



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 20 June 2001

Psalm 23 (24)

The Lord enters his temple!

(Lauds on Tuesday of the first week of the four week psalter)

1. The ancient chant of the People of God that we just heard, resounded in the temple of Jerusalem. To be able to grasp the main thrust of the prayer, we have to keep in mind three basic affirmations.

The first is the truth of creation: God has created the world and is its Lord. The second is the judgement to which he submits his creatures: we must appear before him and be questioned about what we have done. The third is the mystery of God's coming: he comes into the universe and into history and desires to be free to establish a relationship of intimate communion with human beings. A modern commentator said: "These are the three elementary forms of the experience of God and of our relationship with God; we live by the work of God, we live before God and we can live with God" (G. Ebeling, *On the Psalms*, [see in the Italian text *Sui Salmi*, Brescia, 1973, p. 97]).

2. The three parts of Psalm 23 correspond to these three basic premises that we will now examine, considering them as three successive scenes of a poetic triptych for our prayer. The first is a brief acclamation of the Creator, to whom belong the earth and all who dwell in it (vv. 1-2). It is a profession of faith in the Lord of the cosmos and of history. In the ancient vision of creation, the earth is conceived as an architectural work: God lays the foundations of the earth on the sea, the symbol of the chaotic and destructive waters, in turn the sign of creaturely limitation, conditioned

by nothingness and evil. Creation is suspended over the watery abyss and God's creative and providential hand keeps it in being and in life.

3. From the cosmic horizon the Psalmist's perspective narrows down to the microcosm of Zion, "the mountain of the Lord". We are now in the second picture of the Psalm (vv. 3-6). We stand before the temple of Jerusalem. The procession of the faithful asks the guardians of the holy door an entrance question: "Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord, who shall stand in his holy place?".

The priests as happens in some other biblical texts called by the experts "liturgy of entrance" (cf. Ps 14; Is 33,14-16; Mi 6,6-8) respond by listing the conditions that enable one to enter into communion with the Lord in worship. They are not merely ritual or external norms to be observed, but moral and existential requisites to be lived. It is an examination of conscience or penitential act that precedes the liturgical celebration.

4. The priests lay down three requisites. Above all, one must have "clean hands and a pure heart". "Hands" and "heart" refer to both action and intention, the whole of the human being who should basically turn toward God and his law. The second requisite calls for one "not to tell lies", in biblical language it entails sincerity, but even more, the struggle against idolatry, for idols are false gods, that is "lies". The precept confirms the first commandment of the Decalogue, the purity of religion and of worship. The third and last requisite deals with relations with our neighbour: "Do not swear so as to deceive your neighbour". In an oral culture like that of ancient Israel, the word was the symbol of social relationships based on justice and uprightness and should not be used to deceive.

5. So we reach the third scene of our triptych which describes indirectly the joyful entry of the faithful into the temple to meet the Lord (vv. 7-10). With a thought-provoking exchange of appeals, questions and answers, God reveals himself progressively with three of his solemn titles: "the King of Glory, the Lord Mighty and Valiant, the Lord of Armies". The gates of the temple of Zion are personified and invited to lift up their lintels to welcome the Lord who takes possession of his home.

The triumphal scene, described by the Psalm in the third poetic picture, has been applied by the Christian liturgy of the East and of the West to the victorious Descent of Christ to the Limbo of the fathers, spoken of in the First Letter of Peter (cf. I Pet 3,19), and to the Risen Lord's Ascension into heaven (cf. Acts 1,9-10). Even today, in the Byzantine Liturgy, the Psalm is sung by alternating choirs on Holy Saturday night at the Easter Vigil, and in the Roman Liturgy it is used on the second Sunday of the Passion at the end of the procession of palms. The Solemn Liturgy of the opening of the Holy Door at the beginning of the Jubilee Year allowed us to relive with great interior emotion the same sentiments the Psalmist felt as he crossed the threshold of the ancient temple of Zion.

6. The last title, "Lord of Armies", is not really a military title as may appear at first sight even if it does not exclude a reference to Israel's ranks. Instead, it has a cosmic value: the Lord, who now comes to meet humanity within the restricted space of the sanctuary of Zion, is the Creator who has all the stars of heaven as his army, that is, the creatures of the universe who obey him. In the book of the prophet Baruch we read: "Before whom the stars at their posts shine and rejoice; when he calls them, they answer, "Here we are!" shining with joy for their Creator" (Bar 3,34-35). The infinite, almighty and eternal God adapts himself to the human creature, draws near to meet, listen and enter into communion with him. The liturgy is the expression of this coming together in faith, dialogue and love.

I extend warm greetings to the priests and religious, to the young people, parish groups and choirs, and to the various ecumenical groups present. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Sweden, Japan, Canada and the United States, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I also express my concern to the group of refugees, accompanied by the members of the Rome branch of the Jesuit Refugee Service. Today, established as World Refugee Day by the United Nations Organization, your presence recalls the 50 million refugees concentrated in some of the world's poorest regions. I warmly hope that national leaders will be able to find prompt and effective solutions to the problems that are at the root of this great suffering, and will guarantee the necessary aid so that people in exile may have the living conditions that human beings deserve.

Lastly, I extend a greeting as usual to young people, to the sick and to newly married couples. The impact of the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ is still with us. Dear young people, may you always find nourishment for your spiritual life in the Eucharist and let yourselves be formed by Christ, to be his heralds of hope in the world.

Dear sick people, offer your sufferings to the Lord, so that he will continue to spread his love in human hearts, also through your mysterious cooperation in his salvific sufferings.

And you, *dear newly married couples*, as you embark on married life, may you have recourse to the Eucharist with a fresher and livelier faith so that, nourished by Christ, you may create families inspired by an intense spiritual life and give concrete Christian witness.

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