



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 19 February 2003

Third chapter of the Book of Daniel (vv. 52-57)

Bless the Lord all you works of the Lord

1. *"These three [young men] in the furnace with one voice sang, glorifying and blessing God..."* (Dn 3,51). This sentence introduces the famous Canticle that we just heard in a fundamental passage. It is found in the *Book of Daniel*, in the section that has come down to us only in Greek, and is intoned by courageous witnesses of the faith, who did not wish to bow down in adoration to a statue of the king and preferred to face a tragic death: martyrdom in the fiery furnace.

They are three young Jewish men, whom the sacred author places in the historical context of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the terrible Babylonian sovereign who destroyed the holy city of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and deported the Israelites to "the streams of Babylon" (cf. Ps 136 [137]). Even in extreme danger, when the flames are already licking their bodies, they find the strength to "praise, glorify and bless God", certain that the Lord of the cosmos and history will not abandon them to death and nothingness.

2. The biblical author, who wrote several centuries later, portrays this heroic event to encourage his contemporaries to hold high the banner of the faith during the persecutions of the Syrian-Hellenistic kings of the second century B.C. Precisely then the courageous reaction of the Maccabees took place, combatants for the freedom of the faith and of the Hebrew tradition.

The Canticle, traditionally known as "of the three young men", is similar to a flame that lights up the darkness of the time of oppression and persecution, a time that has often been repeated in the history of Israel and of Christianity itself. We know that the persecutor does not always assume the

violent and grim face of an oppressor, but often delights in isolating the just person with mocking and irony, asking him sarcastically: "Where is your God?" (Ps 41[42],4.11).

3. All creatures are involved in the blessing that the three young men raise to the Almighty Lord from the crucible of their trial. They weave a sort of multicoloured tapestry where the stars shine, the seasons flow, the animals move, the angels appear, and, above all, "servants of the Lord" sing, the "holy" and "the humble of heart" (cf. Dan 3,85.87).

The passage that was just proclaimed precedes this magnificent evocation of all creation. It constitutes the first part of the Canticle, that evokes the glorious presence of the Lord, transcendent yet close. Yes, because God is in heaven, where "he looks into the depths" (cf. 3,55), and he is also "in the temple of holy glory" of Zion (cf. 3,53). He is seated on the "throne" of his eternal and infinite "kingdom" (cf. 3,54) but is also "throned upon the cherubim" (cf. 3,55) in the ark of the covenant placed in the Holy of Holies in the temple of Jerusalem.

4. He is a God who is above us, capable of saving us with his power; but also a God close to his People, in whose midst he willed to dwell in his "glorious holy temple", thus manifesting his love. A love that he will reveal fully in making his Son "full of grace and truth", "dwell among us" (cf. Jn 1,14). He will reveal the fullness of his love by sending his Son among us to share, in all things except sin, our condition marked by trials, oppression, loneliness and death.

The praise of the three young men to God our Saviour continues in various ways in the Church. For example, at the end of his *Letter to the Corinthians*, St Clement of Rome includes a long prayer of praise and confidence. It is woven throughout with biblical references and, perhaps echoes the early Roman liturgy. It is a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord who, despite the apparent triumph of evil, guides history to a happy end.

Prayer of Thanksgiving of St Clement of Rome

5. Here is a passage:

"You have opened the eyes of our hearts (Eph 1,18) to recognize that / you alone (Jn 17,3) are highest in the highest heavens, / ever remaining holy among the holy. / You humble the violence of the arrogant (cf. Is 13,11), / overthrow the calculations of the nations (cf. Ps 32[33],10), / raise up the humble and humble the proud (cf. Jb 5,11); / you make rich and make poor, / kill and make alive (cf. Dt 32,39); / you alone are the benefactor of spirits and / the God of all flesh / You fathom the depths (cf. Dn 3,55) and observe men's deeds; / you are the aid of those in peril, Saviour of those in despair (cf. Jdt 9,11), / the Creator of every spirit and its Custodian. / You multiply the nations upon the earth and / from them all you have chosen those who love you / through Jesus Christ your beloved Servant, / through whom you have educated, sanctified, and honoured us" (Clement of Rome, *Letter to the Corinthians*, 59,3, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1978, Thomas Nelson

Inc., Nashville, Tennessee, USA, p. 50).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's audience, especially those from England, Japan and the United States. Upon you and your families, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

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

Thinking of the Feast of the Chair of St Peter, which we will celebrate next Saturday, I invite you, dear *young people*, to be everywhere apostles of fidelity to the Church; I urge you, dear *sick people*, to offer the Lord your sufferings for the unity of all who believe in Christ; and I encourage you, dear *newly-weds*, to nourish your family on that faith that is founded on the witness of Peter and the other Apostles.