



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 31 March 2004

Canticle in Chapters 4: 11 and 5: 9-12 of the Book of Revelation

"Worthy is the lamb who was slain!"

1. The Canticle we have just heard and are now meditating upon is part of the *Liturgy of Vespers* whose Psalms we are commenting on in our weekly catecheses. As often happens in liturgical praxis, prayerful compositions are born from the artificial piecing together of biblical fragments that belong to larger passages.

In our case, we have taken up certain verses of chapters 4 and 5 of the Book of Revelation, in which is described a great and glorious heavenly scene. At the centre is a throne on which is seated God himself, whose name is not spoken out of reverence (cf. Rv 4: 2). Later, on that throne was to be seated a Lamb, the symbol of the risen Christ: indeed, "a Lamb... as though it had been slain", but "standing" up, alive and glorious (5: 6).

These two divine figures are surrounded by the chorus of the heavenly court, represented by four "living creatures" (4: 6) who perhaps call to mind the angels of the divine presence in the cardinal points of the universe, and by "twenty-four elders" (4: 4), in Greek *presbyteroi*, that is, the leaders of the Christian community whose number recalls both the 12 tribes of Israel and the Twelve Apostles; in other words, this is a synthesis of the Old and New Covenants.

2. This assembly of the People of God sings a hymn to the Lord, exalting the "glory and honour and power" expressed in his act of creating the universe (cf. 4: 11). At this point, a particularly important symbol is introduced: *biblíon* in Greek, that is, a "scroll" [or book], but which is completely inaccessible: indeed, it has seven seals that prevent it from being read (cf. 5: 1).

Thus, we are dealing with a secret prophecy. That scroll contains the whole series of divine

decrees that must be accomplished in human history to make perfect justice prevail. If the scroll remains sealed, these decrees can be neither known nor implemented, and wickedness will continue to spread and oppress believers. Hence, the need for an authoritative intervention: it would be made precisely by the slain and risen Lamb. He was able "to take the scroll and to open its seals" (cf. 5: 9).

Christ is the great interpreter and lord of history, the revealer of the hidden plan of divine action which unfolds within it.

3. The hymn continues by showing us the foundation of Christ's power over history. It is nothing other than his Paschal Mystery (cf. 5: 9-10): Christ was "slain" and with his blood "ransomed" all humanity from the power of evil. The word "ransom" refers to Exodus, to the freeing of Israel from Egyptian slavery. In the ancient law, the duty to ransom a person was incumbent on the closest relative. In the case of his People, this was God himself, who called Israel his "first-born son" (Ex 4: 22).

Christ then carried out this duty for all humanity. The redemption he brought about does not only serve to redeem us from our evil past, to heal our wounds and to relieve our wretchedness. Christ gives us a new inner being: he makes us priests and kings who share in his own dignity.

Alluding to the words that God proclaimed on Sinai (cf. Ex 19: 6; Rv 1: 6), the hymn reasserts that the redeemed People of God is made up of kings and priests who must guide and sanctify all creation. This consecration is founded in the Passover of Christ and fulfilled in Baptism (cf. I Pt 2: 9). From it comes an appeal to the Church to become aware of her dignity and her mission.

4. The Christian tradition has constantly applied the image of the paschal Lamb to Christ. Let us listen to the words of a second-century Bishop, Melito of Sardis, a city in Asia Minor, who said in his *Homily on Easter*: "Christ came down to earth from Heaven out of love for suffering humanity.

He put on our humanity in the womb of the Virgin and was born like a man.... It is he who as a lamb was taken away and as a lamb was slaughtered, thereby redeeming us from the slavery of the world.... It is he who brought us from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, from death to life, from oppression to eternal kingship; and he made us a new priesthood and a chosen people forever.... It is he, the silent Lamb, the slain Lamb, the Son of Mary, the Lamb without stain. He was seized by the flock, led to his death, slain towards evening and buried at night" (nn. 66-71: SC 123, pp. 96-100).

In the end, Christ himself, the slaughtered Lamb, calls to all peoples: "So come, you of all races of men who are ensnared by your sins, and receive forgiveness for your sins. Indeed, I am your forgiveness, the Passover of your salvation; I am the Lamb slain for you, I am your redemption, your way, your resurrection, your light, your salvation and your king. It is I who lead you to the

heights of Heaven, I who will show you the Father who exists from eternity, I who will raise you to life with my right hand" (n. 103,; *ibid.*, p. 122).

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to the Felician Sisters from various countries meeting in Rome for their Biennial Assembly. My greeting also goes to the priests of the Institute for Continuing Theological Education at the Pontifical North American College. I also welcome the Lutheran pilgrims from Sweden and Finland. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Denmark, Japan and the United States, I cordially invoke God's blessings of grace and peace.

Lastly, I address a cordial greeting to you, *young people*, *sick people* and *newly-weds*. In this last stretch of Lent, I ask you, dear *young people*, to intensify your witness of love for the Cross of Christ; I urge you, dear *sick people*, and I am thinking in particular of those afflicted by Sclerodermic diseases represented by a large group here, to live the trial of pain as an act of love for the crucified and risen Jesus; and I ask you, dear *newly-weds*, to imitate in your spousal union the lasting fidelity of the Lord for his Bride the Church.