



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 14 December 2005

Psalm 139[138]

"O where can I go?"

Evening Prayer - Wednesday of the Fourth Week

1. The Liturgy of Vespers - on whose Psalms and Canticles we are meditating - offers us in two separate phases the reading of a sapiential hymn of clear beauty and strong emotional impact: Psalm 139[138]. Today, we have before us the first part of the composition (cf. vv. 1-12), that is, the first two strophes which respectively exalt God's omniscience (cf. vv. 1-6) and his omnipresence in space and in time (cf. vv. 7-12).

The purpose of the forceful images and expressions is to celebrate the Creator: "If the greatness of the works created is immense", said Theodoret of Cyr, a Christian writer of the fifth century, "how much greater their Creator must be!" (*Discorsi sulla Provvidenza*, 4: *Collana di Testi Patristici*, LXXV, Rome, 1988, p. 115). The Psalmist's meditation sought above all to penetrate the mystery of God, transcendent yet close to us.

2. The substance of the message he offers us is straightforward: God knows everything and is present beside his creature who cannot elude him. However, his presence is neither threatening nor inspectorial; of course, he also looks reprovingly at evil, to which he is not indifferent.

Yet the basic element is that of a saving presence which can embrace the whole being and the whole of history. In practice, this is the spiritual scenario to which St Paul alluded at the Areopagus of Athens, with recourse to a quotation from a Greek poet: "In him we live and move and have our

being" (Acts 17: 28).

3. The first part (cf. Ps 139[138]: 1-6), as I said, is the celebration of the divine omniscience: in fact, verbs suggesting knowledge are repeated, such as "scrutinize", "know", "discern", "penetrate", "understand", "be wise".

As is well known, biblical knowledge exceeds pure and simple intellectual learning and understanding; it is a sort of communion between the One who knows and the one known: hence, the Lord is intimately close to us while we are thinking and acting.

On the other hand, the second part of our Psalm (cf. vv. 7-12) is dedicated to the divine omnipresence. The illusory desire of human beings to flee from that presence is vividly described in it. The whole of space is steeped in it: there is first of all the vertical axis "heaven-hell" (cf. v. 8), which gives way to the horizontal dimension which extends from dawn, that is, from the East, and reaches as far as the Mediterranean "sea's furthest end", that is, the West (cf. v. 9). Every sphere of space, even the most secret, contains God's active presence.

The Psalmist continues, also introducing the other reality in which we are immersed: time, symbolically portrayed by night and by light, by darkness and by day (cf. vv. 11-12).

The gaze and the manifestation of the Lord of being and time even penetrates the darkness, in which it is difficult to move about and see. His hand is always ready to grasp ours, to lead us on our earthly journey (cf. v. 10). This is not, therefore, a judgmental closeness that inspires terror, but a closeness of support and liberation.

And so we can understand what the ultimate, essential content of this Psalm is: it is a song of trust. God is always with us. Even in the darkest nights of our lives, he does not abandon us. Even in the most difficult moments, he remains present. And even in the last night, in the last loneliness in which no one can accompany us, the night of death, the Lord does not abandon us.

He is with us even in this final solitude of the night of death. And we Christians can therefore be confident: we are never left on our own. God's goodness is always with us.

4. We began with a citation by the Christian writer Theodoret of Cyr. Let us end by entrusting ourselves once again to him and to his *Fourth Discourse on Divine Providence*, because in the ultimate analysis this is the theme of the Psalm. He reflects on v. 6, in which the person praying exclaims: "Too wonderful for me, [your] knowledge, too high, beyond my reach".

Theodoret comments on this passage by examining the interiority of the conscience and personal experience, and says: "Having turned to me and become intimate with me, after removing me from the external din, he wanted to immerse me in contemplation of my nature.... Reflecting on

these things and thinking of the harmony between the mortal and the immortal natures, I am won over by so much wonder and, not succeeding in contemplating this mystery, recognize my defeat; furthermore, while I proclaim the victory of the Creator's knowledge and sing hymns of praise to him, I cry: "Too wonderful for me, [your] knowledge, too high, beyond my reach" (*Collana di Testi Patristici*, LXXV, Rome, 1988, pp. 116, 117).

* * *

To special groups

I am pleased to welcome the English-speaking pilgrims present at this Audience, especially those from the United States of America. In a special way I greet the group of Buddhists from Japan. Upon all of you I invoke the Lord's Blessings of peace and joy.

Lastly, my greeting goes to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly weds*.

Today's Memorial of St John of the Cross invites us, dear friends, to turn the heart's gaze on the mystery hidden in Christ Jesus, remembering that those who truly desire divine wisdom, desire first of all to enter into "the depths of the Cross".

With these sentiments, let us prepare to live Christmas, now at hand.

A good Advent season to you all!

© Copyright 2005 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana