



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 2 April 2003

42nd chapter of the Book of Isaiah

"Sing to the Lord a new song!"

1. In the Book that bears the Prophet Isaiah's name, scholars have identified various voices all of which are placed under the patronage of this great prophet who lived in the eighth century B.C. This is the case with the vigorous hymn of joy and victory that has just been proclaimed as part of the *Liturgy of Lauds* of the Fourth Week. Exegetes refer to it as the so-called "Second Isaiah", a prophet who lived in the sixth century B.C., at the time of the return of the Hebrews from the Babylonian Exile. The hymn begins with an appeal to "sing to the Lord a new song" (cf. Is 42: 10), as in other Psalms (cf. 95[96]: 1 and 97[98]: 1).

The "newness" of the song that the Prophet invites the Hebrews to sing certainly refers to the unfolding horizon of freedom, a radical turning-point in the history of a people which experienced oppression and exile in a foreign land (cf. Ps 136[137]).

2. In the Bible, "newness" often has the flavour of a perfect and definitive reality. It is almost the sign of the beginning of an era of saving fullness that seals humanity's tormented history. The Canticle of Isaiah has this exalted tone that is well suited to Christian prayer.

The whole world, including the earth, sea, coastlands, deserts and cities, is invited to sing to the Lord a "new song" (cf. Is 42: 10-12). All space is involved, even its furthest horizons that also contain the unknown, and its vertical dimension, which rises from the desert plain, the dwelling place of the nomadic tribes of Kedar (cf. Is 21: 16-17), and soars to the mountains. High up, in the territory of the Edomites, we can locate the city of Sela which many people have identified with Petra, a city placed between the rocky peaks.

All the Earth's inhabitants are invited to become like an immense choir to acclaim the Lord with exultation and to give him glory.

3. After the solemn invitation to sing (cf. vv. 10-12), the Prophet brings the Lord onto the scene, represented as the God of the Exodus, who has set his people free from slavery in Egypt: "The Lord goes forth like a mighty man, like a warrior" (v. 13). He sows terror among his foes, who oppress others and commit injustice.

The Canticle of Moses also portrays the Lord during the Red Sea crossing as a "man of war", ready to stretch out his right hand and destroy the enemy (cf. Ex 15: 3-8). With the return of the Hebrews from the deportation to Babylon, a new exodus is about to take place, and the faithful must be assured that history is not at the mercy of destiny, chaos or oppressive powers: the last word rests with God who is just and strong. The Psalmist had already sung: "Grant us help against the foe, for vain is the help of man!" (Ps 59[60]: 13).

4. Having entered on the scene, the Lord speaks and his vehement words (cf. Is 42: 14-16) combine judgement and salvation. He begins by recalling that "for a long time" he has "held [his] peace": in other words, he has not intervened. The divine silence is often a cause of perplexity to the just, and even scandalous, as Job's long lamentation attests (cf. Jb 3: 1-26). However, it is not a silence that suggests absence as if history had been left in the hands of the perverse, or the Lord were indifferent and impassive. In fact, that silence gives vent to a reaction similar to a woman in labour who gasps and pants and screams with pain. It is the divine judgement on evil, presented with images of aridity, destruction, desert (cf. v. 15), which has a living and fruitful result as its goal.

In fact, the Lord brings forth a new world, an age of freedom and salvation. The eyes of the blind will be opened so that they may enjoy the brilliant light. The path will be levelled and hope will blossom (cf. v. 16), making it possible to continue to trust in God and in his future of peace and happiness.

5. Every day the believer must be able to discern the signs of divine action even when they are hidden by the apparently monotonous, aimless flow of time. As a highly-esteemed modern Christian author has written: "The earth is pervaded by a cosmic ecstasy: in it is an eternal reality and presence which, however, usually sleeps under the veil of habit. Eternal reality must now be revealed, as in an epiphany of God, through all that exists" (R. Guardini, *Sapienza dei Salmi*, Brescia, 1976, p. 52).

Discovering this divine presence, with the eyes of faith, in space and time but also within ourselves, is a source of hope and confidence, even when our hearts are agitated and shaken "as the trees of the forest shake before the wind" (Is 7: 2). Indeed, the Lord enters the scene to govern and to judge "the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth" (Ps 95[96]: 13).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I am pleased to welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Denmark and the United States. Upon you and your families, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

Lastly, my thoughts turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and *newly-weds*.

May the Lenten journey on which we have set out on our way to Easter, help you, dear *young people*, to gain a conscious and mature faith in Christ; may it increase in you, dear *sick people*, hope in the crucified Jesus, our support and comfort in trial; may it help you, dear *newly-weds*, to make your life a daily school of faithful and generous love.