



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 25 September 2002

Psalm 84 [85]

"Show us, O Lord, your Mercy; grant ... salvation"

1. Psalm 84 [85], which we have just heard sung, is a joyful hymn full of hope in the future of our salvation. It reflects the happy moment of Israel's return from the Babylonian Exile to the land of the fathers. The life of the nation begins again in that beloved homeland, burnt-out and destroyed in the conquest of Jerusalem by the army of King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.

Indeed, in the original Hebrew of the Psalm one hears repeated the verb *shûb*, which refers to the return of the deported but it also means a spiritual "return", or a "conversion". The rebirth, therefore, does not only refer to the nation, but also to the community of the faithful who regarded the exile as a punishment for the sins they had committed, and now see their repatriation and new freedom as a divine blessing that is the result of their conversion.

2. We can follow the Psalm in its development according to two fundamental stages. The first is articulated by the subject of "return", with the two meanings we mentioned.

Israel's physical return is celebrated first of all. "Lord ... you did restore the fortunes of Jacob" (v. 2); "Restore us again, O God of our salvation.... Will you not revive us again?" (vv. 5.7). This is a precious gift of God, who is concerned to deliver his People from oppression and promotes their prosperity. Indeed, you "love all things that exist ... spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord who love the living" (cf. Wis 11,24.26).

However, besides this "return" that concretely unifies those who were scattered, there is another more interior and spiritual "return". The Psalmist allows it ample room, attributing a special importance to it that applies not only to ancient Israel, but to the faithful of all time.

3. In this "return" the Lord acts effectively, revealing his love in forgiving the iniquity of his People, pardoning all their sins, withdrawing all his wrath and putting an end to his anger (cf. Ps 84[85],3-4).

In fact, their deliverance from evil, the pardon of their faults and the purification of sins create the new People of God. This is expressed in an invocation that has also entered the Christian liturgy: "Show us, O Lord, your mercy and grant us your salvation" (v. 8).

However, to the "return" of God who forgives must correspond the "return", that is, the "conversion", of the one who repents. In fact, the Psalm says that peace and salvation are offered "to those who turn to him in their hearts" (v. 9). Those who set out with determination on the path of holiness receive the gifts of joy, freedom and peace.

It is well known that biblical terms for sin often refer to a mistaken direction, a missed goal, a deviation from the straight path. Conversion is, precisely, a "return" to the straight road that leads to the house of the Father who waits to embrace us, pardon us and make us happy (cf. Lk 15,11-32).

4. Thus we come to the second part of the Psalm (cf. Ps 84[85],10-14), so dear to Christian tradition. It describes a new world in which God's love and his faithfulness embrace each other as if they were persons. Similarly, justice and peace meet and kiss each other. Truth sprouts up as if in a new springtime and justice, which for the Bible also means salvation and holiness, appears from heaven to begin its journey in the midst of humanity.

All the virtues, at first expelled from the earth by sin, now re-enter history and meet, drawing the map of a world of peace. Mercy, truth, justice and peace become the four cardinal points of this geography of the spirit. Isaiah also sings: "Let justice descend, O heavens, like dew from above, like gentle rain let the skies drop it down. Let the earth open and salvation bud forth; let justice also spring up. I, the Lord, have created this" (Is 45,8).

5. The Psalmist's words, already in the second century, were re-read by St Irenaeus of Lyons as a proclamation of the "generation of Christ from the Virgin" (*Adversus haereses*, III, 5, 1). Indeed, Christ's coming is the source of mercy, the springing up of truth, the flowering of justice, the splendour of peace.

For this reason, especially in the last part, the Psalm is reread by Christian tradition in terms of Christmas. This is how St Augustine interprets it in a discourse for Christmas. Let us allow him to conclude our reflection. ""Truth, then, is sprung out of the earth: Christ who said, 'I am the truth', is born of a virgin. And justice looked down from heaven: man, believing in him who has been born, has been justified not by himself, but by God. Truth is sprung out of the earth, for the Word was made flesh. And justice looked down from heaven, for every best gift, and every perfect gift, is

from above. Truth is sprung out of the earth - flesh born of Mary. And justice looked down from heaven, for a man cannot receive anything, unless it be given him from heaven" (*Discorsi*, IV/1, Rome 1984, p. 11; Sermon 185, [Roman Breviary, 24 December, Second Reading]).

The Holy Father then summed up his catechesis and greeted the pilgrims and visitors in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Polish and Italian. To the Polish he mentioned the arrest in 1953 of the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński.

I am pleased to greet the Felician Sisters meeting in Rome for their Biennial Assembly, as well as the Missionary Benedictine Sisters taking part in a Week of Encounter. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Australia and the United States, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To the Polish-speaking

Today is the 49th anniversary of the arrest by the Communist regime of the Servant of God Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, Primate of the Millennium, on 25 September 1953. It was an act of persecution against the Church.

Today we speak of the Psalms. Perhaps what they express is expressed by the short psalm "Laudate Dominum" that was sung at the end of Benediction. I remember that we sang it in Poland, in Wadowice during Vespers.

"Praise the Lord all you nations, praise him all you peoples, for his mercy is confirmed upon us and his truth remains forever. Glory to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit ...".