



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St. Peter's Square

Wednesday, 19 October 2011

[\[Video\]](#)

The Great Hallel

Psalm 136 (135)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to meditate with you on a Psalm that sums up the entire history of salvation recorded in the Old Testament. It is a great hymn of praise that celebrates the Lord in the multiple, repeated expressions of his goodness throughout human history: it is Psalm 136 or 135 according to the Greco-Latin tradition.

A solemn prayer of thanksgiving, known as the “Great Hallel”, this Psalm is traditionally sung at the end of the Jewish Passover meal and was probably also prayed by Jesus at the Last Supper celebrated with his disciples. In fact, the annotation of the Evangelists, “and when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (cf. Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26), would seem to allude to it.

The horizon of praise thus appears to illumine the difficult path to Golgotha. The whole of Psalm 136 unfolds in the form of a litany, marked by the antiphonal refrain: “for his steadfast love endures for ever”. The many wonders God has worked in human history and his continuous intervention on behalf of his people are listed in the composition. Furthermore, to every proclamation of the Lord’s saving action the antiphon responds with the basic impetus of praise.

The eternal love of God, is a love which, in accordance with the Hebrew term used, suggestive of fidelity, mercy, kindness, grace and tenderness, is the unifying motif of the entire Psalm. The refrain always takes the same form, whereas the regular paradigmatic manifestations of God's love change: creation, liberation through the Exodus, the gift of land, the Lord's provident and constant help for his people and for every created being.

After a triple invitation to give thanks to God as sovereign (vv. 1-3), the Lord is celebrated as the One who works "great wonders" (v. 4), the first of which is the Creation: the heavens, the earth, the heavenly bodies (vv. 5-9). The created world is not merely a scenario into which God's saving action is inserted rather is the very beginning of that marvellous action. With the Creation, the Lord shows himself in all his goodness and beauty, he commits himself to life, revealing a desire for goodness which gives rise to every other action of salvation.

And in our Psalm, re-echoing the first chapter of Genesis, the principal elements of the created world are summed up, with special insistence on the heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon and the stars, magnificent created things that govern the day and the night. Nothing is said here of the creation of human beings but they are ever present; the sun and the moon are for them — for men and women — so as to structure human time, setting it in relation to the Creator, especially by denoting the liturgical seasons. And it is precisely the Feast of Easter that is immediately evoked, when, passing to God's manifestation of himself in history, the great event of the exodus, freedom from slavery in Egypt begins, whose most significant elements are outlined:

The liberation from Egypt begins with the plague of killing the Egyptian firstborn, the Exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the journey through the desert to the entry into the Promised Land (vv. 10-20). This is the very first moment of Israel's history; God intervened powerfully to lead his people to freedom; through Moses, his envoy, he asserted himself before Pharaoh, revealing himself in his full grandeur and at last broke down the resistance of the Egyptians with the terrible plague of the death of the firstborn. Israel could thus leave the country of slavery taking with it the gold of its oppressors (cf. Ex 12:35-36) and "defiantly" (Ex 14:8), in the exulting sign of victory.

At the Red Sea too the Lord acted with merciful power. Before an Israel so terrified by the sight of the Egyptians in pursuit as to regret its departure from Egypt (cf. Ex 14:10-12), God, as our Psalm says, "divided the Red Sea in sunder... and made the people of Israel pass through the midst of it... but overthrew Pharaoh and his host" (136:13-15). The image of the Red Sea "divided" into two seems to call to mind the idea of the sea as a great monster hacked into two and thereby rendered harmless. The might of the Lord overcomes the danger of the forces of nature and of these soldiers deployed in battle array by men: the sea, which seemed to bar the way of the People of God, let Israel cross on dry ground and then swept over the Egyptians, submerging them. Thus the full salvific force of the Lord's "mighty hand, and an outstretched arm" (cf. Deut 5:15; 7:19; 26:8) was demonstrated: the unjust oppressor was vanquished, engulfed by the waters, while the people of God "walked on dry ground through the sea", continuing its journey to freedom.

Our Psalm now refers to this journey, recalling in one short phrase Israel's long pilgrimage toward the promised land: he "led his people through the wilderness, for his steadfast love endures for ever" (v. 16). These few words refer to a 40-year experience, a crucial period for Israel which in letting itself be guided by the Lord learned to live in faith, obedience and docility to God's law. These were difficult years, marked by hardship in the desert, but also happy years, trusting in the Lord with filial trust. It was the time of "youth", as the Prophet Jeremiah describes it in speaking to Israel in the Lord's name with words full of tenderness and nostalgia: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown" (Jer 2:2).

The Lord, like the shepherd of Psalm 23[22] whom we contemplated in a Catechesis, for 40 years guided, taught and cherished his people, leading it right to the promised land, also overcoming the resistance and hostility of enemy peoples that wished to block its way to salvation (cf. 136:17-20).

So as the "great wonders" that our Psalm lists unfold, we reach the moment of the conclusive gift, the fulfilment of the divine promise made to the Fathers: "gave their land as a heritage, for his steadfast love endures for ever; a heritage to Israel his servant, for his steadfast love endures for ever" (136:21-22). Then, in celebrating the Lord's eternal love, the gift of land was commemorated, a gift that the people were to receive but without ever taking possession of it, continuing to live in an attitude of grateful acknowledgment and gratitude.

Israel received the land it was to live in as "a heritage", a generic term which designates the possession of a good received from another person, a right of ownership which specifically refers to the paternal patrimony. One of God's prerogatives is "giving"; and now, at the end of the journey of the Exodus, Israel, the recipient of the gift, enters as a son or daughter the land of the promise now fulfilled. The time of wandering, of living in tents, of living a precarious life, is over.

It was then that the happy period of permanence began, of joy in building houses, of planting vineyards, of living in security (cf. Deut 8:7-13). Yet it was also the time of the temptation to idolatry, contamination with pagans, self-sufficiency that led to the Origin of the gift being forgotten.

Accordingly, the Psalmist mentions Israel's low estate and foes, a reality of death in which the Lord, once again reveals himself as Saviour: "He... remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures for ever; and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love endures for ever" (136:23-24).

At this point a question arises: how can we make this Psalm our own prayer, how can we ourselves claim this Psalm as our own prayer? What is important is the Psalm's setting, for at the beginning and at the end is the Creation. Let us return to this point: the Creation as God's great gift by which we live and in which he reveals himself in his great goodness. Therefore, to think of

the Creation as a gift of God is a common point for all of us.

The history of salvation then follows. We can of course say: this liberation from Egypt, the time in the desert, the entry into the Holy Land and all the other subsequent problems are very remote from us, they are not part of our own history. Yet we must be attentive to the fundamental structure of this prayer. The basic structure is that Israel remembers the Lord's goodness. In this history dark valleys, arduous journeys and death succeed one another but Israel recalls that God was good and can survive in this dark valley, in this valley of death, because it remembers. It remembers the Lord's goodness and his power; his mercy is effective for ever. And this is also important for us: to remember the Lord's goodness. Memory strongly sustains hope. Memory tells us: God exists, God is good, his mercy endures for ever. So it is that memory unfolds, even in the darkest day or time, showing the way towards the future. It represents "great lights" and is our guiding star. We too have good memories of the goodness, of God's merciful love that endures for ever.

Israel's history is a former memory for us, too, of how God revealed himself, how he created a people of his own. Then God became man, one of us: he lived with us, he suffered with us, he died for us. He stays with us in the Sacrament and in the Word. It is a history, a memory of God's goodness that assures us of his goodness: his love endures for ever. And then, in these 2,000 years of the Church's history there is always, again and again, the Lord's goodness. After the dark period of the Nazi and Communist persecution, God set us free, he showed that he is good, that he is powerful, that his mercy endures for ever. And, as in our common, collective history, this memory of God's goodness is present, it helps us and becomes for us a star of hope so that each one also has his or her personal story of salvation.

We must truly treasure this story, and in order to trust must keep ever present in our mind the memory of the great things he has also worked in my life: his mercy endures for ever. And if today I am immersed in the dark night, tomorrow he sets me free, for his mercy is eternal.

Let us return to the Psalm, because at the end it returns to the Creation. The Lord, it says, "gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures for ever" (v. 25). The prayer of the Psalm concludes with an invitation to praise: "Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures for ever".

The Lord is our good and provident Father, who gives his children their heritage and lavishes life-giving food upon all. God who created the heavens and the earth and the great heavenly bodies, who entered human history to bring all his children to salvation is the God who fills the universe with his presence of goodness, caring for life and providing bread.

The invisible power of the Creator and Lord of which the Psalm sings is revealed in the humble sign of the bread he gives us, with which he enables us to live. And so it is that this daily bread

symbolizes and sums up the love of God as Father and opens us to the fulfilment of the New Testament, to that “Bread of Life”, the Eucharist, which accompanies us in our lives as believers, anticipating the definitive joy of the messianic banquet in Heaven.

Brothers and Sisters, the praise and blessing of Psalm 136[135], has made us review the most important stages in the history of salvation, to reach the Paschal Mystery in which God’s saving action reaches its culmination. Let us therefore celebrate with grateful joy the Creator, Saviour and faithful Father, who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). In the fullness of time, the Son of God became man to give life, for the salvation of each one of us, and gave himself as bread in the Eucharistic mystery to enable us to enter his Covenant which makes us his children. May both God’s merciful goodness and his sublime “steadfast love for ever” reach far afield.

I would therefore like to conclude this Catechesis by making my own the words that St John wrote in his First Letter and that we must always have in mind in our prayers: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 Jn 3:1). Many thanks.

To special groups:

I offer cordial greetings to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today’s Audience, especially those from England, Norway, Nigeria, Australia, Indonesia and the United States. My greeting also goes to the members of *Legatus* visiting Rome on pilgrimage and to the group of Lutheran pilgrims from Iceland. I also welcome the group of Anglican seminarians taking part in a month of study in Rome. Upon all of you I invoke God’s blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly I greet the *sick*, the *newlyweds* and the *young people*, especially those recently confirmed, led by their pastor, Bishop Claudio Stagni of Faenza-Modigliana. Yesterday we celebrated the Feast of St Luke the Evangelist. May his love for Christ sustain you, *sick people*, in accepting suffering in union with the divine Teacher; may it encourage you, dear *newlyweds* to live the sacrament of marriage to the full; and may it foster in you, *young people* and *children*, an ever more convinced adherence to the word of salvation, so as to bear witness to it joyfully among your peers. Many thanks.

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