



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 15 December 2004

"He shall save the poor!"

1. The Liturgy of Vespers, which we are following through its series of Psalms, presents to us in two stages Psalm 72[71], a royal and messianic hymn. After meditating on the first part (cf. vv. 1-11; [ORE], 8 December 2004, p. 11), we now have before us the second poetic and spiritual movement of this hymn dedicated to the glorious figure of the Messiah-King (vv. 12-19). We must immediately point out, however, that the finale of the last two verses (cf. vv. 18-19) is actually a later liturgical addition to the Psalm.

In fact, it is a brief but intense blessing that was to seal the second of the five books into which Judaic tradition divided the collection of the 150 Psalms: this second book began with Psalm 42[41], the Psalm of the thirsting deer, a vivid symbol of spiritual thirst for God. So, a song of hope in an age of peace and justice concludes the sequence of Psalms and the words of the final blessing are an exaltation of the Lord's effective presence, both in the history of humanity where he "works wonders" (Ps 72[71]: 18) and in the universe he created, which is filled with his glory (cf. v. 19).

2. As we have already seen in the first part of the Psalm, the crucial elements by which to recognize the figure of the Messianic King are above all his justice and his love for the poor (cf. vv. 12-14).

He is their sole reference point and source of hope, as the visible representative of their only defender and patron: God. In fact, this Old Testament story teaches us that all too often, the sovereigns of Israel neglected this duty of theirs and abused the weak, the wretched and the poor.

For this reason, the Psalmist's gaze now focuses on a just and perfect king, incarnated by the Messiah, the one sovereign ready to redeem the oppressed "from oppression" and abuse (cf. v. 14). The Hebrew word used is the legal term for the protector of the lowliest and victims; it was also applied to Israel, "redeemed" from slavery when it was oppressed by Pharaoh's power.

The Lord is the principal "deliverer-redeemer" who works visibly through the Messiah-King to save the poor whom he protects, for their "life" and "blood" are dear to him. "Life" and "blood" are the fundamental reality of the person; they represent the rights and dignity of each human being, which are frequently violated by the powerful and domineering of this world.

3. In the original composition, Psalm 72[71] ends before the final antiphon mentioned above with an acclamation in honour of the Messiah-King (cf. vv. 15-17). It is like a trumpet blast that accompanies a chorus of good wishes and hopes for the sovereign, for his life, his well-being, his blessing and the endurance of his memory down the ages.

We are, of course, in the presence of elements belonging to the style of courtly compositions, with their own special emphasis. Henceforth, however, these words were to acquire their truth in the action of the perfect king, the longed for and expected Messiah.

In accordance with a feature of messianic poems, the whole of nature is involved in a transformation that is first and foremost for the good of society: the corn of the harvests will be so abundant as to become, as it were, an undulating sea of rustling ears rolling to the peaks of the mountains (cf. v. 16). This is a sign of the divine blessing that in its fullness spreads over the earth, pacified and serene. Indeed, all humanity, leaving aside and putting an end to all divisions, will converge toward this sovereign of justice, thus fulfilling the Lord's great promise to Abraham: "Every tribe shall be blessed in him, all nations bless his name (v. 17; cf. Gn 12: 3).

4. Christian tradition has discerned in the face of this Messiah-King the features of Jesus Christ. In his *Exposition on Psalm 72[71] (Esposizione sul Salmo 71)*, St Augustine, who reinterprets our Psalm in a Christological key, explains that the wretched and the poor, to whose help Christ comes, are "the people who believe in him". Indeed, recalling the kings mentioned earlier in the Psalm, he explains that "this people also includes the kings who worship him. They did not in fact scorn to be wretched and poor, that is, humbly to confess their sins and recognize their need for God's glory and grace, so that that king, the son of the king, might free them from the powerful", that is, from Satan the "slanderer", the "powerful". "But our Saviour humiliated the slanderer and entered the house of the powerful, carrying away his vases after leaving him in chains. He "has set the unfortunate free from the powerful, and the poor who had no one to save them'. Indeed, no created power could have done this: neither any just man nor an angel. There was no one who could save us; and behold, he came in person and he saved us" (71, 14: *Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana*, XXVI, Rome, 1970, pp. 809, 811).

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, particularly the two groups from the United States of America. In the joy of this Advent season I cordially invoke upon you and your families the abundant Blessings of Jesus Christ our Lord and King.

I extend my greeting to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. I greet you, in particular, dear faithful from the Autonomous Province of Trent, together with your Pastor, Archbishop Luigi Bressan, and the civil Authorities who have accompanied you. I remember with gratitude the cordial welcome you gave me during my brief but wonderful holidays in your beautiful mountains. Today, you have come to present to me the fine, tall Christmas tree, set up in St Peter's Square, and the trees that have been arranged in this Hall, in the Apostolic Palace and in other parts of the Vatican. They are a gift from your Autonomous Province. Thank you! And my special thanks to all who have made this Christmas tribute possible. It will remind the visitors and pilgrims of the birth of Jesus, Light of the world.

I then greet the Delegation of the Regional Council of Puglia and express my pleasure at the efforts made to protect human life and support families founded on marriage.

Lastly, I thank the *young people*, the *sick people* and the *newly-weds* for their participation in this Meeting. I hope that you will all come to the solemn feast of Christmas, watchful and ready in your hearts to receive our Redeemer.