



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 10 July 2002

Give praise and glory to God for Creation

Canticle of the three young men, Dn 3,57-88.56

1. A luminous prayer like a litany is included in chapter 3 of the Book of Daniel, a real Canticle of the creatures, which the liturgy of Lauds presents to us on several occasions in various fragments.

We have now heard the fundamental part, a grandiose cosmic choir framed by two recapitulatory antiphons: "Bless the Lord, all works of the Lord, sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever.... Blessed are you [Lord] in the firmament of heaven and to be sung and glorified for ever" (vv. 56.57).

Between these two acclamations a solemn hymn of praise unfolds that is expressed in the repeated invitation: "Bless". This form seems no more than an invitation to all creation to bless God but it is actually a hymn of thanksgiving for all the marvels of the universe which the faithful raise to the Lord. Man gives a voice to all creation, to thank and praise God.

2. This hymn, sung by three young Hebrews who invite all the creatures to praise God, develops in a dramatic situation. The three young men, persecuted by the king of Babylon, are cast into a fiery furnace because of their faith. Yet even facing martyrdom, they do not hesitate to sing, rejoice, and praise God. The pain of their harsh and violent trial disappears, seeming as it were to dissolve in the presence of prayer and contemplation. It is this very attitude of confident abandonment that elicits the divine intervention.

Indeed, as the vivid account in Daniel testifies, "the angel of the Lord came down into the furnace

to be with Azariah and his companions, and drove the fiery flames out of the furnace, and made the midst of the furnace like a moist and whistling wind, so that the fire did not touch them at all or hurt or trouble them" (vv. 49-50). Nightmares evaporate like mist in sunshine, fears dissolve and suffering vanishes when the whole human being becomes praise and trust, expectation and hope. This is the strength of prayer when it is pure, intense, and total abandonment to God our provident Redeemer.

3. The Canticle of the three young men depicts a sort of cosmic procession filing past, beginning in heaven, peopled by angels, where sun, moon and stars also shine. From on high, God pours out upon the earth the gift of the waters in heaven above (cf. v. 60); that is, rain and dew (cf. v. 64).

However, the winds then blow, thunder peals ... the chill of winter and the burning summer heat explode, besides ice and cold, frost and snow (cf. vv. 65-70.73). The poet also includes time in his hymn of praise to the Creator: day and night, light and darkness (cf. vv. 71-72). Finally his gaze comes to rest on the mountaintops where earth and sky seem to converge (cf. 74-75).

All things that grow on the earth (cf. v. 76) then join in singing praise to God; the springs that bring life and freshness, and the rivers and seas with their abundant and mysterious waters. Indeed, the poet mentions the "whales" besides marine creatures and fish (cf. v. 79), as a vision of that primordial watery chaos on which God imposed the limits to be observed (cf. *Ps* 92 [93], vv. 3-4; *Jb* 38,8-11; 40,15-41; 26).

Then comes the vast and varied animal kingdom that lives and moves in the waters, on the earth and in the sky (cf. *Dn* 3,80-81).

4. The last actor of creation to enter the scene is man. First the poet's gaze broadens and sweeps over all "the sons of man" (cf. v. 82); attention is next focused on Israel, the People of God (cf. v. 83); it is then the turn of those who are fully consecrated to God, not only as priests (cf. v. 84) but also as witnesses to faith, justice and truth. They are the "servants of the Lord", the "spirits and souls of the righteous", the "holy and humble in heart", and from among them emerge the three young men: Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael, who give a voice to all the creatures in a universal and enduring song of praise (cf. vv. 85-88).

Three verbs of divine glorification constantly resound, as in a litany: "Bless, praise, exalt" the Lord. This is the true heart of prayer and song: ceaseless celebration of the Lord with the joy of being part of a choir that includes all creation.

5. Let us end our meditation by listening to the words of the Fathers of the Church such as Origen, Hippolytus, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan, who have all commented on the account of the six days of creation (cf. *Gen* 1,1-2,4a) precisely in connection with the Canticle of the three young men.

We shall limit ourselves to the comment of St Ambrose, who, referring to the fourth day of creation (cf. *Gn* 1,14-19), imagines the earth speaking and, in a discourse on the sun, shows all the creatures united in praise of God: "The sun is truly good, for it serves to make me fruitful and ripens my fruits. It was given to me for my own good, and, with me, is subjected to great effort. It groans with me for the adoption of sons and the redemption of the human race, so that we too may be freed from slavery. Beside me, together with me, it praises the Creator; with me it raises a hymn to the Lord our God. Wherever the sun blesses, there the earth blesses, the fruit-trees bless, the animals bless, the birds bless with me" (*I sei giorni della creazione*, SAEMO, I, Milan-Rome 1977-1994, pp. 192-193).

No one is excluded from blessing the Lord, not even our marine creatures (cf. *Dn* 3,79). Indeed, St Ambrose continues: "Snakes also praise the Lord, for their nature and appearance reveal to us a certain beauty, and show that they have their justification" (*ibid.*, pp. 103-104).

This is all the more reason why we, as human beings, should add our own joyful and confident voice to this symphony of praise, and accompany it with a consistent and faithful life.

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from Ireland, Malta, Canada and the United States. My special greeting goes to the priests of the Archdiocese of New York and to the choir from Ireland. Upon all of you I cordially invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lastly, to the Italian-speaking pilgrims present, the Holy Father said:

I cordially welcome the Italian-speaking pilgrims. I greet you in particular, dear people of Castel Gandolfo, who have also welcomed me this year with great cordiality. I am thinking with respect of the Mayor and all the authorities; as well as of the Bishop and his Auxiliary, the parish priest and the whole parish community. I am glad to be back with you, here at Castel Gandolfo where, please God, I shall spend the summer as I have in previous years. I am thinking of the forthcoming World Youth Day, which will take place in Toronto at the end of this month. I ask you too to pray that this important ecclesial event will bring the desired spiritual fruits.