



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 10 December 2003

Chapter 19, verses 1-7 of the Book of Revelation

"Let us rejoice and be glad!"

1. Continuing with the series of Psalms and Canticles that constitute the ecclesial prayer of *Vespers*, we come across a hymn-like passage from Chapter 19 of the Book of Revelation that consists of a sequence of *alleluias* and *acclamations*.

Behind these joyful invocations is the dramatic lament intoned in the previous chapter by the kings, merchants and seafaring men at the fall of imperial Babylon, the city of evil and oppression, symbol of the persecution unleashed against the Church.

2. To counter this cry that rises from the earth, a joyful chorus of a liturgical nature rings out in the heavens, and in addition to the *alleluia*, repeats the *amen*. The various acclamations, similar to antiphons, that the *Liturgy of Vespers* now combines in a single hymn, are actually put on the lips of various figures in the Apocalypse text. We discover first of all a "great multitude", made up of the hosts of angels and saints (cf. vv. 1-3). Then, we can single out the voice of "the twenty-four elders" and "four living creatures", symbolic figures who seem to be the priests of this heavenly liturgy of praise and thanksgiving (cf. v. 4). Lastly, a single voice is raised (cf. v. 5), which in turn involves in the canticle the "great multitude" with which it began (cf. vv. 6-7).

3. In future stages of our journey we will have the opportunity to describe the individual antiphons of this grand and festive hymn of praise by several voices. Let us now make do with two observations. The first concerns the introductory acclamation which states: "Salvation, glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just" (vv. 1-2).

At the heart of this joyful invocation is the representation of God's decisive intervention in history:

the Lord is not indifferent like an impassive emperor, remote from human events. As the Psalmist says, "The Lord's throne is in heaven; his eyes behold, his searching glance is on mankind" (Ps 11[10]: 4).

4. Indeed, his gaze is a source of action, for he intervenes and demolishes overbearing and oppressive empires, brings down the proud who challenge him and judges those who perpetrate evil. Again, it is the Psalmist who describes in picturesque images how God bursts into history (cf. Ps 11[10]: 7), referred to by the author of the Apocalypse in the previous chapter (cf. Rv 18: 1-24), the terrible divine intervention regarding Babylon, uprooted from her centre and hurled into the sea. Our canticle mentions this act in a passage that is not part of the celebration of *Vespers* (cf. Rv 19: 2-3).

Our prayer, therefore, must above all invoke and praise divine action, the Lord's effective justice, his glory, which he obtains by triumphing over evil. God makes himself present in history, taking the side of the righteous and victims, exactly as the brief and essential acclamation of the Apocalypse declares and the canticles of the Psalms so often repeat (cf. Ps 146[145]: 6-9).

5. Let us emphasize another theme in our Cantic. It is developed in the final acclamation and is a dominant motif in the Apocalypse itself: "The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready" (Rv 19: 7). Christ and the Church, the Lamb and the Bride, are in a profound communion of love.

Let us seek to make this spousal mystery shine out through the poetic witness of a great Father of the Syrian Church, St Ephrem, who lived in the fourth century. Using symbolically the sign of the Wedding at Cana (cf. Jn 2: 1-11), he introduces the town itself, personified, in order to praise Christ for the great gift received:

"Together with my guests I will thank him for he has deemed me worthy to invite him: He who is the heavenly Bridegroom, who descended and invited all; and I too was invited to come to his pure wedding feast. Before the peoples I will recognize him as the Bridegroom; there is none other like him. His wedding chamber has been ready for centuries, and it is richly decked out and lacks nothing: not like the wedding feast of Cana where he provided for all that was lacking" (*Inni sulla Verginità*, 33, 3: *L'Arpa dello Spirito*, Rome, 1999, pp. 73-74).

6. In another hymn that also sings of the Wedding at Cana, St Ephrem stresses that Christ, invited to the weddings of others (here, precisely, that of the newly married couple of Cana), wanted to celebrate the feast of his wedding: the wedding with his bride, which is every faithful soul. "Jesus, you were invited to someone else's wedding feast, the spouses of Cana; here, instead, is your own pure and beautiful feast: it gladdens our days because your guests also, O Lord, have need of your songs: let your harp fill everything! The soul is your bride, the body your nuptial chamber, your guests are the senses and thoughts. And if only one body is a wedding feast for you, the

whole Church is your nuptial banquet!" (*Inni sulla Fede*, 14, 4-5: *op. cit.*, p. 27).

To the English-speaking visitors

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland and the United States. Upon all of you I cordially invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

To young people, the sick and the newly-weds

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*.

Dear friends, in Advent, a time of waiting that prepares us for Christmas, Mary, the Virgin of hope, is especially present. To her I entrust you all, so that you may prepare yourselves to welcome Christ who comes to establish his Kingdom of justice and peace.