



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St. Peter's Square

Wednesday, 22 June 2011

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In recent catecheses we have reflected on some of the Old Testament figures who are particularly significant for our reflection on prayer. I have talked about Abraham, who interceded for foreign cities, about Jacob, who in his nocturnal struggle received the blessing, about Moses, who invoked forgiveness for his people and about Elijah, who prayed for the conversion of Israel.

With today's catechesis I would like to begin a new stretch of the journey: instead of commenting on specific episodes of people praying, we shall enter "the book of prayer" par excellence, the Book of Psalms. In the forthcoming catecheses we shall read and meditate on several of the most beautiful Psalms that are dearest to the Church's tradition of prayer. Today I would like to introduce them by talking about the Book of Psalms as a whole.

The Psalter appears as a "formulary" of prayers, a collection of 150 Psalms which the Biblical Tradition offers the people of believers so that they become their and our prayer, our way of speaking and of relating to God. This Book expresses the entire human experience with its multiple facets and the whole range of sentiments that accompany human existence.

In the Psalms are expressed and interwoven with joy and suffering, the longing for God and the perception of our own unworthiness, happiness and the feeling of abandonment, trust in God and sorrowful loneliness, fullness of life and fear of death. The whole reality of the believer converges

in these prayers. The People of Israel first and then the Church adopted them as a privileged mediation in relations with the one God and an appropriate response to God's self revelation in history.

Since the Psalms are prayers they are expressions of the heart and of faith with which everyone can identify and in which that experience of special closeness to God — to which every human being is called — is communicated. Moreover the whole complexity of human life is distilled in the complexity of the different literary forms of the various Psalms: hymns, laments, individual entreaties and collective supplications, hymns of thanksgiving, penitential psalms, sapiential psalms and the other genres that are to be found in these poetic compositions.

Despite this multiplicity of expression, two great areas that sum up the prayer of the Psalter may be identified: supplication, connected to lamentation, and praise. These are two related dimensions that are almost inseparable since supplication is motivated by the certainty that God will respond, thus opening a person to praise and thanksgiving; and praise and thanksgiving stem from the experience of salvation received; this implies the need for help which the supplication expresses.

In his supplication the person praying bewails and describes his situation of anguish, danger or despair or, as in the penitential Psalms, he confesses his guilt, his sin, asking forgiveness. He discloses his needy state to the Lord, confident that he will be heard and this involves the recognition of God as good, as desirous of goodness and as one who "loves the living" (cf. Wis 11:26), ready to help, to save and to forgive. In this way, for example, the Psalmist in Psalm 31[30] prays: "In you, O Lord, do I seek refuge; let me never be put to shame... take me out of the net which is hidden for me, for you are my refuge" (vv. 2,5). In the lamentation, therefore, something like praise, which is foretold in the hope of divine intervention, can already emerge, and it becomes explicit when divine salvation becomes a reality.

Likewise in the Psalms of thanksgiving and praise, recalling the gift received or contemplating the greatness of God's mercy, we also recognize our own smallness and the need to be saved which is at the root of supplication. In this way we confess to God our condition as creatures, inevitably marked by death, yet bearing a radical desire for life. The Psalmist therefore exclaims in Psalm 86 [85]: "I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name for ever. For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol" (vv. 12-13). In the prayer of the Psalms, supplication and praise are interwoven in this manner and fused in a single hymn that celebrates the eternal grace of the Lord who stoops down to our frailty.

It was precisely in order to permit the people of believers to join in this hymn that the Psalter was given to Israel and to the Church. Indeed the Psalms teach how to pray. In them, the word of God becomes a word of prayer — and they are the words of the inspired Psalmist — which also

becomes the word of the person who prays the Psalms.

This is the beauty and the special characteristic of this Book of the Bible: the prayers it contains, unlike other prayers we find in Sacred Scripture, are not inserted in a narrative plot that specifies their meaning and role. The Psalms are given to the believer exactly as the text of prayers whose sole purpose is to become the prayer of the person who assimilates them and addresses them to God. Since they are a word of God, anyone who prays the Psalms speaks to God using the very words that God has given to us, addresses him with the words that he himself has given us. So it is that in praying the Psalms we learn to pray. They are a school of prayer.

Something similar happens when a child begins to speak, namely, he learns how to express his own feelings, emotions, and needs with words that do not belong to him innately but that he learns from his parents and from those who surround him. What the child wishes to express is his own experience, but his means of expression comes from others; and little by little he makes them his own, the words received from his parents become his words and through these words he also learns a way of thinking and feeling, he gains access to a whole world of concepts and in it develops and grows, and relates to reality, to people and to God. In the end his parents' language has become his language, he speaks with words he has received from others but which have now become his own.

This is what happens with the prayer of the Psalms. They are given to us so that we may learn to address God, to communicate with him, to speak to him of ourselves with his words, to find a language for the encounter with God. And through those words, it will also be possible to know and to accept the criteria of his action, to draw closer to the mystery of his thoughts and ways (cf. Is 55:8-9), so as to grow constantly in faith and in love.

Just as our words are not only words but teach us a real and conceptual world, so too these prayers teach us the heart of God, for which reason not only can we speak to God but we can learn who God is and, in learning how to speak to him, we learn to be a human being, to be ourselves.

In this regard the title which the Jewish tradition has given to the Psalter is significant. It is called *tehillim*, a Hebrew word which means "praise", from the etymological root that we find in the expression "Alleluia", that is, literally "praised be the Lord". This book of prayers, therefore, although it is so multiform and complex with its different literary genres and its structure alternating between praise and supplication, is ultimately a book of praise which teaches us to give thanks, to celebrate the greatness of God's gift, to recognize the beauty of his works and to glorify his holy Name. This is the most appropriate response to the Lord's self manifestation and to the experience of his goodness.

By teaching us to pray, the Psalms teach us that even in desolation, even in sorrow, God's

presence endures, it is a source of wonder and of solace; we can weep, implore, intercede and complain, but in the awareness that we are walking toward the light, where praise can be definitive. As Psalm 36[35] teaches us: “with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light” (Ps 36[35]:10).

However, in addition to this general title of the book, the Jewish tradition has given many Psalms specific names, attributing most of them to King David. A figure of outstanding human and theological depth, David was a complex figure who went through the most varied fundamental experiences of life. When he was young he was a shepherd of his father’s flock, then passing through chequered and at times dramatic vicissitudes, he became King of Israel and pastor of the People of God. A man of peace, he fought many wars; unflagging and tenacious in his quest for God, he betrayed God’s love and this is characteristic: he always remained a seeker of God even though he sinned frequently and seriously. As a humble penitent he received the divine pardon, accepted the divine punishment and accepted a destiny marked by suffering. Thus David with all his weaknesses was a king “after the heart of God” (cf. 1 Sam 13:14), that is, a passionate man of prayer, a man who knew what it meant to implore and to praise. The connection of the Psalms with this outstanding King of Israel is therefore important because he is a messianic figure, an Anointed One of the Lord, in whom, in a certain way, the mystery of Christ is foreshadowed.

Equally important and meaningful are the manner and frequency with which the words of the Psalms are taken up in the New Testament, assuming and accentuating the prophetic value suggested by the connection of the Psalter with the messianic figure of David. In the Lord Jesus, who in his earthly life prayed with the Psalms, they were definitively fulfilled and revealed their fullest and most profound meaning.

The prayers of the Psalter with which we speak to God, speak to us of him, speak to us of the Son, an image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), which fully reveals to us the Father’s Face. Christians, therefore, in praying the Psalms pray to the Father in Christ and with Christ, assuming those hymns in a new perspective which has in the paschal mystery the ultimate key to its interpretation. The horizon of the person praying thus opens to unexpected realities, every Psalm acquires a new light in Christ and the Psalter can shine out in its full infinite richness.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us therefore take this holy book in our hands, let us allow God to teach us to turn to him, let us make the Psalter a guide which helps and accompanies us daily on the path of prayer. And let us too ask, as did Jesus’ disciples, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1), opening our hearts to receive the Teacher’s prayer, in which all prayers are brought to completion. Thus, made sons in the Son, we shall be able to speak to God calling him “Our Father”. Many thanks.

To special groups:

I welcome the participants in the Congress of the European Society of Clinical Neurophysiology, with good wishes for their deliberations. I greet the Catholic educators from Canada and the United States meeting in Rome. I also greet the officers of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. My welcome goes to the American seminarians taking part in a study programme in Rome, and to the novices of the Missionaries of Charity. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Scotland, Sweden, Indonesia and the United States, I invoke God's abundant blessings.

I now greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. May the example and intercession of St Aloysius Gonzaga, whom we commemorated yesterday spur you, dear *young people*, to make the most of the virtue of evangelical purity; may they help you, dear *sick people*, to face suffering finding comfort in the crucified Christ; may they lead you, dear *newlyweds*, to an ever deeper love for God and tomorrow, the feast of *Corpus Christi*, we will celebrate Holy Mass at 7:00 p.m. at St John Lateran, as we do every year. Afterwards the solemn procession along Via Merulana will end at St Mary Major's. I invite the faithful of Rome and the pilgrims to join in this act of profound faith in the Eucharist, which is the most precious treasure of the Church and of humanity.

© Copyright 2011 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana