



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 4 May 2005

Psalm 121[120]

Israel's guard

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. As I announced last Wednesday, in our Catecheses I have decided to continue the commentary on the Psalms and Canticles of Vespers, using the texts prepared by my beloved Predecessor, Pope John Paul II.

Let us begin today with Psalm 121[120]. The Psalm is one of the "*songs of ascents*" that accompanied the pilgrimage to the encounter with the Lord in the Temple of Zion. It is a Psalm of trust, for the Hebrew verb *shamar*, "to safeguard, to protect", is repeated in it six times. God, whose name is frequently invoked, emerges as the ever vigilant, attentive and concerned "guardian", the "sentinel" who keeps watch over his people to protect them from every hazard and danger.

The song begins with the Psalmist raising his eyes "to the mountains", that is, to the hills crowned by Jerusalem: from up there comes help, for there, in his temple, the Lord dwells (cf. vv. 1-2).

However, the word "mountains" can also conjure up images of idolatrous shrines in the so-called "high places", which are frequently condemned in the Old Testament (cf. I Kgs 3: 2; II Kgs 18: 4). In this case, there would have been a contrast: while the pilgrim was advancing towards Zion, his eyes would have lit on pagan temples that were a great temptation to him. But his faith was steadfast and he was certain of one thing alone: "My help shall come from the Lord, who made

heaven and earth" (Ps 121[120]: 2).

There are also similar things in our pilgrimage through life. We see the high places that spread out before us as a promise of life: wealth, power, prestige, the easy life. These high places are temptations, for they truly seem like the promise of life. But with our faith we realize that this is not true and that these high places are not life. True life, true help, comes from the Lord. And we turn our gaze, therefore, to the true high places, to the true mountain: Christ.

2. This trust is illustrated in the Psalm through the image of the guardian and sentinel, who watch and protect. There is also an allusion to the foot that does not stumble (cf. v. 3) on the way through life, and perhaps to the shepherd who, stopping for the night, watches over his flock without falling asleep or dozing (cf. v. 4). The divine Pastor knows no rest in the task of caring for his people, for all of us.

Another symbol is then introduced into the Psalm: "shade", which implies that the journey is resumed during the heat of the day (cf. v. 5). Let us remember the historic march through the desert of Sinai where the Lord preceded Israel "in the daytime by means of a column of cloud to show them the way" (Ex 13: 21). Many prayers in the Psalter say: "Hide me in the shadow of your wings" (Ps 17[16]: 8; cf. Ps 91[90]: 1). Here too, there is an aspect that relates to our life. Our lives move beneath a merciless sun; the Lord is the shade that protects and helps us.

3. After the vigil and the shade there is the third symbol, that of the Lord who is "at [the] right side" of his faithful (cf. Ps 121[120]: 5). This is the position of defence, both in military and court contexts: it is the certainty of never being abandoned in a time of trial, in an assault by evil or by persecution. At this point the Psalmist returns to the idea of a journey on a scorching hot day on which God protects us from the fierce heat of the sun.

But night follows day. In ancient times it was also thought that moonbeams were harmful and caused fever or blindness, or even madness; thus, the Lord also protects us at night time (cf. v. 6), in the nights of our lives.

The Psalm now draws to a close with a concise declaration of trust: God will protect us with love at every moment, guarding our lives from every evil (cf. v. 7). All our activities, summed up in two opposite verbs, "going" and "coming", always take place under the vigilant gaze of the Lord, as do all our acts and all our time, "both now and for ever" (v. 8).

4. Let us now, in conclusion, comment on this final declaration of trust with a spiritual testimony of the ancient Christian tradition. In fact, in the *Epistolarium* of Barsanuphius of Gaza (who died in the mid-sixth century), a widely renowned aesthete sought out by monks, clerics and lay people for the wisdom of his discernment, we find several references to the verse of our Psalm: "The Lord will guard you from evil, he will guard your soul". With this Psalm, with this verse, Barsanuphius

wanted to comfort all those who came to him with their toils, life's trials, dangers and misfortunes.

Once asked by a monk to pray for him and his companions, Barsanuphius responded as follows, including the citation of this verse in his greeting: "My beloved sons, I embrace you in the Lord, entreating him *to protect you from all evil*, and to support you as he did Job, to give you grace as he gave to Joseph, gentleness as to Moses and valour in battle as to Joshua, the son of Nun, mastery of thought as to the judges, victory over enemies as to King David and King Solomon, fertile land as to the Israelites.... May he grant you forgiveness of your sins with the healing of the body as he did to the paralytic. May he save you from the waters as he did Peter and snatch you from troubles as he did Paul and the other Apostles. *May he protect you from every evil*, as his true children, and grant you your heart's desire, for the advantage of your soul and your body, in his name. Amen" (Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, *Epistolario* 194: *Collana di Testi Patristici, XCIII*, Rome, 1991, pp. 235-236).

To English-speaking pilgrims

I am pleased to greet the students of the Faculty of Canon Law of St Paul University in Ottawa, Canada. My warm welcome goes to all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including the pilgrimage groups from England, Ireland, Australia, Canada and the United States. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace.

To special groups

I address a warm welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular I greet the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Bétharram and the Little Sisters, Missionaries of Charity of St Luigi Orione, who are celebrating their respective General Chapters. Dear brothers and sisters, always be faithful to the spirit of your Founders, to be courageous Gospel witnesses in our time.

I also greet the seminarians from Pius XI Regional Seminary in Puglia: dear friends, as I assure you of my spiritual closeness, I pray to the spirit of the Risen One to help you discern God's call. Lastly, I would like as usual to address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*.

In this month of May dedicated especially to the Mother of the Lord, I invite you, dear *young people*, to learn from Mary to love and follow Christ above all things. May Our Lady help you, dear *sick people*, to look with faith at the mystery of pain and to grasp the saving value of every cross. I entrust you, dear *newly-weds*, to the motherly protection of the Blessed Virgin, so that you will live out in your own family the atmosphere of prayer and love of the home in Nazareth.

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