



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 1 September 2004

Psalm 115[113B]

"We who live bless the Lord!"

1. The living God and the lifeless idol are juxtaposed in Psalm 115[113B], one in the series on the Psalms of Vespers, that we have just heard. The ancient Greek translation of the Bible called the *Septuagint*, followed by the Latin version of the ancient Christian Liturgy, joined this Psalm in honour of the true Lord with the one that precedes it. The result is a single composition which, however, is clearly divided into two distinct texts (cf. Ps 114[113A] and Ps 115[113B]).

After the first words addressed to the Lord to illustrate his glory, the Chosen People present their God as the almighty Creator: "Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he wills" (Ps 115[113B]: 3). "Fidelity and grace" are the typical virtues of the God of the Covenant with regard to the people chosen by him, Israel. (cf. v. 1). Thus, the universe and history come under his sovereignty, which is a power of love and salvation.

2. "Their [the heathens'] idols" (v. 4) are immediately set against the true God worshipped by Israel. Idolatry is a temptation of all humanity in all lands and in all epochs. The idol is an inanimate object created by human hands, a cold and lifeless statue. The Psalmist ironically describes all seven of its useless members: a mouth that cannot speak, eyes that are blind, ears that are deaf, nostrils that smell nothing, hands that cannot feel, feet that cannot walk, a throat from which no sound comes (cf. vv. 5-7).

After this merciless criticism of idols, the Psalmist expresses a sarcastic wish: "Their makers will come to be like them and so will all who trust in them" (v. 8). The formulation of this wish is

certainly calculated to produce, with regard to idolatry, a radically dissuasive effect. Those who worship the idols of riches, power and success forfeit their personal dignity. The Prophet Isaiah said: "All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame" (Is 44: 9).

3. On the contrary, the faithful of the Lord know that "their help" and "their shield" are in the living God (cf. Ps 115[113B]: 9-13). They are presented in three categories. First come "the sons of Israel", that is, the entire people, the community that gathers in the temple to pray. They are followed by the "sons of Aaron", which refers to the priests, custodians and preachers of the divine Word, called to preside over worship. Lastly, those who fear the Lord are mentioned, in other words, the authentic and constant faithful who, in the Judaism that followed the Babylonian Exile and even later, also denote those pagans who drew near to the community and faith of Israel with a sincere heart and genuine interest. Such a one, for example, was the Roman centurion, Cornelius (cf. Acts 10: 1-2, 22), whom St Peter subsequently converted to Christianity.

Divine blessings are poured out upon these three categories of true believers (cf. Ps 115[113B]: 12-15). According to the biblical conception, the blessing was a source of fruitfulness: "may the Lord grant increase, to you and all your children" (v. 14). Finally, the faithful, rejoicing in the gift of life that they have received from the living God, the Creator, sing a short hymn of praise, responding to the effective blessing of God with their own grateful and confident blessing (cf. vv. 16-18).

4. A lively and evocative reference is made to our Psalm in the fifth *Homily on the Canticle of Canticles* by St Gregory of Nyssa (fourth century), a Father of the Eastern Church: he describes humanity passing from the "ice of idolatry" to the springtime of salvation. Indeed, St Gregory recalls, human nature had, as it were, been transformed into lifeless, "inert beings" who "were made the object of worship", as we actually find written: "Their makers will come to be like them and so will all who trust in them". "And it was logical that this should be so. In fact, just as those who look at the true God receive in themselves the special features of the divine nature, those who turn to the vanity of idols are transformed into the likeness of what they were gazing at, and from the human beings that they were, become stone. Thus, since human nature, turned to stone by idolatry, remained inanimate, frozen in idol worship even before the best of prospects, the Sun of justice shines upon this tremendous winter and turns it into spring with the breath of wind from the south that melts such ice and warms all who are beneath it with the rays of that rising sun; man, therefore, who had been turned into stone by ice, thawed by the Spirit and warmed by the radiance of the Logos, is once more gushing water for eternal life (*Omèlie sul Cantico dei Cantici*, Rome, 1988, pp. 133-134).

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking pilgrims present at this Audience, especially those from Ireland and the United States of America. Upon you and your loved ones, I invoke the Lord's Blessings of health and joy.

To youth, the sick and newly-weds

Dear friends, I hope that after the holiday period you will resume your customary activities in the knowledge that you are always doing the will of God, the source of our peace.

APPEAL OF THE HOLY FATHER

With great sorrow and distress, I learned the new bad news of the terrorist attacks in Israel and in Russia in which many people died, defenceless and innocent victims.

Nor has the chain of blind violence been broken in Iraq, which prevents a prompt return to civil coexistence. Abhorrence at the barbaric execution of 12 Nepalese citizens is accompanied by fear for the fate of the two French journalists held hostage by their kidnappers.

I address a pressing appeal for the end everywhere of recourse to violence, which is always unworthy of any good cause; and I appeal for the humane treatment of the two French journalists and for their return unharmed, as before, to their loved ones.

Today, 1 September, is the anniversary of the invasion of Poland and of the beginning of the Second World War, which spread bereavement in Europe and on other continents. Thinking back to those days in this time of serious and widespread tension, let us implore God, Father of all men and women, for the precious gift of peace.
