



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 20 January 1999

God shows himself a father to Israel

1. The people of Israel - as we already said in our last catechesis - experienced God as father. Like all other peoples, they sensed in him the fatherly feelings drawn from the universal experience of an earthly father. Above all, they discerned in God a particularly paternal attitude, based on direct knowledge of his special saving action (cf. [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), n. 238).

From the first point of view, that of universal human experience, Israel recognized the divine fatherhood through wonder at the creation and renewal of life. The miracle of a child being formed in his mother's womb cannot be explained without God's intervention, as the psalmist recalls: "For you formed my inward parts, you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Ps 139 [138]:13). Israel could also see God as a father by analogy with other figures who had a public and especially religious function and were considered fathers, such as priests (cf. Jgs 17:10; 18:19; Gn 45:8) or prophets (cf. 2 Kgs 2:12). Moreover, it is easy to understand how the respect for fathers required by Israelite society led Jews to see God as a demanding father. In fact, Mosaic law is very severe with children who do not respect their parents, to the point of prescribing the death penalty for anyone who strikes or merely curses his father or mother (Ex 21:15, 17).

2. But beyond this representation suggested by human experience, a more specific image of the divine fatherhood develops in Israel on the basis of God's saving interventions. By saving them from slavery in Egypt, God calls Israel to enter into a covenant relationship with him, and even to consider itself his first-born. God thereby shows he is a father in a unique way, as is clear from his words to Moses: "You shall say to the Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, Israel is my first-born son"" (Ex 4:22). In their hour of desperation, this people-son will be able to call upon the heavenly Father by the same privileged title, so that he will once again renew the miracle of the Exodus: "Have mercy, O Lord, upon the people called by your name, upon Israel, whom you have likened

to a first-born son" (Sir 36:11). By virtue of this situation, Israel is bound to observe a law that distinguishes it from the other peoples to whom it must bear witness of the divine fatherhood that it enjoys in a special way. Deuteronomy stresses this in the context of the commitments stemming from the Covenant: "You are the sons of the Lord your God.... For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth" (Dt 14:1f.).

By not observing God's law, Israel acts in opposition to its filial status, earning reproofs from the heavenly Father: "You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth". This filial status includes all the members of the people of Israel, but it is applied in a unique way to the descendant and successor of David, according to Nathan's wellknown prophecy in which God says: "I will be his father and he shall be my son" (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13). On the basis of this prophecy, the messianic tradition affirms a divine sonship for the Messiah: "You are my son, today I have begotten you" (Ps 2:7; cf. 110 [109]:3).

3. The divine fatherhood in Israel's regard is marked by an intense, constant and compassionate love. Despite the people's infidelities and the consequent threats of punishment, God shows himself incapable of forsaking his love. And he expresses it in terms of deep tenderness, even when he is forced to lament his children's lack of response: "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love; I fostered them like one who raises an infant to his cheeks, and I bent down to them and fed them.... How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender" (Hos 11:3f., 8; Jer 31:20).

Even the reproof becomes the expression of a privileged love, as the Book of Proverbs explains: "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prv 3:11-12).

4. Such a divine fatherhood, which at the same time is so "human" in its forms of expression, includes all the features which are usually attributed to a mother's love. Although rare, the Old Testament images in which God is compared to a mother are extremely significant. We read, for example, in the Book of Isaiah: "Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me". "Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?". Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Is 49:14-15). And again: "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you" (Is 66:13).

Thus, God's attitude to Israel also appears with maternal features, which express tenderness and understanding (cf. CCC, n. 239). This love which God lavishes on his people in such abundance prompts the elderly Tobit to proclaim: "Acknowledge him before the nations, O sons of Israel; for he has scattered us among them. Make his greatness known there, and exalt him in the presence

of all the living; because he is our Lord and God, he is our Father for ever" (Tob 13:3-4).

* * * * *

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, the Holy Father said:

I welcome the *Viva Vox* Cathedral Choir from Helsinki and I encourage you to continue to devote your talents to singing God's praises. I greet the many English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Denmark, Finland, Australia, Japan and the United States of America. Upon you and your families, I invoke the abundant blessings of almighty God.

PEACE APPEAL

Prospects for peace are still threatened in many parts of the world. In recent days outbursts of ruthless savagery have occurred, particularly in Kosovo and Sierra Leone.

Let us ask God with renewed trust that wherever hatred abounds, he will make his fatherly mercy even more abound, reawakening the consciences of those who guide the destiny of peoples and moving their hearts to intentions of peace.

I express my particular closeness and solidarity to the Archbishop of Freetown, to the men and women missionaries who are being held hostage by those fighting in Sierra Leone, despite their tireless dedication to serving the peoples of that African country. I appeal to those responsible to give these hostages their freedom and allow them to return to their ministry of evangelization and charity.