



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 3 November 2004

Fourth chapter of the *Book of Revelation*

"Worthy is the Lamb"

1. The Canticle we have just heard marks the Liturgy of Vespers with the simplicity and intensity of a chorus of praise. It belongs to the solemn vision situated at the beginning of the Book of Revelation, placing at the forefront a heavenly Liturgy to which we too, pilgrims on the earth, join during our ecclesial celebrations.

The hymn, composed of certain verses taken from the Book of Revelation and pieced together for liturgical use, is based on two fundamental elements. Outlined briefly, the first is the celebration of the Lord's work: "You created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (Rv 4: 11). Indeed, creation reveals God's immense power. In the Book of Wisdom, it is written that "from the greatness and beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen" (Wis 13: 5). Likewise, the Apostle Paul notes that "since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God's eternal power and divinity, have become visible" (Rom 1: 20). It then becomes a duty to raise the song of praise to the Creator in celebration of his glory.

2. It may be interesting to recall in this context that the Emperor Domitian, who probably ruled when the Book of Revelation was written, demanded that he himself be hailed as "*Dominus et deus noster*" [Lord and our God] (cf. Suetonius, *Domitian*, XIII).

Obviously, Christians refused to attribute such titles to a human creature, however powerful, preferring to direct their acclamation of adoration to "our only true Lord and God", the Creator of the universe (cf. Rv 4: 11), to the One who is, together with God, "the first and the last" (cf. 1: 17),

seated on the heavenly throne with God his Father (cf. 3: 21): Christ died and risen, symbolically represented here as a "Lamb who is worthy" although he has been "slain" (cf. 5: 6).

Christ, the slain Lamb

3. Such is the second element, broadly developed, of the canticle that we are commenting on: Christ, the slain Lamb. The four living creatures together with the 24 elders praise him with a song beginning with the acclamation: "Worthy are you, O Lord, to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain" (5: 9).

It is Christ, then, with his historical work of redemption, who is at the heart of the praise. Precisely for this reason, he is able to interpret the meaning of history, for it is he who "opens the seals" (cf. *ibid.*) of the secret scroll which contains the project willed by God.

4. His is not only a work of interpretation, but is likewise an act of fulfilment and liberation. As he has been "slain", he is able to "ransom" (*ibid.*) men and women coming from the most varied origins.

The Greek word used does not explicitly refer us to the history of the Exodus, where "ransoming" the Israelites is never spoken of; however, the continuation of the phrase makes a clear reference to the well-known promise made by God to the Israelites of Sinai: "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19: 6).

5. This promise has now become a reality: the Lamb has truly established for God "a kingdom and priests... who shall reign on earth" (cf. Rv 5: 10). The door of this kingdom is open to all humanity, called to form the community of the children of God, as St Peter reminds us: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (I Pt 2: 9).

The Second Vatican Council explicitly refers to these texts of the First Letter of Peter and of the Book of Revelation when, referring to the "common priesthood" that belongs to all the faithful, it points out the components to enable them to carry it out. "The faithful indeed, by virtue of their royal priesthood, participate in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise that priesthood, too, by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, abnegation and active charity (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 10).

6. The canticle of the Book of Revelation that we are meditating upon today draws to a close with a final acclamation raised by "thousands and thousands" of angels (cf. Rv 5: 11). It refers to the "slain Lamb", to whom is granted the same glory given to God the Father, because he is "worthy... to receive power and wealth, and wisdom and might" (Rv. 5: 12). This is the moment of pure contemplation, joyful praise, song of love to Christ in his Paschal Mystery.

This shining image of heavenly glory is anticipated in the liturgy of the Church. Indeed, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, the liturgy is an "action" of the *whole Christ* ("*Christus totus*"). Those who even now celebrate it on earth without signs are already in the heavenly liturgy, where celebration is totally communion and feast. "It is in this eternal liturgy that the Spirit and the Church enable us to participate whenever we celebrate the mystery of salvation in the sacraments" (n. 1139).

To English-speaking pilgrims

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience. I greet particularly the groups from England, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Malta and the United States of America. Wishing you a pleasant stay in Rome, I cordially invoke upon you joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

To special groups

I greet the *young people, sick people and newly-weds*.

Dear friends, we have just celebrated the Solemnity of All Saints and the Commemoration of All Souls, and tomorrow is the Memorial of St Charles Borromeo, especially dear to me. May these celebrations encourage each one of you to follow the example of the saints, who sacrificed their lives in the service of God and neighbour.
