



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 6 March 2002

The Holy Father prepared his 32nd catechesis on Psalm 64[65] for the General Audience but was unable to read it himself due to arthritic pain in his right knee. Priests in the language sections of the Secretariate of State read the catechesis, summaries and greetings in French, English, German, Spanish, Czech, Croatian. After the audience the Holy Father greeted the faithful from the window of his study and thanked them for their prayers for his speedy recovery.

Psalm 64[65] "To you all flesh shall come with its burden of sin"

1. Our journey through the *Psalms of the Liturgy of Lauds* leads us now to a hymn that captivates us with the fascinating spring scene of the last part (cf. Ps 64[65]10-14), a scene full of freshness, ablaze with colours and pervaded by joyful voices.

In fact Psalm 64[65] has a broader structure, the result of the interlacing of two different tones: first, the historical theme of the forgiveness of sins and God's closeness emerges (cf. vv. 2-5), then the cosmic subject of God's action in the confrontation of seas and mountains (cf. vv. 6-9a); lastly, the description of spring is developed (cf. vv. 9b-14): in the sun-baked, arid panorama of the Middle East, the rain that brings fruitfulness expresses the Lord's fidelity toward creation (cf. Ps 103[104],13-16). For the Bible, creation is the home of humanity and sin an attack on the order and perfection of the world. Thus conversion and forgiveness restore integrity and harmony to the cosmos.

2. In the first part of the Psalm we are inside the temple of Zion. Burdened by the moral miseries they have accumulated, the people flock there to pray for deliverance from evil (cf. Ps 64[65],2-4a). Once they have obtained absolution from their sins, the faithful feel welcomed by God, close

to him, ready to be led to his banquet, and to take part in the feast of divine intimacy (cf. vv. 4b-5).

The Lord who rises in the temple is then represented with a glorious, cosmic profile. Indeed, he is called "the hope of all the ends of the earth, and of the farthest seas ... who by [his] strength has established the mountains ... girded with might ... stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves and the tumult of the peoples, so that those who dwell at farthest bounds of the earth are afraid at [his] signs", from east to west (vv. 6-9).

3. At the heart of this celebration of God the Creator, we would like to highlight one event: The Lord is also able to dominate and silence the tumult of the ocean waters, which in the Bible are the symbol of chaos, opposed to the order of creation (cf. Jb 38,8-11). This is a way of exalting the divine victory, not only over nothingness, but also over evil: this is why the "tumult of the peoples" (cf. Ps 64[65],8), that is, the rebellion of the proud is also associated with the motif of the "roaring of the seas" and the "roaring of their waves".

St Augustine comments aptly: "The sea is the figure of this world, bitter with saltiness, troubled by storms, where men and women with their perverse and depraved appetites have become like fish devouring one another at will. Look at this tempestuous sea, the bitter sea with its cruel waves!... Let us not behave like this, brothers, for the Lord is *the hope of all the ends of the earth*" (*Esposizione sui Salmi [Exposition on the Psalms] II*, Rome 1990, p. 475).

The conclusion the Psalm suggests is an easy one: God, who imposes order on chaos and puts an end to the evil in the world and in history, can overcome and forgive the malice and sin that the praying person bears within and presents in the temple with the certainty of divine purification.

4. At this point, the other waters enter the scene: the waters of life and fruitfulness that in spring drench the earth and spiritually represent the new life of the faithful who have been pardoned. The last verses of the Psalm (cf. Ps 64[65],10-14), as has been said, are of great beauty and meaning.

God quenches the thirst of the earth parched by drought and by the winter ice, by showering it with rain. The Lord is like a farmer (cf. Jn 15,1) who with his labour makes the wheat grow and the grass spring up. He prepares the ground, he irrigates the furrows, he breaks up the clods, and waters every part of his field.

The Psalmist uses 10 verbs to describe the loving action of the Creator for the earth, transformed into a kind of living creature. Indeed, all its parts "shout and sing together for joy" (Ps 64[65],14).

The three verbs connected with the symbol of clothing are thought-provoking in this regard: "The hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain" (vv. 13-14). The image is one of a meadow specked with the white of the sheep; perhaps the hills are girded with vines, a sign of their product, wine, "to gladden the heart

of man" (Ps 103[104],15); the valleys put on the golden mantle of the harvests. Verse 12 also recalls the crowns, perhaps reminiscent of the garlands set upon the heads of the guests at festive banquets (cf. Is 28,1.5).

5. As though in a sort of procession all the creatures together turn to their Creator and Sovereign, dancing and singing, praising and praying. Once again nature becomes an eloquent sign of divine action; it is a page, open to all, ready to express the message the Creator has written on it, so that "from the greatness and beauty of created things their original author by analogy is perceived" (Wis 13,5; cf. Rom 1,20). In this lyric, theological contemplation and poetic abandon blend to become adoration and praise.

However, the most intense meeting which the Psalmist looks forward to throughout his song is that which unites creation and redemption. Just as in springtime the earth revives once again through the action of the Creator, so man rises from his sin through the action of the Redeemer. Creation and history thus are under the provident, saving gaze of the Lord, who calms the tumultuous and destructive waters and gives water that purifies, fertilizes, and quenches thirst. The Lord, in fact, "heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds", but also "covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the mountains" (Ps 146[147],3.8).

Thus the Psalm becomes a hymn to divine grace. Once again, St Augustine in commenting on our Psalm recalls this transcendent, unique gift: "The Lord God is telling you in your heart: I am your treasure. Do not go after what the world promises, but after what the Creator of the world promises! Pay attention to what God promises you, if you observe justice; and despise what man promises, to lure you away from righteousness. Do not go after what the world promises you! Rather, consider what the Creator of the world promises" (*l.c.*, p. 481).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors at the end of the commentary, the priest speaking in the name of the Holy Father said:

His Holiness extends a special greeting to the many groups of students present at today's audience, including the seminarians of the Blessed John the XXIII National Seminary in Massachusetts. He invites all of you to be open to the grace of Christ, especially as we prepare for Easter, so that you may be filled with true joy and peace. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, in particular those from Denmark and the United States, he invokes God's abundant blessings.

Following are the words John Paul II addressed, from the window of his study, to the faithful and pilgrims gathered in St Peter's Square.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Thank you for your visit and for your prayers for my speedy recovery. We meditated together on the Word of God taken from Psalm 64 [65]. It invites us not to go after what the world promises us, but, instead, to consider what the Creator of the world promises. With these sentiments, I exhort you always to trust in divine Providence, source of peace and serenity.

We continue on our Lenten journey, with our gaze directed toward Christ, whom we can find in the intimacy of prayer. I greet each one warmly, especially young people, the sick and newly-weds.

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