



# The Holy See

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POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** Saint Peter's Square

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## 8. Mercy and power

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,*

We continue with our catecheses on mercy in Sacred Scripture. Various passages speak of the powerful, of kings, of men “in high places”, and also of their arrogance and their abuse of power. Wealth and power are situations that can be good and beneficial to the common good, if placed at the service of the poor and of all, with justice and charity. But when, as too often occurs, they are experienced as a privilege, with selfishness and high-handedness, they are transformed into instruments of corruption and death. This is what happened in the episode of Naboth’s vineyard, described in the First Book of Kings, Chapter 21, which we shall pause to consider today.

In this text it is recounted that Ahab, the King of Israel, wants to buy the vineyard of a man called Naboth, because this vineyard borders the royal palace. The offer appears legitimate, even generous, but land holdings in Israel were considered as practically inalienable. In fact the Book of Leviticus states: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me (Lev 25:23). The land is sacred, because it is a gift of the Lord, which as such, must be safeguarded and preserved, as a sign of the divine blessing that passes from generation to generation and guarantees dignity for all. Thus one can understand Naboth’s negative reply to the king: “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers” (1 Kings 21:3).

King Ahab reacts to this refusal with bitterness and disdain. He feels offended — he is the king, the powerful man — his sovereign authority vitiated, and his desire for ownership frustrated. Seeing him so dejected, his wife Jezebel, a pagan queen who had promoted idolatrous worship and who had had the Lord’s prophets killed (cf. 1 Kings 18:4), — she was not bad, she was evil! — decided to intervene. The words she addressed to the king are quite significant. Listen to the wickedness that was behind this woman: “Do you now govern Israel? Arise, and eat bread, and let your heart be cheerful. I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite” (1 Kings 21:7). She emphasizes the king’s prestige and power, which, in her way of looking at it, are called into

question by Naboth's rejection. Instead, it is a power that she considers absolute, and through which the powerful king's every desire becomes an order. The great St Ambrose wrote a little book about this episode. It's called "Naboth". It will be good for us to read it in this Season of Lent. It is really beautiful, very practical.

Jesus, recalling these things, tells us: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave" (Mt 20:25-27). Should a person lose this dimension of service, power can transform into arrogance and become domination and oppression. This is exactly what happened in the episode of Naboth's vineyard. Jezebel, the queen, in an unscrupulous manner, decides to eliminate Naboth and puts her plan into action. She uses false pretences of a perverse legal system: in the king's name, she sends letters to the elders and nobles of the city, ordering that false witnesses publicly accuse Naboth of having cursed God and the king, a crime punishable by death. Thus, with Naboth dead, the king was able to take possession of the vineyard. This is not a story of former times, it is also a story of today, of the powerful who, in order to have more money, exploit the poor, exploit people. It is the story of the trafficking of people, of slave labour, of poor people who work "under the table" and for a minimal wage, thus enriching the powerful. It is the story of corrupt politicians who want more and more! This is why I said that it would be good for us to read St Ambrose's book about Naboth, because this text is relevant to modern day.

That is where the exercise of authority without respect for life, without justice, without mercy leads. And that is where the thirst for power leads: it becomes greed that wants to own everything. A text of the Prophet Isaiah is especially enlightening in this regard. In it, the Lord cautions against the avidity of wealthy landowners who want to own more and more houses and lands. The Prophet Isaiah says:

"Woe to those who join house to house,  
who add field to field,  
until there is no more room,  
and you are made to dwell alone  
in the midst of the land" (Is 5:8).

The Prophet Isaiah was not a communist! God, however, is greater than the wickedness and of the underhanded dealings of human beings. In his mercy he sends the Prophet Elijah to help Ahab to convert. Now let us turn the page over, and how does the story continue? God sees this crime and also knocks at the heart of Ahab, and the king, his sins placed before him, understands, humbles himself and asks for forgiveness. How beautiful it would be if today's powerful exploiters did the same! The Lord accepts his repentance; however, an innocent man has been killed, and the evil perpetuated leaves painful scars. Indeed, the evil committed leaves its painful vestiges, and the history of mankind bears the wounds. Mercy shows, in this case too, the royal road that

must be followed. Mercy can heal wounds and can change history. Open your heart to mercy! Divine mercy is stronger than the sins of men. It is stronger, this is the example of Ahab! We know its power, when we recall the coming of the Innocent Son of God who became man to destroy evil with his forgiveness. Jesus Christ is the true King, but his power is completely different. His throne is the Cross. He is not a king who kills, but on the contrary, who gives life. His going toward everyone, especially the weakest, vanquishes loneliness and the deadly fate to which sin leads. Jesus Christ, with his closeness and tenderness, leads sinners into the place of grace and pardon. This is the mercy of God.

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### **Special greetings:**

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Gabon, Mozambique and the United States of America. With fervid wishes that the present Jubilee Year of Mercy may be for you and your families a time of grace and spiritual renewal, I invoke upon all of you the joy and peace of the Lord Jesus. May God bless you!

I also hope that everyone, in this Holy Year of Mercy, may exercise all forms of power as service for God and for brothers and sisters, with the criteria of love of justice and of service to the common good.

Lastly I greet *young people*, *the sick* and *newlyweds*. Lent is a favourable time to intensify spiritual life: may the practise of fasting be of help to you, dear *young people*, in order to acquire greater mastery of yourselves; may prayer be for you, dear *sick people*, the means to entrust your suffering to God and to feel him always nearby; may the works of mercy, lastly, help you, dear *newlyweds*, to live your married life open to the needs of brothers and sisters.

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