



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Saint Paul (9)

The Importance of Christology: Pre-existence and Incarnation.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the Catecheses of these past weeks we have meditated on St Paul's "conversion", the result of his personal encounter with the crucified and Risen Jesus, and we asked ourselves what relationship the Apostle to the Gentiles had with the earthly Jesus. Today I would like to speak of the teaching that St Paul bequeathed to us on the *centrality of the Risen Christ in the mystery of salvation*, on his Christology. In truth, the Risen Jesus Christ, "exalted above every other name", is at the centre of every reflection Paul makes. Christ, for the Apostle, is the criterion for evaluating events and things, the goal of every effort that he makes to proclaim the Gospel, the great passion that sustains his footsteps on the roads of the world. And this is a real and living Christ: "Christ", Paul says, "who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2: 20). This person who loves me, with whom I can speak, who listens to me and answers me, this is truly the starting point for understanding the world and finding the way through history.

Those who have read St Paul's writings know well that he was not concerned to recount the sequence of individual events in Jesus' life. Nevertheless we may think that in his catechesis he told far more about the pre-Paschal Jesus than he writes in his Letters which are admonitions in precise situations. His pastoral and theological intention was so focused on fostering the nascent communities that it came naturally to him to concentrate completely on the proclamation of Jesus

Christ as "Lord", alive now and present now among his followers. Hence the characteristic essentiality of Pauline Christology, which develops the depths of the mystery with a constant and precise concern: to proclaim the living Jesus, of course, but above all to proclaim the central reality of his death and Resurrection as the culmination of his earthly existence and the root of the successive development of the whole Christian faith, the whole reality of the Church. For the Apostle the Resurrection is not an event in itself, separate from death: the Risen One is always the One who has first been crucified. Even as the Risen One he bears his wounds: the Passion is present in him and we can say, together with Pascal, that he is the Suffering One until the end of the world, while at the same time being the Risen One and living with us and for us. Paul had understood this identification of the Risen One with the Crucified Christ at the encounter on the road to Damascus: at that moment it was clearly revealed to him that the Crucified One is the Risen One and the Risen One is the Crucified One, who asks Paul: "Why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9: 4). Paul is persecuting Christ in the Church and then realizes that the Cross is not "accursed by God" (Dt 21: 23), but is also the sacrifice for our redemption.

Fascinated, the Apostle contemplates the hidden secret of the Crucified and Risen One and, through the suffering experienced by Christ in his humanity (*earthly dimension*), goes back to that eternal existence in which he is wholly one with the Father (*dimension before time*): "When the time had fully come", he wrote, "God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4: 4-5). These two dimensions, his eternal *pre-existence* with the Father and the Lord's descent in his *Incarnation* are already announced in the Old Testament, in the figure of Wisdom. We find in the sapiential Books of the Old Testament certain texts which exalt the role of Wisdom that existed prior to the world's creation. Passages such as the one from Psalm 90[89] should be interpreted in this sense: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (v. 2); or passages like this one that speaks of the creator Wisdom: "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth" (Prv 8: 22-23). The praise of Wisdom, contained in the Book of the same name, is also evocative: "She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well" (Wis 8: 1).

The sapiential texts themselves which speak of the eternal pre-existence of Wisdom, also speak of the descent, the abasement of this Wisdom, who pitched a tent for herself among men. Thus we already hear echoing the words of the Gospel of John, who speaks of the tent of the Lord's flesh. He created a tent for himself in the Old Testament: here the temple is shown, and worship in accordance with the Torah; but the New Testament perspective enables us to realize that this was only a prefiguration of the tent that was far more real and meaningful: the tent of Christ's flesh. And we already see in the Books of the Old Testament that this lowering of Wisdom, her descent in the flesh, also suggests the possibility that she was rejected. St Paul, in developing his Christology, refers precisely to this sapiential perspective: in Jesus he recognizes the eternal wisdom that has always existed, the wisdom that descends and pitches a tent for herself among us and thus he can

describe Christ as "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1: 24), he can say that Christ has become, through God's work, "our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (*ibid.*, v. 30). Similarly, Paul explains that Christ, like Wisdom, can be rejected above all by the rulers of this world (cf. 1 Cor 2: 6-9), so that within God's plans a paradoxical situation is created, the Cross, which was to transform itself into the means of salvation for the whole human race.

In the famous hymn contained in the Letter to the Philippians (cf. 2: 6-11) a further development of this sapiential cycle sees Wisdom abase herself to then be exalted despite rejection. This is one of the most elevated texts in the whole of the New Testament. The vast majority of exegetes today agree that this passage reproduces an earlier composition than the text of the Letter to the Philippians. This is a very important fact because it means that Judaeo-Christianity, prior to St Paul, believed in Jesus' divinity. In other words, faith in the divinity of Jesus was not a Hellenistic invention that emerged much later than Jesus' earthly life, an invention which, forgetful of his humanity, would have divinized him; we see in reality that early Judaeo-Christianity believed in the divinity of Jesus. Indeed, we can say that the Apostles themselves, at the important moments in the life of their Teacher, understood that he was the Son of God, as St Peter said in Caesarea Philippi: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16: 16). However, let us return to the hymn in the Letter to the Philippians. This text's structure is in three strophes, which illustrate the high points on the journey undertaken by Christ. His pre-existence is expressed by the words: "though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (Phil 2: 6). Then comes the Son's voluntary self-abasement in the second strophe: "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (v. 7), to the point of humbling himself and "[becoming] obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (v. 8). The third strophe of the hymn proclaims the Father's response to the Son's humbling of himself: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (v. 9). What is striking is the contrast between the radical humbling of himself and his subsequent glorification in the glory of God. It is obvious that this second strophe is in contrast with the claim of Adam, who wanted to make a God of himself, and in contrast with the act of the builders of the tower of Babel, who wanted to construct a bridge to Heaven and make themselves divinities. However, this initiative of pride ended in self-destruction: this is not the way to Heaven, to true happiness, to God. The gesture of the Son of God is exactly the opposite: not pride but humility, which is the fulfilment of love and love is divine. The initiative of Christ's abasement, of his radical humility, in stark contrast with human pride, is truly an expression of divine love; it is followed by that elevation into Heaven to which God attracts us with his love.

In addition to the Letter to the Philippians, there are other places in Pauline literature where the themes of the pre-existence and descent to the earth of the Son of God are connected to each other. A reaffirmation of the assimilation of Wisdom and Christ, with all the connected cosmic and anthropological implications, is found in the First Letter to Timothy: "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed in throughout

the world, taken up in glory" (3: 16). It is above all on these premises that a better definition of Christ as the sole Mediator is possible, against the background of the One God of the Old Testament (cf. 1 Tm 2: 5 in relation to Is 43: 10-11; 44: 6). Christ is the true bridge that leads us to Heaven, to communion with God.

And lastly, just a brief reference to the last developments of St Paul's Christology in his Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians. In the former, Christ is described as the "first-born of all creation" (1: 15-20). This word "first-born" suggests that the first of numerous children, the first of a great many brothers and sisters, came down to draw us and make us his brothers and sisters. In the Letter to the Ephesians we find a beautiful exposition of the *divine plan of salvation*, when Paul says that in Christ God desired to recapitulate everything (cf. Eph 1: 23). Christ is the epitome of all things, he takes everything upon himself and guides us to God. And thus he involves us in a movement of descent and ascent, inviting us to share in his humility, that is, in his love for neighbour, in order also to share in his glorification, becoming with him sons in the Son. Let us pray the Lord to help us conform to his humility, to his love, in order to be rendered participants in his divinization.

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I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Ghana, Guam, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Canada and the United States. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

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