



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Castelgandolfo

Wednesday, 13 August 2003

Canticle of Tobit

"Give thanks worthily to the Lord"

1. *The Liturgy of Lauds* has gathered among its Canticles a fragment of a hymn, that is placed as a seal on the history narrated in the biblical Book of *Tobit*: to which we listened a few moments ago. The rather long and solemn hymn is an expression typical of Judaic prayer and spirituality, which draws on other texts in the Bible.

The Canticle develops by means of a double invocation. Above all, what emerges is a repeated invitation to praise God (cf. vv. 3, 4, 7) for the purification he carries out is by means of exile. The "sons of Israel" are exhorted to welcome this purification with a sincere conversion (cf. vv. 6, 8). If conversion will flower in the heart, the Lord will make the dawn of liberation rise on the horizon. It is precisely in this spiritual atmosphere that the Liturgy has chosen to set the Canticle it has taken from the broader context of *Tobit's* hymn in chapter 13.

2. The second part of the text intoned by the elderly Tobit, who throughout the Book is the protagonist with his son, Tobias, is an authentic and characteristic celebration of Zion. It reflects the impassioned nostalgia and the ardent love that is experienced by the Hebrew in the diaspora regarding the Holy City (cf. vv. 9-18) and this aspect also shines out from the passage that has been chosen as the morning prayer in the *Liturgy of Lauds*. Let us dwell on these two themes: the purification of sin through trial and the expectation of the encounter with the Lord in the light of Zion and of his holy temple.

3. Tobit presses sinners to convert and act with justice: this is the path to take to rediscover that divine love which gives serenity and hope (cf. v. 8).

Jerusalem's very history is a parable which teaches everyone what choice to make. God punished the city because he could not remain indifferent before the evil committed by his children. Now, however, seeing that many have converted and become faithful and righteous children, he will once again show his merciful love (cf. v. 10).

Throughout the Cantic of chapter 13 of *Tobit* this firm conviction is repeated often: the Lord "afflicts, and he shows mercy;... will afflict us for our iniquities; and again he will show mercy.... He will afflict you for the deeds of your sons, but again he will show mercy to the sons of the righteous" (vv. 2, 5, 9). God's punishment is a way to make sinners who are deaf to other appeals turn back to the right path. However, the last word of the righteous God remains a message of love and of forgiveness; he profoundly desires to embrace anew the wayward children who return to him with a contrite heart.

4. With regard to the elect people, divine mercy manifests itself with the reconstruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, carried out by God himself "so that his tent may be rebuilt in you with joy" (v. 10). Thus, Zion, the second theme, appears as a holy place on which not only the returning Hebrews converge, but also those on pilgrimage seeking God. And so, a universal perspective opens: the rebuilt temple of Jerusalem, sign of the divine word and presence, will shine with a planetary light dispelling the darkness so that "many nations, the inhabitants of all the limits of the earth" (cf. v. 11), may begin marching, bearing their gifts and singing their joy at participating in the salvation that the Lord bestows in Israel.

Therefore the Israelites are marching with all peoples toward a single finality of faith and of truth. On them, the hymnist calls down a repeated blessing, saying to Jerusalem: "How blessed are those who love you! They will rejoice in your peace" (v. 14). Happiness is authentic when it is rediscovered in the light that shines from heaven on all who seek the Lord with a purified heart and a deep yearning for truth.

5. It is toward this Jerusalem, free and glorious, sign of the Church in the last stage of her hope, a prefiguration of Christ's Paschal sacrifice, that St Augustine turns with fervour in his book of *Confessions*.

Making reference to the prayer which he intends to raise in his "[inner] chamber", he describes for us "songs of love... between groaning with groanings unutterable, which in my wayfaring, made me remember Jerusalem, with heart lifted up towards it, Jerusalem my country, Jerusalem my mother, and You that rule over it, the Enlightener, Father, Guardian, Husband, the pure and strong delight, and solid joy, and all good things unspeakable". And he ends with a promise: "Nor will I be turned away, until You gather all that I am, from this dispersed and disordered estate, into the peace of that our most dear mother, where the first-fruits of my spirit be already (whence I am ascertained of these things), and You conform and confirm it forever, O my God, my Mercy" (cf. *Confessions*, 12,16,23).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from Malta, Japan, Sri Lanka and the United States. I cordially invoke upon all of you joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

To you, dear *young people*, dear *sick people* and dear *newly-weds*, I invite you to imitate the heroic example of St Maximilian Mary Kolbe, whom we will commemorate tomorrow. Make the effort to live the Christian vocation as he did, with consistent authenticity.