



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 24 September 2003

On Wednesday, 24 September, illness prevented the Holy Father from conducting the General Audience. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Secretary of State, standing in for the Pope, informed the faithful accordingly and read the Holy Father's Catechesis to them, while the Pope watched the proceedings on television. At the conclusion, a television link-up with Castel Gandolfo enabled the Holy Father to express his disappointment over not attending the Audience in person, and to impart his final blessing to the pilgrims present.

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,*

Due to an indisposition, the Holy Father is unable to be present at this General Audience. Let us pray for him together, confident that he will make a speedy recovery.

For his part, the Pope wants you to know that he is watching us on television, and at the end of this meeting, he will be connected via a television link-up so that he can speak to us. Let us thank him straightaway.

I will now read the text, as the Pope has requested, which he had prepared for this meeting, a commentary on Psalm 8 that extols the greatness of the Lord and the dignity of the human being. Here is the text of the Pope's Message:

Psalm 8

O Lord, our Lord!

1. In meditating on Psalm 8, a wonderful hymn of praise, we come to the end of our long journey through the Psalms and Canticles that make up the prayerful heart of the *Liturgy of Lauds*. In

these catecheses, we have reflected on 84 biblical prayers whose spiritual intensity we have especially tried to emphasize, without overlooking their poetic beauty.

Indeed, the Bible invites us to start our day with a hymn that not only proclaims the marvels wrought by God and our response of faith, but celebrates them with "music" (cf. Ps 47[46]: 8), that is, in a beautiful, luminous way, gentle and strong at the same time.

Psalm 8 is the most splendid example of all; in it, man, engulfed in night, feels like a grain of sand compared to infinity and the boundless space that arches above him, when the moon rises and the stars begin to twinkle in the vast expanse of the heavens (cf. v. 4).

2. In fact, in the middle of Psalm 8, a twofold experience is described. On the one hand, the human person feels almost overwhelmed by the grandeur of creation, "the work of the divine fingers". This curious phrase replaces the "works of the hands" of God (cf. v. 7), as if to suggest that the Creator had traced a drawing or an embroidery with the shining stars, casting them over the immensity of the firmament.

Yet on the other hand, God bends down to man and crowns him as his viceroy: "you crown him with glory and honour" (v. 6). Indeed, he entrusts the whole universe to this frail creature, so that he may draw from it knowledge and the means for his survival (cf. vv. 7-9).

The horizon of man's dominion over the other creatures is specified, as it were, recalling the opening page of Genesis: flocks, herds, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea were entrusted to man so that in giving them a name (cf. Gn 2: 19-20), he might discover their profound reality, respect it and transform it through work, perfecting it so that it might become a source of beauty and of life. The Psalm makes us aware of our greatness, but also of our responsibility for creation (cf. Wis 9: 3).

3. Reinterpreting Psalm 8, the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* discovered in it a deeper understanding of God's plan for humankind. The human vocation cannot be restricted to the "here and now" of the earthly world; if the Psalmist says that God has put *all things* under man's feet, this means that he also wants him to subdue "the world to come" (Heb 2: 5), the "kingdom that cannot be shaken" (12: 28). In short, man's call is a "heavenly call" (3: 1). God wants "[to bring] to glory" in heaven "many sons" (2: 10). In order for this divine plan to take place, God had to trace out the life of "a pioneer" (cf. *ibid.*), in which the human vocation could find its first complete fulfilment. This pioneer is Christ.

The author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* remarked on this subject that the Psalm's words apply in a privileged way to Christ, that is, more specifically to him than to other men. In fact, the Psalmist uses the verb "to make less", saying to God: "you made him for a little while lower than the angels, you crowned him with glory and honour" (cf. Ps 8: 6; Heb 2: 6). For ordinary people this verb is

inappropriate: they have not been "made lower" than the angels since they were never above them.

Instead, for Christ it is the right verb, because he was above the angels as the Son of God, and was made lower when he became man; then he was crowned with glory in his Resurrection. Thus, Christ fulfilled completely the vocation of man and, the author explains, he has done this "for every one" (Heb 2: 9).

4. In this light, St Ambrose comments on the Psalm and applies it to us. He starts with the sentence that describes the "crowning" of man: "you crown him with glory and honour" (v. 6). He sees in that glory, however, the reward that the Lord keeps in store for us, when we shall have overcome the test of temptation.

These are the words of this great Father of the Church in his *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam* [Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke]: "The Lord has also crowned his beloved with glory and magnificence. That God who desires to distribute crowns, procures temptations: thus, when you are tempted, know that he is preparing a crown for you. Abolish the heroic fight of the martyrs and you will abolish their crowns; abolish their suffering and you will abolish their blessedness" (cf. IV, 41: *SAEMO* 12, pp. 330-333).

God weaves that "crown of righteousness" for us (II Tm 4: 8) as the reward for our fidelity to him which we were able to preserve, even when storms batter our heart and mind. But in all seasons he is attentive to his beloved creature and wants the divine "image" to shine perpetually in him (cf. Gn 1: 26), so as to radiate a sign of harmony, light and peace in the world.

After the Catechesis, officials of the Secretariat of State summarized the homily in various languages and read the greetings prepared by the Holy Father to the pilgrims present.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, India, Indonesia, Australia, Canada, the Philippines and the United States of America. Upon all of you I cordially invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

As is customary, my thoughts now go to the young people, the sick and the newly-weds. Dear

young people, may you always be faithful to the Gospel ideal and carry it out in your daily activities. May you, dear *sick people*, entrust yourselves each day to the grace of the Lord to find strength in your trials. And may you, dear *newly-weds*, open your hearts to divine love, so that it may give vibrance to your family life.

The Holy Father then imparted his final blessing to the faithful, broadcast live on television from Castel Gandolfo.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I address my cordial greeting to you all. I am sorry that I was unable to be with you for our customary weekly meeting. I carry you all in my heart, and I bless you with affection.

Following John Paul II's Blessing via radio-television link-up, Cardinal Sodano greeted the Bishops, the sick and the faithful.