



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Psalm 150

Let every living being praise the Lord'

1. The hymn which just served as a support of our prayer is Psalm 150, the last canticle in the Psalter. The last word that rings out in Israel's book of prayers is *alleluia*, namely, the pure praise of God, and this is why the Psalm is presented twice in the *Liturgy of Lauds*, on the second and fourth Sundays.

The brief text is punctuated with a set of 10 imperatives repeating the same word, "*hallelū*", "praise!". As if they were eternal music and song, they never seem to end, rather like what happens with the famous *Alleluia* chorus of Handel's *Messiah*. Praise of God becomes like the continuous breath of the soul. As has been written, "this is one of the rewards for being human: quiet exaltation and the capacity for celebration; it is summed up well in a phrase that *Rabbi Akiba* offered his disciples: A song every day, / a song for every day" (A.J. Heschel, *Chi è l'uomo?*, Milan 1971, p. 178, the English title is *Who is Man?*).

2. Psalm 150 seems to unfold in three moments. At the beginning, in the first two verses (vv. 1-2) we fix our gaze on "the Lord" in "his sanctuary", on "his power", "his wonderful works", his "greatness". Then, in the second moment, as in a genuine musical movement, the orchestra of the temple of Zion is involved in praising the Lord (vv. 3-5b) that accompanies the sacred dances and songs. Finally, in the last verse of the Psalm (cf. v. 5c) the universe appears, represented by "every living thing" or, if one wishes to follow the original Hebrew, by "everything that breathes". Life itself becomes praise, praise that rises to the Creator from the beings he created.

3. In our first encounter with Psalm 150, it will be enough to reflect on the first and last parts of the hymn. They frame the second part, the heart of the composition, that we shall examine in the future, the next time the Psalm is proposed by the Liturgy of Lauds.

The "sanctuary" is the first place where the musical and the prayerful theme unfolds (cf. v. 1). The original Hebrew speaks of the pure, transcendent "sacred" area in which God dwells. It is then a reference to the horizon of heaven and paradise where, as the Book of the Apocalypse will explain, the eternal, perfect liturgy of the Lamb is celebrated (cf. for example, Apoc 5,6-14). The mystery of God, in which the saints are welcomed for full communion, is a place of light and joy, of revelation and love. We can understand why the Septuagint translation and the *Latin Vulgate* use the word "saints" instead of "sanctuary": "Praise the Lord in his saints!"

4. From heaven our thought moves to earth, with an emphasis on the "mighty deeds" wrought by God that manifest "his great majesty" (v. 2). These mighty deeds are described in Psalm 104 [105], that invites the Israelites to "meditate on all his wonderful works" (v. 2), to remember "the wonderful works that he has done, his prodigies, and the judgements he uttered" (v. 5). The Psalmist then recalls "the covenant which he [the Lord] made with Abraham" (v. 9), the extraordinary story of Joseph, the miracles of the liberation from Egypt and the journey through the desert, and lastly, the gift of the land. Another Psalm speaks of the troubles from which the Lord delivers those who "cry" to him; those he sets free are asked repeatedly to "Let them thank the Lord for his mercy, for his wonderful works for the sons of men!" (Ps 106-107, 8,15,21,31).

Thus in our Psalm we can understand the reference to "mighty deeds" as the original Hebrew says, that is, the powerful "prodigies" (cf. v. 2) that God disseminates in the history of salvation. Praise becomes a profession of faith in God the Creator and Redeemer, a festive celebration of divine love that is revealed by creating and saving, by giving life and by delivering.

5. Thus we come to the last verse of Psalm 150 (cf. v. 5c[6]). The Hebrew word used for the "living" who praise God refers to "breathing", as I said earlier, but also to something intimate and profound that is inherent in man.

Although one might think that all created life should be a hymn of praise to the Creator, it is more correct to maintain that the human creature has the primary role in this chorus of praise. Through the human person, spokesman for all creation, all living things praise the Lord. Our breath of life that also presupposes self-knowledge, awareness and freedom (cf. Prv 20,27) becomes the song and prayer of the whole of life that vibrates in the universe.

That is why all of us should address one another "with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord" with all our hearts (Eph 5,19).

6. In transcribing the verses of Psalm 150, the authors of the Hebrew manuscripts often portray

the *Menorah*, the famous seven-branched candlestick set in the Holy of Holies of the temple of Jerusalem. In this way they suggest a beautiful interpretation of the Psalm, a true and proper *Amen* to the prayer that our "elder brothers" have always prayed: the whole man with all the instruments and musical forms that his genius has invented trumpet, harp, zither, drums, dance, strings, flutes, sounding cymbals, clashing cymbals, as the Psalm says as well as "everything that breathes", is invited to burn like the *Menorah* before the Holy of Holies, in a constant prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

In union with the Son, perfect voice of the whole universe that he created, let us too become a constant prayer before God's throne.

The Holy Father greeted the pilgrims in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Czech. To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

At the beginning of the New Year, I extend a special greeting to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Denmark and the United States of America. I particularly welcome the many students from various schools and universities, and I ask the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen you as you grow in knowledge and prepare for life's challenges. Upon all of you I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.