



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 11 December 2002

Show us O Lord your mercy

Canticle from the Book of Jeremiah (Jer 14,17-21)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The Prophet Jeremiah raises to heaven from within his own historical context a bitter and deeply felt song (14,17-21). We have just heard it recited as an invocation, which the *Liturgy of Lauds* presents to us on the day when we commemorate the Lord's death: Friday. The context in which this lamentation arises is represented by a scourge that often strikes the land of the Middle East: drought. However, with this natural disaster, the prophet interweaves another, the tragedy of war which is equally appalling: "If I walk out into the field, look! those slain by the sword; if I enter the city look! those consumed by hunger". Unfortunately, the description is tragically present in so many regions of our planet.

2. Jeremiah enters the scene with his face bathed in tears: he weeps uninterruptedly for "the daughter of his people", namely for Jerusalem. Indeed, according to a well-known biblical symbol, the city is represented with a feminine image, "the daughter of Zion". The prophet participates intimately in the "great destruction" and in the "incurable wound" of his people (v. 17). Often, his words are marked by sorrow and tears, because Israel does not allow herself to be involved in the mysterious message that suffering brings with it. In another passage, Jeremiah exclaims: "If you do not listen to this in your pride, I will weep in secret many tears; my eyes will run with tears for the Lord's flock, led away to exile" (13,17).

3. The reason for the prophet's heart-rending prayer is to be found, as has been said, in two tragic events: the sword and hunger, that is, war and famine (Jer 14,18). We are therefore in a tormented historical situation and the portrait of the prophet and the priest, guardians of the Lord's

Word who "wander about the land distraught" (*ibid.*) is striking.

The second part of the Canticle (cf. vv. 19-21) is no longer an individual lament in the first person singular, but a collective supplication addressed to God: "Why have you struck *us* a blow that cannot be healed?" (v. 19). In fact, in addition to the sword and hunger, there is a greater tragedy, that of the silence of God who no longer reveals himself and seems to have retreated into his heaven, as if disgusted with humanity's actions. The questions addressed to him are therefore tense and explicit in a typically religious sense: "Have you cast off Judah completely?", or "Is Zion loathsome to you?" (v. 19). Now they feel lonely and forsaken, deprived of peace, salvation and hope. The people, left to themselves, feel as if they were isolated and overcome by terror.

Isn't this existential solitude perhaps the profound source of all the dissatisfaction we also perceive in our day? So much insecurity, so many thoughtless reactions originate in our having abandoned God, the rock of our salvation.

4. Now comes the turning-point: the people return to God and raise an intense prayer to him. First of all, they recognize their own sin with a brief but heartfelt confession of guilt: "We recognize, O Lord, our wickedness,... that we have sinned against you" (v. 21). Thus God's silence was provoked by man's rejection. If the people will be converted and return to the Lord, God will also show himself ready to go out to meet and embrace them.

Finally, the prophet uses two fundamental words: "remember" and "covenant" (v. 21). God is asked by his people to "remember", that is, to return to the line of his generous kindness, which he had so often shown in the past with crucial interventions to save Israel. God is asked to remember that he bound himself to his people by a covenant of fidelity and love. Precisely because of this covenant, the people can be confident that the Lord will intervene to set them free and save them.

The commitment he assumed, the honour of his "name" and the fact that he was present in the temple, "the throne of his glory", impel God - after his judgement of sin and his silence - to draw close to his people once again to give them life, peace and joy.

With the Israelites, therefore, we too can be sure that the Lord will not give us up for good but, after every purifying trial, will return to make "his face to shine upon us, and be gracious to us ... and give us peace" as the priestly blessing mentioned in Numbers says (6,25-26).

5. To conclude, we can associate Jeremiah's plea with the moving exhortation that St Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in the third century, addressed to the Christians of that city. In a time of persecution, St Cyprian exhorted his faithful to implore the Lord. This prayer is not identical to the prophet's supplication for it does not include a confession of sin as the persecution is not so much a punishment for sin, but a participation in Christ's Passion. Nevertheless, it is as urgent an entreaty as Jeremiah's. St Cyprian writes, "What we must do is beg the Lord with united and

undivided hearts, without pause in our entreaty, with confidence that we shall receive, seeking to appease Him with cries and tears as befits those who find themselves amid the lamentations of the fallen and the trembling of the remnant still left, amidst the host of those who lie faint and savaged and the tiny band of those who stand firm. We must beg that peace be promptly restored, that help be quickly brought to our places of concealment and peril, that those things be fulfilled which the Lord vouchsafes to reveal to his servants: the restoration of His church, the certitude of our salvation, bright skies after rain, after darkness light, after wild storms a gentle calm. We must beg that the Father send his loving aid to his children, that God in his majesty perform now as he has so often His wonderful works" (cf. Letter 11,8 in *The Letters of St Cyprian of Carthage*, vol. I, p. 80, in the series *Ancient Christian Writers*, Newman Press, Ramsay, N.J. 1984).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I extend a special greeting to the Marist Brothers taking part in a programme of spiritual renewal: may your time in Rome confirm you in your service of the Lord and his Church. Upon all the English-speaking visitors I invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ, and I pray that this season of Advent will prepare you for a truly blessed celebration of Christmas.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

Finally, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. In the spiritual atmosphere of Advent, season of hope that prepares us for Christmas, Mary the expectant Virgin is especially present. I entrust you to her, dear *young people*, so that you can enthusiastically welcome Christ's invitation to realize fully his Kingdom. I urge you, dear *sick people*, to offer your suffering with Mary for the salvation of humanity. May the motherly intercession of Our Lady help you, dear *newly-weds*, to found your family on a faithful love that is open to welcoming life.