



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 21 July 2004

14th strophe of Psalm 119[118]

Your word is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path

1. At this General Audience, after the interval I spent in the Valle d'Aosta, let us now continue on our journey through the Psalms proposed by the Liturgy of Vespers. Today we come to the 14th of the 22 strophes that make up Psalm 119[118], a grandiose hymn to the Law of God and an expression of his will. The number of the strophes corresponds to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and suggests fullness; each one is composed of eight verses and of words that begin with the corresponding letter in alphabetical order.

In our case, the first words of the verses we have just heard begin with the Hebrew letter *nun*. This strophe is illuminated by the shining image in its first line: "Your word is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path" (v. 105). Man ventures on life's often dark journey, but all of a sudden the darkness is dispelled by the splendour of the Word of God.

Psalm 19[18] compares the Law of God to the sun, when it says that "the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes" (19[18]: 9). Then in the Book of Proverbs it is reasserted that "the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light" (6: 23). Christ was also to present himself as a definitive revelation with exactly the same image: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8: 12).

2. The Psalmist then continues his prayer, calling to mind the suffering and danger in the life he has to lead, in which he stands in need of enlightenment and support: "Lord, I am deeply afflicted: by your word give me life.... Though I carry my life in my hands, I remember your law"

(Ps 119[118]: 107, 109).

A dark image pervades the strophe: "the wicked try to ensnare me" (v. 110), the person praying again intimates, making use of a hunting image well known to the Psalter. The faithful know that they are advancing on the highways of the world amid danger, anxiety and persecution; they know that trials are lying in wait. Christians, for their part, know that every day they must carry the Cross up the hill of their Calvary (cf. Lk 9: 23)

3. However, the just keep their fidelity intact: "I have sworn and have made up my mind to obey your decrees... I remember your law... I do not stray from your precepts" (Ps 119[118]: 106, 109, 110). A conscience at peace is the strength of believers; their constancy in obeying the divine commandments is the source of their serenity.

The final declaration is therefore consistent: "Your will is my heritage for ever, the joy of my heart" (v. 111) It is this that is the most precious reality, the "heritage", the "reward" (cf. v. 112) which the Psalmist cherishes with vigilant and ardent love: the teaching and commandments of the Lord. He wants to be totally faithful to the will of his God. On this path he will find peace of soul and will succeed in getting through the dark tangle of trials and reaching true joy.

4. In this regard, St Augustine's words are enlightening. He begins his commentary on Psalm 119[118] by developing the theme of the happiness that derives from observing the Law of the Lord. "From the very beginning, this very long Psalm invites us to happiness, which, as everyone knows, constitutes the hope of every man. Indeed, could there (was there or will there) ever be anyone who did not desire to be happy? And if this is so, what need is there to invite people to a goal that the human soul spontaneously strives for?... Might not the reason be that although we all aspire to happiness, most of us do not know how to attain it? Yes, this is precisely the lesson that is taught by the One who says: "Blessed are those who are undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord". It seems to say: "I know what you desire; I know you are seeking happiness; if, then, you wish to be happy, be undefiled. All seek the former, whereas few trouble about the latter: however, without it, what all wish for cannot be attained. But where can anyone be undefiled, except in the way, which is none other than the Law of the Lord? Hence, it is those who are undefiled in the way, those who walk in the laws of the Lord who are happy! This exhortation is not superfluous but necessary to our spirit" (*Esposizioni sui Salmi, III*, Rome, 1976, p. 1113).

Let us make our own the conclusion of the great Bishop of Hippo who reaffirms the continual timeliness of the happiness promised to those who strive faithfully to do God's will.

To special groups

I extend a special welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including members of the General Chapter of the Congregation of Holy Cross. I also greet the young Ursulines from all over the world gathered here in Rome, as well as groups from England, Ireland, the Philippines and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of Our Lord, and I wish you a happy stay in Rome.

Lastly, as usual, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear brothers and sisters, I hope that you will make the most of this summer period to intensify your contact with God in prayer, quietly listening to his Word.