



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 14 January 2004

Canticle in the First Letter of Peter

Our Lord's glorious Passion as foreseen at his Baptism in the River Jordan

1. Today, after the interval for the Christmas festivities, we continue with our meditation on the liturgy of Vespers. The Canticle just proclaimed, taken from the First Letter of Peter, is a meditation on the redemptive Passion of Christ, foretold already at the moment of his Baptism in the Jordan.

As we heard last Sunday, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, Jesus reveals himself from the very beginning of his public life to be the "beloved Son" with whom the Father was well pleased (cf. Lk 3: 22), the true "Servant of Yahweh" (cf. Is 42: 1) who freed man from sin through his Passion and death on the Cross.

The *Letter of Peter* quoted above, in which the fisherman of Galilee describes himself as a "witness of the sufferings of Christ" (5: 1), is full of references to the Passion. Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb without blemish whose precious blood was poured out for our redemption (cf. 1: 18-19). He is the living stone rejected by men but chosen by God as the "cornerstone" that gives coherence to the "spiritual house", in other words, the Church (cf. 2: 6-8). He is the righteous one who sacrifices himself for the unrighteous in order to bring them back to God (cf. 3: 18-22).

2. Our attention is now focused on the profile of Christ that is outlined in the passage we have heard (cf. 2: 21-24). He is the model for us to contemplate and imitate, the "programme", as it says in the original Greek (cf. 2: 21), to put into practice, the example to follow without hesitation, conforming ourselves to his decisions.

In fact, use is made of the Greek word of *sequela* [following], of discipleship, setting out in the very footsteps of Jesus. And the Teacher's footsteps take a steep and demanding path, just as we read in the Gospel: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk 8: 34).

At this point the Petrine hymn sketches a wonderful synthesis of the Passion of Christ, modelled on the words and images of Isaiah, applied to the figure of the Suffering Servant (cf. Is 53) and reinterpreted in the Messianic key of the ancient Christian tradition.

3. This hymn that tells the history of the Passion consists in four negative (cf. I Pt 2: 22-23a) and three positive declarations (cf. 2: 23b-24), in which it describes the fortitude of Jesus in that terrible and grandiose event.

It begins with the twofold affirmation of his absolute innocence in the words of Isaiah 53: 9: "He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips" (I Pt 2: 22). This statement is followed by two further considerations on his exemplary behaviour, inspired by meekness and gentleness: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten" (I Pt 2: 23). The Lord's patient silence is not only a courageous act but a generous one. It is also a trusting gesture in regard to the Father, as suggested by the first of the three positive affirmations, "he trusted to him who judges justly" (*ibid.*). His was a total and perfect trust in divine justice that leads history towards the triumph of the innocent.

4. Thus, we reach the summit of the narrative of the Passion which highlights the saving value of Christ's supreme act of self-giving: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (2: 24).

This second positive assertion, formulated with the words of Isaiah's prophecy (cf. 53: 12), explains that Christ bore our sins "in his body on the tree", that is, on the cross, in order to cancel them.

Likewise, freed from the "old" man with his evil and mediocrity, we too can "live to righteousness", that is, in holiness. The thought corresponds, although most of the words differ, to the Pauline doctrine on Baptism which regenerates us as new creatures, immersing us in the mystery of the Passion, death and glory of Christ (cf. Rom 6: 3-11).

The last phrase - "by his wounds you have been healed" (I Pt 2: 24) - focuses on the saving value of Christ's suffering, expressed in the same idiom Isaiah used to express the saving fruitfulness of the pain suffered by the Lord's Servant (cf. Is 53: 5).

5. Contemplating the wounds of Christ by which we have been saved, St Ambrose said: "I can revel in none of my deeds, I have nothing to boast about; therefore, I will glory in Christ. I will not glory because I am just, but I will glory because I have been redeemed. I will not glory because I

am exempt from sins, but I will glory because my sins have been forgiven. I will not glory because I have been a help nor because someone has helped me, but because Christ is my advocate with the Father, and Christ's blood was poured out for me. My sin has become for me the price of the Redemption, through which Christ came to me. For my sake, Christ tasted death. Sin is more profitable than innocence. Innocence had made me arrogant, sin made me humble" (*Giacobbe e la vita beata*, I, 6, 21: SAEMO, III, Milan-Rome, 1982, pp. 251, 253).

The Holy Father then addressed the groups present in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish and Italian.

To the English-speaking visitors

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present today, including the groups from Denmark and the United States of America. Upon all of you and your families, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Happy New Year!

To the Italian-speaking visitors

I address a cordial greeting to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular, I greet the Italian Association *The Friends of Raoul Follereau* and the faithful from Corridonia. I then embrace in spirit the Belarusian children and the *Welcome Group* from Modugno that has generously offered them hospitality.

To young people, the sick and the newly-weds

My thoughts also go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. May the feast of the Baptism of the Lord that we celebrated last Sunday help you, dear *young people*, to rediscover and live joyfully the gift of faith in Christ; may it make you, dear *sick people*, strong in trial; may it spur you, dear *newly-weds*, to make your family a true domestic church.