

Psalms 51(50)



"Have mercy on me, O God!"



Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness.
In your compassion blot out my offense.
O wash me more and more from my guilt
and cleanse me from my sin.

My offenses truly I know them;
my sin is always before me
Against you, you alone, have I sinned;
what is evil in your sight I have done.

That you may be justified when you give sentence
and be without reproach when you judge,
O see, in guilt I was born,
a sinner was I conceived.

Indeed you love truth in the heart;
then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom.
O purify me, then I shall be clean;
O wash me, I shall be whiter than snow.

Make me hear rejoicing and gladness,
that the bones you have crushed may thrill.
From my sins turn away your face
and blot out all my guilt.

A pure heart create for me, O God,
put a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
nor deprive me of your holy spirit.

Give me again the joy of your help;
with a spirit of fervor sustain me,
that I may teach transgressors your ways
and sinners may return to you.

O rescue me, God, my helper,
and my tongue shall ring out your goodness.
O Lord, open my lips
and my mouth shall declare your praise.

For in sacrifice you take no delight,
burnt offering from me you would refuse,
my sacrifice, a contrite spirit,
a humbled, contrite heart you will not spurn.

In your goodness, show favor
to Zion:
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
Then you will be pleased with lawful sacrifice,
(burnt offerings wholly consumed),
then you will be offered young bulls on your altar.

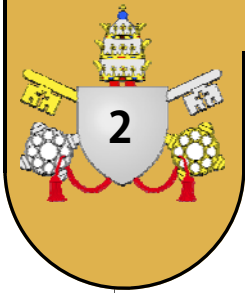


1. For the fourth time during our reflections on the Liturgy of Lauds, we hear proclaimed Psalm 51 [50], the famous Miserere. Indeed, it is presented anew to us on the Friday of every week, so that it may become an oasis of meditation in which we can discover the evil that lurks in the conscience and beg the Lord for purification and forgiveness. Indeed, as the Psalmist confesses in another supplication, "O Lord... no man living is righteous before you" (Ps 143[142]: 2). In the Book of Job we read: "How can man be righteous before God? How can he who is born of woman be clean? Behold, even the moon is not bright, and the stars are not clean in his sight; how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!" (25: 4-6).

These are strong, dramatic words that are intended to portray the full seriousness and gravity of the limitations and frailty of the human creature, his perverse capacity to sow evil and violence, impurity and falsehood. However, the message of hope of the Miserere which the Psalter puts on the lips of David, a converted sinner, is this: God can "blot out, wash and cleanse" the sin confessed with a contrite heart (cf. Ps 51[50]: 2-3). The Lord says, through the voice of Isaiah, even if "your sins are scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool" (Is 1: 18).

2. This time we will reflect briefly on the end of Psalm 51[50], a finale that is full of hope, for the person praying knows that God has forgiven him (cf. vv. 17-21). On his lips is praise of the Lord, which he is on the point of proclaiming to the world, thereby witnessing to the joy felt by the soul purified from evil, hence, freed from remorse (cf. v. 17).

The person praying witnesses clearly to another conviction, making a link with the teaching reiterated by the prophets (cf. Is 1: 10-17; Am 5: 21-25; Hos 6: 6):



the most pleasing sacrifice that rises to the Lord like a fragrance, a pleasant odour (cf. Gn 8: 21), is not the holocaust of bulls and lambs, but rather of "the broken and contrite heart" (Ps 51[50]: 19).

The Imitation of Christ, a text so dear to the Christian spiritual tradition, repeats this same recommendation of the Psalmist: "Humble repentance for sins is the sacrifice that pleases you, its fragrance far sweeter than the smoke of incense.... It is there that one is purified and every evil washed away" (cf. III 52, 4).

3. The Psalm ends on an unexpected note in an utterly different perspective that even seems contradictory (cf. vv. 20-21). From the final supplication of a single sinner, it becomes a prayer for the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem, which takes us from the time of David to that of the city's destruction centuries later. Moreover, having voiced the divine rejection of animal sacrifices in v. 18, the Psalm proclaims in v. 21 that it is in these same burnt offerings that God will take delight.

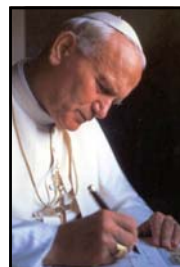


It is clear that the last passage is a later addition, made at the time of the Exile and intended, in a certain sense, to correct or at least to complete the perspective of the Davidic Psalm on two points: on the one hand, it was not deemed fit that the entire Psalm be restricted to an individual prayer; it was also necessary to think of the griev-

ous situation of the whole city. On the other hand, there was a desire to give a new dimension to the divine rejection of ritual sacrifices; this rejection could be neither complete nor definitive, for it was a cult that God himself had prescribed in the Torah. The person who completed the Psalm had a valid intuition: he grasped the needy state of sinners, their need for sacrificial mediation. Sinners cannot purify themselves on their own; good intentions are not enough. An effective external mediation is required. The New Testament was to reveal the full significance of this insight, showing that Christ, in giving his life, achieved a perfect sacrificial mediation.

4. In his *Homilies on Ezechiel*, St Gregory the Great shows a good understanding of the change of outlook that occurs between vv. 19 and 21 of the Miserere. He suggests an interpretation that we too can accept as a conclusion to our reflection. St Gregory applies v. 19, which speaks of a contrite heart, to the earthly life of the Church, and v. 21, which speaks of burnt offerings, to the Church in heaven.

Here are the words of that great Pontiff: "Holy Church has two lives: one that she lives in time, the other that she receives eternally; one with which she struggles on earth, the other that is rewarded in heaven; one with which she accumulates merits, the other that henceforth enjoys the merits earned. And in both these lives she offers a sacrifice: here below, the sacrifice of compunction, and in heaven above, the sacrifice of praise. Of the former sacrifice it is said: 'The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit' (Ps 51[50]: 19); of the latter it is written: 'Then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and in whole burnt offerings' (Ps 51[50]: 21).... In both, flesh is offered, since the sacrifice of the flesh is the mortification of the body, up above; the sacrifice of the flesh is the glory of the resurrection in praise to God. In heaven, flesh will be offered as a burnt holocaust when it is transformed into eternal incorruptibility, and there will be no more conflict for us and nothing that is mortal, for our flesh will endure in everlasting praise, all on fire with love for him" (*Omèlie su Ezechiele/2*, Rome 1993, p. 271).



Blessed John Paul II
30 July 2003
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20030730_en.html