



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 28 May 2003

Psalm 108[107]

"My heart is steadfast, O God!"

1. Psalm 108[107], which has just been presented to us, is part of the sequence of Psalms in the *Liturgy of Lauds*, the topic of our catechesis. It has a characteristic which at first sight is surprising: it is merely composed of two pre-existing psalm fragments fused together, one from Psalm 57[56] (vv. 8-12) and the other from Psalm 60[59] (vv. 7-14). The first fragment is reminiscent of a hymn, the second seems to be a supplication but includes a divine oracle which instils serenity and trust in the person praying.

This fusion gives rise to a new prayer, and this fact provides us with a model. Actually, the Christian liturgy frequently combines different biblical passages, transforming them into a new text destined to illuminate new situations. Yet the link with the original source is preserved. In practice, Psalm 108[107] - (but it is not the only one; for further proof, see Psalm 144[143]) - shows that Israel, already in the Old Testament, was re-using and bringing up-to-date the Word of God revealed.

2. The Psalm resulting from this fusion is therefore something more than the mere combination or juxtaposition of two pre-existing passages. Instead of beginning with a humble plea like Psalm 57[56]: "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me" (v. 2), the new Psalm begins with a resolute announcement of praise to God: "My heart is steadfast, O God... I will sing praises..." (Ps 108 [107]: 2). This praise replaces the lament in the opening lines of another Psalm (cf. Ps 60[59]: 1-6), and thus becomes the basis of the following divine oracle (Ps 60[59]: 8-10 = Ps 108[107]: 8-10) and of the supplication that surrounds it (Ps 60[59]: 7, 11-14 = Ps 108[107]: 7, 11-14).

Hope and nightmare are blended to form the substance of the new prayer, the whole of which is

intended to imbue confidence, even in the times of adversity which the entire community has experienced.

3. So the Psalm opens with a joyful hymn of praise. It is a morning song, accompanied by harp and lyre. (cf. Ps 108[107]: 3). The message is clear. At the centre it has the divine "love" and "faithfulness" (cf. v. 5): in Hebrew, *hésed* and *'emèt* are typical words used to describe the loving fidelity of the Lord regarding the Covenant with his people. On the basis of this fidelity, the people are sure that God will never abandon them in the abyss of the void or of despair.

The Christian interpretation of this Psalm is particularly evocative. In v. 6, the Psalmist celebrates God's transcendent glory: "Be exalted (that is, "rise'), O God, above the heavens!". Commenting on this Psalm, Origen, the renowned third-century Christian writer, goes back to this sentence of Jesus: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (Jn 12: 32), referring to his crucifixion, whose result is described in the affirmation of the next verse: "that your beloved may be delivered" (Ps 108[107]: 7). Origen thus concludes: "What a marvellous meaning! The Lord was crucified and exalted so that his beloved might be delivered.... All we have asked for has come true: he has been lifted up and we have been delivered" (Origene-Gerolamo, *74 Omelie sul Libro dei Salmi*, Milan 1993, p. 367).

4. Let us now move on to the second part of Psalm 108[107], a partial citation of Psalm 60[59], as has been said. In the midst of the anguish of Israel, who feels that God is absent and remote ("have you not rejected us, O God?": v. 12), is raised the voice of the oracle of the Lord which echoes in the temple (cf. vv. 8-10). In this revelation, God is presented as the judge and lord of all the holy land, from the city of Shechem to the Vale of Succoth beyond the Jordan, from the eastern regions of Gilead and Manasseh to the central-southern regions of Ephraim and Judah, reaching even to the subjugated but foreign territories of Moab, Edom and Philistia.

The divine lordship over the promised land is then proclaimed in colourful martial or juridical imagery. If the Lord reigns, there is nothing to fear: we are not tossed here and there by the evil forces of fate or chaos. Even in the darkest of moments there is always a superior plan that governs history.

5. This faith kindles the flame of hope. God, in any case, will point to a way out, that is, a "fortified city" set in the region of Edom. This means that despite their hardship and his silence, God will reveal himself anew to sustain and guide his people. Effective help can come from him alone, not from external military alliances, that is, the power of armies (cf. v. 13). Only with him will freedom be won, and we will do "valiantly" (v. 14).

With St Jerome, let us remember the last lesson of the Psalmist, interpreted in a Christian key: "No one must despair of this life. You have Christ, and you are still afraid? He will be our strength, our bread, our guide" (*Breviarium in Psalmos*, Ps CVII: PL 26, 1224).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I welcome the international group of scholars attending a Conference sponsored by The Medieval Institute at Notre Dame University. My respectful greetings go to the Rissho Kosei-kai Buddhists from Japan. I also thank the two choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland and the United States, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

Lastly, I address you, dear *young people*, dear *sick people* and dear *newly-weds*. This month of May is coming to an end and we think spontaneously of Blessed Mary, the bright Star on our Christian journey. Let us call on her constantly, and we will find in her maternal intercession and in her shining example of fidelity to God's will, inspiration and support on the daily pilgrimage towards the heavenly Homeland.