



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 8 January 2003

Psalm 99

In prayer we abandon ourselves to God's embrace

1. In the spirit of joy and celebration that continues in this last week of the Christmas season, we want to resume our meditation on the *Liturgy of Lauds*. Today we reflect on Psalm 99[100], just proclaimed, which is a joyful invitation to praise the Lord, the shepherd of his people.

Seven imperatives are scattered throughout the psalm and call the faithful community to celebrate and worship the God of love and of the covenant: *extol, serve, come before, acknowledge, enter his gates, praise him, bless him*. One thinks of a liturgical procession that is about to enter the Temple of Zion to perform a rite in honour of the Lord (cf. Ps 14; 23; 94).

In the Psalm certain characteristic terms are repeated for exalting the bond of the covenant that exists between God and Israel. Above all, there emerges the assertion of a complete belonging to God: "we belong to him, we are his people" (Ps 99[100],3), an affirmation full of both pride and humility, since Israel is presented as "the sheep of his pasture" (*ibid.*). We later find an expression of relationship: "For he [the Lord] is our God" (Ps 94[95],7). Then we discover the richness of the relationship of love, his "mercy" and "fidelity", joined with his "goodness" (cf. Ps 99[100],5), which, in the original Hebrew are formulated with the typical terms of the covenant that binds Israel to her God.

2. The coordinates of space and time are also reviewed. In fact, on the one hand, the entire earth is presented to us as joined in the praise of God (cf. v. 2); then the horizon shifts to the sacred area of the Temple of Jerusalem with its courts and gates (cf. v. 4), where the community is gathered in prayer. On the other hand, reference is made to time in its three basic dimensions: the past of creation ("the Lord our God, he made us", v. 3), the present of the covenant and

worship ("we belong to him, we are his people, the sheep of his pasture", *ibid.*) and finally, the future, in which the Lord's merciful fidelity extends "from age to age" revealing itself to be "eternal" (v. 5).

3. We will now reflect briefly on the seven imperatives that make up the long invitation to praise God and take up the whole Psalm (vv. 2-4) before we discover, in the last verse, their motivation in the exaltation of God, contemplated in his intimate and profound identity.

The first appeal consists in the festive acclamation that involves the whole earth in the song of praise to the Creator. When we pray, we should feel in tune with all those who pray exalting the one Lord in different languages and ways. As the Prophet Malachi says, "For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and everywhere they bring sacrifice to my name and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts" (1,11).

4. Then come several calls using liturgical and ritual terms "serve", "come before" and "go within the gates" of the temple. These are verbs which in alluding to royal audiences, describe the various gestures the faithful perform when they enter the sanctuary of Zion to take part in the community's prayer. After the cosmic hymn, the liturgy is celebrated by the people of God "the sheep of his pasture", his "possession among all peoples" (Ex 19,5).

The invitation to "go within his gates, giving thanks" and to "enter his courts with songs of praise" reminds us of a passage from *The Mysteries* of St Ambrose, in which he describes the baptized as they approach the altar: "The cleansed people, [rich in these insignia], hasten to the altar of Christ, saying: 'I will go to the altar of God, the God who gives joy to my youth' (Ps 42[43],4). For the people, having put aside the defilements of ancient error, renewed in their youth as an eagle, hasten to approach the heavenly banquet. So they come, and, when they see the sacred altar properly prepared, they exclaim: ['You have prepared a table in my sight'. David introduces these people as speaking when he says], 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul' (Ps 22[23],1-2)" (St Ambrose, *Theological and Dogmatic Works*, pp. 20-21, CUA Press, 1963).

5. The other imperatives that enrich the Psalm repeat the fundamental religious attitudes of the person at prayer: *acknowledge, praise, bless*. The verb *to acknowledge* expresses the content of the profession of faith in the one God. In fact, we must proclaim that only "the Lord is God" (Ps 99[100],3), combatting all idolatry, pride and human power opposed to him.

The object of the other verbs *praise and bless*, is also "the name" of the Lord (cf. v. 4), or his person, his effective and saving presence.

In this light the Psalm leads in the end to a solemn exaltation of God, that is a kind of profession of

faith: the Lord is good and his fidelity never abandons us because He is always ready to sustain us with his merciful love. With this confidence the person praying abandons himself to the embrace of his God: "Taste and see that the Lord is good!" and the Psalmist also says, "happy are those who take refuge in him" (Ps 33[34],9; cf. I Pt 2,3).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present today, including the groups from Denmark, New Zealand and the United States of America. Upon all of you and your families, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Happy New Year!

To the Italian-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I address a cordial thought to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular, I greet the new priests of the Institute of the Legionaries of Christ, present with their entire Roman community. Dear friends, I urge you to draw from daily prayer a renewed spiritual vigour, in order to proclaim and witness untiringly to the Gospel at the service of the People of God.

I greet the faithful of the Parish of Our Lady of the Assumption in Balze di Verghereto, which, this year too has provided the moss for the crib in St Peter's Square and for the other cribs displayed in the Vatican. I then address a special thought to the Medrano Circus artists, and encourage them always to live joyfully their faith in Christ.

To young people, the sick and the newly-weds

Finally, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear friends, in these days that mark the feast of the Epiphany let us continue to meditate on the manifestation of Christ to all peoples. The Church invites you, dear *young people*, to be enthusiastic apostles of Christ among your peers; he urges you, dear *sick people*, to spread his light every day with serene patience; and he encourages you, dear *newly-weds*, to be a sign, with your faithful love, of his renewing presence.