



JOHN PAUL II

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 2 May 2001*

***Let every creature bless the Lord***

1. *"Bless the Lord, all works of the Lord"* (Dn 3: 57). A cosmic dimension imbues this Canticle taken from the Book of Daniel, which the *Liturgy of the Hours* proposes for Sunday Lauds in the first and third weeks. This marvellous litany-like prayer is well-suited to the *Dies Domini*, the Day of the Lord, that lets us contemplate in the risen Christ the culmination of God's plan for the cosmos and for history. Indeed, in him, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of history (cf. Rv 22: 13), creation itself acquires its full meaning since, as John recalls in the Prologue to his Gospel, "all things were made through him" (Jn 1: 3). The history of salvation culminates in the resurrection of Christ, opening human life to the gift of the Spirit and adoption as sons and daughters, while awaiting the return of the divine Spouse who will hand the world back to God the Father (cf. 1 Cor 15: 24).

2. In this text, in the form of a litany, it is as if our gaze passes all things in review. Our gaze focuses on the sun, the moon and the stars; it settles upon the immense expanse of the waters, rises to the mountains, lingers over the most varied elements of the weather; it passes from hot to cold, from light to darkness; considers the mineral and vegetable worlds, dwells on the various types of animals. Then the call becomes universal: it refers to God's angels, reaches all the "sons of men", but most particularly involves the People of God, Israel, the priests and the holy ones. It is an immense choir, a symphony in which the varied voices are raised in praise to God, Creator of the universe and Lord of history. Prayed in the light of Christian revelation, it is addressed to the Trinitarian God, as we are invited to do by the liturgy which adds a Trinitarian formula to the Canticle: "Let us praise the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit".

3. Reflected in the Canticle, in a certain sense, is the universal religious soul, which perceives God's imprint in the world and is lifted up to contemplate the Creator. However, in the context of the Book of Daniel, the hymn is presented as the thanksgiving of three young Israelites - Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael - who were condemned to die burnt in a furnace for refusing to adore the golden idol of Nebuchadnezzar, but were miraculously preserved from the flames. Against the background of this event is that special history of salvation in which God chooses Israel as his people and makes a covenant with them. It is the same covenant to which the three young Israelites want to stay faithful, even at the cost of martyrdom in the fiery furnace. Their fidelity meets with the fidelity of God who sends an angel to drive the flames away from them (cf. Dn 3: 49).

In this way the Canticle is patterned on the Old Testament songs of praise for danger averted. Among them is the famous song of victory, cited in chapter 15 of Exodus, in which the ancient Hebrews express their gratitude to the Lord for that night in which they would inevitably have been overcome by Pharaoh's army, had the Lord not opened a passage for them, dividing the waters and hurling "the horse and his rider ... into the sea" (Ex 15: 1).

4. It is not by chance, in the solemn Easter Vigil, that every year the liturgy makes us repeat the hymn sung by the Israelites in Exodus. That path which was opened for them, prophetically announced the new way that the risen Christ inaugurated for humanity on the holy night of his resurrection from the dead. Our symbolic passing through the waters of Baptism enables us to relive a similar experience of passing from death to life, thanks to the victory over death won by Jesus, for the benefit of us all.

By repeating the Canticle of the three young Israelites in the Sunday liturgy of Lauds, we disciples of Christ want to be swept up in the same wave of gratitude for the great works wrought by God, in creation and, above all, in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

In fact, the Christian discerns a relationship between the release of the three young men, mentioned in the Canticle, and the resurrection of Jesus. In the latter, the Acts of the Apostles see granted the prayer of the believer who, like the Psalmist, confidently sings: "you will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let your Holy One see corruption" (Acts 2: 27; Ps 15: 10).

It is traditional to associate the Canticle with the Resurrection. Some ancient records show the existence of the hymn in the prayer of the Lord's Day, the weekly Easter of Christians. Moreover, iconographical depictions which show three young men praying unharmed amidst the flames have been found in the Roman catacombs, thereby witnessing to the effectiveness of prayer and the certainty that the Lord will intervene.

5. "Blessed are you in the firmament of heaven praiseworthy and glorious forever" (Dn 3: 56). In singing the hymn on Sunday, the Christian feels gratitude not only for the gift of creation but also because we are the recipients of the fatherly care of God, who in Christ has raised us to the dignity of being his sons and daughters.

God's fatherly care makes us see creation in a new way and its astounding beauty offers an elegant sign in which we can catch a glimpse of his love. With these sentiments Francis of Assisi contemplated creation and lifted his praise to God, the ultimate source of all beauty. It comes naturally to imagine that the prayers of the Biblical text were echoed in his soul when at San Damiano, after touching the peaks of physical and spiritual suffering, he composed the "Canticle of Brother Sun" (cf. *Fonti Francescane*, 263).

\*\*\*\*\*

I warmly greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present, especially those from England, Canada and the United States of America. As we give thanks to God in this Easter season for his saving deeds, I invoke his abundant blessings upon you and your families.

---

*After greeting the pilgrims in various languages at the end the Holy Father spoke of his forthcoming visit to Greece, Syria and Malta:*

As everyone knows, in two days' time I will be setting out on the last part of my Jubilee pilgrimage to the places linked to the history of salvation. In this way is fulfilled the wish, which I expressed in the perspective of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, to go and pray at the places where God's initiatives for our salvation actually occurred. After having visited Sinai, where God revealed himself to Moses, as well as the Holy Land, I am now preparing to go to some of the cities especially connected with the life of St Paul. My pilgrimage in the great Apostle's footsteps will be a return to the roots of the Church, because we must constantly refer to them in order to remain totally faithful to God's plan. The journey will take me to Athens, in whose Areopagus Paul gave a very illuminating discourse about the impact of the Gospel message on an important culture like that of Greece. I will then go on to Damascus, a place that calls to mind Saul's conversion, and, lastly, to Malta, where the Apostle of the Gentiles was shipwrecked while being taken to Rome as a prisoner.

Dear brothers and sisters, I ask you to accompany with prayer the journey that is so important to me. May it be a favourable opportunity to increase understanding with Orthodox Christians, encouraging further progress on our journey towards the full unity of Christians. I also hope that my visit to Syria, and especially to the Great Mosque of Damascus, will effectively strengthen interreligious dialogue with the followers of Islam, encouraging the commitment to an active and peaceful coexistence.

