



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 9 July 2003

Psalm 143[142]: 1-11

"Penitential Psalms"

1. The last of the so-called "Penitential Psalms" in the seventh supplication contained in the Psalter was just now proclaimed in Psalm 142 (cf. Ps 6; 31; 37; 50; 101; 129; 142). The Christian tradition has used all of them to seek pardon from God for its sins. The text that we want to examine today was particularly dear to St Paul, who detected in it a radical sinfulness of every human creature: "for no man living is righteous before you, (O Lord)" (v. 2). This thought is used by the Apostle as the foundation of his teaching on sin and grace (cf. Gal 2: 16; Rm 3: 20).

The Liturgy of Lauds proposes to us this supplication as a proposition of faith and an imploring of divine help at the beginning of the day. The Psalm, in fact, has us say to God: "Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I put my trust" (v. 8).

2. The Psalm begins with an intense and insistent invocation directed to God, faithful to his promise of salvation offered to the people (cf. v. 1). The person in prayer recognizes his unworthiness and therefore humbly asks God not to act as a judge (cf. v. 2).

Then he traces a dramatic situation, similar to an earthly nightmare, which he is battling; the enemy, who represents evil in history and in the world, has led him to the threshold of death. He has fallen, in fact, into the dust of the earth, which is probably an image of the grave; then there is the darkness which is the absence of the light, a divine sign of life; then finally, "the deaths of great time", that is, the long-gone dead (cf. v. 3), among which he seems to be already relegated.

3. The Psalmist's very being is devastated: he cannot even breathe and his heart seems like a piece of ice, incapable of continuing to fight (cf. v. 4). To the faithful, knocked down and

trampled, only the hands are left free, which stretch towards the sky in a gesture that is, at the same time, one of imploring help and seeking assistance (cf. v. 6). The thought, in fact, recalls the past when God wrought marvels (cf. v. 5).

This spark of hope warms the ice of suffering and the test in which the person in prayer feels immersed and at the point of being swept away (cf. v. 7). The tension, however, remains ever strong; but a ray of light seems to appear on the horizon. We continue, then, to the other part of the Psalm (cf. vv. 7-11).

4. It opens with a new, pressing invocation. The faithful, feeling life almost ebbing away, raises his cry to God: "Make haste to answer me, O Lord! My spirit fails!" (v. 7). Then, he fears that God may be hiding his face and may be far away, abandoning and leaving his creature alone.

Indeed, the disappearance of the divine face plunges the man into desolation, into death itself, because the Lord is the giver of life. Trust in the Lord, who does not abandon, flowers precisely in this sort of extreme perspective. The person in prayer redoubles his supplications and supports them with a declaration of faith in the Lord: "for in you I put my trust... for to you I lift up my soul... I have fled to you... for you are my God...". He asks to be saved from his enemies (cf. vv. 8-10) and freed from anguish (cf. v. 11), but he also repeatedly makes another request that manifests a profound spiritual aspiration: "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God!" (v. 10a; cf. vv. 8b, 10b).

This admirable request we must make our own. We need to understand that the greatest good is the union of our will with the will of our heavenly Father, because only in this way are we able to receive in ourselves all his love, which brings us salvation and the fullness of life. If it is not accompanied by a strong desire of docility to God, our faith in him is not authentic. Thus, the person in prayer is aware of it and so he expresses this wish. His is therefore a true and proper profession of faith in God the Saviour, who removes the anguish and restores the taste for life, in the name of his "justice", namely, of his loving and salvific faithfulness (cf. v. 11). Starting with a very distressing situation, the person in prayer is led to hope, to joy and to light, thanks to a sincere union to God and to his will that is a will of love. This is the power of prayer, generator of life and of salvation.

5. Turning the gaze to the light of the morning of grace (cf. v. 8), St Gregory the Great, in his commentary of the seven Penitential Psalms, described this dawn of hope and of joy thus: "It is the day illuminated by that only truth which does not set, which the clouds do not darken and the rain does not obscure.... When Christ, our life, appears, and we begin to see God with open eyes, then every haze of darkness will flee, every puff of ignorance will dissolve, every cloud of temptation will be dissipated.... That will be the glorious and splendid day, prepared for all the elect by the One who has freed us from the power of darkness and has transferred us into the reign of his beloved Son.

"The morning of that day is the future resurrection.... On that morning, the faithfulness of the just will be brilliant, the glory will appear, the exaltation will be seen, when God will wipe away every tear from the eyes of the saints, when death will finally be destroyed, when the just will shine forth like the sun in the kingdom of the Father.

"On that day, the Lord will use his mercy, saying: 'Come, blessed of my Father' (Mt 25: 34). Then, the mercy of God will be made manifest, which in the present life the human mind cannot conceive. The Lord has in fact prepared, for those who love him, that which eye has not seen, nor ear has heard, nor has entered the heart of man" (PL 79, coll. 649-650).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I offer special greetings to the English-speaking visitors present today, especially those from Scotland, New Zealand and the United States of America. May this summer period of rest and relaxation bring you renewed joy and strength in our Lord Jesus Christ. Happy holidays!

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

My thought goes now, as usual, to the young people, the sick and the newly-weds. We are advancing ever more into the summer period, a time of tourism and of pilgrims, of holidays and of rest. Dear young people, I invite you to profit from the summer by making use of social and religious experiences. I hope that you, dear sick people, find comfort in the closeness of your families. And to you, dear newly-weds, I extend the invitation to use this summer period to understand better your important mission in the Church and in society.