



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 27 February 2002

Canticle of thanksgiving after nightmare of illness

Canticle of King Hezekiah in Isaiah, chapter 38.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. In the various canticles that it combines with the Psalms, the *Liturgy of the Hours* offers us a hymn of thanksgiving with the title: "The Canticle of Hezekiah, King of Judah, after he had been sick and recovered from his sickness" (Is 38,9). It is found in a section of the book of the prophet Isaiah that is given to historical narratives (cf. Is 36-39), whose histories repeat, with few variants, those presented in the *Second Book of Kings* (cf. chapters 18-20).

Following the liturgy of Lauds, today we have heard and used for our prayer two strophes of the Canticle that describe the two typical movements of the prayer of thanksgiving: first, one evokes the nightmare of suffering from which the Lord has freed his faithful one, and second, one joyfully sings in thanksgiving for the recovery of life and salvation.

King Hezekiah, a just ruler and friend of the prophet Isaiah, was struck down by a serious illness, that the prophet Isaiah said to be mortal (Is 38,1). "Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, and said "Remember Lord I beseech you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight". Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: "Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer and have seen your tears; behold I will add fifteen years to your life!" (Is 38,2-5).

2. At this point the canticle of thanksgiving bursts from the heart of the king. As I said earlier, he first looks to the past. According to the ancient conception of Israel, death introduced one into a subterranean existence, in Hebrew *Sheol*, where light was put out, life faded away and became almost ghostlike, time came to a halt, hope was extinguished, and above all there was no longer any possibility of calling upon God and meeting him in worship.

This is why Hezekiah recalled first of all the words full of bitterness that he spoke when his life was sliding towards the frontier of death: "I shall not see the Lord in the land of the living" (v. 11). The Psalmist also prayed this way on the day of his sickness: "No one among the dead remembers you, O Lord. Who sings your praises in Sheol?" (Ps 6,6). Instead, freed from the danger of death, Hezekiah could confirm forcefully and joyfully: "The living, the living, give you thanks as I do this day" (Is 38,19).

3. On this subject, the Cantic of Hezekiah takes a new tone, if read in the light of Easter. Already in the Old Testament, great flashes of light were reflected in the psalms, when the one praying proclaimed his certainty that "you will not abandon me to Sheol, nor let your faithful one see corruption. You will show me the path of life, fullness of joy in your presence, at your right hand rejoicing without end" (Ps 15[16], 10-11; cf. Ps 48[49] and 72[73]). For his part, the author of the Book of *Wisdom* no longer hesitates to affirm that the hope of the righteous is "full of immortality" (Wis 3,4), because he is convinced that the experience of communion with God lived during the earthly life will not be broken. We will remain always beyond death, sustained and protected by the eternal and infinite God, because the "souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them" (Wis 3,1).

Above all, with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, a seed of eternity was planted and made grow in our mortal perishability, which is why we can repeat the words of the Apostle, based on the Old Testament: "And when that which is corruptible clothes itself with incorruptibility and that which is mortal clothes itself with immortality, then the word that is written shall come about: "Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, o death, is your victory? Where, o death, is your sting?" " (I Cor 15,54-55; cf. Is 25,8; Hos 13,14).

4. However, the canticle of King Hezekiah also invites us to reflect on the fragility of the creature. The images are thought-provoking. Human life is described with the nomadic symbol of the tent: We are always pilgrims and guests on earth. It also refers to images of cloth, that is woven and can remain incomplete when the thread is cut and the work is interrupted (cf. Is 38,12). The Psalmist feels the same sensation: "You have given my days a very short span; my life is as nothing before you. All mortals are but a breath. Mere shadows, we go our way; mere vapour our restless pursuits" (Ps 38[39],6-7). We should recover an awareness of our limitations, knowing that "seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty, if we are strong; most of them are sorrow or toil; they pass quickly, we are all but gone", as the Psalmist says again (Ps 89 [90],10).

5. Therefore, in the day of sickness and suffering, it is right to raise one's lament to God, as Hezekiah teaches us; using poetic images, he describes his weeping as the chirping of a swallow and the moaning of a dove (cf. Is 38,124). And, even if he doesn't hesitate to admit that he feels that God is an adversary, almost like a lion that breaks all his bones (cf. v. 13), he does not cease to invoke him: "O Lord, I am in straits; be my surety!" (v. 14).

The Lord is not indifferent to the tears of the one who suffers, and he responds, consoles and saves, although not always in ways that coincide with what we expect. It is what Hezekiah confesses at the end, encouraging all to hope, to pray, to have confidence, with the certainty that God will not abandon his creatures: "The Lord is our saviour; we shall sing to stringed instruments in the house of the Lord all the days of our life" (v. 20).

6. The medieval Latin tradition conserves a spiritual commentary on the canticle of King Hezekiah by one of the most important mystics of Western monasticism, St Bernard of Clairvaux. It is the third of his *Various Sermons*. In it, Bernard, applying to the life of each one the drama lived by the ruler of Judah, and internalizing his experience, writes: "*I will bless the Lord at all times, namely from morning until evening, as I have learned to do, and not like those who only praise you when you do good to them, nor like those who believe for a certain time, but in the hour of temptation give way; but with the saints I will say: If we received good things from the hand of God, should we not also accept evil things? ... Thus both these moments of the day will be a time of service to God, because at night there will be weeping, and in the morning, joy. I will submerge myself in suffering at night so that I can then enjoy the happiness of the morning*" (*Scriptorium Claravallense, Sermo III, n. 6, Milan 2000, pp. 59-60*).

Thus, St Bernard reads the prayer of the king as representing the prayerful song of the Christian should have the same constancy and serenity in the darkness of the night and of trial, and in the light of day and of joy.

After the commentary the Holy Father greeted the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors. At the end he greeted young persons, the sick and the newly-weds.

I gladly offer warm greetings to the English-speaking visitors present today. I express my encouragement to the groups of priests and religious who are following courses of continuing education. Upon all of you, especially the pilgrims from Denmark, Norway, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kuwait, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Holy Father concluded the audience with greetings and best wishes for the young persons, the sick and the newly-weds who were there. He urged all to continue on their Lenten journey,

docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, who is leading us in the footsteps of Christ to Jerusalem where he will accomplish his redemptive mission. We have to let him re-shape us with his grace so that in school, in sickness, or in family life we can experience the richness of the journey of conversion and penitence that we are living in this holy season.