful to God that we had been able to fulfill his wish.

*Luis*