



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 30 October 2002

The Lord will Judge with Justice

Canticle of the Book of Isaiah, chapter 33

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. We find the brief text proclaimed today among the biblical Canticles that are interwoven with the Psalms in the *Liturgy of Lauds*. It is taken from the 33rd chapter of the *Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, his extensive and wonderful collection of divine oracles.

In the verses that precede those quoted (cf. vv. 10-12), the canticle begins by proclaiming God's powerful and glorious entry onto the stage of human history: "'Now I will arise', says the Lord, 'now I will lift myself up; now I will be exalted'" (v. 10). God's words are addressed to those who are "far off" and to those who are "near", that is, to all the nations of the earth, even the most remote, and to Israel, the people "close" to the Lord, because of the Covenant (cf. v. 13).

Another passage of the Book of Isaiah says: "I will place on my lips: Peace, peace, to the far and to the near, says the Lord; and I will heal them" (Is 57,19). Now, instead, the Lord's words grow harsh and acquire the tone of judgement on the evil of both the "far off" and the "near".

2. In fact see how immediately after, fear spreads among the inhabitants of Zion in whom sin and wickedness have taken root (Is 33,14). They are conscious of living alongside the Lord who dwells in the temple, who has chosen to walk with them through history and has transformed himself into the "Emmanuel", "God-with-us" (cf. Is 7,14). But the just and holy Lord cannot tolerate unholiness, corruption, injustice. As a "consuming fire" and "everlasting flame" (Is 33,14), he lashes out against evil to destroy it.

Isaiah had already warned in chapter 10: "The light of Israel will become a fire, and his Holy One a flame; and it will burn and devour" (v. 17). The psalmist also sang: "As wax melts before fire, so the wicked will perish before God" (Ps 67,3). In the context of the economy of the Old Testament, this means that God is not indifferent to good and evil and shows himself to be indignant and angry in the face of wickedness.

3. Our Canticle does not end with this dark scene of judgement. On the contrary, its principal and most intense part is devoted to holiness, received and lived as a sign of the conversion and of reconciliation brought about with God. In continuity with some Psalms, such as 14 and 23, that bring to light the conditions the Lord requires for living in joyful communion with him in the liturgy of the temple, Isaiah lists six moral duties for the true believer who is faithful and just (cf. Is 33,15) and can dwell unharmed in the divine fire, that is for him a source of benefits.

The first duty consists of "walking in justice", that is, of seeing divine law as the lamp that lights the path of life. The second one coincides with loyal and sincere speech, the sign of correct and genuine social relations. As the third duty, Isaiah suggests "spurning what is gained by oppression", thus combatting the oppression of the poor, as well as unjust riches. The believer then is determined to condemn political and judicial corruption, "brushing his hands free of contact with a bribe", a provocative image that illustrates the refusal of gifts made to deflect the application of the law and the course of justice.

4. The fifth moral duty is expressed with the meaningful gesture of "stopping your ears", when acts of bloodshed or of violence to be performed are proposed. The sixth and last commitment is expressed with an image which at first sight we find disconcerting. When we speak of "turning a blind eye", we want to say "to pretend not to see so as not to have to intervene"; instead, the prophet says that the honest person "closes his eyes in order not to see evil" as a sign of his complete refusal to have anything to do with evil.

In his commentary on Isaiah, St Jerome develops this concept with a reflection that takes in the entire passage: "Every iniquity, oppression and injustice is a decision for bloodshed: if one does not kill with the sword, one kills by intention "and shuts one's eyes, to blot out the evil": happy the conscience that does not listen to nor contemplate evil! Whoever is like this will dwell "on high", that is, in the Kingdom of Heaven, or in the highest cavern of the soundest Rock, in Christ Jesus" (*In Isaiam prophetam*, 10,33: *PL* 24, 437, p. 367).

Thus Jerome introduces us to a correct understanding of that "closing of the eyes" referred to by the Prophet: it is an invitation to reject absolutely any complicity with evil. As it is easy to perceive, the principal senses of the body are challenged: indeed, the hands, feet, eyes, ears and tongue are involved in human moral behaviour.

5. Whoever chooses to follow this path of honesty and justice will have access to the temple of the

Lord where he will receive the security of the exterior and interior well-being which God gives to those who are in communion with Him. The Prophet uses two images to describe this happy ending (cf. v. 16): security in impregnable fortresses and the abundance of bread and water, symbols of the prosperous and happy life.

Tradition has spontaneously interpreted the symbol of water as an image of Baptism (cf. for example, the *Letter of Barnabas*, 11,5), whereas the bread is transfigured, for Christians, into the sign of the Eucharist. This is what we read, for example, in the commentary of St Justin the Martyr, who sees Isaiah's words as prophesying the Eucharistic "bread", the "memorial" of Christ's redeeming death (cf. *Dialogo con Trifone*, Paoline 1988, p. 242; *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 70, p. 262, CUA Press, 1948).

After his commentary on the Canticle, the Holy Father then greeted the pilgrims and gave a summary of his commentary in the major European languages.

To English-speaking pilgrims and visitors:

I extend a warm welcome to the priests of the Institute for Continuing Theological Education at the Pontifical North American College. I also greet the delegation from the Port Authority Police Department of New York and New Jersey, who honour their fellow officers who gave their lives in last year's terrorist attack on New York City. Upon all the English-speaking visitors, especially those from England, Ireland, Canada and the United States, I invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

To Italians:

I cordially greet the Italian pilgrims, particularly, the deacons from the Diocese of Milan. Dear friends, I urge you to build your life on the Word of God, in order to be its courageous heralds to the people of our time.

I also greet the volunteer doctors and dentists who assist the Comboni Missionaries in their work with emigrants and refugees.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds:

Lastly I greet the young people, the sick and the newly-weds.

May the upcoming celebrations of the Solemnity of All-Saints and the Commemoration of All-Souls motivate the faithful to think about the final and decisive realities that await us.

Dear young people, pursue as your primary goal holiness of life in order to prepare a future filled with every good thing.

Dear sick people, may the example of virtue of the saints and their intercession help you face with courage the trials of life.

Dear newly-weds, may the thought of our heavenly homeland, to which we are called, direct your family to fidelity to Christ and to the full and mutual communion of love.