



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 17 October 2001

Psalm 47 (48)

O God we ponder your love within your temple

1. The Psalm just proclaimed is a canticle in honour of Zion, "the city of the great King" (Ps 47 [48],3), at the time, the seat of the temple of the Lord and the place of his presence in the midst of humanity. Christian faith now applies it to "Jerusalem above" which is "our mother" (Gal 4,26).

The liturgical tone of this hymn, which evokes a festive procession (cf. vv. 13-14), the peaceful vision of Jerusalem that reflects divine salvation, renders Psalm 47 (48) a prayer that we can use to begin the day, offering a canticle of praise, even if clouds form on the horizon.

To appreciate the meaning of the Psalm, three helpful acclamations are placed at the beginning, the middle and the end, almost as though offering the spiritual key of the composition and introducing us to its interior atmosphere. The three invocations are: "The Lord is great and worthy to be praised in the city of our God" (v. 2); "O God we ponder your love within your temple" (v. 10); "Such is our God, our God forever and always, it is he who leads us" (v. 15).

2. These three acclamations, which exalt the Lord but also "the city of our God" (v. 2), frame two great parts of the Psalm. The first is a joyful celebration of the holy city, Zion, victorious against the assaults of her enemies, serene under the mantle of divine protection (cf. vv. 3-8). There is a virtual litany of definitions of this city: it is a wonderful height that is set up as a beacon of light, a source of joy for the peoples of the earth, the only true "Olympus" where heaven and earth meet. It is - to use the expression of the prophet Ezekiel - the Emmanuel-city because "the Lord is there", present in it (cf. Ez 48,35). But besieging troops are massed around Jerusalem for an assault, it is

a symbol of the evil that attacks the splendour of the city of God. The clash has an immediate and foreseen outcome.

3. Indeed, the powerful of the earth, by assaulting the holy city, also provoked its king, the Lord. The Psalmist shows the dissolution of the pride of a powerful army with the thought-provoking image of the pains of childbirth: "A trembling seized them there like the pangs of birth" (v. 7). Arrogance is transformed into feebleness and weakness, power into collapse and rout.

Another image expresses the same idea: the routed army is compared to an invincible naval fleet, on which a typhoon is unleashed caused by a violent East wind (cf. v. 8). What remains is an unshaken certainty for the one who stands within the shadow of divine protection: the last word is not in the hands of evil, but of good; God triumphs over hostile powers, even when they seem great and invincible.

4. The faithful one celebrates his thanksgiving to God the deliverer in the temple itself. His is a hymn to the merciful love of the Lord, expressed with the Hebrew word *hésed*, typical of the theology of the covenant. We come now to the second part of the psalm (cf. vv. 10-14). After the great canticle of praise to the faithful, just and saving God (cf. vv. 10-12), there is a sort of procession around the temple and the holy city (cf. vv. 13-14). The towers of the sure protection of God, are counted, the ramparts are observed, expressions of the stability offered to Zion by its Founder. The walls of Jerusalem speak and its stones recall the deeds which must be transmitted "to the next generation" (v. 14) through the stories that fathers will tell their children (cf. Ps 77,3-7).

Zion is the place of an uninterrupted chain of saving actions of the Lord, that are announced in the catechesis and celebrated in the liturgy, so that believers will continue to hope in God who intervenes to set them free.

5. In the concluding antiphon there is one of the most beautiful definitions of the Lord as shepherd of his people: "It is he who leads us" (v. 15). The God of Zion is the God of the Exodus, of freedom, of closeness to the people enslaved in Egypt and pilgrims in the desert. Now that Israel is settled in the promised land, she knows that the Lord will not abandon her: Jerusalem is the sign of his closeness and the temple is the place of his presence.

As he rereads these expressions, the Christian moves to the contemplation of Christ, the new and living temple of God (cf. Jn 2,21), and he turns to the heavenly Jerusalem, which no longer needs a temple or an external light, because "its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb.... the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb" (Apoc 21,2-23). St Augustine invites us to this "spiritual" rereading because he was convinced that in the Books of the Bible "there is nothing that only concerns the earthly city, because all that is said about it refers to her, or what is realized by her, symbolizes something that by allegory can also be referred to the heavenly Jerusalem" (*City of God*, XVII, 3,2). St Paulinus of Nola echoes him, because commenting on the words of the

Psalm he exhorts us to pray so that "we can be found to be living stones in the walls of the heavenly and free Jerusalem" (*Letter 28,2 to Severus*). Contemplating the solidity and compactness of this city, the same Father of the Church continues: "In fact, he who dwells in this city, is revealed to be One in three persons.... Christ is not only the foundation of the city but also its tower and door.... If the house of our soul is founded on Him and a construction rises on Him worthy of such a great foundation, then the door of admission into the city will be precisely him who will lead us forever and will take us to the place of his pasture" (*ibid.*).

The Holy Father greeted the pilgrims and visitors in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Slovak, Slovene, Croatian and then in Italian.

In English, the Holy Father gave this greeting.

I am pleased to greet Cardinal Keeler and the group from the Basilica of the Assumption in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. I remember well my own visits to the first Cathedral of the Catholic Church to be built in the United States of America. May God bless the efforts you are now making to restore this historic shrine as a worldwide symbol of religious freedom.

My greetings go as well to the other English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Australia, Canada, and the United States of America: upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

At the end of the audience, the Holy Father made an appeal for Nigeria in Italian:

Another episode of savage violence has been added to the tragic world situation of these days: more than 200 dead and hundreds of wounded, victims of a clash between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. Whoever has occasioned these unjustifiable acts is responsible before God. As I express, in the name of all of you, to Bishop Patrick Francis Sheenan of Kano, and to those bewailing the loss of their loved ones, our spiritual closeness, I pray to God that he will help all to find the path of fraternity again. Only in this way will it be possible to respond to God's expectations, who wills to make of humanity one single human family.
