



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 12 June 2002

Sing in praise of Christ's redeeming work

Psalm 91[92]

Lauds on Saturday of the second week of the year

1. Psalm 91[92] which we have just heard, the song of the righteous man to God the Creator, has a special place in the ancient Hebrew tradition. In fact, the title given to this Psalm indicates that it was sung on the Sabbath (cf. v. 1). Hence, it is the hymn raised to the Most High and Eternal Lord when, at sundown on Friday, we enter the holy day of prayer, contemplation and serene stillness of body and spirit.

The magnificent person of God the Most High is at the centre of the Psalm (cf. v. 9) around whom is arrayed a harmonious and peaceful world. Standing before him is the just person who, in keeping with a favourite Old Testament concept, is filled with well-being, joy and longevity as a natural consequence of his upright and faithful life. This refers to the so-called "theory of retribution", that claims that every crime is punished and every good deed rewarded already on this earth. Although there may be an element of truth to this view, nonetheless - as Job will intuit and Jesus will confirm (cf. Jn 9, 2-3) - the reality of human suffering is much more complex and cannot be so easily simplified. Indeed, human suffering must be viewed in the perspective of eternity.

2. Let us now examine this sapiential hymn with liturgical features. It includes an intense call to praise, the joyful song of thanksgiving, the festival of music played on the ten-stringed harp, the lyre and the lute (cf. vv. 2-4). The Lord's love and fidelity must be celebrated in liturgical song that is to be performed "with skill" (Ps 46[47],8). This invitation can also apply to our celebrations, so

that they recover their splendour, not only in the words and rites, but also in the melodies that accompany them.

After this appeal not to break the interior and exterior thread of prayer, the true and constant breath of faithful humanity, Psalm 91[92] presents, as though in two portraits the profile of the wicked (cf. vv. 7-10) and of the just person (cf. vv. 13-16). The wicked man, moreover, is brought before the Lord, "the most high for ever" (v. 9), who will make his enemies perish and will scatter all evildoers (cf. v. 10). Indeed, only in the divine light can we understand the depth of good and evil, justice and wickedness.

3. The figure of the sinner is described with images from the vegetable world: "though the wicked sprout like grass, and all evildoers flourish" (v. 8). But this flourishing is destined to shrivel and disappear. In fact, the Psalmist heaps up verbs and words that describe the devastation: "they are doomed to destruction for ever ... Your enemies, O Lord, shall perish, all evildoers shall be scattered" (vv. 8.10).

At the root of this catastrophic outcome is the profound evil that grips the minds and hearts of the wicked: "The dull man cannot know, the stupid cannot understand this" (v. 7). The adjectives used here belong to the language of wisdom and denote the brutality, blindness and foolishness of those who think they can rage over the face of the earth without moral consequences, deceiving themselves that God is absent and indifferent. Instead, the person praying is certain that sooner or later the Lord will appear on the horizon to establish justice and break the arrogance of the fool (cf. Psalm 13[14]).

4. Here we stand before the figure of the upright person, sketched as in a vast, richly coloured painting. Here too the Psalmist has used fresh, luxuriant green plant images (Ps 91[92], 13-16). As opposed to the wicked, who is luxuriant but short-lived like the grass of the fields, the upright person rises toward heaven, solid and majestic like the palm tree or a cedar of Lebanon. Besides, the just "flourish in the courts of our God" (v. 14), namely, they have a particularly sound and stable relationship with the temple, hence with the Lord, who has established his dwelling in them.

The Christian tradition also played on the double meaning of the Greek word *phoinix*, used to translate the Hebrew term for "palm tree". *Phoinix* is the Greek word for "palm", but also for the bird we call the "phoenix". Everyone knows that the phoenix was a symbol of immortality because it was believed that the bird was reborn from its ashes. Christians have a similar rebirth from ashes, though their participation in the death of Christ, the source of new life (cf. Rom 6,3-4). "But God ... even when we were dead through our transgression, brought us to life with Christ", the Letter to the Ephesians says, "and raised us up with him" (2,5-6).

5. Another image, taken from the animal kingdom, represents the just man and intends to exalt the strength that God lavishes, even in old age. "You have exalted my horn like that of the wild ox; you

have poured rich oil upon me" (Ps 91[92],11). On the one hand, the gift of divine power makes one triumph and gives security (cf. v. 12); on the other, the glorious forehead of the righteous is anointed with oil that radiates energy and a protective blessing. So then, Psalm 91[92] is an optimistic hymn, strengthened by music and song. It celebrates confidence in God who is the source of serenity and peace, even when one witnesses the apparent success of the wicked. A peace that is intact even in old age (cf. v. 15), a time of life to be lived in security and fruitfulness.

Origen's comment, translated by St Jerome: God's oil keeps the lamp of life burning brightly
 Let us end with the words of Origen, translated by St Jerome, which are inspired by the phrase in which the Psalmist tells God: "You have poured rich oil upon me" (v. 11). Origen comments: "our old age has need of God's oil. Just as when our bodies are tired, we only feel refreshed by anointing them with oil, just as the flame of the lantern is extinguished if we do not add oil to it, so too, the flame of my old age needs to grow with the oil of God's mercy. The Apostles also went up to the Mount of Olives (Acts 1,12) to receive the light from the Lord's oil, because they were tired and their lanterns needed the oil of the Lord.... Therefore let us pray the Lord that our old age, our every effort and our darkness may be enlightened by the oil of the Lord" (*74 Omelie sul Libro dei Salmi, [Homilies on the Book of Psalms]* Milan 1993, pp. 280-282, *passim*).

The Holy Father greeted the pilgrims in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Flemish, Hungarian, Slovak, Croatian and Italian. To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience. Upon all of you, especially those from England, Iceland, Australia, Singapore, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Saviour.