



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 6 February 2002

Psalm 42[43]

With confidence on road toward the heavenly "Zion"

1. In a General Audience sometime ago, commenting on the Psalm that precedes the one we have just heard, we said that it was closely related to the following one. In fact, Psalms 41[42] and 42[43] form one song, divided into three parts by the same antiphon: "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why do you groan within me? Hope in God; for I shall praise him again, the saviour of my countenance and my God" (Ps 41 [42],6.12; 42[43],5).

These words, that have the form of a soliloquy, lay bare the psalmist's innermost sentiments. He was far from Zion, point of reference of his existence, because it is the privileged place of the divine presence and of the faithful's worship. Because of this he feels the loneliness caused by misunderstanding and even by aggression on the part of the impious, aggravated by his isolation and silence on the part of God. However, the Psalmist reacts against sadness with an appeal to confidence, that he directs to himself and with a beautiful assertion of hope: he is confident that he will still praise God "the salvation of my countenance".

In Psalm 42[43], instead of speaking only to himself as in the previous psalm, the Psalmist turns to God and entreats him to defend him against his adversaries. Taking up, almost literally, an invocation announced in the other psalm (cf. 41[42],10), the praying person this time effectively addresses his desolate cry to God "Why then do you spurn me? Why must I go about in sadness, with the enemy oppressing me?" (Ps 42[43],2).

2. Yet he feels at this point that the the dark period of distance is about to end, and expresses the

certainty of his return to Zion to find again the divine dwelling. The Holy City is no longer the lost homeland as it was in the case of the lament of the previous psalm (cf. 41[42],3-4), instead, it is the joyful goal toward which he is moving. The guide of his return to Zion will be the "truth" of God and his "light" (cf. Ps 42[43],3). The Lord himself will be the final destination of the journey, he is invoked as judge and defender (cf. vv. 1-2). Three verbs mark his implored intervention: "Grant me justice", "defend my cause", "rescue me" (v. 1). They are like three stars of hope that burn in the dark skies of the trial, that point to the imminent dawn of salvation.

St Ambrose's reading of the Psalmist's experience is significant, applying it to Jesus praying at Gethsemane: "You should not be surprised that the prophet says that his soul was shaken, for the Lord Jesus himself said: *"Now my soul is troubled"*. In fact, he has taken our weaknesses upon himself, even our sensibility, and this was why he was saddened even unto death, but not because of death. A voluntary death, on which the happiness of all mankind depended, could not have caused sadness.... So he was saddened unto death, while waiting for the grace to be carried to fulfilment. This is reflected in his own witness when he says of his death: *"I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am in anguish until it is accomplished!"* (*Le rimonstranze di Giobbe e di Davide*, Rome 1980, VII, 28, p. 233, *The Remonstrances of Job and David*).

3. Now, continuing with Psalm 42[43], the solution he longs for is about to open before the eyes of the Psalmist: his return to the fountain of life and communion with God. "Truth", that is loving fidelity of the Lord, and the "light", that is the revelation of his goodness, are represented as messengers that God himself will send from heaven to take the faithful one by the hand and lead him to the desired goal (cf. Ps 42[43],3).

Very eloquent is the sequence of stages of his drawing closer to Zion and its spiritual centre. First appears the holy hill on which stand the temple and citadel of David. Then the "dwellings" appear on the scene, the sanctuary of Zion with all the different spaces and buildings that make it up. Then "the altar of God", the place of sacrifice and of the official worship of the whole people. The last and decisive goal is the God of joy; his embrace, the intimate encounter with him who at first was distant and silent.

4. At this point everything becomes song, joy and celebration (cf. v. 4). The original Hebrew speaks of "God who is the joy of my jubilation". This is a Semitic form of speech that expresses the superlative: the Psalmist wants to stress that the Lord is the source of all happiness, he is supreme joy, he is the fullness of peace. The Greek translation of the Septuagint had recourse, it seems, to an equivalent Aramaic term that means "youth", and translated it "to God the joy of my youth", thus introducing the idea of the freshness and intensity of joy that the Lord gives. Thus the Latin Psalter of the Vulgate, a translation made from the Greek, says: *"ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam"* (To God who gives joy to my youth). In this form the Psalm was recited at the foot of the altar, in the preceding Eucharistic liturgy, as an introductory invocation to the encounter with the Lord.

5. The initial lament of the antiphon of Psalms 41[42]-42[43] resounds for the last time at the end (cf. Ps 42[43], 5). The person praying has not yet reached the temple of God, he is still overwhelmed by the darkness of the trial; but now before his eyes shines the light of the future encounter, and his lips already experience the tone of the song of joy. At this point, the appeal is largely characterized by hope. In commenting on our Psalm St Augustine in fact observes: "*Hope in God, he will respond to him whose soul disquiets him.... Meanwhile live in hope: for 'hope that is seen is not hope; but if we hope for that which we cannot see, it is thanks to patience that we wait for it' (cf. Rom 8, 24-25)*" (*Esposizioni sui Salmi, I, Rome 1982, p. 1019 [Expositions on the Psalms, I]*).

The Psalm then becomes the prayer of the one who is a pilgrim on earth and still finds himself in contact with evil and suffering, but has the certainty that the endpoint of history is not an abyss of death, but rather a saving encounter with God. This certainty is even stronger for Christians, to whom the Letter to the Hebrews proclaims: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to countless angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the just made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel" (Heb 12,22-24).

The Holy Father then addressed the faithful in English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors he said:

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially the members of the Apostolate for the Vietnamese in Diaspora. My warm greeting also goes to the pilgrims from the Diocese of Charleston. I thank the Choir from Saint John the Baptist Church for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you and your families I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lastly, the Holy Father said in Italian:

I want to greet the *young people*, the *sick*, and the *newly-wed couples*. Today we are celebrating the liturgical memorial of St Paul Miki and his companions, the Japanese martyrs.

May the courage of these faithful witnesses of Christ help you, dear *young people*, to open your hearts to the heroism of holiness. May it sustain you, dear *sick people*, as you offer up the precious gift of prayer and suffering for the whole Church. And may it give you, dear *newly-wed couples*, strength to make your families a place where you will live a life shaped by Christian values.

My Blessing to you all.

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