



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 3 December 2003

Psalm 114[113A]

"They all sang with one voice"

1. The joyful and triumphant song we have just proclaimed recalls Israel's Exodus from the oppression of the Egyptians. Psalm 114[113A] belongs to the collection that Jewish tradition has called the "Egyptian Hallel". These are Psalms 112-117[113-118], a selection of songs used especially in the Jewish Passover liturgy.

Christianity has taken Psalm 114-[113A] with the same paschal connotation, but opened it to the new interpretation derived from Christ's Resurrection. The Exodus celebrated by the Psalm becomes, therefore, the symbol of another, more radical and universal liberation. Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, places this hymn, in its Latin *Vulgate* version, on the lips of the souls in Purgatory: "*In exitu Israël de Aegypto / they all sang together with one voice...*" (*Purgatory* II, 46-47). In other words, he saw in the Psalm the song of expectation and hope of those who are on the way, after purification from every sin, towards the final goal of communion with God in Paradise.

2. Let us now follow the thematic and spiritual line of this short, prayerful composition. It opens (cf. vv. 1-2) by recalling the Exodus of Israel from Egyptian oppression until its entry into that Promised Land which is God's "sanctuary"; that is, the place of his presence in the midst of his people. In fact, land and people are fused together: Judah and Israel, terms with which the Holy Land or the Chosen People were designated, come to be considered as the seat of the presence of the Lord, his special property and inheritance (cf. Ex 19: 5-6).

After this theological description of one of the fundamental elements of faith of the Old Testament, that is, the proclamation of the marvels God worked for his people, the Psalmist reflects more

profoundly, spiritually and symbolically on the constitutive events.

3. The Red Sea of the Exodus from Egypt and the Jordan of the entry into the Holy Land are personified and transformed into witnesses and instruments that have a part in the liberation wrought by God (cf. Ps 114[113A]: 3, 5).

At the beginning in the Exodus, the sea rolls back to allow Israel to pass, and at the end of the journey through the desert, it is the Jordan which turns back in its course, leaving its bed dry so that the procession of the children of Israel can cross over (cf. Jos 3-4). At the centre there is a reference to Sinai: it is now the mountains that participate in the great divine revelation which takes place on their summits. Likened to living creatures such as rams and lambs, they skip and exult. With a very vivid personification, the Psalmist now asks the mountains about the reason for their confusion: "[Why is it]... you mountains, that you skip like rams? You hills, like the lambs of the flock?" (Ps 114[113A]: 6). Their response is not mentioned: it is given indirectly through an injunction, subsequently addressed to the earth, so that it too should tremble "before the Lord" (cf. v. 7). The confusion of the mountains and the hills, therefore, was a startled adoration in the presence of the Lord, God of Israel, an act of glorious exaltation of the transcendent and saving God.

4. This is the theme of the last part of Psalm 114[113A] (cf. vv. 7-8), which introduces another important event of Israel's march through the desert, that of the water that gushed from the rock of Meribah (cf. Ex 17: 1-7; Nm 20: 1-13). God transformed the rock into a spring of water which becomes a lake: at the root of this miracle is his fatherly concern for the people.

This gesture acquires, then, a symbolic meaning: it is a sign of the saving love of the Lord who sustains and regenerates humanity as it advances through the desert of history.

St Paul was known to use this image and, on the basis of a Jewish tradition which claims that the rock accompanied Israel on its journey through the desert, he re-read the event in a Christological key: "All drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (I Cor 10: 4).

5. In this wake, commenting on the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt, a great Christian teacher such as Origen conceived of the New Exodus undertaken by Christians. Indeed, this is what he says: "Do not think that it was only then that Moses led the people out of Egypt: now too we have Moses with us..., that is, the law of God wants to bring you out of Egypt; if you listen to it, it wishes to distance you from Pharaoh.... It does not want you to remain in the dark actions of the flesh, but to go out into the desert, that you reach a place apart from the upheavals and instability of the world, that you reach stillness and silence.... So when you have arrived in this place of calm, there you can sacrifice to the Lord, recognize the law of God and the power of the divine voice" (*Omèlie sull'Esodo*, Rome, 1981, pp. 71-72).

Taking up the Pauline image that calls to mind the crossing of the sea, Origen continues: "The Apostle calls this a baptism, realized in Moses in the cloud and sea, so that you too, who have been baptized in Christ, in water and in the Holy Spirit, may know that the Egyptians are pursuing you and want to reclaim you to serve them: namely, the rulers of this world and the evil spirits to whom you were first enslaved. They will certainly seek to follow you, but you will go into the water and escape unharmed, and having washed away the stains of sin, you will come out as a new man ready to sing the new canticle" (*ibid.*, p. 107).

To young people, the sick and the newly-weds

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*.

I invite you all, dear friends, to look at Jesus, the Son of God whom, in this season of Advent, we are awaiting as Saviour. May he be your strength and your support.

To the English-speaking visitors

I offer special greetings to the participants in the General Assembly of the Conference of International Catholic Organizations. Today I bless the crosses that you will receive at the closing Mass of your Assembly: may they serve as a permanent reminder of the Lord's love and his promise to be with us always, "to the close of the age" (Mt 28: 20). Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims present at this Audience, especially those from Malta, Japan and the United States, I cordially invoke the grace and peace of Jesus Christ.