



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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How Great Is Your Name through all the earth

Psalm 8, Lauds on Saturday of the second week of the year

1. "Man ..., at the heart of this enterprise, is revealed to us as gigantic. He seems to be divine, not in himself, but in his beginning and his end. Honour, therefore, to man, honour to his dignity, to his spirit, to his life". With these words, in July 1969, Paul VI entrusted to the American astronauts leaving for the moon the text of Psalm 8, just proclaimed for us, so that it might enter into the cosmic spaces (cf. *Insegnamenti*, [1969], pp. 493-494, ORE, 17 July 1969, p. 1).

In fact, this hymn celebrates the human person, a minute creature when compared to the immensity of the universe, a fragile "reed" to use a famous image of the great philosopher Blaise Pascal (*Pensieri*, n. 264). And yet he is a "thinking reed" who can understand creation, insofar as he is the lord of creation, "crowned" by God himself (cf. Ps. 8,6). As is often the case with hymns exalting the Creator, Psalm 8 begins and ends with a solemn antiphon addressed to the Lord, whose magnificence is disseminated in the universe: "O Lord, our God, how great is your name through all the earth" (cf. vv. 2,10).

2. The body of the canticle itself seems to assume a nocturnal atmosphere, with the moon and the stars that light up in the sky. The first strophe of the hymn (cf. vv. 2-5) is dominated by the comparison between God, the human being and the cosmos. First of all, the Lord appears on the scene, whose glory is sung by the heavens, but also by the lips of humanity. The praise that rises spontaneously on the lips of children cancels and confounds the presumptuous discourses of those who deny God (cf. v. 3). They are described as "foes, enemies, avengers", because they delude themselves by challenging and opposing the Creator with their reason and their actions (cf.

Ps. 13 [14],1).

Then, right afterwards, the impressive scene of a starry night opens. In the face of such an infinite horizon, the eternal question arises, "What are human beings" (Ps 8,5). The first and immediate answer speaks of nullity, either in relation to the immensity of the heavens or, above all, with regard to the majesty of the Creator. In fact, the Psalmist says, the heavens are "yours", you set the moon and the stars, they are "the work of your fingers" (cf. v. 4). This last expression is beautiful, rather than the more common "works of your hands" (cf. v. 7): God has created this colossal reality with the ease and refinement of an embroidery or chisel, with the light touch of a harpist who glides his fingers over the cords.

3. The first reaction, there, is of dismay: how can God "remember" and be "mindful" of this creature who is so fragile and so little (cf. v. 5)? But here is the great surprise: God has given the human person, the weak creature, a wonderful dignity: he has made him a little less than the angels or, as the original Hebrew can be translated, a little less than a god (cf. v. 6).

Thus we enter the second strophe of the Psalm (cf. vv. 6-10). Man is seen as the royal lieutenant of the Creator himself. God, indeed, has "crowned" him as a viceroy, giving him a universal lordship. "You have ... put all things under his feet" and the adjective "all" resounds while the various creatures file past (cf. vv. 7-9). However, this dominion is not conquered by man's capacity, fragile and limited reality, nor is it obtained either by a victory over God, as the Greek myth of Prometheus intended. It is a dominion given by God: to the fragile and often egotistic hands of man God entrusts the entire range of creatures so that he will preserve them in harmony and beauty, use them but not abuse them, reveal their secrets and develop their potential.

As the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* of the Second Vatican Council states, "man was created in the image of God, is capable of knowing and loving his Creator, and was appointed by him as master of all earthly creatures that he might subdue them and use them for God's glory" (n. 12).

4. Unfortunately, the selfish person, often revealed to be a mad tyrant and not a wise and intelligent ruler, can misunderstand and deform the dominion of the human person, affirmed in Psalm 8. The Book of Wisdom warns against deviations of this kind, when it specifies that God has "established man to rule the creatures produced by you, to govern the world in holiness and justice" (Wis 9,2-3). Although in a different context, Job also refers to our Psalm to recall in particular human weakness, which does not merit so much attention from God: "What is man, that you make much of him, or pay him any heed? You observe him with each new day" (Jb 7,17-18). History documents the evil that human freedom disseminates in the world with environmental disasters and the most awful social injustices.

As opposed to human beings who humiliate their own and creation, Christ appears as the perfect

man (*si presenta come l'uomo perfetto*), "crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death ... that by the grace of God he might taste death for the good of all" (Heb 2,9). He reigns over the universe with that dominion of peace and love that prepares the new world, the new heavens and the new earth (cf. 2 Pt 3,13). What is more, his royal authority - as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews suggests applying Psalm 8 to him - is exercised by the supreme self giving of himself in death "for the good of all".

Christ is not a sovereign who makes himself be served, but who serves and consecrates himself for others: "The Son of man came not be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for the many" (Mk 10,45). In this way, he recapitulates in himself "all things ... in heaven and on earth" (Eph 1,10). In this Christological light, Psalm 8 reveals all the force of its message and of its hope, inviting us to exercise our sovereignty over creation not as dominion but as love.

At the end of the catechesis, the Holy Father greeted the various groups of pilgrims in their own tongues. Here is the greeting for the English-speaking.

I am pleased to greet the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit on the occasion of their General Chapter. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. I also offer special greetings to the many pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Newark and to the students from Catholic Central High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present, especially those from Norway, Sweden, Japan and the United States of America, I cordially invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.