



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 10 April 2002

Psalm 79[80]

O Shepherd of Israel, come to our aid!

1. The Psalm we just heard is a song of lament, a plea from the entire people of Israel.

The first part makes use of a famous biblical symbol, the shepherd. The Lord is invoked as "the shepherd of Israel", who "leads Joseph like a flock" (Ps 79,2). From high above the Ark of the Covenant, enthroned among the cherubim, the Lord guides his flock, that is, his people, and protects them in danger.

He did this during the crossing of the desert. Now, however, he seems absent, as though asleep or indifferent. He feeds the flock he must lead and nourish (cf. Ps 22) only with the bread of tears (cf. Ps 79[80],6). Enemies scoff at this humiliated, despised people; yet God does not seem to be moved nor "to be stirred up" (v. 3), nor does he reveal his might, arrayed to defend the victims of violence and oppression. The repetition of the antiphonal invocation (cf. vv. 4.8), seeks virtually to rouse God from his detached attitude, so that he will return to be the shepherd and defender of his people.

2. In the second part of the prayer, full of tension and charged with trust, we find another symbol dear to the Bible: the vine. It is an image easy to understand because it belongs to the vision of the Promised Land and is a sign of fruitfulness and joy.

As the Prophet Isaiah teaches in one of his most exalted poetic passages (cf. Is 5,1-7), the vine is the incarnation of Israel. It illustrates two fundamental aspects: on the one hand, since it has been

planted by God (cf. Is 5,2; Ps 79[80],9-10), it represents the gift, grace and love of God; on the other, it demands the labour of the farmer that enables it to produce grapes that yield wine, and thus symbolize the human response: personal effort and the fruit of good deeds.

3. Through the imagery of the vine, the psalm recalls the major milestones of Hebrew history: their roots, the experience of the Exodus from Egypt, their entry into the promised land. The vine attained its full level of extension, extending over the whole of Palestine and beyond, during Solomon's reign. Indeed, it reached out from the northern mountains of Lebanon with their cedars as far as the Mediterranean Sea, almost to the great River Euphrates (cf. vv. 11-12).

But this splendid flourishing was shattered. The Psalm reminds us that a tempest struck God's vineyard: in other words, Israel suffered a harsh trial, a brutal invasion that devastated the Promised Land. As though he were an invader, God himself broke down the walls surrounding the vineyard, letting the plunderers break in who are represented by the wild boar, held by an ancient tradition to be a fierce and impure animal. Associated with the ferocity of the boar are all wild beasts, the symbol of an enemy horde that ravages everything (cf. vv. 13-14).

4. The Psalmist then directs a pressing appeal to God to come back and defend the victims, to break his silence: "Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine" (v. 15). God will again be the defender of the vital stump of this vine, subjected to such a violent storm, and will scatter all those who have tried to tear it up or set fire to it (cf. vv. 16-17).

At this point, the Psalm opens to messianic hope. Indeed, in verse 18 the Psalmist prays: "Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!". Perhaps his first thought is of the Davidic king who, with the Lord's help, will lead the uprising for freedom. But confidence in the future Messiah is implicit, that "Son of Man" who would be sung by the Prophet Daniel (cf. 7,13-14), a title Jesus would choose as his favorite to define his work and messianic being. Indeed, the Fathers of the Church were unanimous in pointing out that the vine that the psalm describes is a prophetic prefiguration of Christ "the true vine" (Jn 15,1), and of his Church.

5. Of course, if the face of the Lord is to shine once again, Israel must be converted through fidelity and prayer to God Our Saviour. This is what the Psalmist says, when he declares: "Then we will never withdraw from you" (Ps 79[80],19).

So Psalm 79[80] is a song that is strongly marked by suffering but also by indestructible trust. God is always ready to "return" to his people, but his people must also "return" to him in fidelity. If we turn away from sin, the Lord will be "converted" from his intention to punish: this is the Psalmist's conviction that finds an echo in our hearts and opens them to hope.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I am pleased to extend a special welcome to the officials from the NATO Defense College, as well as to the seminarians from Saint Cuthbert's College in England. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present, particularly those from England, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Canada and the United States of America, I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Saviour.

The Holy Father ended the General Audience by a strong appeal to the faithful to pray constantly for peace in the Holy Land:

I now invite everyone to join me in prayer to implore from the Lord peace in the Holy Land. Let us ask the Blessed Virgin Mary to intercede, so that the efforts being made by a number of parties to overcome the tragic situation in which those sorely tried peoples are living may enjoy great success.
