



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 17 July 2002

Praise to him who sits upon the throne

Psalm 148, Lauds for Sunday of the third week

1. Psalm 148 that we have just lifted up to God is a true "*canticle of creatures*", a kind of Old Testament *Te Deum*, a cosmic "alleluia" that involves everyone and everything in divine praise.

This is how a contemporary exegete has commented on it: "The Psalmist, calling them by name, puts beings in order. Above are the heavens with two heavenly bodies, that move according to time, and then the stars; on the one side are the fruit-trees and on the other the cedars; on one level the reptiles, on the other birds; here the princes, over there the people; in two lines, perhaps holding hands, young men and maidens God has established them, giving them their place and role; the human being accepts them, giving them their place in language, and arranged in this way, introduces them into the liturgical celebration. Man is the 'shepherd of being' or the liturgist of creation" (L. Alonso Schökel, *Trenta salmi: poesia e preghiera [Thirty Psalms, Poetry and Prayer]*, Bologna, 1982, p. 499).

Let us too follow this universal chorus that echoes in the apse of heaven and whose temple is the whole cosmos. Let us join in the breathing forth of the praise that all creatures raise to their Creator.

2. We find in the heavens the singers of the starry universe: the remotest heavenly bodies, the choirs of angels, the sun and moon, the shining stars, the "highest heavens" (v. 4), that is, the starry space and the waters above the heavens, which the man of the Bible imagines were stored in reservoirs before falling on the earth as rain.

The "alleluia", that is, the invitation to "praise the Lord", resounds at least eight times, and has as its final goal the order and harmony of the heavenly bodies: "He fixed their bounds which cannot be passed" (v. 6).

We then lift our eyes to the earthly horizon where a procession of at least 22 singers unfolds: a sort of alphabet of praise whose letters are strewn over our planet. Here are the sea monsters and the depths of the sea, symbols of the watery chaos on which the earth is founded (cf. Ps 23[24],2), according to the ancient Semite conception of the cosmos.

St Basil, a Father of the Church observed: "Not even the deep was judged as contemptible by the Psalmist, who included them in the general chorus of creation, and what is more, with its own language completes the harmonious hymn to the Creator" (*Homiliae in hexaemeron*, III 9: PG 29,75).

3. The procession continues with the creatures of the atmosphere: the flash of lightening, hail, snow, frost and stormy winds, thought to be a swift messenger of God (Ps 148,8).

Then the mountains and hills appear, popularly held to be the most ancient creatures (cf. v. 9a). The vegetable kingdom is represented by the fruit-trees and cedars (cf. v. 9b). The animal kingdom is represented by the beasts, cattle, reptiles and flying birds (cf. v. 10).

Finally, the human being, who presides over the liturgy of creation, is represented according to all ages and distinctions: boys, youth and the old, princes, kings and nations (cf. vv. 11-12).

4. Let us now entrust to St John Chrysostom the task of casting a comprehensive look upon this immense chorus. He does so in words that refer also to the Canticle of the three young men in the fiery furnace, which we meditated upon in the last catechesis.

The great Father of the Church and Patriarch of Constantinople says: "Because of their great rectitude of spirit, when the saints gather to thank God, they used to invite many to join with them in singing his praise, urging them to take part with them in this beautiful liturgy. This is what the three young men in the furnace also did, when they called the whole of creation to praise and sing hymns to God for the benefit received" (Dn 3).

This Psalm does the same calling both parts of the world, that which is above and that which is below, the sentient and the intelligent. The Prophet Isaiah also did this, when he said: "Sing for joy, O heavens, and rejoice, O earth! ... for the Lord has comforted his people and shows mercy to his afflicted" (Is 49,13). The Psalter goes on: "When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language ... the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs" (Ps 113[114],1,4); and elsewhere in Isaiah, "Let the heavens rain down justice like dew from above" (Is 45,8). Indeed, considering themselves inadequate on their own to sing praise to the

Lord, the saints "turn to all sides involving all things in singing a common hymn" (*Expositio in psalmum CXLVIII: PG 55, 484-485*).

5. We are also invited to join this immense choir, becoming the explicit voice of every creature and praising God in the two fundamental dimensions of his mystery. On the one hand, we must adore his transcendent greatness, "for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven" as our Psalm says (v. 13). On the other hand, we should recognize his goodness in coming down to us because God is close to his creatures and comes especially to help his people: "He has raised up a horn for his people ... for the people of Israel who are near to him" (v. 14), as the Psalmist re-affirms.

Before the almighty and merciful Creator, let us take up St Augustine's invitation to praise him, exalt him and celebrate him in his works: "When you observe these creatures and enjoy them and rise up to the Architect of all things and of created things, when you contemplate his invisible attributes intellectually, then a confession rises on earth and in heaven.... If creation is beautiful, how much more beautiful must its Creator be?" (*Esposizioni sui Salmi [Expositions on the Psalms]*, IV, Rome, 1977, pp. 887-889).

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially those from Ireland, Scotland and the United States of America. Upon all of you I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Happy Summer!

After greeting the pilgrims in their languages, the Holy Father said in Italian:

Dear young people, meeting you, I begin to think of the impending World Youth Day. I pray that it may be a favourable opportunity to experience the joy of being true witnesses of Christ. Also present are many sick people, whom I greet with deep affection. Dear friends, I invite you to find comfort in the suffering Lord, who continues his work of redemption in every person's life. To you, dear newly married couples, I express the hope that your love will be ever deeper and truer.