



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 19 June 2002

Fidelity is the best response to God's benefits

Canticle of Deuteronomy 32,1-12

Lauds on Saturday of the 2nd Week of the year

1. "Then Moses pronounced the words of this song from beginning to end, for the whole assembly of Israel to hear" (Dt 31,30). This is how the canticle we have just heard begins. It is taken from the last pages of the Book of Deuteronomy, to be precise, from chapter 32. The *Liturgy of Lauds* took the first 12 verses, recognizing in them a joyful hymn to the Lord who lovingly protects and cares for his people amid the daylong dangers and difficulties. On examination the canticle is shown to be an ancient text, later than Moses, that is put on his lips to give it a solemn character. The liturgical canticle is placed at the root of the history of the people of Israel. On that prayerful page there is no lack of reference and links with a few of the psalms or the message of the prophets: hence it was a moving and intense expression of the faith of Israel.

2. Moses' canticle is longer than the passage used in the *office of Lauds*, which is only the prelude. Some scholars think they can identify in the composition a literary genre that is technically defined with the Hebrew word "rīb", namely, "quarrel", "court litigation". The image of God present in the Bible is not at all that of a dark being, an anonymous and brute energy, an incomprehensible fact.

Instead, he is a person who experiences sentiments, acts and reacts, loves and condemns, participates in the life of his creatures and is not indifferent to their actions. So, in our case, the Lord convokes a sort of trial, in the presence of witnesses, denounces the crimes of the accused people, exacts a punishment, but lets his verdict be permeated by infinite mercy. Let us now follow

the traces of this event, even if only reflecting on the verses proposed by the liturgy.

3. First of all he mentions the cosmic spectator-witnesses: "Give ear, O heavens, ... let the earth hearken ..." (Dt 32,1). In this symbolic trial Moses acts almost as a public prosecutor. His word is effective and fruitful, like the prophetic word, expression of the divine word. Note the significant flow of the images that define it: They are signs taken from nature like rain, dew, showers, drizzle and the spraying of water that makes the earth green and covers it with grain stalks (cf. v. 2).

The voice of Moses, prophet and interpreter of the divine word, announces the imminent appearance on the scene of the great judge, the Lord, whose most holy name he pronounces, exalting one of his many attributes. In fact, the Lord is called the Rock (v. 4), a title that is repeated throughout our Canticum (cf. vv. 15.18.30.31.37), an image that exalts God's stable and unchanging fidelity, so different from the instability and infidelity of the people. The topic is developed with a series of affirmations on divine justice: "how faultless are his deeds, how right all his ways. A faithful God, without deceit, how just and upright he is" (v. 4).

4. After the solemn presentation of the supreme Judge, who is also an injured party, the objective of the cantor is directed to the accused. In order to describe this, he takes recourse to an effective representation of God as father (cf. v. 6). His much loved creatures are called his children, but, unfortunately, they are "degenerate children" (cf. v. 5). In fact, we know that already in the Old Testament there is an idea of God as a solicitous father in his meetings with his children who often disappoint him (Ex 4,22; Dt 8,5; Ps 102 [103],13; Sir 51,10; Is 1,2; 63,16; Hos 11,1-4). Because of this, the denunciation is not cold but impassioned: "Is the Lord to be thus repaid by you, O stupid and foolish people? Has he not made and established you?" (Dt 32,6). Indeed, rebelling against an implacable sovereign is very different from revolting against a loving father.

In order to make concrete the gravity of the accusation and thus elicit a conversion that flows from the sincerity of the heart, Moses appeals to the memory: "Think back on the days of old, reflect on the years of age upon age" (v. 7). In fact, biblical faith is a "memorial", namely, a rediscovering of God's eternal action spread over time; it is to make present and effective that salvation that the Lord has given and continues to offer man. Hence, the great sin of infidelity coincides with "forgetfulness", which cancels the memory of the divine presence in us and in history.

5. The fundamental event that must not be forgotten is that of the crossing of the desert after the flight from Egypt, major topic of Deuteronomy and of the entire Pentateuch. So the terrible and dramatic journey in the Sinai desert is evoked, "a wasteland of howling desert" (cf. v. 10), as described with an image of strong emotional impact. However, there God bends over his people with amazing tenderness and gentleness. The paternal symbol is intertwined with an allusion to the maternal symbol of the eagle: "He shielded them and cared for them, guarding them as the apple of his eye. As an eagle incites its nestlings forth by hovering over its brood. So he spread his wings to receive them and bore them up on his pinions" (vv. 10-11). Then the way of the desert

steppe is transformed into a quiet and serene journey because of the protective mantle of divine love.

The canticle also refers to Sinai, where Israel became the Lord's ally, his "portion" and "hereditary share", namely, the most precious reality (cf. v. 9; Ex 19,5). Thus the canticle of Moses becomes a collective examination of conscience, so that in the end the response to the divine benefits will no longer be sin but fidelity.

I extend a warm welcome to the various groups present: in particular to the staff members of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and to the Sisters taking part in the Program for Formators organized by the International Union of Superiors General. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Sweden, Japan and the United States, I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

APPEALS

World Refugee Day

John Paul II also reminded the faithful that World Refugee Day will be observed on Thursday 20 June.

The UN promotes the observance of the day to call attention to the 15 million human beings obliged to cross the borders of countries to flee from persecution and the violation of their fundamental rights. May the leaders of nations listen to the cry that rises from such a tragic exodus of individuals and families and do what is necessary to offer an adequate response to the tragic problems of these brothers and sisters of ours.

Condemnation of Suicide Bombers in Jerusalem

John Paul II harshly condemned "with the most absolute disapproval" Tuesday's suicide bomb attack in Jerusalem which killed 19, mostly students on their way to school, and wounded 50 others. On Wednesday there was more violence as a suicide bomber blew himself up along with six persons at a bus stop. More than 35 were wounded.

The tragic news of yesterday's attack which sowed terror and death in Jerusalem can only elicit the most absolute disapproval on the part of all. For the nth time I repeat to those who plot and plan such barbarous actions that he will have to answer to God for them. While I express my heartfelt human and spiritual solidarity to the families in mourning and to the wounded, I invite all

to pray with me to the Lord so that he may change hardened hearts and inspire thoughts of peace and reciprocal pardon in those who dwell in that region that we love so much.