

Psalms 96(95)



The Lord reigns from the Cross

Sing a new song to the LORD;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
O sing to the LORD; bless his name.
Proclaim his salvation day by day.
Tell among the nations his glory,
and his wonders among all the peoples.

For the LORD is great and highly to be praised,
to be feared above all gods.

For the gods of the nations are naught.
It was the LORD who made the heavens.
In his presence are majesty and splendor,
strength and honor in his holy place.

Give the LORD, you families of peoples,
give the LORD glory and power;
give the LORD the glory of his name.

Bring an offering and enter his courts;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.
O tremble before him, all the earth.

Say to the nations, "The LORD is king."
The world he made firm in its place;
he will judge the peoples in fairness.

Let the heavens rejoice and earth be glad;
let the sea and all within it thunder praise.
Let the land and all it bears rejoice.

Then will all the trees of the wood shout for joy
at the presence of the LORD, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with justice;
he will govern the peoples with his truth.



1. "Say among the nations "the Lord reigns!". This exhortation of Psalm 95 (v. 10), just proclaimed, sets the tone that colours the whole hymn. Indeed, it is one of the "Psalms of the Lord's Kingship" that include Psalms 95-98[96-99] as well as 46[47] and 92[93].

In the past we have already had the chance to pray and comment upon Psalm 92 [93] and we know that these canticles are centred on the great figure of God who rules the whole universe and governs human history.

Psalm 95[96] exalts both the Creator of beings and the Saviour of the peoples: God "establishes the world, it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity" (v. 10). Indeed, in the original Hebrew, the verb translated as "judge" means "govern": thus we are certainly not left to the mercy of the dark forces of chaos or chance, but are always in the hands of a just and merciful Sovereign.

2. The Psalm begins with a joyful invitation to praise God, that opens immediately on to a universal perspective: "Sing to the Lord, all the earth!" (v. 1). The faithful are invited to "declare his glory among the nations", and then to tell "of his marvellous deeds" (v. 3). Indeed, the Psalmist directly calls on the "families of the peoples" (v. 7) to invite them to glorify the Lord. Lastly, the Psalmist asks the faithful to "say among the nations, "the Lord reigns!" (v. 10), and explains that the Lord "judges the peoples" (v. 10), and the whole "world" (v. 13). This universal opening on the part of a small nation squeezed between two great empires is very important. This people know that their Lord is God of the universe and that "all the gods of the nations are nothing" (v. 5).

The Psalm is substantially composed of two scenes. The first part (cf. vv. 1-9) portrays a solemn epiphany of the Lord "in his sanctuary" (v. 6), that is, the Temple of Zion. It is preceded and followed by the songs and sacrificial rites of the congregation of the faithful. The current of praise flows steadily before the divine majesty: "Sing to the Lord a new song ... sing ... sing ... bless ... tell of his salvation ... tell God's glory ... declare his marvellous works ... ascribe to the Lord glory and power ... give to the Lord the glory ... bring offerings ... bow down before him!" (vv. 1-3.7-9).

The fundamental gesture before the Lord King who manifests his glory in the history of salvation is therefore the hymn of adoration, praise and blessing. These attitudes must also be present in our daily liturgy and in our personal prayer.



3. At the heart of this choral song of praise, we find an anti-idolatrous declaration. Thus prayer is revealed as a way of reaching the purity of faith, according to the well known affirmation *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the norm of true prayer is also the norm of faith and is a lesson on divine truth. Indeed, the latter can really be discovered through the intimate communion with God achieved in prayer.

The Psalmist proclaims: "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised, he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are nothing; but the Lord made the heavens" (vv. 4-5) Through the liturgy and prayer, the faith of every generation is purified, the idols to which one sacrifices so easily in daily life are abandoned, and we pass from fear of the transcendent justice of God to living experience of his love.

4. So we come to the second scene, the one that opens with the proclamation of the Lord's kingship (cf. vv. 10-13). It is now the universe that sings, even through its most mysterious and dark elements, such as the sea, in accord with the ancient biblical concept: "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice, let the sea and what fills it resound; let all the plains exult, and all that is in them! Then let all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth" (vv. 11-13).

As St Paul will say, even nature with the human person, "waits with eager longing ... [to] be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the sons of God" (Rom 8, 19.21).

And at this point we would like to make room for the Christian re-reading (rilettura) of the Psalm by the Fathers of the Church, who saw in it a prefiguration of the Incarnation and Crucifixion, a sign of the paradoxical lordship of Christ.

5. Thus at the beginning of his address in Constantinople, on Christmas Day in 379 or 380, St Gregory Nazianzen uses some expressions of Psalm 95: "Christ is born: glorify him! Christ comes down from heaven: go to meet him! Christ is on earth: Be exalted! "Sing to the Lord, all the earth!" (v. 1) and, to combine the two concepts, "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice" (v. 11), because of Him who is of heaven and then of earth" (*Omelie sulla natività, Discorso 38, 1*, Rome 1983, p. 44; *Oration 38 on the Birthday of Christ, 1.*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol 7, p. 345, reprinted by Eerdmans March, 1989).

In this way the mystery of the divine lordship is manifested in the Incarnation. Indeed, he who reigns by

"becoming earthly", reigns precisely in humiliation on the Cross. It is significant that many of the ancients interpreted v. 10 of this Psalm with a thought-provoking Christological integration: "The Lord reigned from the tree".

Thus the Letter of Barnabas taught that "the kingdom of Jesus is on the wood [of the cross]" (VIII, 5: *I Padri Apostolici*, Rome 1984, p. 198; *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 282, Thomas Nelson, 1978) and the martyr St Justin, quoting almost the whole of the Psalm in his First Apology, ended by inviting all the Gentiles to rejoice because "the Lord hath reigned from the tree" of the Cross (*Gli apologeti greci*, Rome 1986, p. 121; *The First Apology*, chapter 41, p.78, *Writings of St Justin Martyr*, CUA Press).

From this terrain sprang the hymn *Vexilla regis* (The Royal Banners of the King, used in Passion week) written by the Christian poet, Venantius Fortunatus, that exalts Christ who reigns from the height of the Cross - a throne of love and not of dominion: *Regnavit a ligno Deus* (God has reigned from the tree). Indeed, already during his earthly life, Jesus warned: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For indeed, the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10,43-45).



Blessed John Paul II
18 September 2002
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20020918_en.html

