



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Castelgandolfo

Wednesday, 30 July 2003

Psalm 51[50]

"Have mercy on me, O God!"

1. For the fourth time during our reflections on the *Liturgy of Lauds*, we hear proclaimed Psalm 51[50], the famous *Miserere*. Indeed, it is presented anew to us on the Friday of every week, so that it may become an oasis of meditation in which we can discover the evil that lurks in the conscience and beg the Lord for purification and forgiveness. Indeed, as the Psalmist confesses in another supplication, "O Lord... no man living is righteous before you" (Ps 143[142]: 2). In the Book of Job we read: "How can man be righteous before God? How can he who is born of woman be clean? Behold, even the moon is not bright, and the stars are not clean in his sight; how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!" (25: 4-6).

These are strong, dramatic words that are intended to portray the full seriousness and gravity of the limitations and frailty of the human creature, his perverse capacity to sow evil and violence, impurity and falsehood. However, the message of hope of the *Miserere* which the Psalter puts on the lips of David, a converted sinner, is this: God can "blot out, wash and cleanse" the sin confessed with a contrite heart (cf. Ps 51[50]: 2-3). The Lord says, through the voice of Isaiah, even if "your sins are scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool" (Is 1: 18).

2. This time we will reflect briefly on the end of Psalm 51[50], a finale that is full of hope, for the person praying knows that God has forgiven him (cf. vv. 17-21). On his lips is praise of the Lord, which he is on the point of proclaiming to the world, thereby witnessing to the joy felt by the soul purified from evil, hence, freed from remorse (cf. v. 17).

The person praying witnesses clearly to another conviction, making a link with the teaching reiterated by the prophets (cf. Is 1: 10-17; Am 5: 21-25; Hos 6: 6): the most pleasing sacrifice that rises to the Lord like a fragrance, a pleasant odour (cf. Gn 8: 21), is not the holocaust of bulls and lambs, but rather of "the broken and contrite heart" (Ps 51[50]: 19).

The *Imitation of Christ*, a text so dear to the Christian spiritual tradition, repeats this same recommendation of the Psalmist: "Humble repentance for sins is the sacrifice that pleases you, its fragrance far sweeter than the smoke of incense.... It is there that one is purified and every evil washed away" (cf. III 52, 4).

3. The Psalm ends on an unexpected note in an utterly different perspective that even seems contradictory (cf. vv. 20-21). From the final supplication of a single sinner, it becomes a prayer for the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem, which takes us from the time of David to that of the city's destruction centuries later. Moreover, having voiced the divine rejection of animal sacrifices in v. 18, the Psalm proclaims in v. 21 that it is in these same burnt offerings that God will take delight.

It is clear that the last passage is a later addition, made at the time of the Exile and intended, in a certain sense, to correct or at least to complete the perspective of the Davidic Psalm on two points: on the one hand, it was not deemed fit that the entire Psalm be restricted to an individual prayer; it was also necessary to think of the grievous situation of the whole city. On the other hand, there was a desire to give a new dimension to the divine rejection of ritual sacrifices; this rejection could be neither complete nor definitive, for it was a cult that God himself had prescribed in the *Torah*. The person who completed the Psalm had a valid intuition: he grasped the needy state of sinners, their need for sacrificial mediation. Sinners cannot purify themselves on their own; good intentions are not enough. An effective external mediation is required. The New Testament was to reveal the full significance of this insight, showing that Christ, in giving his life, achieved a perfect sacrificial mediation.

4. In his *Homilies on Ezekiel*, St Gregory the Great shows a good understanding of the change of outlook that occurs between vv. 19 and 21 of the *Miserere*. He suggests an interpretation that we too can accept as a conclusion to our reflection. St Gregory applies v. 19, which speaks of a contrite heart, to the earthly life of the Church, and v. 21, which speaks of burnt offerings, to the Church in heaven.

Here are the words of that great Pontiff: "Holy Church has two lives: one that she lives in time, the other that she receives eternally; one with which she struggles on earth, the other that is rewarded in heaven; one with which she accumulates merits, the other that henceforth enjoys the merits earned. And in both these lives she offers a sacrifice: here below, the sacrifice of compunction, and in heaven above, the sacrifice of praise. Of the former sacrifice it is said: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit' (Ps 51[50]: 19); of the latter it is written: "Then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and in whole burnt offerings' (Ps 51[50]: 21).... In both, flesh is

offered, since the sacrifice of the flesh is the mortification of the body, up above; the sacrifice of the flesh is the glory of the resurrection in praise to God. In heaven, flesh will be offered as a burnt holocaust when it is transformed into eternal incorruptibility, and there will be no more conflict for us and nothing that is mortal, for our flesh will endure in everlasting praise, all on fire with love for him" (*Omelia su Ezechiele/2*, Rome 1993, p. 271).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I extend a special welcome to the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims here today, including the groups from Scotland, the Holy Land, Saint Lucia and the United States. May your visit to Castel Gandolfo and Rome bring you peace and hope. Upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Happy holidays!

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. I invite you, dear *young people*, to dedicate part of your summer holidays to meaningful experiences of solidarity. I hope that you, dear *sick people*, will benefit from this time of rest. May you, dear *newly-weds*, enjoy the serenity of your union during the holidays.