



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 16 November 2005

Psalm 135,10-26

"To the God of Heaven give thanks"

Evening Prayer - Monday of Week Fourth

1. Our reflection returns to the hymn of praise in Psalm 136[135] which the Liturgy of Vespers presents in two successive stages, following the specific distinction of themes offered by the composition. Indeed, the celebration of the Lord's works is described in two spheres: space and time.

In the first part (cf. vv. 1-9), which was the subject of our last meditation, we focused on the divine acts expressed in creation; the marvels of the universe were born from them. In that part of the Psalm, therefore, faith is expressed in God the Creator who reveals himself through his cosmic creatures.

Now, instead, the joyful hymn of the psalmist, called by Jewish tradition "the Great Hallel" or the most exalted praise raised to the Lord, leads us to a different horizon, that of history.

The first part, therefore, addresses creation as a reflection of God's beauty, and the second part speaks of history and the good that God has done for us in the course of time.

We know that biblical Revelation repeatedly proclaims that the presence of God the Saviour is manifested in particular in the history of salvation (cf. Dt 26:5-9; Jos 24:1-13).

2. Thus, the Lord's liberating actions, the heart of the fundamental event of the Exodus from Egypt, pass before the psalmist's eyes. Closely connected with the Exodus is the gruelling journey

through the Sinai Desert, whose ultimate destination is the Promised Land, the divine gift that Israel continues to experience in all the pages of the Bible.

The famous crossing of the Red Sea, "divided in two", split as it were in two and subdued like a defeated monster (cf. Ps 136[135]:13), brings forth the free people called to a mission and a glorious destiny (cf. vv. 14-15; Ex 15:1-21), who will have a new Christian interpretation in their full liberation from evil by baptismal grace (cf. I Cor 10:1-4).

The journey then begins through the desert: there the Lord is portrayed as a warrior who, by continuing the work of liberation begun in the Red Sea crossing, stands by his people to defend them by striking down their enemies. The desert and the sea thus represent the passage through evil and oppression, to receive the gift of freedom and the Promised Land (cf. Ps 136[135]:16-20).

3. In the finale, the Psalm looks out over that land which the Bible praises enthusiastically as "a good country, a land with streams of water, with springs and fountains welling up..., a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, of olive trees and of honey, a land where you can eat bread without stint and where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones contain iron and in whose hills you can mine copper" (Dt 8:7-9).

This emphatic celebration, which goes beyond the reality of that land, wants to exalt the divine gift, focusing our expectations on the most sublime gift of eternal life with God. It is a gift that enables people to be free, a gift that is born - as the refrain which marks every verse continues to repeat - by the *hesed* of the Lord, that is, his "mercy", by his faithfulness to the commitment he made in the Covenant with Israel and by his love that continues to be revealed because "he remembered" them (cf. Ps 136[135]:23).

In the time of "humiliation", that is, of the series of trials and oppression, Israel was always to discover the saving hand of the God of freedom and love. Even in times of hunger and wretchedness, the Lord was to arrive on the scene to offer food to all humanity, confirming his identity as Creator (cf. v. 25).

4. Consequently, with Psalm 136[135] two forms of the one divine Revelation are interwoven: the cosmic (cf. vv. 4-9) and the historical (cf. vv. 10-25). The Lord, of course, is transcendent as the Creator and Arbiter of being; but he is also close to his creatures, entering space and time. He does not remain far away, in a distant Heaven. On the contrary, his presence in our midst reaches its crowning point in Christ's Incarnation.

This is what the Christian interpretation of the Psalm clearly proclaims, as the Fathers of the Church testified: they saw as the culminating point of the history of salvation and the supreme sign of the Father's merciful love his gift of his Son to be the Saviour and Redeemer of humanity (cf. Jn 3:16).

Thus, at the beginning of his treatise *The Works of Charity and Alms*, St Cyprian, a third-century martyr, contemplates with wonder the acts that God accomplished for his people through Christ his Son, and finally bursts into passionate recognition of his mercy.

"Dearest brothers, many and great are God's benefits, which the generous and copious goodness of God the Father and of Christ has accomplished and will always accomplish for our salvation. In fact, to preserve us, to give us a new life and to be able to redeem us, the Father sent the Son; the Son, who was sent, wanted to be called also Son of Man, to make us become children of God; he humbled himself to raise the people who were first lying on the ground, was wounded to heal our wounds, he became a slave to lead us, who were slaves, to freedom. He accepted death to be able to offer immortality to mortals. These are the many and great gifts of divine mercy" (1: *Trattati: Collana di Testi Patristici*, CLXXV, Rome, 2004, p. 108).

With these words, the holy Doctor of the Church develops the Psalm with a litany of benefits that God has given us, adding to what the psalmist did not yet know but expected, the true gift that God has made to us: the gift of his Son, the gift of the Incarnation in which God gave himself to us and stays with us, in the Eucharist and in his Word, every day, to the very end of history.

Our danger is that the memory of evil, of the evils suffered, may often be stronger than the memory of good. The Psalm's purpose is also to reawaken in us the memory of good as well as of all the good that the Lord has done and is doing for us, which we can perceive if we become deeply attentive. It is true, God's mercy endures for ever: it is present day after day.

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience. I extend particular greetings to the members of the Executive Committee of *Caritas Internationalis*. I am also pleased to greet the groups from England, Spain, South Africa and the United States of America. May your pilgrimage strengthen your faith and renew your love for the Lord and may God bless you all!

My thoughts now turn to you, dear delegates of the Pro-Life Movement, whom I thank for your courageous 30 years of work in promoting and defending the right to life and the dignity of every human person from conception to natural death. Committing yourselves to preventing voluntary abortion, with attentive support for women and families, you work together to write a hopeful page for the future of humanity, proclaiming in a concrete way the "Gospel of Life".

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear friends, after the example of St Margaret of Scotland and St Gertrude, whose memorial we are celebrating today, always seek in Jesus the enlightenment and support for every decision in your daily life.

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