



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Castel Gandolfo

Wednesday, 23 July 2003

Psalm 147[146]

"Praise the Lord!"

1. The Psalm just sung is the first part of a composition that also includes the next Psalm, n. 147[146], that the original Hebrew had kept as one. It was the ancient Greek and Latin versions which divided the song into two different Psalms.

The Psalm begins with an invitation to praise God and then lists a long series of reasons to praise him, all expressed in the present tense. These are activities of God considered as characteristic and ever timely, but they could not be more different: some concern God's interventions in human life (cf. Ps 147[146]: 3, 6, 11) and in particular for Jerusalem and Israel (cf. v. 2); others concern the created cosmos (cf. v. 4) and more specifically, the earth with its flora and fauna (cf. vv. 8-10).

Finally, in telling us what pleases the Lord, the Psalm invites us to have a two-dimensional outlook: of religious reverence and of confidence (cf. v. 11). We are not left to ourselves nor to the mercy of cosmic energies, but are always in the hands of the Lord, for his plan of salvation.

2. After the festive invitation to praise the Lord (cf. v. 1), the Psalm unfolds in two poetic and spiritual movements. In the first (vv. 2-6), God's action in history is introduced with the image of a builder who is rebuilding Jerusalem, restored to life after the Babylonian Exile (cf. v. 2). However, this great mason who is the Lord also shows himself to be a father, leaning down to tend his people's inner and physical wounds humiliated and oppressed (cf. v. 3).

Let us make room for St Augustine who, in the *Enarrationes in Psalmos 146* which he gave at Carthage in the year 412, commented on the sentence "the Lord heals the brokenhearted" as

follows: "Those whose hearts are not broken cannot be healed.... Who are the brokenhearted? The humble. And those who are not brokenhearted? The proud. However, the broken heart is healed, and the heart swollen with pride is cast to the ground. Indeed, it is probable that once broken it can be set aright, it can be healed. "He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds...". In other words, he heals the humble of heart, those who confess, who are punished, who are judged with severity so that they may experience his mercy. This is what heals. Perfect health, however, will be achieved at the end of our present mortal state when our corruptible being is reinvested with incorruptibility, and our mortal being with immortality" (cf. 5-8: *Esposizioni sui Salmi*, IV, Rome 1977, pp. 772-779).

3. God's action, however, does not only concern uplifting his people from suffering. He who surrounds the poor with tenderness and care towers like a severe judge over the wicked (cf. v. 6). The Lord of history is not impassive before the domineering who think they are the only arbiters in human affairs: God casts the haughty to the dusty ground, those who arrogantly challenge heaven (cf. I Sam 2: 7-8; Lk 1: 51-53).

God's action, however, is not exhausted in his lordship over history; he is also the King of creation: the whole universe responds to his call as Creator. Not only does he determine the boundless constellations of stars, but he names each one and hence defines its nature and characteristics (cf. Ps 147[146]: 4).

The Prophet Isaiah sang: "Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these [the stars]? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name" (Is 40: 26). The "hosts" of the Lord are therefore the stars. The Prophet Baruch continued: "The stars shone in their watches and were glad; he called them, and they said, "Here we are!". They shone with gladness for him who made them" (Bar 3: 34-35).

4. Another joyful invitation to sing praises (cf. Ps 147[146]: 7) precludes the second phase of Psalm 147[146] (cf. vv. 7-11). Once again God's creative action in the cosmos comes to the fore. In a territory where drought is common, as it is in the East, the first sign of divine love is the rain that makes the earth fertile (cf. v. 8). In this way the Creator prepares food for the animals. Indeed, he even troubles to feed the tiniest of living creatures, like the young ravens that cry with hunger (cf. v. 9). Jesus was to ask us to look at the birds of the air; "they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them" (Mt 6: 26; cf. also Lk 12: 24, with an explicit reference to "ravens").

Yet once again our attention shifts from creation to human life. Thus, the Psalm ends by showing the Lord stooping down to the just and humble (cf. Ps 147[146]: 10-11), as was declared in the first part of our hymn (cf. v. 6). Two symbols of power are used, the horse and the legs of a man running, to intimate that divine conduct does not give in to or let power intimidate it. Once again, the Lord's logic is above pride and the arrogance of power, and takes the side of those who are

faithful, who "hope in his steadfast love" (v. 11), that is, who abandon themselves to God's guidance in their acts and thoughts, in their planning and in their daily life.

It is also among them that the person praying must take his place, putting his hope in the Lord's grace, certain that he will be enfolded in the mantle of divine love: "The eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death, and keep them alive in famine.... Yea, our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name" (Ps 33[32]: 18-19, 21).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I offer special greetings to the English-speaking visitors present today, especially those from Ireland, Malta, Nigeria, Japan and the United States of America. May the God of peace fill you always with his gifts of joy and strength!

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear friends, make the most of the summertime to deepen your personal relationship with Christ. May he be a guide for you, *young people*, a comfort for you, *sick people*, and for you, *newly-weds*, a bond of love.