



The Holy See

POPE JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 26 January 2005

"O Lord... deliver me!"

1. In Psalm 116[114] that has just been proclaimed, the voice of the Psalmist expresses gratitude and love for the Lord after he has granted his anguished plea: "I love the Lord for he has heard the cry of my appeal; for he turned his ear to me in the day when I called him" (vv. 1-2). This declaration of love is immediately followed by a vivid description of the mortal dread that has gripped the man in prayer (cf. vv. 3-6).

The drama is portrayed through the symbols customarily used in the Psalms. The snares that enthrall life are the snares of death, the ties that enmesh it are the coils of hell, which desire to entice the living of whom it can never have "enough" (cf. Prv 30: 15-16).

2. The image is that of the prey which has fallen into the trap of a relentless hunter. Death is like a vice that tightens its grip (cf. Ps 116[114]: 3). Behind the praying person, therefore, lurked the risk of death, accompanied by an agonizing psychological experience: "they caught me, sorrow and distress" (v. 3). But from that tragic abyss the person praying cried out to the only One who can stretch out his hand and extricate him from that tangle: "O Lord, my God, deliver me!" (v. 4).

This is the short but intense prayer of a man who, finding himself in a desperate situation, clings to the one rock of salvation. Thus, in the Gospel, just as the disciples cried out during the storm (cf. Mt 8: 25), so Peter cried to the Lord when, walking on the water, he began to sink (cf. Mt 14: 30).

3. Having been saved, the person praying proclaims that the Lord "is gracious... and just", indeed, he has "compassion" (Ps 116[114]: 5). In the original Hebrew, the latter adjective refers to the

tenderness of a mother whose "depths" it evokes.

Genuine trust always perceives God as love, even if it is sometimes difficult to grasp the course of his action. It remains certain, however, that "the Lord protects the simple hearts" (v. 6). Therefore, in wretchedness and abandonment, it is always possible to count on him, the "father of the fatherless and protector of widows" (Ps 68[67]: 6).

4. A dialogue of the Psalmist with his soul now begins and continues in the following Psalm 116[115], which should be seen as a whole with our Psalm. The Judaic tradition created Psalm 116 as a single psalm, according to the Hebrew numbering of the Psalter. The Psalmist invites his soul to turn back, to rediscover restful peace after the nightmare of death (cf. Ps 116[114]: 7).

The Lord, called upon with faith, stretched out his hand, broke the cords that bound the praying person, dried his tears and saved him from a headlong fall into the abyss of hell (cf. v. 8).

Henceforth, the turning point is clear and the hymn ends with a scene of light: the person praying returns to the "land of the living", that is, to the highways of the world, to walk in the "presence of the Lord". He joins in the community prayer in the temple, in anticipation of that communion with God which awaits him at the end of his life (cf. v. 9).

5. To conclude, let us re-examine the most important passages of the Psalm, letting ourselves be guided by Origen, a great Christian writer of the third century whose commentary in Greek on Ps 116[114] has been handed down to us in the Latin version of St Jerome.

In reading that "the Lord has turned his ear to me", he remarks: "We are little and low; we can neither stretch out nor lift ourselves up, so the Lord turns his ear to us and deigns to hear us. In the end, since we are men and cannot become gods, God became man and bowed down, as it has been written: 'He bowed the heavens, and came down' (Ps 18[17]: 10)".

Indeed, the Psalm continues, "the Lord protects the simple hearts" (Ps 116[114]: 6). "If someone is great and becomes haughty and proud, the Lord does not protect him; if someone thinks he is great, the Lord has no mercy on him; but if someone humbles himself, the Lord takes pity on him and protects him. Hence, it is said, 'Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me' (Is 8: 18). And further, 'I was helpless so he saved me'".

So it is that the one who is little and wretched can return to peace and rest, as the Psalm says (cf. Ps 116[114]: 7), and as Origen himself comments: "When it says: 'Turn back, my soul, to your rest', it is a sign that previously he did have repose but then he lost it.... God created us good, he made us arbiters of our own decisions and set us all in paradise with Adam. But since, through our own free choice, we pitched ourselves down from that bliss and ended in this vale of tears, the just man urges his soul to return to the place from which it fell.... 'Turn back, my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has been good'. If you, my soul, return to paradise, it is not because you yourself deserve it, but because it is an act of God's mercy. It was your fault if you left paradise; on the other hand,

your return to it is a work of the Lord's mercy. Let us also say to our souls: "Turn back to your rest'. Our rest is in Christ, our God" (*Omelia sul Libro dei Salmi*, Milan, 1993, pp. 409, 412-413).

To special groups:

I extend a special welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including groups from Denmark, Canada and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the peace and joy of our Lord, and I wish you a happy stay in Rome.

I then greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Today, we are celebrating the liturgical memorial of Sts Timothy and Titus. Dear friends, may their example spur you always to follow Jesus, the authentic teacher of life and holiness.

ENGLISH-SPEAKING GROUPS

From Denmark:

Students from Sct Ibs Skole, Horsens.

From Canada:

Pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Toronto.

From the United States of America:

The 1980 Ordination Class, St Charles Borromeo Seminary, Archdiocese of Philadelphia; a group of Church Music Directors; *pilgrims from:* St Andrew Parish, Avenel, New Jersey; St Gabriel Parish, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Sacred Heart Parish, Watertown, Massachusetts.

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