

# Psalm 24(23)



## The Lord enters his temple!



he Lord's is the earth and its fullness,  
the world and all its peoples.  
It is he who set it on the seas;  
on the waters he made it firm.

Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord?  
Who shall stand in his holy place?  
The man with clean hands and pure heart,  
who desires not worthless things,  
(who have not sworn so as to deceive their neighbor.)

He shall receive blessings from the Lord  
and reward from the God who saves him .  
Such are the men who seek him,  
seek the face of the God of Jacob.

O gates, lift high your heads;  
grow higher, ancient doors.  
Let him enter, the king of glory!

Who is the king of glory?  
The Lord, the mighty, the valiant,  
the Lord, the valiant in war.

O gates, lift high your heads;  
grow higher, ancient doors.  
Let him enter, the king of glory!

Who is he, the king of glory?  
He, the Lord of armies,  
he is the king of glory.



1. The ancient chant of the People of God that we just heard, resounded in the temple of Jerusalem. To be able to grasp the main thrust of the prayer, we have to keep in mind three basic affirmations.

The first is the truth of creation: God has created the world and is its Lord. The second is the judgement to

which he submits his creatures: we must appear before him and be questioned about what we have done. The third is the mystery of God's coming: he comes into the universe and into history and desires to be free to establish a relationship of intimate communion with human beings. A modern commentator said: "These are the three elementary forms of the experience of God and of our relationship with God; we live by the work of God, we live before God and we can live with God" (G. Ebeling, *On the Psalms*, [see in the Italian text *Sui Salmi*, Brescia, 1973, p. 97]).

2. The three parts of Psalm 23 correspond to these three basic premises that we will now examine, considering them as three successive scenes of a poetic triptych for our prayer. The first is a brief acclamation of the Creator, to whom belong the earth and all who dwell in it (vv. 1-2). It is a profession of faith in the Lord of the cosmos and of history. In the ancient vision of creation, the earth is conceived as an architectural work: God lays the foundations of the earth on the sea, the symbol of the chaotic and destructive waters, in turn the sign of creaturely limitation, conditioned by nothingness and evil. Creation is suspended over the watery abyss and God's creative and providential hand keeps it in being and in life.

3. From the cosmic horizon the Psalmist's perspective narrows down to the microcosm of Zion, "the mountain of the Lord". We are now in the second picture of the Psalm (vv. 3-6). We stand before the temple of Jerusalem. The procession of the faithful asks the guardians of the holy door an entrance question: "Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord, who shall stand in his holy place?"

The priests as happens in some other biblical texts called by the experts "liturgy of entrance" (cf. Ps 14; Is 33,14-16; Mi 6,6-8) respond by listing the conditions that enable one to enter into communion with the Lord in worship. They are not merely ritual or external norms to be observed, but moral and existential requisites to be lived. It is an examination of conscience or penitential act that precedes the liturgical celebration.

4. The priests lay down three requisites. Above all, one must have "clean hands and a pure heart". "Hands" and "heart" refer to both action and intention, the



whole of the human being who should basically turn toward God and his law. The second requisite calls for one "not to tell lies", in biblical language it entails sincerity, but even more, the struggle against idolatry, for idols are false gods, that is "lies". The precept confirms the first commandment of the Decalogue, the purity of religion and of worship. The third and last requisite deals with relations with our neighbour: "Do not swear so as to deceive your neighbour". In an oral culture like that of ancient Israel, the word was the symbol of social relationships based on justice and uprightness and should not be used to deceive.

5. So we reach the third scene of our triptych which describes indirectly the joyful entry of the faithful into the temple to meet the Lord (vv. 7-10). With a thought-provoking exchange of appeals, questions and answers, God reveals himself progressively with three of his solemn titles: "the King of Glory, the Lord Mighty and Valiant, the Lord of Armies". The gates of the temple of Zion are personified and invited to lift up their lintels to welcome the Lord who takes possession of his home.

The triumphal scene, described by the Psalm in the third poetic picture, has been applied by the Christian liturgy of the East and of the West to the victorious Descent of Christ to the Limbo of the fathers, spoken of in the First Letter of Peter (cf. I Pet 3,19), and to the Risen Lord's Ascension into heaven (cf. Acts 1,9-10). Even today, in the Byzantine Liturgy, the Psalm is sung by alternating choirs on Holy Saturday night at the Easter Vigil, and in the Roman Liturgy it is used on the second Sunday of the Passion at the end of the procession of palms. The Solemn Liturgy of the opening of the Holy Door at the beginning of the Jubilee Year allowed us to relive with great interior emotion the same sentiments the Psalmist felt as he crossed the threshold of the ancient temple of Zion.

6. The last title, "Lord of Armies", is not really a military title as may appear at first sight even if it does not exclude a reference to Israel's ranks. Instead, it has a cosmic value: the Lord, who now comes to meet humanity within the restricted space of the sanctuary of Zion, is the Creator who has all the stars of heaven as his army, that is, the creatures of the universe who obey him. In the book of the prophet Baruch we read: "Before whom the stars at their posts shine and rejoice; when he calls them, they answer, 'Here we are!' shining with joy for their Creator" (Bar 3,34-35). The infinite, almighty and eternal God adapts himself to the human creature, draws near to meet, listen and enter into communion with him. The liturgy is the expression of this coming together in faith, dialogue and love.



Blessed John Paul II  
20 June 2001  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/audiences/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_20010620\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010620_en.html)