



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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God is our strength in the storms of life

Psalm 92 [93]

1. The essential content of Psalm 92 [93] on which we are reflecting today is evocatively expressed by some verses of the Hymn in the Liturgy of the Hours for Vespers of Monday: "O, immense Creator who, in the harmony of the cosmos laid out a path and a limit for the pounding waves of the sea, you gave to the harsh deserts of the parched earth the refreshment of rivers and seas".

Before entering the heart of the Psalm with its powerful image of the waters, let us understand its basic tone, the literary genre that supports it. In fact, our Psalm, like the following Psalms 95-98, is described by Bible scholars as "a song acclaiming Our Lord the King". It exalts the Kingdom of God, the source of peace, truth and love, which we pray for in the "Our Father" when we implore: "Thy Kingdom come!".

Indeed, Psalm 92 [93] opens precisely with a joyful acclamation: "The Lord reigns!" (v. 1). The Psalmist celebrates the active kingship of God, that is, his effective and saving action which creates the world and redeems man. The Lord is not an impassive emperor relegated to his distant heavens, but is present among his people as Saviour, powerful and great in love.

2. The Lord, the King, occupies the first part of this hymn of praise. Like a sovereign, he is seated on a throne of glory, a throne that is indestructible and eternal (cf. v. 2). His mantle is the splendour of transcendence, the belt of his robe is omnipotence (cf. v. 1). The omnipotent sovereignty of God is revealed at the heart of the Psalm, which compares it to the striking image of

turbulent waters.

The Psalmist mentions in particular the "voice" of the rivers, in other words, the roaring of their waters. Actually, the thundering of great waterfalls produces a sensation of tremendous force in those whose ears are deafened and whose whole body is seized with trembling. Psalm 41 [42] evokes the same sensation when it says: "Deep is calling on deep, in the roar of waters; your torrents and all your waves swept over me" (v. 8). The human being feels small before this natural force. The Psalmist, however, uses it as a trampoline to exalt the power of the Lord, which is greater by far. The triple repetition of the words: "have lifted up" (cf. Ps 92 [93], 3) their voice, is answered by the triple affirmation of the superior might of God.

3. The Fathers of the Church like to comment on this Psalm by applying it to Christ, "Lord and Saviour". Origen, translated into Latin by St Jerome, says: "The Lord reigns, he is robed in beauty. That is, he who formerly trembled in the misery of the flesh, now shines in the majesty of divinity". For Origen, the rivers and waters that lift up their voices represent the "authoritative figures of the prophets and the apostles" who "proclaim the praise and glory of the Lord and announce his judgements for the whole world (cf. 74 *omelie sul libro dei Salmi*, Milan 1993, pp. 666; 669).

St Augustine develops the symbol of the torrents and oceans even further. Like swollen rivers in full spate, that is, filled with the Holy Spirit and strengthened, the Apostles are no longer afraid and finally raise their voice. However, "when many voices begin to announce Christ, the sea starts to get rough". In the ebb and flow of the ocean of the world, Augustine says, the little barque of the Church seems to rock fearfully, menaced by threats and persecutions, but "the Lord is full of wonder on high"; he "walked upon the waters of the sea and calmed the waves" (*Esposizioni sui salmi*, III, Rome 1976, p. 231).

4. Yet God, sovereign of all things, almighty and invincible, is always close to his people, to whom he imparts his teachings. This is the idea that Psalm 92 [93] expresses in the last verse: the highest throne of the heavens is succeeded by the throne of the ark of the temple of Jerusalem, the power of God's cosmic voice is replaced by the sweetness of his holy and infallible words: "Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, for ever more" (v. 5).

Thus ends a short hymn, but one with real prayerful breadth. It is a prayer that instils confidence and hope in the faithful who often feel restless, afraid of being overwhelmed by the storms of history and struck by dark, impending forces.

An echo of this Psalm can be detected in the Apocalypse of John when the inspired author, describing the great gathering in heaven that is celebrating the fall of oppressive Babylon says: "I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, "Alleluia! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns"" (19,6).

5. Let us end our reflection on Psalm 92 [93] by listening to the words of St Gregory of Nazianzus, "the theologian" *par excellence* among the Fathers: We do so through one of his beautiful poems in which praise to God, Sovereign and Creator, acquires a Trinitarian dimension: "You, [Father], have created the universe, giving everything its rightful place and preserving it through your providence.... Your Word is God the Son: indeed, he is consubstantial with the Father, equal to him in honour. He has harmoniously tuned the universe to reign over all things. And in embracing them all, the Holy Spirit, God, safeguards and cares for all things. I will proclaim You, the living Trinity, the one and only monarch ... steadfast strength that sustains the heavens, a gaze inaccessible to our sight but which contemplates the whole universe and penetrates every secret depth of the earth to its abysses. O Father, be good to me: ... may I find mercy and grace, because glory and grace are to you to the age without end" (*Carm.* 31 in *Poesie/1*, Rome 1994, pp. 65-66).

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking pilgrims present at this Audience, and I offer a special word of thanks to the choirs and to the Virginia Youth Symphony Orchestra for their praise of God in music. Upon all of you, particularly the visitors from England, Ireland, Scotland, Canada and the United States of America, I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.