



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 23 January 2002

Glimmers of Hope During the Exile

Canticle of Sirach 36,1-5.10-13

Lauds on Monday of the Second Week

1. There is not just the official prayer book of the People of God in the Old Testament, namely, the Psalter. Many Biblical pages are embellished with canticles, hymns, psalms, supplications, prayers and invocations that rise to the Lord as a response to his Word. The Bible thus turns out to be a dialogue of God with humanity, an interaction placed under the seal of the word of God, word of grace and love.

It is the case of the supplication that we have just addressed to "the Lord God of the universe" (Sir 36,1). It is contained in the book of Sirach, a sage who gathered his reflections, counsels and hymns probably around 190-180 B.C. on the threshold of the epoch of liberation that Israel lived under the guidance of the Maccabees. In 138 B.C. a grandson of this sage translated into Greek, as he tells us in the prologue of the volume, the work of his grandfather in order to offer these teachings to a wider circle of readers and disciples.

The Book of Sirach is called "Ecclesiasticus" by the Christian tradition. Though it was not included in the Hebrew canon, this book, along with other "sapiential books", ended up setting forth the so-called "*Christian truth*" ("*veritas Christiana*"). Thus the values proposed by this sapiential work entered into Christian education in the Patristic age, above all, in the monastic world, becoming a manual of practical behaviour for the disciples of Christ.

2. The invocation of chapter 36 of Sirach, incorporated in a simplified form in the prayer of Lauds of the Liturgy of the Hours develops a few key themes.

Above all, we find the supplication to God to intervene in favour of Israel and against the foreign nations that oppress her. In the past God showed his holiness when he punished the sins of his people, by putting them in the hands of their enemies. Now the one praying asks God to show his greatness by undoing the power of his oppressors and establishing a new Messianic-like era.

Certainly, the request reflects the tradition of prayer in Israel, and in reality is full of Biblical references. In a certain sense, it can be considered a model of prayer to be used in time of persecution or oppression, as it was at the time the author lived, under the rather harsh and severe dominion of the foreign Syro-Hellenic sovereigns.

3. The first part of this prayer opens with an ardent appeal to the Lord that he may have mercy and pay attention to what is happening (cf. Sir 36,1). But immediately attention is directed to the divine action, that is exalted by a series of remarkable verbs: "Have mercy ... pay attention ... put in dread ... raise your hand ... show yourself great ... renew your signs ... work new wonders ... glorify your hand and your right arm...".

The God of the Bible is not indifferent in the face of evil. Even if his ways are not our ways, and his times and plans are different from ours (cf. Is 55,8-9), yet he takes sides with the victims and will be a severe judge of the violent, the oppressor, those who triumph without showing mercy. His intervention does not seek destruction. By showing his power and the faithfulness of his love, He can generate even in the conscience of the evil one a shudder that can lead to his conversion. "They will know, as we know, that there is no God but you, O Lord" (Sir 36,4).

4. The second part of the hymn opens with a more positive perspective. In fact, while the first part asks for the intervention of God against one's enemies, the second part no longer speaks of enemies, but asks the favour of God for Israel, begs his mercy for the Chosen People and for the holy city, Jerusalem.

The dream of the return of those sent into exile, even those belonging to the Northern kingdom, became the goal of the prayer: "Gather all the tribes of Jacob, that they may inherit the land as of old" (v. 10). The prayer is for the rebirth of the entire Israel, as in the happy days of the occupation of the whole of the Promised Land.

In order to make the prayer more urgent, the one praying insists on the relation that binds God to Israel and Jerusalem. Israel is designated "the people called by *your* name", the "whom you *have* treated as your firstborn"; Jerusalem is "*your* holy city", "*your* dwelling place". It then expresses the desire that the relation become still closer and more glorious: "Fill Zion with your majesty, *your* people with your glory" (cf. v. 13). By filling with his majesty the Temple of Jerusalem, that will attract all nations to itself (cf. Is 2,2-4; Mi 4,1-3), the Lord will fill his people with his glory.

5. In the Bible, the lament of those who suffer never ends in desperation, but is always open to

hope. It is based on the certainty that the Lord does not abandon his children, he does not let those he made fall out of his hands.

The selection made by the liturgy has left out a very beautiful expression in the prayer. It asks God to "give evidence to the creatures that are yours from the beginning" (Sir 36,14). From all eternity God has a plan of love and salvation for all his creatures, called to become his people. It is a plan that St Paul recognized as "revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit ... the eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3,5-11).

At the end of the commentary, the Holy Father greeted the pilgrims and visitors in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Slovak and Italian.

In Italian he gave a special prayerful greeting to the pilgrimage of deaf mutes coming from various regions of Italy who belong to the National Organization for Deaf Mutes. He greeted those participating in study days on the Encyclical Letter, Laborem Exercens, organized by the Rural Environmental Industrial Nutritional Federation. He asked the young, the sick and the newly-wed to intensify their prayer for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. He asked young people to be witnesses of unity among their peers, the sick to offer their sufferings for Christian unity and the newly-weds to be of one heart and one mind in their future families.

I warmly welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today, especially those from England, Denmark, Finland, Japan and the United States. I greet especially the Marist Brothers: may your time of renewal in Rome strengthen your commitment to teach the young the way of Christ. Upon all present I invoke the blessings of peace, and I ask you to be united spiritually with me and the representatives of the world religions as we go on pilgrimage to Assisi tomorrow in order to pray for peace in the world.

At the end of the audience, John Paul II appealed to the faithful to pray for the success of the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi. Here is a translation of his remarks.

As you know, *tomorrow I will travel to Assisi*, where, with the exponents of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities and with the Representatives of other religions, we will live a *day dedicated to prayer for world peace*. It will be a pilgrimage in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi, prophet and witness of peace.

I trust that this initiative, in addition to the spiritual effects that escape human calculations, may contribute to direct spirits and decisions toward *sincere and courageous resolutions for justice and pardon*. If this happens, we will have contributed to consolidating the bases of *an authentic and lasting peace*.

I invite the Catholic faithful *to join their prayer* with the prayer that we will make together as Christians in Assisi tomorrow, at the same time cultivating in their hearts sentiments of respect toward the followers of the other religions who have come together in the city of St Francis to pray for peace.

To everyone, individuals and communities, I express even now my heartfelt gratitude.