



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 22 September 2004

Canticle in I Peter 2: 21-24

***The face of the suffering Christ and his patience
in bearing the burden of the Cross***

1. Today, as we listened to the hymn in the passage from chapter 2 of St Peter's First Letter, the face of the suffering Christ stood out vividly before our eyes. This is how it was for readers of that Letter in the early times of Christianity, and how it was for centuries during the liturgical proclamation of the Word of God and in personal meditation.

This Canticle, inserted in the Letter, presents a liturgical tone and seems to mirror the prayer breathed by the early Church (cf. Col 1: 15-20; Phil 2: 6-11; I Tm 3: 16). It is also marked by an ideal dialogue between the author and his readers, punctuated by the alternation of the personal pronouns "we" and "you": "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.... He himself bore our sins in his body... that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds [we] have been healed" (I Pt 2: 21, 24-25).

2. In the original Greek text, however, the most often repeated pronoun, virtually hammered out at the beginning of the principal verses (cf. 2: 22, 23, 24), is *hos*: "he", the patient Christ, he who had committed no sin, he who when reviled did not react by seeking revenge, he who bore on the Cross the burden of humanity's sins to take them away.

Peter, like the faithful who recite this Canticle, especially at the Liturgy of Vespers in the Lenten season, is remembering the *Servant of Yahweh* described in the fourth hymn of the First Book of the Prophet Isaiah. The suffering Servant is a mysterious figure interpreted by Christianity in a

messianic and Christological key since he prefigures the details and importance of the Passion of Christ: "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... with his stripes we are healed.... He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth" (Is 53: 4, 5, 7).

The profile of sinful humanity is also suggested by the image of a scattered flock in a verse that is not included in the Liturgy of Vespers (cf. I Pt 2: 25) but comes from that ancient prophetic poem. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (Is 53: 6).

3. Thus, two figures intersect in this Petrine hymn. First of all, there is he, Christ, who sets out on the inexorable journey of the Passion without protesting against the injustice and violence, without recrimination or outbursts, but entrusting himself and his sorrowful experience "to him who judges justly" (I Pt 2: 23). This act of pure and total trust was to be sealed on the Cross with his famous last words, cried with a loud voice as his supreme abandonment to the will of the Father: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Lk 23: 46; cf. Ps 31[30]: 6).

There is no question, therefore, of blind and passive resignation, but of courageous confidence destined to serve as an example to all of his disciples who are walking on the dark path of trial and persecution.

4. Christ is presented as the Saviour, in solidarity with us in his human "body". In being born of the Virgin Mary, he became our brother. So it is that he can stand beside us, share in our pain and bear our wickedness, "our sins" (I Pt 2: 24). But he is also and always the Son of God, and his solidarity with us becomes radically transforming, liberating, expiatory and salvific (*ibid.*).

So it is that our poor humanity is snatched from the deviating, twisted paths of evil and brought back to "righteousness", that is, to the beautiful plan of God. The last sentence of the Canticle is especially moving. It says: "By his wounds you have been healed" (v. 25). Here we see how dearly Christ paid to obtain our healing!

5. Let us conclude by leaving the floor to the Fathers of the Church, that is, to Christian tradition that has meditated and prayed with St Peter's hymn.

Interweaving a phrase of the hymn with other biblical remembrances, St Irenaeus of Lyons sums up in this way the figure of Christ the Saviour in a passage from his Treatise *Adversus Haereses*: "There is one and the same Jesus Christ, Son of God, who through his Passion reconciled us to God and was raised from the dead, is seated at the right hand of God and is perfect in all things: he was hit but did not return the blows, "he who, when he suffered, did not threaten", and while he suffered tyrannical violence, prayed to the Father to forgive those who had crucified him. He truly saved us, he is the Word of God, he is the Only Begotten Son of the Father, Christ Jesus Our Lord" (III, 16: 9, Milan, 1997, p. 270).

To English-speaking pilgrims

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience. I greet particularly the groups from England, Ireland, Scotland, Denmark, Latvia, Australia and the United States of America. Wishing you a pleasant stay in Rome, I cordially invoke upon you peace and consolation in our Lord Jesus Christ. Happy vacation!

To special groups

As usual, my thoughts now go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*.

Dear friends, always be faithful to the Gospel ideal and put it into practice in your daily activities.