

Psalms 49(48):1-13



In his riches, man lacks wisdom!

Lord, your strength gives joy to the King;
how your saving help makes him glad!
You have granted him his heart's desire;
you have not refused the prayer of his lips.

You came to meet him with the blessings of success,
you have set on his head a crown of pure gold.
He asked you for life and this you have given,
days that will last from age to age.

Your saving help has given him glory.
You have laid upon him majesty and splendor,
you have granted your blessings to him forever.
You have made him rejoice with the joy of your presence.

The king has put his trust in the Lord:
through the mercy of the Most High he shall stand firm.
His hand will seek and find all his foes,
his right hand find out those that hate him.

You will burn them like a blazing furnace
on the day when you appear.
And the Lord will destroy them in his anger;
fire will swallow them up.

You will wipe out their race from the earth
and their children from the sons of men.
Though they plan evil against you,
though they plot, they shall not prevail.

For you will force them to retreat;
at them you will aim with your bow.
O Lord, arise in your strength;
we shall sing and praise your power.



1. Our meditation on Psalm 49[48] will be divided into two parts, just as it is proposed on two separate occasions by the Liturgy of Vespers. We will now comment in detail on the first part in which it is hardship that inspires reflection, as in Psalm 72[71]. The just man must face "evil days" since he is surrounded by "the malice of [his] foes", who "boast of the vastness of their riches" (cf. Ps 49[48]: 6-7).

The conclusion that the just man reaches is formulated as a sort of proverb, a refrain that recurs in the finale to the whole Psalm. It sums up clearly the predominant message of this poetic composition: "In his riches, man lacks wisdom: he is like the beasts that are destroyed" (v. 13). In other words, untold wealth is not an advantage, far from it! It is better to be poor and to be one with God.

2. The austere voice of an ancient biblical sage, Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth, seems to ring out in this proverb when it describes the apparently identical destiny of every living creature, that of death, which makes frantic clinging to earthly things completely pointless: "As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil... For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other... All go to one place" (Eccl 5: 14; 3: 19, 20).



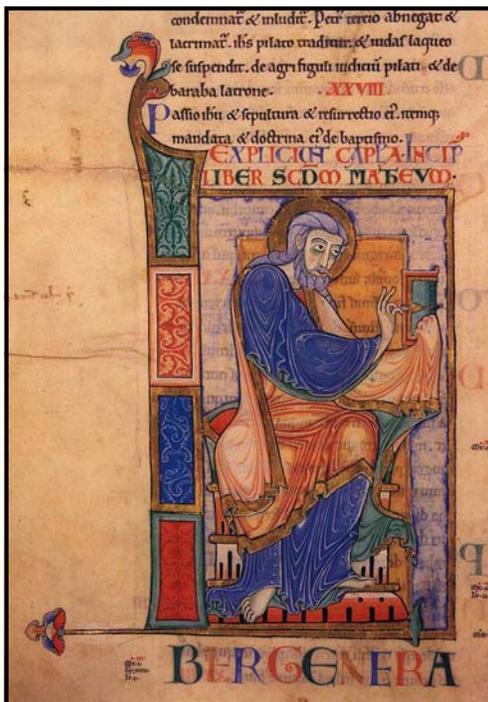
3. A profound blindness takes hold of man if he deludes himself that by striving to accumulate material goods he can avoid death. Not for nothing does the Psalmist speak of an almost animal-like "lack of understanding".

The topic, however, was to be explored by all cultures and forms of spirituality and its essence was expressed once and for all by Jesus, who said: "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk 12: 15). He then recounts the famous Parable of the Rich Fool who accumulated possessions out of all proportion without a thought of the snare that death was setting for him (cf. Lk 12: 16-21).



4. The first part of the Psalm is wholly centred on this illusion that has the rich man's heart in its grip. He is convinced that he will also even succeed in "buying off" death, attempting as it were to corrupt it, much as he had to gain possession of everything else, such as success, triumph over others in social and political spheres, dishonest dealings, impunity, his satisfaction, comforts and pleasures.

But the Psalmist does not hesitate to brand this excess as foolish. He uses a word that also has financial overtones: "ransom": "No man can buy his own ransom, or pay a price to God for his life. The ransom of his soul is beyond him. He cannot buy life without end, nor avoid coming to the grave" (Ps 49[48]: 8-10).



5. The rich man, clinging to his immense fortune, is convinced that he will succeed in overcoming death, just as with money he had lorded it over everything and everyone. But however vast a sum he is prepared to offer, he cannot escape his ultimate destiny. Indeed, like all other men and women, rich and poor, wise and foolish alike, he is doomed to end in the grave, as happens likewise to the powerful, and he will have to leave behind on earth that gold so dear to him and those material possessions he so idolized (cf. vv. 11-12).

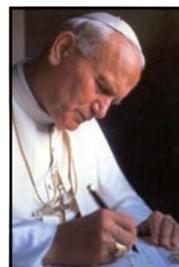
Jesus asked those listening to him this disturbing question: "What shall a man give in return for his life?" (Mt 16: 26). No exchange is possible, for life is a gift of God, and "in his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind" (Jb 12: 10).

6. Among the Fathers who commented on Psalm 49[48], St Ambrose deserves special attention. He extends its meaning to

a broader vision, starting precisely with the Psalmist's initial invitation: "Hear this, all you peoples, give heed, all who dwell in the world".

The Bishop of Milan commented in ancient times: "Let us recognize here, from the outset, the voice of the Lord our Saviour who calls the peoples to the Church in order to renounce sin, to become followers of the truth and to recognize the advantage of faith". Moreover, "all the hearts of the various human generations were polluted by the venom of the serpent, and the human conscience, enslaved by sin, was unable to detach itself from it". This is why the Lord, "of his own initiative, in the generosity of his mercy promised forgiveness, so that the guilty would be afraid no longer and with full awareness rejoice to be able to offer their offices as servants to the good Lord who has forgiven sins and rewarded virtues" (*Commento a Dodici Salmi*, n. 1:SAEMO, VIII, Milan-Rome, 1980, p. 253).

7. In these words of our Psalm we can hear echoes of the Gospel invitation: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you" (Mt 11: 28). Ambrose continues, "Like someone who will come to visit the sick, like a doctor who will come to treat our painful wounds, so [the Lord] points out the cure to us, so that men may hear him clearly and hasten with trust and promptness to receive the healing remedy.... He calls all the peoples to the source of wisdom and knowledge and promises redemption to them all, so that no one will live in anguish or desperation" (n. 2: *ibid.*, pp. 253, 255).



Blessed John Paul II
20 October 2004
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20041020_en.html