

"I SEE A BRANCH OF AN ALMOND TREE..."

(JER 1, 11-12)



by Bro MARIANO DI VITO

During this time of year the bare, rocky hills of the Gargano promontory seem almost less austere with the gentle, bright blossoms of the almond trees. The small white and pink blossoms of this tree are the first encouraging signs of the return of spring: of Beauty!

In Sacred Scripture that mirrors humanity and intricately bound to the language of symbols, we find different references to the gnarled and gentle almond tree.

It is referred to in an early prophecy of Jeremiah. "Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Jeremiah, what do you see?' And I said, 'I see a branch of an almond tree.' Then the Lord said to me, 'You have seen well, for I am watching to perform My word'" (Jer 1, 10-12).

The Hebrew word for almond, *shaked*, is also translated "to watch," and the text here plays on this double sense. The almond, the first tree to bloom, is like a sentinel who sees before others, watches over the safety

of the city, and warns when something new and unexpected is to happen.

The prophet Jeremiah saw this branch of an almond tree in a very tragic time for his people, it was a warning of "calamity", the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and deportation of the Israelites to Babylon (cf. 2 Kings 25, 1-30).

The Lord warned in every possible way the people of Israel and their king to amend their ways, not to trust in human alliances as fickle as bruised reeds, to return to obedience to His law and to faith in His Covenant. They had everything to gain by placing their trust in the Lord for He was watching over them to fulfil His word and promise. We usually think, and rightly so, of watchfulness as a virtue that must be practised by us. Jesus Himself, in fact, invites us to watch and to be vigilant at all times so as to be ready for the encounter with the Lord (cf. Mt 26,41; Lk 21, 25-36).

However, the simple, festive, pink blossom of a branch of an almond tree can also astound us and open us to God's love, because it is He who is Life who is watching over us, keeping an eye on us and protecting us. . . It is not evil that has the last word, but He who has triumphed over death, the Son of God, the Promised One, who has brought about definitively our redemption.

This is the message of Easter! Despite everything!

Babylon is not the final destination in

mankind's long journey. It was not so for the Israelites and neither is it for us. It is Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem, that comes down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And where "God will dwell with His people and . . . He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away" (cf. Rev 21, 3-4).

This is the message of Easter! A message that exceeds infinitely our failings both small and large!

The gentle and delicate blossom of the almond tree, that fades to give place to its sweet and well protected fruit, (its botanical name is *prunus dulcis* . . .), then becomes a symbol of the Risen Lord, the "true" and blessed fruit of the Virgin Mary's womb, who promises and anticipates for us, in the bitter adversities of daily life, the sweetness of final victory.

Padre Pio in a brief sermon written as a young priest for Easter day, probably for the parishioners of Pietrelcina, commenting on the apparitions of the Risen Lord, encouraged the faithful that "it is not enough to rise in imitation of Christ if we do not appear also risen, changed and renewed in spirit" (Letters IV). This is the work that we can and must all do, with humility and courage, and perhaps making a visit to our countryside and hill-sides to see from close up the gentle beauty of the almond tree.

I see a branch of an almond tree. . .

What do you see?

It is Easter, the day of the Lord! ❖

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