



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 27 November 2002

Psalm 98[99]

Holy is the Lord our God

Brothers and Sisters,

1. "The Lord reigns". The acclamation that opens Psalm 98[99], that we have just heard, reveals its basic theme and literary genre. It is a lofty song of the People of God to the Lord who governs the world and history as transcendent, supreme sovereign. It reminds us of other similar hymns - Psalms 95-97, which we have already reflected upon - which the *Liturgy of Lauds* sets forth as an ideal morning prayer.

In fact, as the faithful person starts his day, he knows that he is not left to the mercy of blind and dark chance, nor given over to the uncertainty of his freedom, nor dependent on the decisions of others, nor dominated by the events of history. He knows that the Creator and Saviour in his greatness, holiness and mercy, is above every earthly reality.

2. Experts have put forward several hypotheses on the use of this Psalm in the liturgy of the Temple of Zion. In any case, it has the character of a contemplative praise that rises to the Lord, enthroned in heavenly glory before all the peoples and the earth (cf. v. 1). Yet God makes himself present in a place and in the midst of a community, namely, in Jerusalem (cf. v. 2), showing that he is "God-with-us".

In the first verses the Psalmist attributes seven solemn titles to God: he is king, great, supreme, terrible, holy, powerful, just (cf. vv. 1-4). Further on, God is also described as "patient" (cf. v. 8). Above all, the emphasis is put on the holiness of God. Indeed, "he is holy" is repeated three times - almost in the form of an antiphon - (vv. 3.5.9). In biblical language this term indicates above all

divine transcendence. God is superior to us, and he is infinitely above every one of his creatures.

This transcendence, however, does not make him an impassive and distant sovereign: when he is called upon, he responds (cf. v. 6). God is He who can save, the only One who can free humanity from evil and death. Indeed, "he loves justice" and has "exercises equity and justice in Jacob" (v. 4).

3. The Fathers of the Church have reflected at great length on the theme of the holiness of God, celebrating his divine inaccessibility. However, this transcendent, holy God drew near to humanity. Indeed, as St Irenaeus says, he already became "accustomed" to being with the human person in the Old Testament, showing himself in appearances and speaking through the prophets, while man "became accustomed" to God learning to follow and obey him. Indeed, in one of his hymns, St Ephrem stressed that through the Incarnation "the Holy One dwelt in the [Mary's] womb in a bodily manner, and behold, he dwells in the mind in a spiritual manner" (St Ephrem, *Inni sulla Natività*, 4, 130 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on the Nativity*, 4, 130, p. 99, Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J., 1989). Moreover, through the gift of the Eucharist, in analogy with the Incarnation, "The Medicine of Life came down from above/ to dwell in those who are worthy of him./ After entering them,/ he set up his dwelling among us,/ so that we can be sanctified in him" (*Inni conservati in armeno*, [*Hymns preserved in Armenian*], 47,27.30).

4. This deep bond between the "holiness" and closeness of God is also developed in Psalm 98[99]. In fact, after contemplating the absolute perfection of the Lord, the Psalmist reminds us that God was in constant touch with his people through Moses and Aaron, his mediators, and through Samuel, his prophet. He spoke and was heard, he punished offenses but also forgave.

The sign of his presence among his people was "his footstool", namely, the throne of the Ark of the Temple of Zion (cf. vv. 5-8). The holy and invisible God also made himself available to his people through Moses, the legislator, Aaron the priest and Samuel the prophet. He revealed himself in words and deeds of salvation and judgement. He was present in Zion in the worship celebrated in the temple.

5. So we can say that today Psalm 98[99] is fulfilled in the Church, the centre of the presence of the holy and transcendent God. The Lord did not withdraw into the inaccessible realm of his mystery, indifferent to our history and our expectations. He "comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with justice, and the peoples with equity" (Ps 97[98],9).

God came among us above all in his Son, who became one of us, to instil in us his life and his holiness. This is why we now approach God with confidence not terror. Indeed, in Christ we have the High Priest, holy, innocent and unblemished. He "is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7,25). Our hymn, then, is full of serenity and joy: it exalts the Lord, the King, who dwells among us, wiping

every tear from our eyes (cf. Apoc 21,3-4).

I extend a special welcome to the English speaking pilgrims present today, particularly the groups from the United States. I thank the Freedom High School Choir who have lifted up our hearts to the Lord with their song of praise. Upon all of you, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

I greet *young people*, the *sick* and *newly-weds*. May the person of the Apostle St Andrew whose feast we will celebrate in a few days' time be for you, dear *young people*, a model of the following of Christ and of Christian witness. May St Andrew intercede for you, dear *sick people*, so that divine consolation may fill your hearts and fortify your faith. May he help you, dear *newly-weds*, to respond faithfully to the plan of love in which Christ brings you to share through the Sacrament of Marriage.