



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Psalm 80 [81] of Lauds

A love that frees the oppressed from their burdens

1. "Blow the trumpet at the full moon, on our feast day" (Ps 80 [81],4). These words of Psalm 80 [81], that we just proclaimed, refer to a liturgical celebration according to the lunar calendar of ancient Israel. It is difficult to identify the precise festival to which the Psalm refers; what is certain is that the biblical liturgical calendar, although it is based on the cycle of the seasons and thus of nature, it is clearly presented as firmly anchored to the history of salvation and, in particular, to the capital event of the exodus from Egyptian slavery, that is linked to the full moon of the first month (cf. Ex 12,2.6; Lv 23,5). There, God is revealed as Liberator and Saviour.

As verse 7 of the Psalm poetically states, God himself relieved the Hebrew slave in Egypt of the basket on his back, full of the bricks needed to build the cities of Pithom and Rameses (cf. Ex 1,11.14). God had stood beside the oppressed people and with his power removed the bitter sign of slavery, the basket of bricks baked in the sun, a symbol of the forced labour to which the children of Israel were constrained.

2. Let us see how this canticle of the liturgy of Israel develops. It opens with an invitation to celebrate, to sing, to make music. It is the official convocation of the liturgical assembly according to the ancient precept of worship, already established in Egypt with the celebration of the Passover (cf. Ps 80 [81],2-6a). After this call, the voice of the Lord himself is raised through the oracle of the priest in the temple of Zion, and his divine words fill the rest of the Psalm (cf. vv. 6b-17).

The theme developed is simple and rotates round two ideal poles. On the one hand there is the divine gift of freedom offered to Israel, oppressed and wretched: "In distress you called, and I delivered you" (v. 8). The Psalm also mentions the Lord's support of Israel on the journey through the desert, that is, the gift of the waters at Meribah, in a context of hardship and trial.

3. On the other hand, along with the divine gift, the Psalmist introduces another significant element. The Biblical religion is not a solitary monologue of God, an action of God destined not to be performed. Instead, it is a dialogue, a word followed by a response, a gesture of love that calls for acceptance. For this reason ample room is given to the invitations that God addresses to Israel.

The Lord first invites it to observe faithfully the First Commandment, the pillar of the whole Decalogue, that is, faith in the one Lord and Saviour and the rejection of idols (cf. Ex 20,3-5). The words of the priest speaking in God's name are punctuated by the verb "to listen", dear to the Book of Deuteronomy, which expresses obedient adherence to the Law of Sinai and is a sign of Israel's response to the gift of freedom. In fact, we hear repeated in our Psalm: "Hear, O my people ... O Israel, if you would but listen to me! ... But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would have none of me.... O that my people would listen to me...!" (Ps 80[81],9.12.14).

Only through faithful listening and obedience can the people receive fully the gifts of the Lord. Unfortunately, God must attest with bitterness to Israel's many infidelities. The journey through the desert, to which the Psalm alludes, is strewn with these acts of rebellion and idolatry which reach their climax in the representation of the golden calf (cf. Ex 32,1-14).

4. The last part of the Psalm (cf. Ps 80[81],14-17) has a melancholic tone. In fact, God expresses a longing that has not yet been satisfied: "O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!" (v. 14).

However, this melancholy is inspired by love and is united with his deep desire to fill the chosen people with good things. If Israel were to walk in the ways of the Lord, he would soon subdue their enemies (cf. v. 15), feed them "with the finest of the wheat" and satisfy them "with honey from the rock" (v. 17). It would be a joyful feast of fresh bread accompanied by honey that seems to run from the rocks of the Promised Land, representing prosperity and total well-being, a recurrent theme in the Bible (cf. Dt 6,3; 11,9; 26,9.15; 27,3; 31,20). In offering this wonderful perspective, the Lord obviously seeks to obtain his people's conversion, a response of sincere and effective love to his own love that is more generous than ever.

In the Christian interpretation, the divine offering is revealed in its fullness. Indeed, Origen gives us this interpretation: the Lord "made them enter into the promised land; there he does not feed them with manna as he did in the desert, but with the wheat that has fallen to the ground (cf. Jn 12,24-25) that is risen.... Christ is the wheat; again, he is the rock whose water quenched the thirst of the

people of Israel in the desert. In the spiritual sense, he satisfied them with honey and not with water, so that all who believe and receive this food, may taste honey in their mouths" (*Omelia sul Salmo 80*, n. 17 [*Homily on Psalm 80, n. 17*]: *Origen-Jerome, 74 Omelie sul Libro dei Salmi, [74 Homilies on the Book of the Psalms]* Milan 1993, pp. 204-205).

5. As is always the case in the history of salvation, the last word in the contrast between God and his sinful people is never judgement and chastisement, but love and pardon. God does not want to judge and condemn, but to save and deliver humanity from evil. He continues to repeat to us the words we read in the Book of the Prophet Ezechiel: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?... Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so return and live" (Ez 18,23.31-32).

The liturgy becomes the privileged place in which to hear the divine call to conversion and return to the embrace of God "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34,6).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I am pleased to greet the members of the Gregorian University Foundation from the United States of America. I also greet the pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Colombo in Sri Lanka. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Norway, Sweden, Finland and the United States, I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Holy Father concluded with a heartfelt appeal to the faithful to pray for peace in the Holy Land and for the religious community and many others who are isolated in the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

My thoughts go constantly to the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem, where the religious community and many others continue to suffer the siege that has been going on for 22 days. Their conditions, already dramatic due to the lack of water and food, have been further aggravated by having their telephone lines cut off. Let us continue to pray the Lord that a solution to this inhuman situation may be found at last, and that with everyone's help the longed-for peace be achieved in that region, which is so dear to the hearts of all believers.

