

# Psalms 110(109)



## God himself enthrones the king in glory



he Lord's revelation to my Master:  
"Sit on my right:  
your foes I will put beneath your feet."

The Lord will yield from Zion  
your scepter of power:  
rule in the midst of all your foes.

A prince from the day of your birth  
on the holy mountains;  
from the womb before the dawn I begot you.

The Lord has sworn an oath he will not change.  
"You are a priest for ever,  
a priest like Melchizedek of old."

The Master standing at your right hand  
will shatter kings in the day of his wrath.

He, the judge of the nations  
will heap high the bodies;  
heads shall be scattered far and wide.

He shall drink from the stream by the wayside  
and therefore he shall lift up his head.



Today I would like to end my catechesis on the prayer of the Book of Psalms by meditating on one of the most famous of the "royal Psalms", a Psalm that Jesus himself cited and that the New Testament authors referred to extensively and interpreted as referring to the Messiah, to Christ. It is Psalm 110 according to the Hebrew tradition, 109 according to the Graeco-Latin one, a Psalm very dear to the ancient Church and to believers of all times. This prayer may at first have been linked to the enthronement of a Davidic king; yet its meaning exceeds the specific contingency of an historic event, opening to broader dimensions and thereby becoming a celebration of the victorious Messiah, glorified at God's right hand.

The Psalm begins with a solemn declaration: "the Lord says to my lord 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool'" (v. 1).

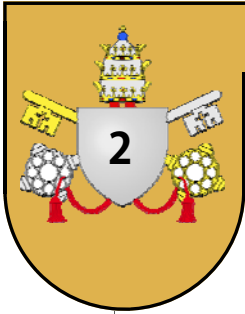
God himself enthrones the king in glory, seating him at his right, a sign of very great honour and of absolute privilege. The king is thus admitted to sharing in the divine kingship, of which he is mediator to the people. The king's kingship is also brought into being in the victory over his adversaries whom God himself places at his feet. The victory over his enemies is the Lord's, but the king is enabled to share in it and his triumph becomes a sign and testimony of divine power.

The royal glorification expressed at the beginning of the Psalm was adopted by the New Testament as a messianic prophecy. For this reason the verse is among those most frequently used by New Testament authors, either as an explicit quotation or as an allusion. With regard to the Messiah Jesus himself mentioned this verse in order to show that the Messiah, was greater than David, that he was David's Lord (cf. Mt 22:41-45; Mk 12:35-37; Lk 20:41-44).

And Peter returned to it in his discourse at Pentecost, proclaiming that this enthronement of the king was brought about in the resurrection of Christ and that Christ was henceforth seated at the right hand of the Father, sharing in God's kingship over the world (cf. Acts 2:29-35). Indeed, Christ is the enthroned Lord, the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven, as Jesus described himself during the trial before the Synedrin (cf. Mt 26:63-64; Mk 14:61-62; cf. also Lk 22:66-69).

He is the true King who, with the Resurrection, entered into glory at the right hand of the Father (Rom 8:34; Eph 2:5; Col 3:1; Heb 8:1; 12:2), was made superior to angels, and seated in heaven above every power with every adversary at his feet, until the time when the last enemy, death, to be defeated by him once and for all (cf. 1 Cor 15:24-26; Eph 1:20-23; Heb 1:3-4; 2:5-8; 10:12-13; 1 Pet 3:22).

And we immediately understand that this king, seated at the right hand of God, who shares in his kingship is not one of those who succeeded David, but is actually



the new David, the Son of God who triumphed over death and truly shares in God's glory. He is our king, who also gives us eternal life.

Hence an indissoluble relationship exists between the king celebrated by our Psalm and God. The two of them govern together as one, so that the Psalmist can say that it is God himself who extends the sovereign's sceptre, giving him the task of ruling over his adversaries as verse 2 says: "The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty sceptre. Rule in the midst of your foes!".



The exercise of power is an office that the king receives directly from the Lord, a responsibility which he must exercise in dependence and obedience, thereby becoming a sign, within the people, of God's powerful and provident presence. Dominion over his foes, glory and victory are gifts received that make the sovereign a mediator of the Lord's triumph over evil. He subjugates his enemies, transforming them, he wins them over with his love.

For this reason the king's greatness is celebrated in the following verse. In fact the interpretation of verse 3 presents some difficulty. In the original Hebrew text a reference was made to the mustering of the army to which the people generously responded, gathering round their sovereign on the day of his coronation. The Greek translation of The Septuagint that dates back to between the second and third centuries B.C. refers however to the divine sonship of the king, to his birth or begetting on the part of the Lord. This is the interpretation that has been chosen by the Church, which is why the verse reads like this: "Yours is princely power in the day of your birth, in holy splendour; before the daystar, like the dew, I have begotten you".

This divine oracle concerning the king would thus assert a divine procreation, steeped in splendour and mystery, a secret and inscrutable origin linked to the arcane beauty of dawn and to the miracle of dew that sparkles in the fields in the early morning light and makes them fertile. In this way, the figure of the king, indissolubly bound to the heavenly reality, who really comes from God is outlined, the Messiah who brings divine life to the people and is the mediator of holiness and salvation. Here too we see that all this is not achieved by the figure of a Davidic king but by the Lord Jesus Christ, who really comes from God; he is the light that brings divine life to the world.

The first stanza of the Psalm ends with this evocative and enigmatic image. It is followed by another oracle, which unfolds a new perspective along the lines of a priestly dimension connected with kingship. Verse 4 says: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek'".

Melchizedek was the priest-king of Salem who had blessed Abraham and offered him bread and wine after the victorious military campaign the patriarch led to rescue his nephew Lot from the hands of enemies who had captured him (cf. Gen 14).

Royal and priestly power converge in the figure of Melchizedek. They are then proclaimed by the Lord in a declaration that promises eternity: the king celebrated in the Psalm will be a priest for ever, the mediator of the Lord's presence among his people, the intermediary of the blessing that comes from God who, in liturgical action, responds to it with the human answer of blessing.

The Letter to the Hebrews makes an explicit reference to this verse (cf. 5:5-6, 10; 6:19-20) focusing on it the whole of chapter seven and developing its reflection on Christ's priesthood. Jesus, as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us in the light of Psalm 110[109], is the true and definitive priest who brings to fulfilment and perfects the features of Melchizedek's priesthood

Melchizedek, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, was "without father or mother or genealogy" (7:3a), hence not a priest according to the dynastic rules of Levitical priesthood. Consequently he "continues a priest for ever" (7:3c), a prefiguration of Christ, the perfect High Priest who "has become a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life" (7:16).

In the Risen Lord Jesus who had ascended into Heaven where he is seated at the right hand of the Father the



prophecy of our Psalm is fulfilled and the priesthood of Melchizedek is brought to completion. This is because, rendered absolute and eternal, it became a reality that never fades (cf. 7:24). And the offering of bread and wine made by Melchizedek in Abraham's time is fulfilled in the Eucharistic action of Jesus who offers himself in the bread and in the wine and, having conquered death, brings life to all believers. Since he is an eternal priest, "holy, blameless, unstained" (7:26), as the Letter to the Hebrews states further, "he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (7:25).

After this divine pronouncement in verse 4, with its solemn oath, the scene of the Psalm changes and the poet, addressing the king directly, proclaims: "The Lord is at your right hand" (Psalm 110:5a). If in verse 1 it was the king who was seated at God's right hand as a sign of supreme prestige and honour, the Lord now takes his place at the right of the sovereign to protect him with this shield in battle and save him from every peril. The king was safe, God is his champion and they fight together and defeat every evil.

Thus the last verses of the Psalm open with the vision of the triumphant sovereign. Supported by the Lord, having received both power and glory from him (cf. v. 2), he opposes his foes, crushing his adversaries and judging the nations. The scene is painted in strong colours to signify the drama of the battle and the totality of the royal victory. The sovereign, protected by the Lord, demolishes every obstacle and moves ahead safely to victory. He tells us: "yes, there is widespread evil in the world, there is an ongoing battle between good and evil and it seems as though evil were the stronger. No, the Lord is stronger, Christ, our true King and Priest, for he fights with all God's power and in spite of all the things that make us doubt the positive outcome of history, Christ wins and good wins, love wins rather than hatred. The evocative image that concludes our Psalm fits in here; it is also an enigmatic word: "He will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his head" (v. 7).

The king's figure stands out in the middle of the description of the battle. At a moment of respite and rest, he quenches his thirst at a stream, finding in it refreshment and fresh strength to continue on his triumphant way, holding his head high as a sign of definitive victory. It is clear that these deeply enigmatic words were a challenge for the Fathers of the Church because of the different interpretations they could be given.

Thus, for example, St Augustine said: this brook is the onward flow of the human being, of humanity, and Christ did not disdain to drink of this brook, becoming

man; and so it was that on entering the humanity of the human being he lifted up his head and is now the Head of the mystical Body, he is our head, he is the definitive winner. (cf. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CIX, 20: PL36, 1462).

Dear friends, following the lines of the New Testament translation, the Church's Tradition has held this Psalm in high esteem as one of the most important messianic texts. And the Fathers continued eminently to refer to it in a Christological key. The king of whom the Psalmist sang is definitively Christ, the Messiah who establishes the Kingdom of God and overcomes the powers of evil. He is the Word, begotten by the Father before every creature, before the dawn, the Son incarnate who died and rose and is seated in Heaven, the eternal priest who through the mystery of the bread and wine bestows forgiveness of sins and gives reconciliation with God, the king who lifts up his head, triumphing over death with his resurrection.



It would suffice to remember a passage, once again in St Augustine's commentary on this Psalm, where he writes: "it was necessary to know the Only-Begotten Son of God who was about to come among men, to adopt man and to become a man by taking on his nature; he died, rose and ascended into Heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father and fulfilled among the people all that he had promised.... All this, therefore, had to be prophesied, it had to be foretold, to be pointed out as destined to come about, so that by coming unexpectedly it would not give rise to fear but by having been foretold, would then be accepted with faith, joy and expectation. This Psalm fits into the context of these promises. It prophesies our Lord and Saviour Jesus





Christ in such reliable and explicit terms that we cannot have the slightest doubt that it is really Christ who is proclaimed in it" (cf. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CIX, 3: PL 36, 1447).

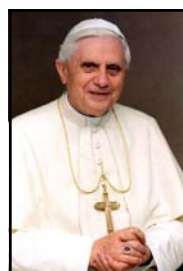
The paschal event of Christ thus becomes the reality to which the Psalm invites us to look, to look at Christ to understand the meaning of true kingship, to live in service and in the gift of self, in a journey of obedience and love "to the end" (cf. Jn 13:1 and 19:30).

In praying with this Psalm let us therefore ask the Lord to enable us to proceed on his paths, in the following of Christ, the Messiah King, ready to climb with him the mount of the cross to attain glory with him, and to contemplate him seated at the right hand of the Father, a victorious king and a merciful priest who gives forgiveness and salvation to all men and women.

And we too, by the grace of God made "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (cf. 1 Pet 2:9), will be able to draw joyfully from the wells of salvation (cf. Is 12:3) and proclaim to the whole world the marvels of the One who "called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (cf. 1 Pt 2:9).

Dear friends, in these recent catecheses I wanted to present to you certain Psalms, precious prayers that we find in the Bible and that reflect the various situations of life and the various states of mind that we may have with regard to God. I would then like to renew to you all the invitation to pray with the Psalms, even becoming accustomed to using the Liturgy of the Hours of the Church, Lauds in the morning, Vespers in the evening, and Compline before retiring.

Our relationship with God cannot but be enriched with greater joy and trust in the daily journey towards him. Many thanks.



Pope Benedict XVI  
16 November 2011  
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