



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 25 July 2001

Canticle of Tobit (Tb 13,1-8)

Lauds on Tuesday of the first week

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. "I exalt my God and my spirit rejoices in the King of heaven" (*Tb 13,7*). The one who speaks these words in the Canticle just recited, is the elderly Tobit of whom the OT gives a brief and edifying story, in the book that is named {in the Latin Vulgate}after his son Tobias {Tobit in the RSV and NAB}. In order to understand fully the meaning of this hymn, we must keep in mind the pages of the story that precede it. The story is set among the exiled Israelites of Niniveh. The sacred author, writing centuries later, looks to them as an example of brothers and sisters in the faith dispersed among a foreign people and tempted to abandon the traditions of their fathers. The portrait of Tobit and of his family is offered as a programme of life. Here is the man who, despite everything that happens to him, remains faithful to the norms of the law, and in particular, to the practice of giving alms. He is stricken by misfortune with the onset of poverty and blindness, but his faith never fails.

God's response was not slow in coming, through the Archangel Raphael, who leads the young Tobias on a risky journey, guiding him into a happy marriage and, in the end, healing his father Tobit from his blindness.

The message is clear: Those who do good, above all, by opening their hearts to the needs of their neighbours, are pleasing to the Lord, even if they are tried; in the end, they will experience his goodness.

2. With this premise, the words of our hymn can make a strong point. They invite us to lift up our eyes on high to "God who lives forever", to his kingdom which "lasts for all ages". From this contemplation of God, the sacred author can offer a short sketch of a theology of history in which he tries to respond to the question which the dispersed and tried People of God are raising: why does God treat us like this? The response turns both to divine justice and mercy: "He chastises you for your injustices, but he will show mercy towards all of you" (v. 5). The chastisement appears thus to be a kind of divine pedagogy, in which the last word is reserved to mercy: "He scourges and then shows mercy, casts down to the depths of the nether world, and he brings up from the great abyss" (v. 2).

Suffering, even the Cross, has a positive meaning if lived in accord with God's plan. One can have absolute confidence in God who never abandons his creature. Moreover, the words of the hymn lead to another perspective, which attributes a salvific meaning to the situation of suffering, turning the exile into an occasion to praise the works of God: "Praise him, you Israelites, before the Gentiles for though he has scattered you among them, he has shown his greatness even there" (vv. 3-4).

3. From this invitation to read the exile in a providential way, our meditation can be extended to consider the mysteriously positive meaning which suffering assumes when it is lived in abandonment to God's plan. Already in the OT several passages delineate such a theme. Think of the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis (cf. *Gn* 37,2-36) who was sold by his brothers and destined to be their future saviour. How can we forget the book of Job? Here the innocent man suffers, and doesn't know how to explain his drama in any way except by surrendering to the greatness and wisdom of God (cf. *Jb* 42,1-16).

For us who read these OT passages from a Christian perspective, the point of reference can only be the Cross of Christ which offers a profound response to the mystery of suffering in the world.

4. To sinners who are chastised for their injustices (cf. v. 5), Tobit's hymn directs a call for conversion that opens the wonderful prospect of a "reciprocal" conversion of God and man: "When you turn back to him with all your heart, to do what is right before him, then he will turn back to you, and no longer hide his face from you" (v. 6). The use of the word "conversion" for the creature and for God speaks volumes, even though it is with different meanings.

If the author of the Canticle thinks of the benefits which accompany the "return" of God, his renewed favour towards his people, in the light of the mystery of Christ, we must think above all of the gift which consists of God himself. The human person has need of him more than of all of his gifts. Sin is a tragedy not just because it draws God's punishments upon us, but because it banishes Him from our hearts.

5. The Canticle raises our eyes to the face of God as Father, inviting us to bless and praise him:

"He is the Lord, our God, our Father". One feels the sense of being special children which Israel experienced with the gift of the covenant and which prepared for the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. Then, in Jesus, the face of the Father will shine forth and his mercy without limits will be revealed.

Here we can think of the parable of the merciful Father as told by the Evangelist Luke. Not only does the Father respond to the conversion of the prodigal son with pardon, but with an embrace of infinite tenderness, coupled with joy and feasting. "When he was still a long way off, the father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him" (*Lk 15,20*).

The expressions of our Canticle are in line with the touching image of the Gospel. The need to praise and thank God springs forth: "So now consider what he has done for you and praise him with full voice. Bless the Lord of justice and exalt the King of the ages" (v. 7).

I warmly welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Scotland, Finland, Australia and Japan. Upon you and your families I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.