



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 16 June 2004

Psalm 46[45]

God "our refuge and strength"

1. We have just heard the first of the six hymns to Zion that are contained in the Psalter (cf. also Ps 48[47]; 76[75]; 84[83]; 87[86]; 122[121]). Like the other similar compositions, Psalm 46[45] celebrates the Holy City of Jerusalem, "the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High" (v. 5), but above all it expresses steadfast trust in God, who is "our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (v. 2; cf. vv. 8, 12). The Psalm pictures tremendous upheavals to give greater force to God's victorious intervention that offers us total safety. Since God is in her midst, Jerusalem "shall not be moved; God will help her" (v. 6).

Our thoughts turn to the oracle of the Prophet Zephaniah who says, addressing Jerusalem: "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!... The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival" (Zep 3: 14, 17-18).

2. Psalm 46[45] is divided into two major parts by a sort of antiphon that rings out in verses 8 and 12: "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge". God's title, "the Lord of hosts", is typical of the Hebraic cult in the Temple of Zion; despite its martial connotations, linked to the Ark of the Covenant, it refers to God's lordship over the whole cosmos and over history.

Hence, this title is a source of confidence, for the whole world and all its vicissitudes are under the supreme governance of the Lord. This Lord is therefore "with us", as the antiphon says once again

with an implicit reference to the Emmanuel, the "God-with-us" (cf. Is 7: 14; Mt 1: 23).

3. The first part of the hymn (cf. 46 [45]: 2-7) focuses on the symbol of the waters and presents a twofold, contrasting meaning. Indeed, on the one hand, the foaming waters are unleashed; in biblical language this symbolizes devastation, chaos and evil. They cause the trembling of the structure of the being and of the universe, symbolized by the mountains shaken by the roaring outburst of some sort of destructive floodwaters (cf. vv. 3-4). On the other hand, however, there are the thirst-quenching waters of Zion, a city set upon arid hills but which is gladdened by "a river and its streams" (cf. v. 5). While he alludes to the streams of Jerusalem such as the Shiloah (cf. Is 8: 6-7), the Psalmist sees in them a sign of flourishing life in the Holy City, of its spiritual fecundity and its regenerative power.

Therefore, despite the upheavals of history that cause people to tremble and kingdoms to shake (cf. Ps 46[45]: 7), the faithful find in Zion the peace and calm that derive from communion with God.

4. So it is that the second part of the Psalm (cf. vv. 9-11) can outline a transfigured world. The Lord himself from his throne in Zion intervenes decisively against wars and establishes the peace for which everyone yearns. When we read v. 10 of our hymn: "he makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire!", we think spontaneously of Isaiah.

The Prophet also sang of the end of weaponry and the transformation of weapons of war into a means for the development of peoples: "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Is 2: 4).

5. With this Psalm, Christian tradition has sung the praise of Christ "our peace" (cf. Eph 2: 14) and, through his death and Resurrection, our deliverer from evil. The Christological commentary that St Ambrose wrote on v. 6 of Psalm 46[45] that describes the "help" offered to the city of God, "right early" before daybreak, is evocative. The famous Father of the Church sees in it a prophetic allusion to the Resurrection.

In fact, he explains: "The Resurrection at break of day procures the support of heavenly help for us, the Resurrection that put an end to night has brought us day; as Scripture says: "Awakened and arisen and raised from the dead! And the light of Christ will shine for you'.

Note the mystical significance! At nightfall Christ's passion occurred... at dawn, the Resurrection.... In the evening of the world he is killed, while the light is dying, for this world was shrouded in total darkness and would have been plunged into the horrors of even grimmer shadows had Christ, the light of eternity, not come down from heaven for us to bring the age of innocence back to the

human race. The Lord Jesus, therefore, suffered and with his blood he redeemed our sins, the light of a clearer knowledge was radiant, and the day shone with spiritual grace" (cf. *Commento a Dodici Salmi*: SAEMO, VIII, Milan-Rome, 1980, p. 213).

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience. I greet particularly the groups from England, Ireland, Canada, Singapore and the United States of America. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. My greeting goes especially to the numerous young people present. The month of June is the month of the Sacred Heart. I invite you to place your trust in the Heart of Jesus, who is for us a refuge and strength, a helper close at hand. Upon all of you I cordially invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

My thoughts now go as usual to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*.

The day after tomorrow we will be celebrating the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This feast recalls the mystery of God's love for the men and women of all times.

Dear *young people*, I invite you to train yourselves at the school of the Heart of Christ to deal confidently with the commitments that await you in life. I thank you, dear *sick people*, for the spiritual help that you give to the Christian People in accepting to do the will of the Crucified Jesus in a fruitful union with his saving sacrifice.

Lastly, dear *newly-weds*, I hope that you will feel the true joy that stems from daily fidelity to the charity of God, of which your conjugal love must be an eloquent testimony.