



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 30 January 2002

Psalm 18, God Creator creates brilliance of Sun

1. The sun, with its increasing brilliance in the heavens, the splendour of its light, the beneficial warmth of its rays, has captivated humanity from the outset. In many ways human beings have shown their gratitude for this source of life and well-being, with an enthusiasm that often reaches the peaks of true poetry. The wonderful psalm, 18[19], whose first part has just been proclaimed, is not only a prayerful hymn of extraordinary intensity; it is also a poetic song addressed to the sun and its radiance on the face of the earth. In this way the Psalmist joins the long series of bards of the ancient Near East, who exalted the day star that shines in the heavens, and which in their regions dominates with its burning heat. It reminds us of the famous hymn to Aton, composed by the Pharaoh Akhnaton in the 14th century BC and dedicated to the solar disc regarded as a deity.

But, for the man of the Bible, there is a radical difference in regard to these hymns to the sun: The sun is not a god but a creature at the service of the one God and Creator. It is enough to think of the words of Genesis: "God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years.... God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night.... And God saw that it it was good" (Gn 1, 14,16,18).

2. Before examining the verses of the Psalm chosen by the liturgy, let us take a look at it as a whole. Psalm 18[19] is like a diptych: in the first part (vv. 2-7) - that has today become our prayer - we find a hymn to the Creator, whose mysterious greatness is manifest in the sun and in the moon. In the second part of the Psalm (vv. 8-15), instead, we find a sapiential hymn to the *Torah*, the Law of God.

A common theme runs through both parts: God lights the world with the brilliance of the sun and illuminates humanity with the splendour of his word contained in biblical Revelation. It is almost like a double sun: the first is a cosmic epiphany of the Creator; the second is a free and historical manifestation of God our Saviour. It is not by chance that the *Torah*, the divine Word, is described with "solar" features: "The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes" (v. 9).

3. But let us now examine the first part of the *Psalms*. It begins with a wonderful personification of the heavens, that to the sacred author appear as eloquent witnesses to the creative work of God (vv. 2-5). Indeed, they "narrate", or "proclaim" the marvels of the divine work (cf. v. 2). Day and night are also portrayed as messengers that transmit the great news of creation. Their witness is a silent one, but makes itself forcefully felt, like a voice that resounds throughout the cosmos.

With the interior gaze of the soul, men and women can discover that the world is not dumb but speaks of the Creator when their interior spiritual vision, their religious intuition, is not taken up with superficiality. As the ancient sage says: "from the greatness and beauty of created things their original author is seen by analogy" (Wis 13,5). St Paul too, reminds the Romans that "ever since the creation of the world, his (God's) invisible perfections can be perceived with the intellect in the works that have been made by him" (Rom 1,20).

4. The hymn then yields place to the sun. The shining globe is depicted by the inspired poet as a warrior hero who emerges from the marital chamber where he spent the night, that is, he comes forth from the heart of darkness and begins his unwearying course through the heavens (vv. 6-7). The sun is compared to an athlete, who does not know rest or fatigue, while our entire planet is enveloped in its irresistible warmth.

So the sun is compared to a bridegroom, a hero, a champion, who, by divine command, must perform a daily task, a conquest and a race in the starry spaces. And here the Psalmist points to the sun, blazing in the open sky, while the whole earth is wrapped in its heat, the air is still, no point of the horizon can escape its light.

5. The solar imagery of the Psalm is taken up by the Christian liturgy of Easter to describe Christ's triumphant exodus from the dark tomb and his entry into the fullness of the new life of the Resurrection. At Matins for Holy Saturday, the Byzantine liturgy sings: "As the sun rises after the night in the dazzling brightness of renewed light, so you also, O Word, will shine with new brightness, when after death, you leave your nuptial bed". An Ode (the first) for Matins of Easter links the cosmic revelation with the Easter event of Christ: "Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult with them because the whole universe, visible and invisible, takes part in the feast: Christ, our everlasting joy, is risen". And another Ode (the third) adds: "Today the whole universe, heaven, earth, and abyss, is full of light and the entire creation sings the resurrection of Christ our strength and our joy". Finally, another (the fourth), concludes: "Christ our Passover is risen from the tomb like a sun of justice shining upon all of us with the splendour of his charity".

The Roman liturgy is not as explicit as the Eastern in comparing Christ to the sun. Yet it describes the cosmic repercussions of his Resurrection, when it begins the chant of Lauds on Easter morning with the famous hymn: "*Aurora lucis rutilat, caelum resultat laudibus, mundus exultans iubilat, gemens infernus ululat*" - "The dawn has spread her crimson rays, And heaven rings with shouts of praise; The glad earth shouts her triumph high, And groaning hell makes wild reply".

6. The Christian interpretation of the Psalm, however, does not invalidate its basic message, that is an invitation to discover the divine word present in creation. Of course, as stated in the second half of the Psalm, there is another and more exalted Word, more precious than light itself, that of biblical Revelation.

Anyway, for those who have attentive ears and open eyes, creation is like a first revelation that has its own eloquent language: it is almost another sacred book whose letters are represented by the multitude of created things present in the universe. St John Chrysostom says: "The silence of the heavens is a voice that resounds louder than a trumpet blast: this voice cries out to our eyes and not to our ears, the greatness of Him who made them" (*PG* 49, 105). And St Athanasius says: "The firmament with its magnificence, its beauty, its order, is an admirable preacher of its Maker, whose eloquence fills the universe" (*PG* 27, 124).

Today I offer a special word of greeting to the Vietnamese priests and religious from various countries participating in a spirituality programme, and to the priest graduates of Kenrick Seminary in Saint Louis celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary of ordination: may the light of the Risen Saviour continue to guide and strengthen you so that you may always bear effective witness to his mercy and love. Upon all the English-speaking visitors, especially those from Denmark, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.