



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 23 June 2004

Canticle in [Revelation 15: 2-4](#)

"Just and true are your ways!"

1. In addition to the Psalms, the *Liturgy of Vespers* includes a series of Canticles taken from the New Testament. Some of these, such as the one we have just heard, are interwoven with passages from Revelation, the book that seals the entire Bible. They are often distinguished by songs and choruses, by solo voices and by the hymns of the assembly of the chosen, by trumpet blasts and the sound of harps and zithers.

Our Canticle, which is very brief, is found in chapter 15 of the Book of Revelation. The curtain is about to be raised on a new and grandiose scene: the seven trumpets that have introduced the same number of divine plagues give way to seven bowls that are also full of scourges: in Greek, *pleghé*, a word that in itself means a blow so violent as to cause injuries and sometimes even death. This is an obvious reference to the narrative of the plagues of Egypt (cf. Ex 7: 14-11: 10).

The "scourge-plague" in Revelation is a symbol of judgment on the evil oppression and violence of the world. Thus, it is also a sign of hope for the just. The seven plagues - it is well known that in the Bible the number "seven" is a symbol of fullness - are described as "the last" (cf. Rv 15: 1), because in them the divine intervention that arrests evil reaches its completion.

2. The hymn is sung by those who are saved, the just of this earth who are "standing" before the risen Lamb (cf. v. 2). Just as the Hebrews sang the Song of Moses (cf. Ex 15: 1-18) in the Exodus after the crossing of the Red Sea, so the Chosen People raise their own "song of Moses and... of the Lamb" (Rv 15: 3) after conquering the beast, the enemy of God (cf. v. 2).

This hymn echoes the liturgy of the Johannine Churches; it consists of an anthology of citations from the Old Testament and from the Psalms in particular. The earliest Christian Community considered the Bible not only as the very soul of its faith and life, but also of its prayer and liturgy, as indeed is the case in these Vespers on which we are commenting.

It is also significant that the Canticle is accompanied by musical instruments: the just hold harps in their hands (*ibid.*), proof that the liturgy was framed by the splendour of sacred music.

3. With their hymn, rather than celebrating their constancy and their sacrifice, the saved exalt the "great and wonderful... deeds" of the "Lord God Almighty", that is, his saving acts in governing the world and in history. Indeed, true prayer, as well as being a petition, is also praise, thanksgiving, blessing, celebration and a profession of faith in the Lord who saves.

In this Canticle, moreover, the universal dimension which is expressed in the words of Psalm 86[85] is significant: "All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord" (v. 9). Our gaze thus broadens to take in the whole horizon and we see streams of people who converge toward the Lord in order to recognize his just "judgments" (Rv 15: 4), that is, his interventions in history to defeat evil and praise good. The expectation of justice that exists in all cultures, the need for truth and love that all forms of spirituality perceive, reach out towards the Lord and the tension is only eased when he is reached.

It is beautiful to think of this universal influence of piety and hope, taken up and interpreted by the words of the Prophets: "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts" (Mal 1: 11).

4. Let us conclude by joining that universal voice. Let us do so through the words of a poem by St Gregory of Nazianzus, a great Father of the Church of the fourth century. "Glory to the Father and to the Son, King of the universe, glory to the Most Holy Spirit, to whom be all praise. One God is the Trinity: He has created and filled all things, the heavens with celestial beings, the earth with those who are earthly. He has filled seas, rivers and springs with aquatic creatures, giving life to them all with his own Spirit so that the whole of creation might sing praise to the wise Creator: living and staying alive depends on him alone. May it be above all rational nature to sing praise to him forever, powerful King and good Father. In my spirit, with my heart, my lips and my thoughts, grant that I too, with purity, may glorify you for ever, O Father" (*Poesie, I, Collana di Testi Patristici* 115, Rome, 1994, pp. 66-67).

To special groups

I extend a special welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including religious leaders and visitors from Indonesia and other groups from England, Denmark and the United States of America. Tomorrow is the Solemnity of the Birth of St John the Baptist. Let us ask his intercession so that we may be faithful witnesses to Christ, as was he. Upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of Our Lord, and I wish you a happy stay in Rome.

As customary, my thoughts now go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. While many young people are busy taking their exams, for many others it is the beginning of the summer period, the time for tourism and pilgrimages, holidays and rest.

Dear *young people*, while I am thinking of your peers who are still busy with their examinations, I hope that you who are already on holiday will make the most of the summer to gain some formative human and spiritual experiences.

I hope that you, dear *sick people*, will not lack the comfort and relief of your relatives and friends. I encourage you, dear *newly-weds*, during these summer months, to deepen your mission in the Church and in society.