



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. It is a dark night; devouring wild beasts are perceived in the surroundings. The one who prays is waiting for the coming of dawn so that the light will dispel the darkness and fear. This is the background of Psalm 56 (57) on which we reflect today. It is a night prayer made by the one who prays at the break of day, anxiously awaited, in order to be able to praise the Lord with joy (cf. vv. 9-12). In fact, the psalm passes from dramatic lament addressed to God to serene hope and joyful thanksgiving, the latter using words that resound again in another psalm (cf. Ps 107 [108],2-6).

In reality, one assists at the passage from fear to joy, from night to day, from nightmare to serenity, from supplication to praise. It is an experience that is often described in the Psalter: "You changed my mourning into dancing, you took off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness. With my whole being I sing endless praise to you. Lord, my God, forever will I will give you thanks" (Ps 29,12-13).

Fear

2. Psalm 56 (57) that we are meditating on has two parts. The first part is the experience of fear before the assault of the evil which tries to strike the just one (cf. vv. 2-7). At the centre of the scene there are lions poised to attack. In no time this image is transformed into a picture of war, complete with spears, arrows, and swords. The one who prays feels assailed by a kind of death squadron. Around him there is a band of hunters, setting traps and digging pits to capture their prey. But this tense atmosphere is suddenly dissolved. In fact, already at the beginning (cf. v. 2), the protective symbol of the divine wings appears which refer, specifically, to the Ark of the Covenant with the winged cherubim, sign of the presence of God among the faithful in the holy temple on Mt Zion.

3. The one who prays asks God insistently to send from heaven his messengers to whom he assigns the symbolic names of “Faithfulness” and “Grace” (v. 4), the qualities proper to the saving love of God. For that reason, even if he shudders at the terrible roaring of the wild beasts and the perfidy of his persecutors, the faithful one remains serene and confident within, like Daniel in the lions' den (cf. Dn 6,17-25).

Confidence

The presence of the Lord does not delay in showing its efficacy by means of the self inflicted punishment of his adversaries: they tumble into the pit which they had dug for the just one (cf. v. 7). Such confidence in divine justice, which is always expressed in the Psalter, wards off discouragement and surrender to the power of evil. Sooner or later, God sides with the faithful one upsetting the manoeuvres of the wicked, tripping them up in their own evil plots.

4. Now we reach the second part of the Psalm, that of thanksgiving (cf. vv. 8-12). There is a passage which shines because of its intensity and beauty: “My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast. I will sing and make melody. Awake my soul. Awake O harp and lyre. I will awake the dawn” (vv. 8-9). Now the darkness has been dispelled: the dawn of salvation has coloured the song of the one who prays.

Applying this image to himself, the Psalmist seems to translate into terms that belong to the religious imagery of the Bible, which is rigorously monotheistic, the custom of the Egyptian or Phoenician priests who were in charge of “awakening the dawn”, of making the sun reappear, since it was considered a beneficent god. He also alludes to the use of hanging up musical instruments and covering them in a time of mourning and trial (cf. Ps 136 [137],2), and of “reawakening” them to a festive sound in times of liberation and joy. Hope blossoms from the liturgy: one turns to God asking him to draw near to his people again and to hear their prayer. In the Psalter, dawn is often the moment when God grants a favour after a night of prayer.

Divine Intervention

5. The Psalm closes with a hymn of praise to the Lord, who works with his two great saving qualities, that already appear with different names in the first part of the supplication (cf. v. 4). Now virtually personified, divine Goodness and Faithfulness enter the scene. They flood the heavens with their presence and are like light that shines in the darkness of trials and persecutions (cf. v. 11). For this reason the Christian tradition has used Psalm 56 (57) as a canticle of awakening to Easter light and joy, which shines out to the faithful removing the fear of death and opening the horizon of heavenly glory. 6. Gregory of Nyssa discovers in the words of the Psalm a kind of typical description of what happens in every human experience open to the recognition of the wisdom of God. “Indeed, He saved me – he exclaims – by shading me with the cloud of the Spirit, and those who trampled me underfoot were humiliated” (From the Italian translation of *On the Titles of the Psalms*, Rome, 1994, p. 183). Later, quoting the expressions at the end of the Psalm, where it says, “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be above the earth”, he concludes, “To the degree

that the glory of God is extended on earth, increased by the faith of those who are saved, the heavenly powers extol God, exulting for our salvation" (*ibid.* p. 184).****I extend warm greetings to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Canada, Malta, Japan, Indonesia and the United States of America. **I invite you to pray in these days that Almighty God will guide the minds and hearts of world leaders so that the ways of justice and peace may prevail.** Upon you and your families I invoke abundant divine blessings.

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