



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 31 October 2001

Canticle in chapter 45 of the Book of Isaiah

"On the Mystery and Providence of God"

1. "Truly, you are a hidden God" (Is 45,15). The verse which introduces the Canticle prayed at Lauds on Friday of the 1st week of the Psalter, is taken from a meditation of the Deutero-Isaiah on the greatness of God manifested in creation and in history: a God who reveals himself, though he remains hidden in the impenetrability of his mystery. He is by definition "*the hidden God*". No thought can encompass him. Man can only contemplate his presence in the universe, discern his imprint and bow down in adoration and praise.

The meditation arises from the historical event of the amazing liberation that God wrought for his people at the time of the Babylonian exile. Who would ever have thought that the exiles of Israel would be able to return to their country? Considering the power of Babylon, they could easily have despaired. Yet there came the great announcement, the surprise of God, which vibrates in the words of the prophet: as at the time of the Exodus, God will intervene. If then he broke the resistance of Pharaoh with tremendous punishments, now he chooses a king, Cyrus of Persia, to defeat the power of Babylon and restore freedom to Israel.

2. "You are a God who hides yourself, God of Israel, the Saviour" (Is 45,15). With these words the prophet invites us to recognize that God intervenes in history, even if it is not immediately apparent. We could say that he acts "behind the scenes". He is the mysterious and invisible director, who respects the freedom of his creatures, but at the same time, holds in his hand the thread of world events. The certainty of the Providential action of God is a source of hope for the believer, who knows he can count on the constant presence of Him, "who has formed the earth

and made it, he established it" (Is 45,18).

Indeed, the creative act is not an episode that is lost in the night of time, so that the world, after that beginning, must be considered as abandoned to itself. God continually brings into being the creation that came from his hands. To acknowledge him is to confess his uniqueness: "Was it not I, the Lord? Outside of me there is no other God" (Is 45,21). God is by definition the only God. Nothing can be compared with him. Everything is subject to him. From here follows the repudiation of idolatry, for which the prophet pronounces harsh words: "They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep praying to a god that cannot save" (Is 45,20). How can we bow down in adoration before a human product?

3. For our present day sensitivity this polemic might seem exaggerated, as if it were criticising the images themselves, without realizing that they might have a symbolic value, which is compatible with the spiritual adoration of the one God. Certainly, what comes into play is the wise divine pedagogy which, by the rigid discipline of the exclusion of images, historically protected Israel from polytheistic contamination. The Church, basing herself on the face of God manifested in the Incarnation of Christ, recognised in the Second Council of Nicea (787) the possibility of using sacred images, provided they are understood in their essentially relational value.

The prophetic admonition retains its importance in view of all the forms of idolatry, not consisting in the improper use of images, but rather often hidden in the attitudes with which men and things are considered as absolute values that are substituted for God himself.

4. On the side of creation, the hymn places us within history, where Israel often did experience the beneficent and merciful power of God, his fidelity and his providence. Particularly, the love of God for his people appears again in such an open and striking way in setting them free from exile that the prophet calls to witness it the "survivors of the nations". He invites them to debate, if they can: "Assemble yourselves and come, draw near together you survivors of the nations" (Is 45,20). The prophet concludes that the intervention of the God of Israel is indisputable.

Then a magnificent universalist perspective emerges. God proclaims: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth, because I am God and there is no other" (Is 45,22). So it becomes clear that the predilection which God has shown Israel as his people is not an act of exclusion, but rather an act of love from which all of humanity is destined to benefit.

Hence, we find outlined in the Old Testament the "sacramental" concept of the history of salvation, which, does not see in the special election of the sons of Abraham and later of the disciples of Christ in the Church, a privilege which does not mean to "close" or "exclude", but the sign and instrument of a universal love.

5. The invitation to adore and the offer of salvation is directed to all peoples: "To me every knee

shall bow, every tongue shall swear" (Is 45,23). To read these words from a Christian perspective means to go in thought to the full revelation of the New Testament, which points out in Christ "the Name which is above every other name" (Phil 2,9), so that "at the name of Jesus, every knee must bend, in heaven, on earth and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2,10-11).

Through this hymn, our morning praise acquires a universal dimension and speaks in the name of those who have not yet had the grace to know Christ. It is a praise which becomes "missionary", forcing us to travel to every corner of the globe, announcing that God has revealed himself in Jesus as Saviour of the world.

At the end of the commentary, the Holy Father addressed the pilgrims in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Czech, Slovenian, Croatian, and Italian. To the English pilgrims he said:

I offer a warm welcome to the priests taking part in the Institute for Continuing Theological Education at the Pontifical North American College. May your studies near the tombs of the Apostles deepen your love of the Lord and enrich your ministry to his people. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Ireland, Sweden and the United States, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.