



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 21 November 2001

Exodus 15,1-18 (Canticle of Moses)

Sing to the Lord for he is triumphant

1. This hymn of victory (cf. Ex 15,1-18), used at Lauds on Saturday of the first week, transports us to the key moment in the history of salvation: the event of the Exodus, when God saved Israel from a humanly desperate situation. The facts are well known: following the long time of slavery in Egypt, the Hebrews were on their way to the promised land when the army of Pharaoh overtook them and nothing would have saved them from annihilation if the Lord had not intervened with his powerful hand. The hymn delights in describing the arrogance of the plans of the armed enemy: "I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoils" (Ex15,9).

What can the greatest army do against divine omnipotence? God commands the sea to make a passage for the assailed people and then to close the passage to the aggressors: "When your wind blew: the sea covered them, they sank like lead in the mighty waters" (Ex 15,10).

These are vigorous images that attempt to describe the greatness of God, while expressing the wonder of a people who can scarcely believe their eyes, and break out with one voice in a glorious hymn of praise: "The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. This is my God and I will praise him, the God of my father and I will exalt him" (Ex 15,2).

2. The Canticle does not just sing of the liberation obtained; it also indicates the positive objective, none other than entry into the dwelling place of God to live in communion with him: "You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you redeemed, you guided them by your strength to your holy abode" (Ex 15,13). So understood, the event was not only at the base of the covenant

between God and his people, but became the "symbol" of the whole history of salvation. On many other occasions, Israel will survive similar situations, and the Exodus will be repeated regularly. In a special way that event prefigures the great redemption that Christ will bring about with his death and resurrection.

For this reason our canticle resounds in a special way in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil to demonstrate with its intense imagery what has taken place in Christ. In Christ we have been saved not from a human oppressor, but from the slavery to Satan and sin, that has weighed on human destiny from the beginning. With Christ humanity takes up the road again on the path that leads us to the house of the Father.

3. This liberation, already achieved in mystery and present in Baptism as the seed of life destined to grow, will attain its fullness at the end of time, when Christ will return in glory and "hand over the Kingdom to God the Father" (I Cor 15,24). It is this final, eschatological horizon that the Liturgy of the Hours certainly invites us to look for when it introduces our canticle with a quote from the Apocalypse: "They have conquered the beast ... [They] were singing the canticle of Moses, the servant of God" (Apoc 15,2.3).

At the end of time what the Exodus event prefigured and what Easter accomplished in a definitive way that is still open to the future will be fully realized for all the saved. Indeed, our salvation is real and entire, but it lies between the "already" and the "not yet" of our earthly condition, as the Apostle Paul recalls: "It is in hope that we are saved" (Rom 8,24).

4. "I will sing to the Lord for he is gloriously triumphant" (Ex 15,1). Putting on our lips the words of the ancient hymn, the liturgy of lauds invites us to see our day in the great horizon of the history of salvation. This is the Christian way of perceiving the passage of time. In the accumulation of passing days, there is no fatality that oppresses us, but a plan that goes on unfolding and that we must learn to read with discernment in the events of our time.

The Fathers of the Church were particularly attuned to this perspective. Indeed, originating from the history of salvation meant they loved to read the salient facts of the Old Testament - from the deluge at the time of Noah to the calling of Abraham, from the liberation of the Exodus to the return of the Hebrews after the Babylonian exile - as "prefigurations" of future events, allowing to those facts an "archetypal" value: in them were pre-announced the fundamental characteristics that would be repeated in some way throughout the course of human history.

5. As for the prophets, they had already reread the events of the history of salvation, showing how they influenced present reality and pointing to the full realization in the future. Thus, meditating on the mystery of the covenant that God established with Israel, they even began to speak of a "new covenant" (Jer 31,31; cf. Ez 36,26-27), in which the law of God would be written in the heart of the human person. It is easy to see in the prophecy the new covenant sealed in the blood of Christ

and realized through the gift of the Spirit. By reciting this hymn of victory on the ancient Exodus, now, with the full light of the Easter exodus, the faithful can live joyously as a pilgrim Church that moves in time towards the heavenly Jerusalem.

6. We can contemplate with increased wonder what God has wrought for his people: "You will bring them in, and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O Lord, which your hands have established" (Ex 15,17). The hymn of victory sings the triumph of God, not of man. It is a canticle, not of war, but of love.

Allowing our days to be permeated by the ancient Hebrews' thrill of praise, we will walk on the roads of the world, full of threats, risk, and suffering, but with the certainty of being encompassed by the merciful gaze of God. Nothing can resist the power of his love.

After giving the commentary, the Holy Father greeted the pilgrims in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Hungarian, Croatian, and then Italian. He said to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors:

I offer a warm welcome to the participants in the Rome Study Visit organized by the Bossey Ecumenical Institute. May your experience of Christian Rome be a source of enrichment for your work in the service of reconciliation and unity between Christ's followers. I also greet the clergy of the Church of Norway taking part in a study tour. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Ireland, Taiwan and the United States, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

In Italian, the Holy Father greeted two groups in a special way, the Legio Mariae and cloistered nuns.

I want to mention the presence of the members of the *Legio Mariae*, who have come in large numbers to observe the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the Marian association. While I express my appreciation for their ecclesial service, I invite each one to find in our Blessed Mother a model they must always contemplate. May the Virgin Mary be the magnetic example and sure guide who leads them to Christ.

Today on the liturgical memorial of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Temple, we celebrate the *Day for Cloistered Nuns*. I want to renew my closeness and that of the whole Church to the sisters whom the Lord has called to a contemplative life. I also ask all Christians to support the monasteries of enclosed sisters both spiritually and materially. We owe so much to these persons who consecrate themselves entirely to unceasing prayer for the Church and for the world. I am delighted to send a special Apostolic Blessing to these wonderful sisters.

At the end of all the greetings, the Holy Father offered a special prayer for the victims of violence in the conflict in Afghanistan and for the four journalists who were killed during the weekend of 18 November.

I am deeply saddened by the recent news of the brutal killing of four journalists, in Afghanistan. My condolences are with the families and those bereaved by this tragedy.

Let us entrust the souls of these deceased persons to the mercy of the Lord and let us pray the Our Father for them and for all the other victims of violence.