

In the Catechesis today I would like to apply myself to a Psalm with strong Christological implications which continually surface in accounts of Jesus' passion, with its twofold dimension of humiliation and glory, of death and life. It is Psalm 22 according to the Hebrew tradition and Psalm 21 according to the Graeco-Latin tradition, a heartfelt, moving prayer with a human density and theological richness that make it one of the most frequently prayed and studied Psalms in the entire Psalter. It is a long poetic composition and we shall reflect in particular on its first part, centred on the lament, in order to examine in depth certain important dimensions of the prayer of supplication to God.

This Psalm presents the figure of an innocent man, persecuted and surrounded by adversaries who clamour for his death; and he turns to God with a sorrowful lament which, in the certainty of his faith, opens mysteriously to praise. The anguishing reality of the present and the consoling memory of the past alternate in his prayer in an agonized awareness of his own desperate situation in which, however, he does not want to give up hope. His initial cry is an appeal addressed to a God who appears remote, who does not answer and seems to have abandoned him: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest" (vv. 3-4).

God is silent and this silence pierces the soul of the person praying, who ceaselessly calls but receives no answer. Day and night succeed one another in an unflagging quest for a word, for help that does not come, God seems so distant, so forgetful, so absent. The prayer asks to be heard, to be answered, it begs for contact, seeks a relationship that can give comfort and salvation. But if God fails to respond, the cry of help is lost in the void and loneliness becomes unbearable.

Yet, in his cry, the praying man of our Psalm calls the Lord "my" God at least three times, in an extreme act of trust and faith. In spite of all appearances, the Psalmist cannot believe that his link with the Lord is totally broken and while he asks the reason for a presumed incomprehensible abandonment, he says that "his" God cannot forsake him.

As is well known, the initial cry of the Psalm, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", is recorded by the Gospels of Matthew and Mark as the cry uttered by Jesus dying on the Cross (cf. Mt 27:46, Mk 15:34). It expresses all the desolation of the Messiah, Son of God, who is facing the drama of death, a reality totally opposed to the Lord of life. Forsaken by almost all his followers, betrayed and denied by the disciples, surrounded by people who insult him, Jesus is under the crushing weight of a mission that was to pass through humiliation and annihilation. This is why he cried out to the Father, and his suffering took up the sorrowful words of the Psalm. But his is not a desperate cry, nor was that of the Psalmist who, in his supplication, takes a tormented path which nevertheless opens out at last into a perspective of praise, into trust in the divine victory.

And since in the Jewish custom citing the beginning of a Psalm implied a reference to the whole poem, although Jesus' anguished prayer retains its burden of unspeakable suffering, it unfolds to the certainty of glory. "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?", the Risen Christ was to say to the disciples at Emmaus (Lk 24:26). In his passion, in obedience to the Father, the Lord Jesus passes through abandonment and death to reach life and to give it to all believers.

This initial cry of supplication in our Psalm 22[21] is followed in sorrowful contrast by the memory of the past, "In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you did deliver them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not disappointed" (vv. 5-6).

The God who appears today to be so remote to the Psalmist, is nonetheless the merciful Lord whom Israel experienced throughout its history. The People to whom the praying person belongs is the object of God's love and can witness to his fidelity to him. Starting with the Patriarchs, then in Egypt and on the long pilgrimage through the

wilderness, in the stay in the promised land in contact with aggressive and hostile peoples, to the night of the exile, the whole of biblical history is a history of a cry for help on the part of the People and of saving answers on the part of God.

And the Psalmist refers to the steadfast faith of his ancestors who “trusted” — this word is repeated three times — without ever being disappointed. Then, however, it seems that this chain of trusting invocations and divine answers has been broken; the Psalmist’s situation seems to deny the entire history of salvation, making the present reality even more painful.

God, however, cannot deny himself so here the prayer returns to describing the distressing plight of the praying person, to induce the Lord to have pity on him and to intervene, as he always had done in the past. The Psalmist describes himself as “a worm, and no man”, scorned by men, and despised by the people” (v. 7). He was mocked, people made grimaces at him, (cf. v. 8), and wounded in his faith itself. “He committed his cause to the Lord; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!” (v. 9), they said.

Under the jeering blows of irony and contempt, it almost seems as though the persecuted man loses his own human features, like the suffering servant outlined in the Book of Isaiah (cf. 52:14; 53:2b-3). And like the oppressed righteous man in the Book of Wisdom (cf. 2:12-20), like Jesus on Calvary (cf. Mt 27:39-43), the Psalmist saw his own relationship with the Lord called into question in the cruel and sarcastic emphasis of what is causing him to suffer: God’s silence, his apparent absence. And yet God was present with an indisputable tenderness in the life of the person praying. The Psalmist reminds the Lord of this: “Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you did keep me safe upon my mother’s breasts. Upon you was I cast from my birth” (vv. 10-11a).

The Lord is the God of life who brings the newborn child into the world and cares for him with a father’s affection. And though the memory of God’s fidelity in the history of the people has first been recalled, the praying person now re-evokes his own personal history of relations with the Lord, going back to the particularly significant moment of the beginning of his life. And here, despite the desolation of the present, the Psalmist recognizes a closeness and a divine love so radical that he can now exclaim, in a confession full of faith and generating hope: “and since my mother bore me you have been my God” (v. 11b).

The lament then becomes a heartfelt plea: “Be not far from me, for trouble is near and there is none to help” (v. 12). The only closeness that the Psalmist can perceive and that fills him with fear was that of his enemies. It is therefore necessary for God to make himself close and to help him, because enemies surround the praying man, they encircle him and were like strong bulls, like ravening and roaring lions (cf. vv. 13-14). Anguish alters his perception of the danger, magnifying it. The adversaries seem invincible, they become ferocious, dangerous animals, while the Psalmist is like a small worm, powerless and defenceless.

Yet these images used in the Psalm also serve to describe that when man becomes brutal and attacks his brother, something brutal within him takes the upper hand, he seems to lose any human likeness; violence always has something bestial about it and only God’s saving intervention can restore humanity to human beings.

Now, it seems to the Psalmist, the object of so much ferocious aggression, that he no longer has any way out and death begins to take possession of him: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint... my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws... they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots” (vv. 15, 16, 19).

The disintegration of the body of the condemned man is described with the dramatic images that we encounter in the accounts of Christ’s passion, the unbearable parching thirst that torments the dying man that is echoed in Jesus’ request “I thirst” (cf. Jn 19:28), until we reach the definitive act of his tormentors, who, like the soldiers at the

foot of the cross divide the clothes of the victim whom they consider already dead (cf. Mt 27:35; Mk 15:24; Lk 23:34; Jn 19:23-24).

Here then, impelling, once again comes the request for help: “But you, O Lord, be not far off! O you my help, hasten to my aid!... Save me” (vv. 20; 22a). This is a cry that opens the Heavens, because it proclaims a faith, a certainty that goes beyond all doubt, all darkness and all desolation. And the lament is transformed, it gives way to praise in the acceptance of salvation: “He has heard... I will tell of your name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (vv. 22c-23).

In this way the Psalm opens to thanksgiving, to the great final hymn that sweeps up the whole people, the Lord’s faithful, the liturgical assembly, the generations to come (cf. vv. 24-32). The Lord went to the rescue, he saved the poor man and showed his merciful face. Death and life are interwoven in an inseparable mystery and life triumphs, the God of salvation shows himself to be the undisputed Lord whom all the ends of the earth will praise and before whom all the families of the nations will bow down. It is the victory of faith which can transform death into the gift of life, the abyss of sorrow into a source of hope.

Dear brothers and sisters, this Psalm has taken us to Golgotha, to the foot of the cross of Jesus, to relive his passion and to share the fruitful joy of the resurrection. Let us therefore allow ourselves to be invaded by the light of the paschal mystery even in God’s apparent absence, even in God’s silence, and, like the disciples of Emmaus, let us learn to discern the true reality beyond appearances, recognizing humiliation itself as the way to exaltation, and the cross as the full manifestation of life in earth. Thus, replacing in God the Father all our trust and hope, in every anxiety we will be able to pray to him with faith, and our cry of help will be transformed into a hymn of praise. Many thanks.