



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Castelgandolfo

Wednesday, 16 July 2003

"Rejoice with Jerusalem!"

Canticle of the Book of Isaiah (66: 10-14a)

1. The canticle we have just heard is taken from the last page of the *Book of Isaiah*. It is a song of joy dominated by the maternal figure of Jerusalem (cf. 66: 11), and then by God's own loving solicitude (cf. v. 13). Biblical scholars claim that this final section that opens onto a splendid and festive future is the testimony of a later voice, the voice of a prophet who is celebrating the rebirth of Israel after the dark period of the Babylonian Exile. We are thus in the sixth century B.C., two centuries after the mission of Isaiah, the great prophet under whose name the whole of this inspired work is placed.

We will now follow the joyful flow of this short canticle, which begins with three imperatives which are indeed an invitation to happiness: "rejoice", "be glad" and "rejoice... in joy" (cf. v. 10). This is a shining thread that often runs through the last pages of the *Book of Isaiah*: the afflicted of Zion are comforted, crowned, covered with the "oil of gladness" (Is 61: 3); the prophet himself says: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God" (*ibid.*, v. 10); "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice" over his people (Is 62: 5). On the page before the canticle which is the object of our song and of our prayer now, it is the Lord himself who shares in the happiness of Israel, about to be reborn as a nation: "Be glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people" (Is 65: 18-19).

2. The source of and reason for this inner exultation lie in the rediscovered vitality of Jerusalem, risen from the ashes of the ruins to which she had been reduced by the Babylonian armies. Indeed, mention is made of her "mourning" (66: 10), now something in the past.

As is often the case in various cultures, cities are represented with feminine, indeed, maternal images. When a city is at peace it is like a protective and safe womb; indeed, it is like a mother who breastfeeds her children with tenderness and abundance (v. 11). In this light the entity which the Bible calls, using a female term, "the daughter of Zion", that is, Jerusalem, resumes her role as a city-mother who comforts, nourishes and delights her children, that is, her inhabitants. Onto this lively, tender scene descends the Lord's word that has the tone of a blessing (cf. vv. 12-14).

3. God makes use of other images linked to fertility: indeed, he speaks of rivers and streams, that is, water which symbolizes life, the flourishing of vegetation, the prosperity of the earth and its inhabitants (cf. v. 12). Jerusalem's prosperity, her "peace" (*shalom*), a generous gift of God, will assure her offspring a life surrounded by motherly tenderness: "they will be carried upon her hip, and dandled upon her knees" (*ibid.*), and this motherly tenderness will be the tenderness of God himself: "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you" (v. 13). Thus, the Lord uses a maternal metaphor to describe his love for his creatures.

We can also read an earlier passage in the Book of Isaiah which gives God a maternal profile: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even though these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Is 49: 15). In our Canticle the Lord's words to Jerusalem end by taking up the theme of inner vitality, expressed with another image of fertility and energy: that of new grass, an image applied to bones to portray the vigour of the body and of life (cf. Is 66: 14).

4. At this point, as we contemplate the city-mother, it is easy to broaden our gaze to take in the silhouette of the Church, virgin and fertile mother. Let us conclude our meditation on the reborn Jerusalem with a reflection by St Ambrose, inferred in his work *Le Vergini*: "Holy Church is immaculate in her spousal union: fruitful in giving birth, she is a virgin through her chastity, yet she is mother of the children she conceives. Thus, we are born from a virgin who has conceived, not by a human act but through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are therefore born of a virgin, not in physical travail but amid the rejoicing of angels. A virgin nourishes us, not with the milk of her body, but with what the Apostle talks about when he speaks of having breastfed the weak state of the adolescent people of God.

"What married woman has more children than holy Church? She is virgin through the holiness she receives in the sacraments and she is mother of peoples. Her fertility is also attested by Scripture which says: 'For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of she who is married' (Is 54: 1; cf. Gal 4: 27); our mother has no husband but she has a bridegroom, for both the Church in the peoples and the soul in individuals - immune from any kind of infidelity, fruitful in the life of the spirit - not without modesty, espouse the Word of God as their eternal bridegroom" (I, 31: *SAEMO* 14/1, pp. 132-133).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I extend a special welcome to the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims here today, including the groups from Scotland, Ireland, Saudi Arabia and the United States. May your visit to Castel Gandolfo and Rome deepen your love of the Church. Upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Happy holidays!

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

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

Today's liturgical memorial of Our Lady of Mount Carmel gives me the opportunity to point out to you as a model for your constant reference Mary Most Holy, so that you may find in her example inspiration and reliable guidance. I urge you to call on her always: she will be a cause of comfort and hope for you.