



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 12 February 2003

Psalm 117[118]

In all our trials, God has the last word

1. The sequence of Psalms from 112[111] to 117[118] was sung during the most important and joyful feasts of ancient Judaism, especially during the celebration of the Passover. This series of hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God were called the "Egyptian *Hallel*" because, in one of them, Psalm 114 A [113], the exodus of Israel from the land of oppression, Pharaonic Egypt, and the marvelous gift of the divine covenant are recalled in a visual poetic way. The last Psalm that seals this "Egyptian *Hallel*" is the Psalm 117[118], just proclaimed, which we have already meditated on in an earlier commentary (cf. [*General Audience*](#), 5 December 2001; *ORE*, 12 December 2001, p. 11).

2. This hymn clearly reveals its liturgical use in the Temple of Jerusalem. In fact, as it unfolds, we see a procession going forward, from among "the tents of the just" (v. 15), that is, the homes of the faithful. They exalt the protection of the divine hand, that can protect the just and believing, even when invaded by cruel adversaries. The Psalmist uses expressive imagery: "They compassed me about like bees; they blazed like a fire among the thorns. In the Lord's name I crushed them" (v. 12).

After escaping from this danger, the people of God break into "shouts of joy and victory" (v. 15) in honour of the Lord's right hand [which] was raised and has done wonders (cf. v. 16). Thus there is a consciousness that we are never alone, left to the mercy of the storm unleashed by the wicked. In truth, the last word is always God's, who, even if he permits the trial of his faithful, never hands him over to death (cf. v. 18).

3. At this point it seems that the procession reaches the end the Psalmist suggests with the image

of "the gates of holiness" (v. 19), that is the Holy Door of the Temple of Zion. The procession accompanies the hero to whom God has granted victory. He asks that the gates be opened to him, so that he may "give thanks to the Lord" (v. 19). With him "the just enter" (v. 20). To express the harsh trial that he has overcome and his consequent glorification, he compares himself to a "stone which the builders rejected" that then "has become the cornerstone" (v. 22).

Christ will use this image and verse, at the end of the parable of the murderous vinedressers, to announce his passion and glorification (cf. Mt 21,42).

4. By applying the Psalm to himself, Christ opens the way for the Christian interpretation of this hymn of confidence and gratitude to the Lord for his *hesed*, his loving fidelity, that echoes throughout the Psalm (cf. Ps 117[118], 1.2.3.4.29).

The Fathers of the Church made use of two symbols. First of all, that of the "gate of justice" on which St Clement of Rome commented in his *Letter to the Corinthians*: "For many gates stand open: the gate of justice is the gate of Christ, and all are blessed who enter by it and direct their way 'in holiness and justice', accomplishing all things without disorder" (48,4: *I Padri Apostolici*, Rome 1976, p. 81; *The Apostolic Fathers, Letter of Clement of Rome to Corinth*, Thomas Nelson and Co. 1978, p. 44).

5. The other symbol, linked to the previous one, is the "rock". We will therefore let St Ambrose guide our meditation with his *Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke*. Commenting on Peter's profession of faith at Cesarea Philippi, he recalls that "Christ is the Rock" and that "Christ did not refuse to give this beautiful name to his disciple so that he too might be Peter, and find in the rock the firmness of perseverance, the steadfast solidity of the faith".

Ambrose then introduces the exhortation: "Try hard also to be a rock. However, to do this, do not seek the rock outside yourself but within yourself. Your rock is your actions, your rock is your thoughts. On this rock your house is built, so that it may never be battered by any storm of the evil spirits. If you are a rock, you will be inside the Church because the Church is on the rock. If you are inside the Church, the gates of hell will not prevail against you" (VI, 97-99: "*Opere Esegetiche*" IX/II [*Exegetical Works*], Milan/Rome, 1978: *Saemo* 12, p. 85).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present today, especially the groups from Thailand, the United States of America and the students from the University of Dallas. Upon all of you and your families, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To Italian-speaking pilgrims and groups of religious

I now address an affectionate greeting to the Italian-speaking pilgrims, and, especially, to the group of the religious of the Hospitaller Order of St John of God-Fatebenefratelli; to the SVD Missionaries and to the Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit; to the Sisters of Mary Reparatrix from Madagascar, Uganda, Colombia and Mexico; to the members of the "Associazioni Missionari senza frontiere" (Associations of Missionaries without frontiers) from Naples, and the "Battenti di San Rocco" (Builders of St Rocco) from Paduli, with Archbishop Serafino Sprovieri of Benevento; to the Cultural Group "Donne Bresciane" (Women of Brescia) and to the military personnel of the Italian Air Force School in Caserta.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

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

May Our Lady of Lourdes, whose liturgical memorial we celebrated yesterday, help you, dear young people, to understand better the value of sacrifice in your human and Christian formation; may she support you, dear sick people, so that you may face suffering and illness with serenity and fortitude; may she guide you, dear newly-weds, to build your family on the solid foundations of prayer and docile fidelity to God's will.