



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 26 March 2003

Psalm 89[90]

Teach us to number our days aright

1. The verses that have just echoed in our ears and in our hearts are a sapiential meditation which, however, has the tone of a supplication. In fact, in Psalm 89[90] the one who prays the Psalm puts at the heart of his prayer one of the topics most explored by philosophy, most sung by poetry and most felt by human experience in all ages and in all the regions of the earth: human frailty and the passing of time.

It is enough to think of certain unforgettable pages of the *Book of Job*, which present our frailty. In fact, we are like those who "dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed more easily than the moth. Between morning and evening they are destroyed; they perish for ever without anyone regarding it" (cf. Job 4,19-20). Our life on earth is "but a shadow" (Job 8,9). Again, Job continues to confess: "My days are swifter than a runner; they flee away, they see no happiness. They shoot by like skiffs of reed, like an eagle swooping on its prey" (Job 9,25-26).

2. At the beginning of his song, which is akin to an elegy (cf. Ps 89[90],2-6), the Psalmist insistently contrasts the eternity of God with the fleeting time of humanity. This is his most explicit declaration: "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch of the night" (v. 4).

As a consequence of original sin, by divine command, man returns to the dust from which he was taken, as already affirmed in the account of Genesis: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gn 3,19; cf. 2,7). The Creator, who shapes the human creature in all his beauty and complexity, is also the One who "turns men back into dust" (cf. Ps 89[90],3). And "dust" in biblical language is

also a symbolic expression for death, the lower regions, the silence of the tomb.

Judgement, sin, death

3. The sense of human limitation is intense in this entreaty. Our existence has the frailty of the grass that springs up at dawn; suddenly it hears the whistle of the sickle that reduces it to a heap of hay. The freshness of life all too soon gives way to the aridity of death (cf. vv. 5-6; cf. Is 40,6-7; Job 14,1-2; Ps 102[103],14-16).

As often occurs in the Old Testament, the Psalmist associates this radical weakness with sin. In us there is finiteness but also culpability. For this reason, the Lord's anger and judgement seem to overshadow our lives. "Truly we are consumed by your anger, filled with terror by your wrath. Our guilt lies open before you.... All our days pass away in your anger" (Ps 89 [90],7-9).

4. At the dawn of the new day, with this Psalm, the *liturgy of Lauds* rouses us from our illusions and our pride. Human life is limited: "Our span is seventy years or eighty for those who are strong", the Psalmist affirms. Moreover the passing of the hours, days, and months is marked by "sorrow and toil" (cf. v. 10) and the years themselves turn out to be like a "sigh" (v. 9).

This, then, is the great lesson: the Lord teaches us to "count our days" so that by accepting them with healthy realism "we may gain wisdom of heart" (v. 12). But the person praying asks something more of God: that his grace support and gladden our days, even while they are so fragile and marked by affliction. May he grant us to taste the flavour of hope, even if the tide of time seems to drag us away. Only the grace of the Lord can give our daily actions consistency and perpetuity: "Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us: give success to the work of our hands, give success to the work of our hands" (v. 17).

In prayer let us ask God that a reflection of eternity penetrate our brief lives and actions. With the presence of divine grace in us, a light will shine on the passing of our days, misery will be turned into glory, what seems not to make sense will acquire meaning.

5. Let us conclude our reflection on Psalm 89[90] by leaving the word to early Christian tradition, which comments on the Psalter having in the background the glorious figure of Christ. Thus for the Christian writer Origen, in his *Treatise on the Psalms* which has been handed down to us in the Latin translation of St Jerome, the Resurrection of Christ gives us the possibility, perceived by the Psalmist, to "rejoice and be glad all our days" (cf. v. 14). This is because Christ's Paschal Mystery is the source of our life beyond death: "After being gladdened by the Resurrection of Our Lord, through whom we believe we have been redeemed and will also rise one day, we now live in joy the days that remain of our life, exulting because of this confidence, and with hymns and spiritual chants we praise God through Jesus Christ Our Lord" (Origen Jerome, "74 *Omellie sul libro dei Salmi*" [74 *Homilies on the Book of the Psalms*], Milan 1993, p. 652).

I extend a special welcome to the priests from the Institute for Continuing Theological Education at the Pontifical North American College and to the visiting Lutheran pastors from Helsinki. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Denmark, Finland and The United States of America, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear friends, yesterday we celebrated the Solemnity of the Annunciation, the first of the "joyful mysteries" that celebrates the Incarnation of the Son of God, Prince of Peace. As we prayed the Rosary, we meditated on this mystery, with our hearts oppressed by the news we are receiving from Iraq which is at war, without forgetting the other conflicts that rage around the globe. How important it is, during this Year of the Rosary, that we persevere in reciting the Rosary to ask for peace! I ask that it be continually recited, especially at the Marian shrines. To Mary, Queen of the Rosary, I now entrust my resolution to make a pilgrimage to her shrine at Pompei, next 7 October, for the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. May Mary's maternal intercession obtain justice and peace for the whole world!

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

I ask you too to join me in praying the Rosary for peace, dear young people, sick persons and newly-weds.

Dear young people, may the contemplation of the mystery of the Annunciation make you ready and available for the Father's call, to be in society the leaven of authentic peace. May it renew in you, dear *persons who are suffering*, the serene and confident acceptance of the Cross, source of humanity's redemption. May Mary's "yes" to the divine will be for you, dear *newly-weds*, a constant encouragement for your commitment to build a family in which solidarity and peace will reign.