



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 10 October 2001

Canticle of Jeremiah (Jer 31,10-14)

Liturgy of the Hours of Lauds on Thursday of the first week

1. "Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, proclaim it on the distant coasts" (*Jer 31, 10*). What is the good news that is to be announced with the solemn words of Jeremiah in the Canticle which we have just heard. It is consoling news, and it is no accident that the chapters that contain it (cf. 30-31) are called the "Book of Consolation". The announcement refers directly to ancient Israel, but in some way it foreshadows the message of the Gospel.

Here is the heart of this announcement: "The Lord will redeem Jacob, he shall redeem him from the hand of his conqueror" (*Jer 31,11*). The historical background of these words is found in a moment of hope experienced by the People of God, about a century after the Assyrians in 722 occupied the Northern part of the Holy Land. In the days of the prophet Jeremiah, the religious reform of King Josiah brought about a return of the people to the covenant with God and fostered the hope that the time of punishment was over. It fostered the further hope that the North might regain its freedom and that Israel and Judah might be reunited. All, even "the distant coasts" should be witnesses of this wonderful event: God the Shepherd of Israel is about to intervene. He who allowed his people to be scattered, now comes to gather them together.

2. The invitation to rejoice is constructed with the aid of the profoundly moving images. It is an oracle which makes one dream! It delineates a future in which the exiles "will come and sing", and will find not only the Temple of the Lord, but also every good thing: wine, wheat, oil, the young of flocks and herds. The Bible does not know of an abstract spirituality. The promised joy does not just affect man's inner being because the Lord takes care of human life in all its dimensions. Jesus

himself highlights this, when he invites his disciples to trust in Providence even for their material needs (cf. *Mt* 6,25-34). Our Canticle insists on this point of view: God wants to make the whole man happy. To convey how all embracing is the happiness, the prophet uses the image of the "watered garden" (*Jer* 31,12), images of freshness and fruitfulness. Mourning is turned into feasting, being satiated with choice portions (cf. v. 14) and abundant goods, so that it will come naturally for them to dance and sing. It will be an unlimited joy, the joy of the people.

3. We know from history that this dream has not yet come true. Certainly not because God has failed to keep his promise: because of their infidelity. the people were to blame for this delusion.

The Book of Jeremiah undertakes to demonstrate it with the unfolding of the prophecy which becomes suffering and hardship, and gradually leads to some of the saddest phases of the history of Israel. Not only do the exiles of the North not return, but Judah itself will be occupied by Nabuchodonosor in 587 BC. Bitter days now begin when, on the shore of Babylon, the lyres were hung from the willows (cf. *Ps* 136,2). There was no desire to sing for the satisfaction of the jailers; no one can rejoice when he is uprooted by force from his own country, the land where God made his dwelling.

4. The Canticle's invitation to rejoice does not lose its meaning. Indeed, the final reason for rejoicing on which it leans remains firm, and we find it in some very intense verses that precede the verses we use in the Liturgy of the Hours. One must keep the verses in mind while reading the expressions of joy in our canticle. The verses describe in vibrant terms the love of God for his people. They indicate an irrevocable covenant: "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (*Jer* 31,3). They sing the fatherly outburst of the God who calls Ephraim his first born and covers him with his tenderness: "They shall go forth with weeping, I will lead them back with consolations; I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; because I am a father to Israel" (*Jer* 31,9). Although the promise could not then be fulfilled because of the children's lack of correspondence, the Father's love retains all its touching tenderness.

5. This love is the golden thread that brings together into unity the ups and downs of the history of Israel, its joys and sorrows, successes and failures. God's love does not fail, and punishment is an expression of his love since it intends to teach and to save.

On the solid rock of this love, the invitation to joy of our Canticle evokes a future plan of God which, though delayed, will come sooner or later, despite all of human frailty. The future comes to fulfilment in the new covenant with the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Spirit.

However, it will be totally fulfilled with the final return of the Lord at the end of time. Interpreted by the light of such certainty, the "dream" of Jeremiah continues to be a real historical opportunity, conditioned by faithfulness of human beings, and, above all, it refers to a final goal, guaranteed by the faithfulness of God and already begun by his love in Christ.

In reading the oracle of Jeremiah, we should let the Gospel resound in our hearts, the wonderful news proclaimed by Christ in the synagogue of Nazareth (cf. *Lk* 4,16-21). Christian life is called to be a true "Jubilation", which only our sin can threaten. By making us pray these words of Jeremiah, the Liturgy of the Hours invites us to keep our life attached to Christ our Redeemer (cf. *Jer* 31,11) and in our personal and communal life to find in him the secret of true joy.

The Holy Father greeted the various groups of pilgrims in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Hungarian, Czech, Slovak and Croatian. Returning to Italian, the Holy Father pointed out the bronze door for the Church of St Catherine in Bethlehem which he blessed after the audience. It was donated by the Diocese of Verona as a prayer for peace in the Holy Land. In the English greeting the Holy Father asked all to pray for peace and to be committed to building a world based on respect for the dignity of every human being and free of violence.

I extend a special greeting to the groups of young people from various countries present at this audience. I invite you all to pray for peace and to be committed to building a world without violence, founded on respect for the dignity of every human being. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors I invoke the blessings of which the Canticle of Jeremiah speaks. God be with you all!