



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Psalm 28 (Lauds, Monday, first week)

The Lord solemnly proclaims his word

1. Some experts consider Psalm 28 that we have just heard as one of the most ancient texts of the Psalter. A powerful image unifies it in its poetic and prayerful unfolding: in fact, we face the progressive unleashing of a storm. The Hebrew term *qol*, which signifies both "voice" and "thunder", repeated at the beginning of key verses creates the mounting tension of the psalm. For this reason commentators call our Psalm the "Psalm of seven thunders", for the number of times in which the word resounds. In fact, one can say that the Psalmist thinks of thunder as a symbol of the divine voice, with its transcendent and unattainable mystery, that breaks into created reality in order to disturb and terrify it, but which in its innermost meaning is a word of peace and harmony. One thinks of chapter 12 of the Fourth Gospel, where the voice that responds to Jesus from heaven is perceived by the crowd as thunder (cf. Jn 12,28-29).

In proposing Psalm 28 for the prayer of Lauds, the Liturgy of the Hours invites us to assume an attitude of profound and trusting adoration of the divine Majesty.

2. The Biblical cantor takes us to two moments and two places. At the centre (vv. 3-9) we have the account of the storm which is unleashed from the "immensity of the waters" of the Mediterranean. In the eyes of Biblical man, the sea waters incarnate the chaos which attacks the beauty and splendour of creation, to corrode, destroy and demolish it. So, in observing the storm that rages, one discovers the immense power of God. The one who prays sees the hurricane move north and hammer the mainland. The tall cedars of Lebanon and of Mount Sirion, sometimes called Hermon, are struck by the flashing lightning and seem to jump under the thunderbolts like frightened

animals. The crashes draw closer, crossing the entire Holy Land, and move south, to the desert steppes of Kades.

3. After this picture of strong movement and tension, by contrast, we are invited to contemplate another scene, portrayed at the beginning and the end of the Psalm (vv. 1-2 and 9b-11). Distress and fear are now countered by the adoring glorification of God in the temple of Zion.

There is almost a channel of communication that links the sanctuary of Jerusalem and the heavenly sanctuary: in both these sacred places, there is peace and praise is given to the divine glory. The deafening sound of the thunder gives way to the harmony of liturgical singing, terror gives way to the certainty of divine protection. God now appears, "enthroned over the flood" as "King for ever" (v. 10), that is as Lord and supreme Sovereign of all creation.

4. Before these two antithetical scenes, the praying person is invited to have a twofold experience.

First of all he must discover that God's mystery, expressed in the symbol of the storm, cannot be grasped or dominated by man. As the Prophet Isaiah sings, the Lord, like lightning or a storm, bursts into history sowing panic among the perverse and oppressors. With the coming of his judgement, his proud adversaries are uprooted like trees struck by a hurricane or like the cedars shattered by the divine thunderbolts (cf. Is 14,7-8).

What becomes evident in this light is what a modern thinker (Rudolph Otto) has described as the *tremendum* of God: his ineffable transcendence and presence as a just judge in the history of humanity. The latter is vainly deluded in opposing his sovereign power. In the *Magnificat* Mary was also to exalt this aspect of God's action: "He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; he has put down the mighty from their thrones" (Lk 1,51-52a).

5. However, the Psalm gives us another aspect of God's face, the one that is discovered in the intimacy of prayer and in the celebration of the liturgy. According to the above-mentioned thinker, it is the *fascinosum* of God, that is the fascination that emanates from his grace, the mystery of love that is poured out upon the faithful, the serene certainty of the blessing reserved for the just. Even facing the chaos of evil, the storms of history, and the wrath of divine justice itself, the one who prays feels at peace, enfolded in the mantle of protection which Providence offers those who praise God and follow his ways. Through prayer, we learn that the Lord's true desire is to give peace.

In the temple, our anxiety is soothed and our terror wiped out; we participate in the heavenly liturgy with all "the children of God", angels and saints. And following the storm, image of the destruction of human malice like the deluge, there now arches in the heavens the rainbow of divine blessing, reminiscent of "the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of

all flesh that is upon the earth" (Gn 9,16).

The Father's exalted voice resounds at the Son's Baptism blessing the waters of the earth. This message stands out above all in the "Christian" rereading of the Psalm. If the seven "thunders" of our Psalm represent God's voice in the cosmos, the loftiest expression of this voice is the one in which the Father, in the theophany of Jesus' Baptism, revealed his deepest identity as the "beloved Son" (Mk 1,11 and paragraph). St Basil wrote: "Perhaps, and more mystically, "the voice of the Lord on the waters resounded when a voice came from on high at the baptism of Jesus and said: This is my beloved Son. Indeed the Lord then breathed upon many waters, sanctifying them with baptism. The God of glory thundered from on high with the strong voice of his testimony.... Then you can also understand by "thunder' that change which, after Baptism, takes place through the great "voice' of the Gospel" (*Homily on the Psalms: PG 30,359*).

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present, especially those from England, Korea, Japan and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.