



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 26 November 2003

Psalm 110[109]

"Sit at my right hand!"

1. We have just listened to one of the most famous Psalms in Christian history. Indeed, Psalm 110[109], which the *Liturgy of Vespers* presents to us every Sunday, is cited frequently in the New Testament. Verses 1 and 4 in particular are applied to Christ in the wake of the ancient Judaic tradition that has transformed this Davidic hymn of royal praise into a Messianic Psalm.

This prayer's popularity is also due to its constant use at Sunday *Vespers*. Psalm 110[109], therefore, in its Latin *Vulgate* version, has been the subject of many splendid musical compositions that have marked the history of western culture. The Liturgy, in accordance with the procedures decided upon by the Second Vatican Council, has omitted the violent verse 6 from the original Hebrew text of this Psalm, which, moreover, is composed of only 63 words. It is very close in tone to the so-called "Cursing Psalms" and describes the Jewish king advancing in a sort of military campaign, crushing his adversaries and judging the nations.

2. Since we will have an opportunity to return to this Psalm on other occasions, after thinking about its use in the Liturgy, we will now be satisfied with an overall glance at it.

We will be able to distinguish clearly two parts in it. The first (cf. vv. 1-3) contains an oracle addressed by God to the one the Psalmist calls "my lord", that is, the sovereign of Jerusalem. The oracle proclaims the enthronement at God's "right hand" of David's descendent. In fact, the Lord speaks to him, saying: "Sit at my right hand" (v. 1). It is quite likely that this is an allusion to a rite that required the person chosen to sit on the right of the Ark of the Covenant, to receive the power of government from the supreme king of Israel, in other words, the Lord.

3. Against this background we can sense the presence of hostile forces that have been neutralized by a victorious conquest: the enemies are portrayed at the feet of the sovereign, who solemnly advances among them bearing the sceptre of his authority (cf. vv. 1-2). This undoubtedly reflects a real political situation, recorded at the time when one king handed over his power to another with the uprising of a few subordinates or an attempt to conquer. Henceforth, however, the text refers to a general contrast between the plan of God, who works through his Chosen People, and the scheming of those who would like to assert their own hostile and counterfeit power. Here, then, we have the eternal conflict between good and evil that takes place in the context of historical events through which God manifests himself and speaks to us.

4. The second part of the Psalm, however, contains a priestly prayer whose protagonist is still the Davidic king (vv. 4-7). Guaranteed by a solemn divine oath, the dignity of kingship also unites in itself the dignity of priesthood. The reference to Melchisedek, the priest-king of Salem, that is, of ancient Jerusalem (cf. Gn 14), is perhaps a way to justify the specific priesthood of the king beside the official Levitical priesthood of the Temple of Zion. Additionally, it is also well known that the *Letter to the Hebrews* starts, precisely, with this oracle: "You are a priest for ever according to the order of Melchisedek" (Ps 110[109]: 4), in order to illustrate the special and perfect priesthood of Jesus Christ.

We will examine Ps 110[109] in greater detail later, going through it verse by verse and making a careful analysis.

5. To conclude, however, let us reread the first verse of the Psalm that contains the divine oracle: "Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool". And let us read it with St Maximus of Turin (fourth-fifth century A.D.), who commented on it in his *Sermon on Pentecost*: "Our custom has it that the sharing of the footstool is offered to the one who, having accomplished some feat, deserves to sit in the place of honour as champion. So too, the man Jesus Christ, overcoming the devil with his passion, opening underground realms with his Resurrection, arriving victorious in heaven as one who has brought some undertaking to a successful conclusion, listens to God the Father inviting him: "Sit at my right hand". Nor must we be surprised if the Father offers to share with us the seat of the Son who, by nature, is consubstantial with the Father.... The Son sits on his right because, according to the Gospel, the sheep will be on the right; on the left, on the other hand, will be the goats. The first Lamb, therefore, must sit on the same side as the sheep, and the immaculate Head must take possession in advance of the place destined for the immaculate flock that will follow him" (40, 2: *Scriptores circa Ambrosium*, IV, Milan-Rome, 1991, p. 195).

To young people, the sick and the newly-weds

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. May the figure of the Apostle St

Andrew, whose feast we will be celebrating in the coming days, be for you all a model of Christian witness to follow.

To the English-speaking visitors

I am pleased to greet the members of the Anglican clergy visiting Rome for a renewal course. My greetings also go to the pilgrims from Melbourne, Australia. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.