



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Psalm 41[40]

Prayer of a sick man betrayed by his friends

1. One reason that impels us to understand and love Psalm 41[40] which we have just heard is the fact that Jesus himself quoted it: "I am not speaking of you all; I know whom I have chosen; it is so that the Scripture may be fulfilled, "He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me"" (Jn 13: 18).

It was the last evening of his earthly life and in the Upper Room, Jesus was about to offer the best morsel to Judas, the traitor. He thought back to this phrase in the Psalm, which is indeed the supplication of a sick man, abandoned by his friends. In this ancient prayer, Christ found the words and sentiments to express his own deep sorrow.

We will now attempt to follow and to elucidate the whole plot of this Psalm, uttered by a person who was certainly suffering an illness, but especially from the cruel irony of his "enemies" (cf. Ps 41[40]: 6-9) and his betrayal by a "friend" (cf. v. 10).

2. Psalm 41[40] begins with a beatitude. It is addressed to the true friend, the one who "considers the poor" [weak]: he will be rewarded by the Lord on the day of his suffering, when he is lying "on his sickbed" (cf. vv. 2-4).

The heart of this supplication, however, lies in the following section where it is the sick person who speaks (cf. vv. 5-10). He begins his discourse by asking God's forgiveness, in accordance with the traditional Old Testament concept of a pain corresponding to every sin: "O Lord, be gracious to

me; heal me, for I have sinned against you!" (v. 5; cf. Ps 38[37]). For the Jew of ancient times sickness was an appeal to the conscience to begin to convert.

Even if it is an outlook surpassed by Christ, the definitive Revealer (cf. Jn 9: 1-3), which is in question, suffering in itself can conceal a secret value and become a path of purification, interior liberation and enrichment of the soul. It is an invitation to overcome superficiality, vanity, selfishness and sin, and to trust more intensely in God and his saving will.

3. At this point, however, the wicked enter the scene: they have come to visit the sick person, not to comfort but to attack him (cf. vv. 6-9). Their words are cruel and wound the heart of the person praying, who senses their merciless wickedness. The same experience will be the lot of many humiliated poor people, condemned to loneliness and the feeling that they are a burden even to their own relatives. And if they occasionally hear some words of consolation, they immediately discern the false and hypocritical tones in which they are spoken.

So, as was said, the person praying experiences indifference and even harshness on the part of his friends (cf. v. 10), who are transformed into hostile, hateful figures. To them the Psalmist applies the gesture of "lifting the heel", the threatening act of those on the point of trampling upon the defeated foe or the impulse of the horseman prodding his horse on with his heel to make him ride over his adversary.

Our bitterness is profound when it is the "friend" we trusted, literally in Hebrew: the "man of peace", who turns against us. We are reminded of Job's friends: from being his companions in life, they become indifferent and hostile presences (cf. Jb 19: 1-6). In our prayer resounds the voices of a crowd of people forgotten and humiliated in their sickness and weakness, even by those who should have stood by them.

4. Yet the prayer of Psalm 41[40] does not end in this gloomy setting. The person praying is sure that God will appear on his horizon, once again revealing his love (cf. vv. 11-14). He will offer his support and gather in his arms the sick person, who will once again be "in the presence" of his Lord (v. 13) or, to use biblical language, will relive the experience of the liturgy in the temple.

The Psalm, streaked by pain, thus ends in a glimpse of light and hope. In this perspective, we can understand how St Ambrose, commenting on the initial beatitude of the Psalm (cf. v. 2), saw in it prophetically an invitation to meditate on the saving passion of Christ that leads to the Resurrection.

Indeed, this Father of the Church suggests introducing into the reading of the Psalm: "Blessed are those who think of the wretchedness and poverty of Christ, who though he was rich made himself poor for us. Rich in his Kingdom, poor in the flesh, because he took this poor flesh upon himself.... So he did not suffer in his richness, but in our poverty.

Therefore, it was not the fullness of divinity that suffered... but the flesh.... So endeavour to penetrate the meaning of Christ's poverty if you want to be rich! Seek to penetrate the meaning of his weakness if you want to obtain salvation! Seek to penetrate the meaning of his crucifixion if you do not want to be ashamed of it; the meaning of his wounds, if you want yours to heal; the meaning of his death, if you want to gain eternal life; and the meaning of his burial, if you want to find the Resurrection" (*Commento a dodici salmi*: SAEMO, VIII, Milan-Rome, 1980, pp. 39-41).

To special groups

I extend a special welcome to the *English-speaking pilgrims* here today, including members of the Australia Youth Choir and other groups from England, Sri Lanka and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of Our Lord, and I wish you a happy stay in Rome.

I address a cordial thought to the *Italian-speaking pilgrims*. Today on the National Public Holiday of the Italian Republic, I express my fervent good wishes to the entire Italian People and to its Authorities.

Lastly, I address you, dear *young people*, dear *sick people* and dear *newly-weds*. At the beginning of the month of June, dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, I invite you to contemplate the mystery of divine Love.

I hope that you, dear *young people*, will learn at the school of the Heart of Christ to face with seriousness the responsibilities that await you. May the Lord grant you to do his will, dear *sick people*, by joining in his sacrifice of love. And dear *newly-weds*, may you remain faithful to the love of God and witness to it with your conjugal love.