



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 8 May 2002

Psalm 50[51]

Where sin abounded, grace was more abundant!

1. Every week, in the *Liturgy of Lauds for Friday*, we pray Psalm 50, the *Miserere*, the penitential Psalm, that is so much beloved, sung and meditated upon. It is a hymn raised to the merciful God by the repentant sinner. We have already had the chance in a previous catechesis to give a general overview of this great prayer. First of all, the Psalmist enters the dark region of sin to bring into it the light of human repentance and divine forgiveness (cf. vv. 3-11). Then he goes on to exalt the gift of divine grace, that transforms and renews the repentant sinner's spirit and heart: this is a place of light, full of hope and confidence (cf. vv. 12-21).

In our reflection, we will comment on the first part of Psalm 50[51] selecting a few key items for comment. Right from the beginning, we want to present the marvellous proclamation of Sinai that is the perfect portrait of God who is praised in the *Miserere*: "The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Ex 34,6-7).

2. The person praying prays to God first of all for the gift of purification that, as the Prophet Isaiah said, makes "white as snow" "like wool" our sins even though they are more like "scarlet" and "red as crimson" (cf. Is 1,18). The Psalmist confesses his sin candidly, without hesitation: "I know my transgressions.... Against you, you only, have I sinned and done that which is evil in your sight" (Ps 50[51],5-6).

Now there comes into play the personal conscience of the sinner who is ready to perceive his

wrongdoing honestly. This experience involves freedom and responsibility, and leads him to admit that he has broken a bond and has preferred to build a life different from that of the divine Word. The result is a radical decision to change. All this is contained in the verb "recognize", that in Hebrew implies not just an intellectual agreement but also a vital choice.

Unfortunately, many do not make this step as Origen warns: "There are some who after sinning are absolutely at peace and give no further thought to their sin; nor are they troubled by the knowledge of the evil they have committed but live as though nothing had happened. Such people would certainly not be able to say: *my sin is ever before me*. Instead, when, after committing a sin, one feels miserable and troubled by it, nagged by remorse, tormented without respite and undergoing inner revolt in his spirit when he tries to deny it, one rightly exclaims: *my sins give my bones no peace....* Thus when we set before the eyes of our heart the sins we have committed, when we look at them one by one, recognize them, blush and repent for what we have done, then, overcome with remorse and terrified, we can rightly say that there is no peace in our bones on account of *our sins ...*" (*Origen, Omelie sui Salmi*, Florence, 1991, p. 277-279 [Homilies on the Psalms]). The admission and consciousness of sin are the fruit of a sensitivity acquired through the light of God's Word.

3. In the confession of the *Miserere* there is a noteworthy emphasis: the sin is described not only in its personal and "psychological" dimension but above all what is described is the theological reality. "Against you, against you alone have I sinned" (Ps 50[51],6) exclaims the sinner, whom tradition claims to be David, conscious of his adultery with Bathsheba and of the Prophet Nathan's denunciation of this crime and of the murder of Uriah, her husband (cf. v. 2; II Sm,11-12).

Sin is not just a psychological and social matter, but an event that corrodes the relationship with God, violating his law, refusing his plan in history and overturning his set of values, "putting darkness for light and light for darkness", in other words, "calling evil good and good evil" (cf. Is 5,20).

Before finally injuring man, sin is first and foremost a betrayal of God. The words the prodigal son says to his father, whose love is so abundant, capture it well: "Father, I have sinned against Heaven (that is, against God) and before you" (Lk 15,21).

4. At this point the Psalmist introduces an angle that is more directly connected with human reality. It is a sentence that has given rise to many interpretations and has been linked with the doctrine of original sin: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps 50[51],7). The praying person wants to indicate the presence of evil in our whole being, as is evident in his mention of conception and birth, as a way of expressing the entirety of existence, beginning with its source. However, the Psalmist does not formally connect his state with the sin of Adam and Eve; he does not speak explicitly of original sin.

It is still clear, according to the text of our Psalm, that evil is rooted in man's innermost depths, it is inherent in his historical reality, so the request for the mediation of divine grace is crucial. The power of God's love exceeds that of sin, the forceful river of evil is less powerful than the fruitful water of forgiveness: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5,20).

5. In this way the theology of original sin and the whole biblical vision of man as a sinner are indirectly recalled in a way that at the same time gives an intuition into the light of grace and salvation.

As we will have the chance to discover later on, when we return to this Psalm and the later verses, the confession of sin and the consciousness of one's misery do not lead to terror or the nightmare of judgement, but indeed, to the hope of purification, liberation and the new creation.

In fact God saves us, "not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour" (Ti 3,5-6).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I extend a special greeting to the young people of Toronto, gathered at the university in a television link-up with the young people of the *University La Sapienza* in Rome. Dear friends, I hope to see many Canadians at the World Youth Day. Coming together in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, you will commit yourselves to being the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's audience, especially those from England, Norway, Sweden, India, South Korea, Canada and the United States of America, I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Saviour.

At the end of the General Audience, John Paul II asked everyone present to pray for the success of the Special Session of the General Assembly of the UN on children. The three day summit is focusing on the improvement of children's situation worldwide.

Today in New York the General Assembly of the UN is beginning a special session on children. The important meeting calls attention to the scourges that continue to afflict little children, the precious but also vulnerable treasure of the human family. I am thinking of the wars, the poverty, the abuses and injustice of every kind of which they are the victims.

In these days in which representatives of countries from around the world are meeting to reflect on the conditions in which little children have to live, I invite everyone to pray for the success of these

deliberations. I also hope that this important meeting may call forth a renewed commitment of the international community in favour of children, so that every type of social action that affects them may be inspired by a genuine promotion of human dignity and full respect of their fundamental rights.