



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 21 May 2003

Psalm 144[143]

"Blessed be the Lord, my rock!"

1. We have just heard the first part of Psalm 144[143]. It appears to be a royal *hymn*, interwoven with other biblical texts so as to give life to a new prayerful composition (cf. Ps 8: 5; 18[17]: 8-15; 33[32]: 2-3; 39[38]: 6-7). The Davidic sovereign himself, speaking in the first person, recognizes the divine origin of his success.

The Lord is portrayed in martial images, in accordance with the ancient use of symbols: indeed, he is seen as a military instructor (cf. Ps 144[143]: 1), an impregnable fortress, a protective shield, a victor (cf. v. 2). It is desired in this way to exalt the personality of God, who battles against the evil in history: he is neither a dark or fateful power, nor an imperturbable sovereign indifferent to human vicissitudes. The citations and tone of this celebration of the divine echo the hymn of David preserved in Psalm 18[17] and in chapter 22 of the *Second Book of Samuel*.

2. Compared with the mightiness of God, the Jewish king recognizes that he is as frail and weak as all human creatures. To express his feeling, the royal person in his prayer makes use of two sentences, found in Psalms 8: 4 and 39[38]: 5 and, interweaving them, produces a powerful new effect: "O Lord, what is man that you regard him, or the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath, his days are like a passing shadow" (vv. 3-4). Here the firm conviction emerges that like a puff of wind we have no substance, if the Creator does not keep us alive, the One in whose "hand", as Job says, "is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind" (12: 10).

Only with divine support can we overcome the dangers and difficulties which beset our daily life. Only by counting on help from Heaven will we have the determination to set out, like the ancient king of Israel, on the way towards freedom from every form of oppression.

3. Divine intervention is pictured in the traditional cosmic and historical images in order to illustrate the divine supremacy over the universe and human events. Here, then, are the mountains smoking in sudden volcanic eruptions (cf. 144[143]: 5). Here are the flashes of lightning that seem like arrows released by the Lord, ready to destroy evil (cf. v. 6). Here, lastly, are the "many waters" which in biblical language symbolize chaos, evil and the void, in a word, the negative elements within history (cf. v. 7). These cosmic images are juxtaposed with others of a historical kind: like the "enemies" (cf. v. 6), the "aliens" (cf. v. 7), the liars and perjurers, that is, idolaters (cf. v. 8).

This is a very concrete and Oriental way of portraying wickedness, perversion, oppression and injustice: terrible realities from which the Lord frees us as we make our way in the world.

4. Psalm 144[143], which the *Liturgy of Lauds* presents to us, ends with a short hymn of thanksgiving (cf. vv. 9-10). It is inspired by the certainty that God will not abandon us in the fight against evil. For this reason, the person praying intones a melody, accompanying it with his ten-stringed harp, in the certainty that the Lord "gives victory to kings" and "rescues David [his anointed] servant" (vv. 9-10).

In Hebrew, the word "consecrated" is "Messiah": thus, we are looking at a royal Psalm, transformed into a messianic hymn, as was the liturgical custom of ancient Israel. We Christians should repeat it as we keep our gaze fixed on Christ, who frees us from every evil and sustains us in the battle against the hidden powers of wickedness. Indeed, "we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the rulers of this dark world, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (cf. Eph 6: 12).

5. Let us therefore conclude with a thought suggested to us by St John Cassian, a monk who lived in Gaul in the fourth to fifth century. In his work *The Incarnation of the Lord*, inspired by verse 5 of our Psalm, "Bow your heavens, O Lord, and come down!", he sees in these words the expectation of Christ's coming into the world.

He continues: "The Psalmist implored... the Lord to manifest himself in the flesh, to appear visibly in the world, to be visibly taken up in glory (cf. I Tm 3: 16) and lastly, to enable the saints to see, with their own eyes, all that they had spiritually foreseen" (*L'Incarnazione del Signore*, V, 13, Rome 1991, pp. 208-209). It is precisely this that every baptized person witnesses to in the joy of faith.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I extend a special welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including groups from England, Ireland, Scotland, Sweden and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the

grace and peace of the Risen Lord, and I wish you a happy stay in Rome. I welcome those from England who have come to Rome to profess their faith at the Tombs of the Apostles. Happy Easter!

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. In this Year dedicated to the Rosary, the month of May is an opportunity for a more intense encounter with Our Lady. May Mary, who waited with the Apostles in the Upper Room for the descent of the Holy Spirit, help you, dear *young people*, to carry out with readiness the mission that God entrusts to you. May he sustain you, dear *sick people*, in accepting your sufferings in union with Christ. May he intercede for you, dear *newly-weds*, so that your family may be a genuine domestic Church, enlivened by the light of faith, hope and charity.