



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 29 August 2001*

***The Lord, Creator of the World, protects his people***

***Canticle of Judith*** (16,1-2a.13-15)

1. The Canticle of praise we have just recited (*Jdt* 16,1-7) is attributed to Judith, a heroine who became the pride of all the women of Israel, because it was her mission to demonstrate the liberating power of God at a dark moment in the life of his people. The Liturgy of Lauds gives us only a few verses to recite. They invite us to celebrate, to sing with a full voice, play drums and cymbals, to praise the Lord "who crushes wars" (v. 2).

The last expression, which defines the true countenance of God, who loves peace, introduces us into the world of ideas in which the hymn was conceived. It was about a victory which the Israelites won in a totally amazing way, a work of God who intervened to rescue them from the prospect of an impending and total defeat.

2. The sacred author reconstructs the event several centuries later to offer his brothers and sisters in the faith, tempted to discouragement by a difficult situation, an example that can encourage them.

So he refers to what happened to Israel, when Nebuchadnezzar, irritated by this people's failure to cooperate with his expansionist plans and idolatrous claims, sent the general Holofernes with the specific order to subdue and annihilate them. No one would dare to resist him who claimed the honours of a god. His general, who shared his presumption, derided the warning he was given not to attack Israel, because it would amount to attacking God himself.

In reality, the sacred author wants to emphasize this principle, to confirm believers of his time in faithfulness to the God of the covenant: one must have confidence in God. The true enemy that Israel must fear, are not the powerful ones of the earth, but infidelity to the Lord. This is what deprives them of God's protection and makes them vulnerable. Otherwise, when they are faithful, the people can count on the power of God "wonderful in his power and unsurpassable" (v. 13).

3. The whole story of Judith splendidly illustrates this principle. The scene is that of the land of Israel now invaded by her enemies. From the canticle emerges the drama of the moment: "The Assyrian came down from the mountains of the north; he came with myriads of warriors; their multitude blocked up the valleys, their cavalry covered the hills" (v. 3). The canticle highlights with sarcasm the fleeting arrogance of the enemy: "He boasted that he would burn up my territory, and kill my young men with the sword, and dash my infants to the ground and seize my children as prey, and take my virgins as booty" (v. 4).

The situation described in the words of Judith is like others lived by Israel, in which salvation arrived when there seemed to be no way out. Was not the salvation of Exodus with its miraculous passage through the Red Sea also like this? Now too the siege by a powerful and numerous army removed all hope. But all this does but manifest the power of God, who is revealed as the invincible protector of his people.

4. The work of God appears even more gloriously since he did not rely on a warrior or an army. As happened before, in the time of Deborah, he eliminated Sisera through Jael, a woman (*Jgs* 4,17-21), now he makes use of an unarmed woman to come to the aid of his people in trouble. Strong in faith, Judith enters the enemy camp, charms the commander with her beauty and kills him in a humiliating way. The Canticle strongly underlines this fact: "The Lord Almighty has foiled them by the hand of a woman. For their mighty one did not fall by the hands of young men, nor did the sons of Titans smite him, nor did the tall giants set upon him: but Judith the daughter of Merari undid him with the beauty of her countenance" (*Jdt* 15,5-6).

Judith is example of woman's mission and prefiguration of Mary's cooperation in redemption. The person of Judith will become the archetype that would permit not just the Jewish tradition, but even the Christian tradition to emphasize God's preference for what is fragile and weak, but precisely, for this reason, chosen to manifest divine power. She is also an exemplary figure who showed the vocation and mission of the woman, called to be man's equal, and to play a significant role in the plan of God. Some of the expressions of the book of Judith will pass, more or less integrally into Christian tradition which sees in the Jewish heroine a prefiguration of Mary. Do we not hear an echo of the words of Judith, when Mary sings in the Magnificat: "He has put down the mighty from their thrones and has raised up the humble" (*Lk* 1,52). One can understand why the liturgical tradition common to Christians of the East and of the West loves to ascribe to Mary the Mother of Jesus, the praise given to Judith: "you are the exaltation of Jerusalem, you are the great glory of Israel, you are the great pride of our nation" (*Jdt* 15,9).

5. From the experience of the victory, the canticle of Judith ends with an invitation to raise a new song to God, acknowledging him as "great and glorious". At the same time, all creatures are admonished to remain subject to Him who with his word made everything and with his spirit fashioned it all. Who can resist the voice of God? Judith recalls it very forcefully: before the Creator and Lord of history, the mountains shall be shaken to their foundations and the rocks melt like wax (cf. *Jdt* 16,15). They are effective metaphors to recall that everything is "nothing" before the power of God. However the canticle of victory does not want to terrify, but to comfort. In fact, God puts his invincible power at the support of those who are faithful to him: "to those who fear you, you will continue to show mercy" (*Jdt* 16,15).

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I warmly welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present, especially those from England, Scotland, Canada, Japan and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of Jesus Christ our Saviour.