



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 10 September 2003

Canticle of Ezekiel 36: 24-28

"I will be your God!"

1. The Canticle that has just echoed in our ears and hearts was composed by one of the great prophets of Israel, Ezekiel, a witness of one of the most tragic ages the Jewish people lived through: the destruction of the Kingdom of Judea and its capital, Jerusalem, followed by the bitter exile in Babylon (sixth century B.C.). The passage that has become part of the Christian prayer of Lauds is an extract from chapter 36 of Ezekiel.

The context of this passage, transformed into a liturgical hymn, seeks to capture the deep meaning of the tragedy that the people lived in those years. The sin of idolatry had contaminated the land that the Lord had given to Israel as an inheritance. In the final analysis it was this more than anything else that was responsible for the loss of the homeland and dispersal among the nations. In fact, God is not indifferent to good and evil; he enters the history of humanity mysteriously with his judgment that sooner or later unmasks evil, defends its victims and points out the way of justice.

2. However, the goal of God's action is never the ruin, the pure and simple condemnation or elimination, of the sinner. It was the Prophet Ezekiel himself who cited these divine words: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?... For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone; so return, and live" (18: 22, 23).

In this light we can understand the meaning of our Canticle that is filled with hope and salvation. After purification through trial and suffering, the dawn of a new era is about to break, as the Prophet Jeremiah had already announced, speaking of a "new covenant" between the Lord and Israel (cf. Jer 31: 31-34). Ezekiel himself, in chapter 11 of his prophetic book, had proclaimed

these divine words: "I will give them a new heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God" (11: 19-20).

In our *Canticle* (cf. Ez 36: 24-28), the prophet takes up this oracle and completes it with a marvellous explanation: the "new spirit" given by God to the children of his people will be his Spirit, the Spirit of God himself (cf. v. 27).

3. Thus, not only is a purification proclaimed, expressed in the sign of the water that washes away the stains on the conscience. There is not only the aspect of liberation from evil and sin (cf. v. 25), necessary though it may be. Ezekiel's message stresses another, far more surprising aspect: humanity is, in fact, destined to be born to new life. The first symbol is that of the "heart" which, in biblical language, suggests interiority, the personal conscience. God will tear from our breasts the "heart of stone" that is cold and hard, a sign of the persistence of evil. Into them he will put a "heart of flesh", that is, a source of life and love (cf. v. 26). The life-giving spirit that brought creatures to life in the creation (cf. Gn 2: 7), will be replaced in the new economy of grace by the Holy Spirit, who sustains us, moves and guides us toward the light of truth and pours out "God's love... into our hearts" (Rom 5: 5).

4. Thus will emerge that "new creation" which St Paul was to describe (cf. II Cor 5: 17; Gal 6: 15), when the "old self" in us, the "sinful body", would pass away, so that "we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom 6: 6), but new creatures, transformed by the Spirit of the risen Christ: "You have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator" (Col 3: 9-10; cf. Rom 6: 6). The prophet Ezekiel proclaims a new people which the New Testament would see as having been gathered together by God himself through the work of his Son. This community, possessing "a heart of flesh" and imbued with the "Spirit", would experience the living and active presence of God himself, who would enliven believers, acting in them with his efficacious grace. "All who keep his commandments abide in him", St John was to say, "and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us" (I Jn 3: 24).

5. Let us end our meditation on the *Canticle of Ezekiel* by listening to St Cyril of Jerusalem who, in his *Third Baptismal Catechesis*, delineates in this prophetic passage the people of Christian Baptism.

"Through Baptism", he recalls, "all sins are forgiven, even the most serious transgressions". The Bishop therefore says to his listeners: "Have faith, Jerusalem, the Lord will remove your wickedness from you (cf. Zep 3: 14-15). The Lord will cleanse you from your misdeeds...; he "will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses" (Ez 36: 25). The angels will encircle you rejoicing and they will soon sing: "Who is that coming up from the

wilderness', immaculate, and "leaning upon her beloved?" (Sg 8: 5). In fact, it is the soul, formerly a slave and now free to address as her adopted brother her Lord, who says to her, accepting her sincere resolution, "Behold, you are beautiful, beautiful!" (Sg 4: 1).... Thus, he exclaims, alluding to the fruits of a confession made with a clear conscience,... may heaven deign that you all... keep alive the remembrance of these words and draw fruits from them, expressing them in holy deeds in order to present yourselves faultless before the mystical Bridegroom and obtain from the Father the forgiveness of your sins" (n. 16; *Le Catechesi*, Rome 1993, pp. 79-80).

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 Latvia, Denmark, Ireland, Scotland, England and the United States. Upon all of you I cordially invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

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

Yesterday we celebrated the Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin and the day after tomorrow we will commemorate her Holy Name. May the heavenly Mother of God guide you and sustain you on the way of an ever more perfect adherence to Christ and his Gospel.

Trip to Slovakia: entrustment to the Mother of the Redeemer

With great hope, I am preparing to make tomorrow my third Apostolic Journey to Slovakia, a land enriched by the witness of Christ's heroic disciples who have left eloquent impressions of holiness on that nation's history.

Dearest brothers and sisters, I invite you to accompany me in prayer. I am entrusting the Apostolic Journey to the Mother of the Redeemer, deeply venerated in Slovakia. May she guide my steps and obtain for the Slovak people a new springtime of faith and civil advancement.