



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 20 November 2002

Canticle from the Book of Isaiah (Is 40,10-17)

Almighty God, Omniscient Lord, Loving Shepherd

1. The book of the great prophet Isaiah, who lived in the eighth century B.C., also contains the voices of other prophets who were his disciples and successors. This is the case of the one whom Biblical scholars have called "Deutero-Isaiah", the prophet of Israel's return from the Babylonian exile which took place in the sixth century B.C. His work forms the chapters 40-55 of the Book of Isaiah and it is from one of these chapters that the Church has taken the Canticle just proclaimed that has become part of the Liturgy of Lauds.

This Canticle consists of two parts: the first two verses come from the end of a magnificent oracle of consolation that proclaims the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, under the leadership of God himself (cf. Is 40,1-11). The subsequent verses form the beginning of an apologetic discourse that exalts God's omniscience and omnipotence and also subjects to harsh criticism the makers of idols.

2. Thus at the beginning of the liturgical text, the powerful figure of God appears, who returns to Jerusalem preceded by his trophies, just as Jacob had returned to the Holy Land preceded by his flocks (cf. Gn 31,17; 32,17). God's trophies are the exiled Hebrews whom he snatched out of the hands of their conquerors. God is then depicted "like a shepherd" (Is 40,11). Frequently in the Bible and in other ancient traditions, this image evokes the idea of leadership and kingship, but here his traits are above all gentle and cherishing, for the shepherd is also the travelling companion of his sheep (cf. Ps 22[23]). He cares for his flock, not only by feeding it and caring that it does not go stray, but also tenderly bending over his lambs and his ewes with their young (cf. Is 40,11).

3. When the description of the entry of the Lord, King and Shepherd onto the scene is over, there is a reflection on his way of acting as Creator of the universe. No one can match him in this grandiose, colossal work: certainly no man and even less so the idols, dead and impotent beings. The prophet then makes use of a series of rhetorical questions which already contain their answers.

They are uttered in a kind of public trial: no one can compete with God nor claim for himself his immense power, his unlimited wisdom.

No one can measure the vast universe created by God. The prophet makes us understand how human instruments are ridiculously inadequate for the task. Furthermore, God was a solitary architect; no one was able to help or advise him in so immense a project as the creation of the cosmos (cf. vv. 13-14).

In his 18th *Baptismal Catechesis*, on the basis of our canticle, St Cyril of Jerusalem suggests that we not measure God with the measure of our human limitations: "To you, poor weak man that you are, India is far from the land of the Goths, Spain from Persia. But to God, who holds the whole earth in the hollow of His hand, all things are near". (*Le catechesi*, Rome 1993, p. 408; *Catechesis* 18, *The Works of St Cyril of Jerusalem*, vol. 2, p. 121, CUA Press, 1970).

4. After celebrating God's omnipotence in creation, the prophet describes his lordship over history, namely, over the nations, over humanity who populates the earth. The inhabitants of the known territories, but also those of the remote regions that the Bible calls the distant "isles", are a microscopic reality in relation to the Lord's infinite greatness. The images are brilliant and intense: the nations are compared to "a drop in the bucket", the "rust on the scales", "powder" (in Italian, a grain of dust) (Is 40,15).

No one would be able to offer a sacrifice worthy of this grandiose Lord and King: all the sacrificial victims of the earth would not suffice, nor all the forests of the cedars of Lebanon to fuel the fire of this holocaust (cf. v. 16). The prophet brings the human being to the consciousness of his limitations before the infinite grandeur and sovereign omnipotence of God. The conclusion is lapidary: "All the nations are a nothing before him, as nothing and emptiness are they accounted by him" (v. 17).

5. The faithful person is therefore invited from the beginning of the day to adore the Almighty Lord. St Gregory of Nyssa, a Father of the Church of Cappadocia (fourth century) meditated on the Canticle of Isaiah this way: "When we hear the word 'almighty', our conception is this, that God sustains in being all intelligible things as well as all things of a material nature. For this reason he sits upon the circle of the earth, for this reason, he holds the ends of the earth in his hands, for this reason he measures out heaven with the span and measures the waters in the hollow of his hand.

For this reason he comprehends in himself all the intelligible creation, that all things may remain in existence controlled by His encompassing power" (*Teologia trinitaria*, Milan 1994; *Against Eunomius*, p. 120, col. 1, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Wm. B Eerdmans, reprinted 1979).

For his part, St Jerome halts with wonder before another amazing truth: that of Christ who, "though he was in the form of God ... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man" (Phil 2,6-7). The infinite, all-powerful God, he remarks, made himself small and finite. St Jerome contemplates him in the stable of Bethlehem and exclaims: "He within whose closed fist the whole world is held, is contained by the narrow confines of a manger" (Lettera 22,39 in: *Opera scelte*, I, Turin 1971, p. 379; *The Letters of St Jerome*, vol. 1, Letters 1-22, p. 176, Newman Press Paulist Press, Ramsey NJ, 1963).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I extend a special welcome to the pilgrims from Sioux City in the United States accompanied by their Bishop and former Bishop, and to the choir and parishioners of Saint Francis Borgia Parish in the Archdiocese of St Louis. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's audience, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

World Day for Cloistered Nuns

Tomorrow, the Memorial of the Presentation in the Temple of the Blessed Virgin Mary [21 November], the Church remembers with special affection *cloistered nuns*. Their prayerful presence in so many parts of the world is a strong reminder for all Christians not to forget the primacy of God in life.

These sisters have chosen to dedicate themselves totally to prayer and to live on whatever Providence provides for them through the generosity of the faithful. As I express my deep appreciation to them for their indispensable contribution to evangelization, I invite everyone to support them by giving them spiritual and material assistance.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly weds*.

Next Sunday, the last in Ordinary Time, we will celebrate the Solemnity of Christ the King. Dear *young people*, put Jesus at the centre of your life, and you will receive light from him in all your decisions. May Christ, who made the Cross a royal throne, help you, dear *sick people*, to accept the redemptive value of suffering lived in union with him. To you, dear *newly-weds*, I express the

wish that you will recognize the Lord's presence in your family, so as to take part in building his Kingdom of love and peace.

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