



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 18 June 2003

Canticle - Isaiah 61: 10 / 62: 4-5

The rebirth and renewal of Jerusalem

My soul exalts in my God!

1. The wonderful Canticle which the *Liturgy of Lauds* offers to us and which has just been proclaimed, begins like a *Magnificat*: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God" (Is 61: 10). The text is set into the third part of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, a section which scholars date to a later period when Israel, having returned from the exile in Babylon (sixth century BC), resumes life as a free people in the land of her fathers and rebuilds Jerusalem and the temple. Not for nothing is the holy city at the centre of the Canticle, as we shall see, and the horizon that is unfolding is bright and full of hope.

2. The Prophet introduces his canticle by portraying the people reborn, splendidly attired like a bridal couple, ready for the great day of their wedding (cf. v. 10). This is immediately followed by the evocation of another symbol, an expression of life, joy and newness: the new shoots that spring up like sprouting plants (cf. v. 11).

The prophets use the image of the new shoot in various forms to represent the messianic king (cf. Is 11: 1; 53: 2; Zec 3: 8; 6: 12). The Messiah is a fertile shoot that renews the world, and the Prophet explains the deep meaning of this vitality: "The Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth" (Is 61: 11), so that the holy city will resemble a garden of righteousness, that is, of fidelity and truth, of justice and love. As the prophet said a little earlier, "You shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise" (Is 60: 18).

3. The Prophet continues to raise his voice loudly: his tireless song is intended to portray the rebirth of Jerusalem, before which a new age is about to unfold (cf. Is 62: 1). The city is pictured

as a bride just before her wedding.

The spousal imagery which emerges vividly in this passage (cf. vv. 4-5) is one of the strongest images used in the Bible to exalt the bond of intimacy and the Covenant of love between the Lord and his chosen people. Its beauty which consists of "salvation", "justice" and "glory" (cf. vv. 1-2) will be so marvellous that it will be "a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord" (cf. v. 3).

The crucial element will be the changing of the name, as happens in our day too when a girl marries. Taking a "new name" (v. 2) almost means taking on a new identity, undertaking a mission, radically changing one's life (cf. Gn 32: 25-33).

4. The new name that will be taken by the bride Jerusalem, destined to represent the entire people of God, is illustrated in the contrast that the Prophet specifically accentuates: "You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My delight is in her, and your land Married" (Is 62: 4). The names that suggested the former situation of forsakenness and desolation, that is, the devastation of the city by the Babylonians and the drama of the Exile, are now replaced by the names of the rebirth and are terms of love and tenderness, celebration and happiness.

At this point full attention is focused on the Bridegroom. This is the great surprise: it is the Lord himself who will give Zion her new married name. The final declaration which sums up the theme of the song of love chanted by the people is astonishing above all: "As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (v. 5).

5. The song no longer sings of the marriage between a king and a queen, but celebrates the profound love which eternally unites God and Jerusalem. In his earthly bride, which is the holy nation, the Lord finds the same happiness which the husband experiences with his beloved wife.

The distant, transcendent God, the just judge, is now replaced by the God who is close and in love. This spousal symbolism would be transferred to the New Testament (cf. Eph 5: 21-32) and taken up and developed by the Fathers of the Church. St Ambrose, for example, recalls that in this perspective, "the husband is Christ, the wife is the Church, a bride for her love and a virgin for her unsullied purity" (*Esposizione del Vangelo Secondo Luca: Opera Esegetiche X/II*, Milan-Rome 1978, p. 289).

He continues in another of his works: "The Church is beautiful. So the Word of God says to her, 'Your beauty is unblemished, my friend, and in you there is no blame' (*Cantico* 4: 7), for sin has overpowered me... Thus, the Lord Jesus - impelled by the desire for such a great love, by the beauty of her raiment and her grace, since in those who have been purified there is no longer any stain of sin - says to the Church, 'Place me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm'

(*Cantico* 8: 6), that is: you are adorned, O my soul, you are wholly beautiful, nothing do you lack! "Place me as a seal upon your heart", so that your faith will be radiant in the fullness of the sacrament. And let your works shine out and show the image of God in whose image you were made" (*I Misteri*, nn. 49, 41: *Opera Dogmatiche*, III, Milan-Rome 1982, pp. 156-157).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, including those from England, Sierra Leone, Canada and the United States. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. In a special way I greet the many student groups present. Upon all of you I cordially invoke the Holy Spirit's gifts of wisdom, joy and peace.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

An affectionate thought goes to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. My dear ones, the forthcoming feast of *Corpus Christi* invites us to deepen our faith in the Eucharistic Mystery. Dear *young people*, may the Body and Blood of Christ be your daily spiritual food, so that you may advance further and further on the path of holiness. May it be for you, dear *sick people*, your support and comfort in suffering. And may it help you, dear *newly-weds*, to instil in your family the love to which Christ bore witness for our sake by giving himself to us in the Eucharist.

"Corpus Christi"

On the occasion of the solemn feast of *Corpus Christi*, I invite Romans and pilgrims to take part in great numbers in the celebrations that will take place tomorrow evening in the square in front of the Basilica of St. John Lateran and which will conclude in the solemn Eucharistic procession to St Mary Major's.

Visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina

Next Sunday, I will go to [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) to strengthen in the faith the Catholic community there which is committed to an important process of reconciliation and agreement. I ask you to accompany me with your prayer on this apostolic journey, which I entrust to the maternal solicitude of the Blessed Virgin.