



The Holy See

POPE JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 3 December 1997

True face of Messiah gradually revealed

1. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). With this forceful and concise statement, the Evangelist John expresses the Incarnation event. He had just spoken of the Word, contemplating his eternal existence and describing it with the well-known words: "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn 1:1). This Johannine perspective, linking eternity to time, also includes Christ's mysterious journey *in the history that preceded him*.

His presence in our world began to be announced long before the Incarnation. The Word was in some way present in humanity's history from the very beginning. Through the Spirit, he prepared his coming as Saviour, secretly directing hearts to nurture expectation in hope. Traces of a hope of liberation are encountered in the various religious cultures and traditions.

2. But Christ is present in a particular way in the history of the people of Israel, the people of the Covenant. This history is specifically marked by the expectation of a Messiah, an ideal king, consecrated by God, who would fulfil the Lord's promise. As this orientation became gradually clearer, Christ progressively revealed the true face of the promised and longed-for Messiah, also allowing signs of acute suffering to be glimpsed against the background of a violent death (cf. Is 53:8). In fact, a certain messianic image, firmly established among some Jewish people, who expected a political liberator who would bring national autonomy and material well-being, came to a radical crisis when the prophecies were historically fulfilled in the scandal of the Cross.

3. In his earthly life, Jesus clearly shows his awareness of being the reference point for his people's history. To those who reproached him for claiming to be greater than Abraham by

promising that those who kept his word would never see death (cf. Jn 8:51), he replied: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad" (8:56). Abraham was thus oriented to Christ's coming. According to the divine plan, Abraham's joy at the birth of Isaac and at his rebirth after the sacrifice was a messianic joy: it announced and prefigured the ultimate joy that the Saviour would offer.

4. Other eminent figures of the Jewish people shine in their full value in the light of Christ. This is the case with Jacob, as can be seen in the Gospel account of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman.

The well which the ancient patriarch had left to his sons became, in Christ's words, a prefiguring of the water he would give, the water of the Holy Spirit, welling up to eternal life (cf. Jn 4:14).

Moses also announces some of the basic aspects of Christ's mission. As liberator of the people from their slavery in Egypt, he symbolically anticipates the true exodus of the New Covenant, constituted by the paschal mystery. As legislator of the Old Covenant, he prefigures Jesus who promulgates the Gospel Beatitudes and guides believers with the interior law of the Spirit. Even the manna that Moses gives the hungry people is a basic figure of God's definitive gift. "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world" (Jn 6:32-33). The Eucharist fulfils the meaning hidden in the gift of manna. Christ thus presents himself as the true and perfect fulfilment of what was symbolically foretold in the Old Covenant.

Another of Moses' acts has a prophetic value: to quench the thirst of the people in the desert, he makes water flow from the rock. On the "feast of Tabernacles", Jesus promises to quench humanity's spiritual thirst: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as Scripture says, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (Jn 7:37-38). The abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit announced by Jesus with the image of rivers of living water is prefigured in the water given by Moses. St Paul, in referring to this messianic event, also stresses the mysterious reference to Christ: "All drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:4).

Along with Abraham, Jacob and Moses, David also refers to Christ. He is aware that the Messiah will descend from him, and describes his ideal image. Christ fulfils this image at a transcendent level, affirming that David himself is mysteriously alluding to his authority when, in Psalm 110, he calls the Messiah "my Lord" (cf. Mt 22:45; par.).

From Old Testament history several characteristic features of Christ's face emerge, a face that is somehow "sketched" in the features of the persons who prefigured him.

5. Christ is not only present in these prefigurations, but also in the prophetic texts of the Old Testament that describe his coming and his saving work.

He is foretold in a particular way in the figure of the mysterious "descendant" of which Genesis speaks in the account of original sin, stressing his victory in the struggle with the enemy of humanity. The divine oracle promises to the man dragged down the path of evil the coming of another man, descended from the woman, who will bruise the serpent's head (Gn 3:15).

The prophetic poems of the Suffering Servant (Is 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) put before our eyes a liberator who begins to reveal the face of Christ in its moral perfection. It is the face of a man who expresses his messianic dignity in the humble condition of a servant. He offers himself in sacrifice to free humanity from the oppression of sin. He behaves in an exemplary way in his physical and especially moral sufferings, generously enduring injustices. As the fruit of his sacrifice, he receives a new life and obtains universal salvation.

His sublime conduct will be found again in Christ, the Son of God made man, whose humility reaches an unsurpassable height in the mystery of the Cross.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors. In particular I thank the Harlem Gospel Singers for their praise of God in song. May your visit to Rome, with its memorials of the Apostles Peter and Paul, strengthen your faith and trust in the Lord.

Upon all present I gladly invoke the joy and peace of Jesus Christ.

Copyright © Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana