

## Psalms 119(118)

### Solemn canticle on the Torah of the Lord



In previous Catecheses we have meditated on several Psalms that are examples of typical forms of prayer: lamentation, trust and praise. In today's Catechesis I would like to reflect on Psalm 119, according to the Hebrew tradition, Psalm 118 according to the Greco-Latin one.

It is a very special Psalm, unique of its kind. This is first of all because of its length. Indeed, it is composed of 176 verses divided into 22 stanzas of eight verses each. Moreover, its special feature is that it is an "acrostic in alphabetical order", in other words it is structured in accordance with the Hebrew alphabet that consists of 22 letters. Each stanza begins with a letter of this alphabet and the first letter of the first word of each of the eight verses in the stanza begins with this letter. This is both original and indeed a demanding literary genre in which the author of the Psalm must have had to summon up all his skill.

However, what is most important for us is this Psalm's central theme. In fact, it is an impressive, solemn canticle on the Torah of the Lord, that is, on his Law, a term which in its broadest and most comprehensive meaning should be understood as a teaching, an instruction, a rule of life. The Torah is a revelation, it is a word of God that challenges the human being and elicits his response of trusting obedience and generous love.

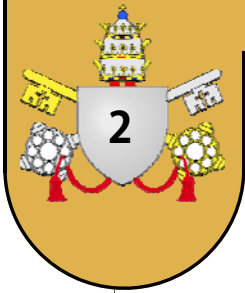
This Psalm is steeped in love for the word of God whose beauty, saving power and capacity for giving joy

and life it celebrates; because the divine Law is not the heavy yoke of slavery but a liberating gift of grace that brings happiness. "I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word", the Psalmist declares (v. 16), and then: "Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it" (v. 35). And further: "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day" (v. 97).

The Law of the Lord, his word, is the centre of the praying person's life; he finds comfort in it, he makes it the subject of meditation, he treasures it in his heart: "I have laid up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (v. 11), and this is the secret of the Psalmist's happiness; and then, again, "the godless besmear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts" (v. 69).

The Psalmist's faithfulness stems from listening to the word, from pondering on it in his inmost self, meditating on it and cherishing it, just as did Mary, who "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart", the words that had been addressed to her and the marvelous events in which God revealed himself, asking her for the assent of her faith (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). And if the first verses of our Psalm begin by proclaiming "blessed" those "who walk in the law of the Lord" (v. 1b), and "who keep his testimonies" (v. 2a). It is once again the Virgin Mary who brings to completion the perfect figure of the believer, described by the Psalmist. It is she, in fact, who is the true "blessed", proclaimed such by Elizabeth because "she... believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45). Moreover it was to her and to her faith that Jesus himself bore witness when he answered the woman who had cried: "Blessed is the womb that bore you", with "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Lk 11:27-28). Of course, Mary is blessed because she carried the Saviour in her womb, but especially because she accepted God's announcement and because she was an attentive and loving custodian of his Word.

Psalm 119 is thus woven around this Word of life and blessedness. If its central theme is the "word" and "Law" of the Lord, next to these terms in almost all the verses such synonyms recur as "precepts", "statutes", "commandments", "ordinances", "promises",

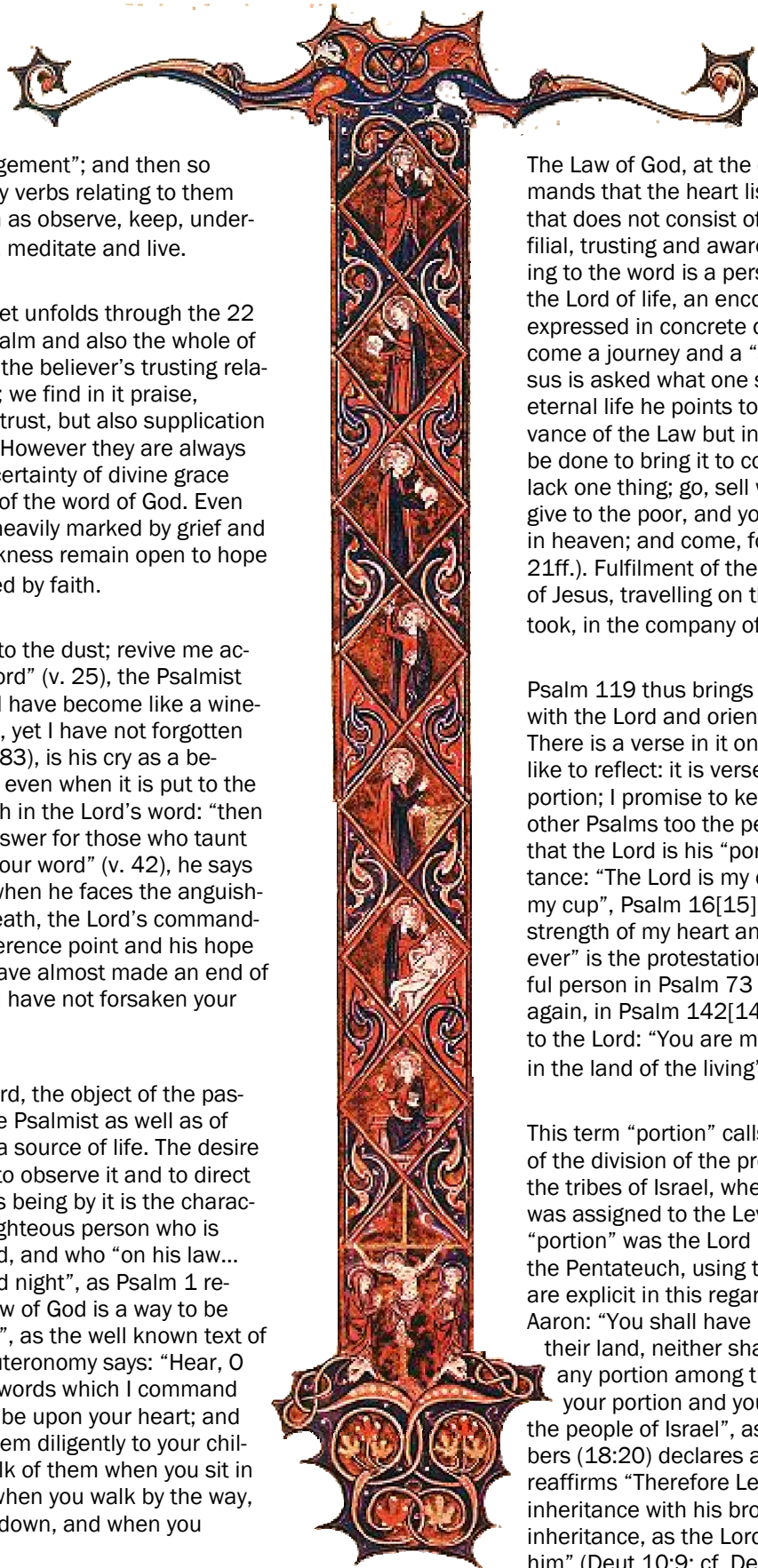


“judgement”; and then so many verbs relating to them such as observe, keep, understand, learn, love, meditate and live.

The entire alphabet unfolds through the 22 stanzas of this Psalm and also the whole of the vocabulary of the believer’s trusting relationship with God; we find in it praise, thanksgiving and trust, but also supplication and lamentation. However they are always imbued with the certainty of divine grace and of the power of the word of God. Even the verses more heavily marked by grief and by a sense of darkness remain open to hope and are permeated by faith.

“My soul cleaves to the dust; revive me according to your word” (v. 25), the Psalmist trustingly prays. “I have become like a wineskin in the smoke, yet I have not forgotten your statutes” (v. 83), is his cry as a believer. His fidelity, even when it is put to the test, finds strength in the Lord’s word: “then shall I have an answer for those who taunt me, for I trust in your word” (v. 42), he says firmly; and even when he faces the anguishing prospect of death, the Lord’s commandments are his reference point and his hope of victory: “they have almost made an end of me on earth; but I have not forsaken your precepts” (v. 87).

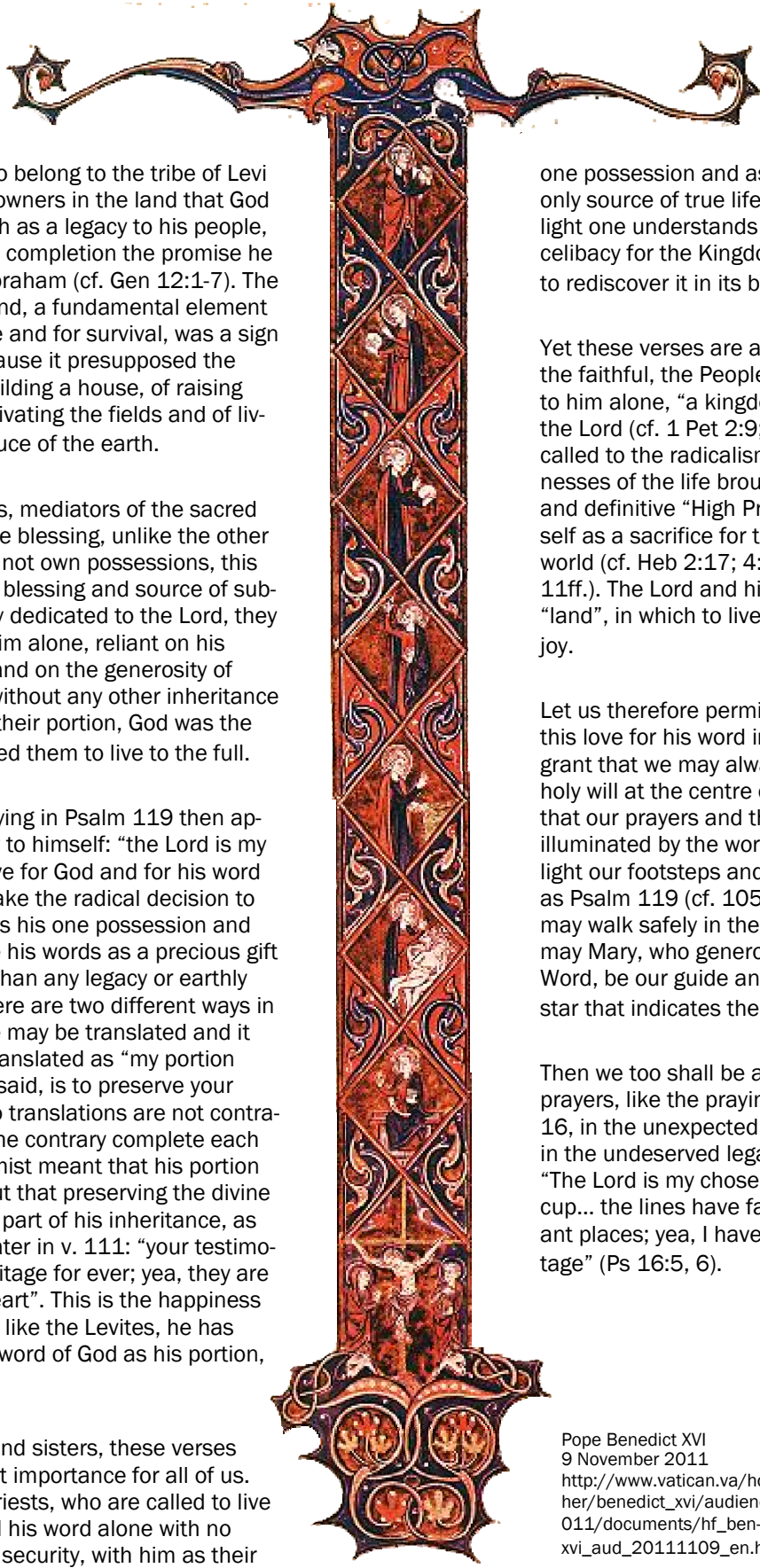
The Law of the Lord, the object of the passionate love of the Psalmist as well as of every believer, is a source of life. The desire to understand it, to observe it and to direct the whole of one’s being by it is the characteristic of every righteous person who is faithful to the Lord, and who “on his law... meditates day and night”, as Psalm 1 recites (v. 2). The law of God is a way to be kept “in the heart”, as the well known text of the Shema in Deuteronomy says: “Hear, O Israel: And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (6:4, 6-7).



The Law of God, at the centre of life, demands that the heart listen. It is a listening that does not consist of servile but rather of filial, trusting and aware obedience. Listening to the word is a personal encounter with the Lord of life, an encounter that must be expressed in concrete decisions and become a journey and a “sequela”. When Jesus is asked what one should do to inherit eternal life he points to the way of observance of the Law but indicates what should be done to bring it to completion: “but you lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me! (Mk 10: 21ff.). Fulfilment of the Law is the following of Jesus, travelling on the road that Jesus took, in the company of Jesus.

Psalm 119 thus brings us to the encounter with the Lord and orients us to the Gospel. There is a verse in it on which I would now like to reflect: it is verse 57: “the Lord is my portion; I promise to keep his words”. In other Psalms too the person praying affirms that the Lord is his “portion”, his inheritance: “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup”, Psalm 16[15] says. “God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever” is the protestation of faith of the faithful person in Psalm 73 [72]: v. 26b, and again, in Psalm 142[141], the Psalmist cries to the Lord: “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living” (v. 5b).

This term “portion” calls to mind the event of the division of the promised land between the tribes of Israel, when no piece of land was assigned to the Levites because their “portion” was the Lord himself. Two texts of the Pentateuch, using the term in question, are explicit in this regard, the Lord said to Aaron: “You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel”, as the Book of Numbers (18:20) declares and as Deuteronomy reaffirms “Therefore Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers; the Lord is his inheritance, as the Lord your God said to him” (Deut 10:9; cf. Deut 18:2; Josh 13:33; Ezek 44:28).



The Priests, who belong to the tribe of Levi cannot be landowners in the land that God was to bequeath as a legacy to his people, thus bringing to completion the promise he had made to Abraham (cf. Gen 12:1-7). The ownership of land, a fundamental element for permanence and for survival, was a sign of blessing because it presupposed the possibility of building a house, of raising children, of cultivating the fields and of living on the produce of the earth.

Well, the Levites, mediators of the sacred and of the divine blessing, unlike the other Israelites could not own possessions, this external sign of blessing and source of subsistence. Totally dedicated to the Lord, they had to live on him alone, reliant on his provident love and on the generosity of their brethren without any other inheritance since God was their portion, God was the land that enabled them to live to the full.

The person praying in Psalm 119 then applies this reality to himself: "the Lord is my portion". His love for God and for his word leads him to make the radical decision to have the Lord as his one possession and also to treasure his words as a precious gift more valuable than any legacy or earthly possession. There are two different ways in which our verse may be translated and it could also be translated as "my portion Lord, as I have said, is to preserve your words". The two translations are not contradictory but on the contrary complete each other: the Psalmist meant that his portion was the Lord but that preserving the divine words was also part of his inheritance, as he was to say later in v. 111: "your testimonies are my heritage for ever; yea, they are the joy of my heart". This is the happiness of the Psalmist, like the Levites, he has been given the word of God as his portion, his inheritance.

Dear brothers and sisters, these verses are also of great importance for all of us. First of all for priests, who are called to live on the Lord and his word alone with no other means of security, with him as their

one possession and as their only source of true life. In this light one understands the free choice of celibacy for the Kingdom of Heaven in order to rediscover it in its beauty and power.

Yet these verses are also important for all the faithful, the People of God that belong to him alone, "a kingdom and priests" for the Lord (cf. 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6, 5:10), called to the radicalism of the Gospel, witnesses of the life brought by Christ, the new and definitive "High Priest" who gave himself as a sacrifice for the salvation of the world (cf. Heb 2:17; 4:14-16; 5:5-10; 9, 11ff.). The Lord and his word: these are our "land", in which to live in communion and in joy.

Let us therefore permit the Lord to instil this love for his word in our hearts and to grant that we may always place him and his holy will at the centre of our life. Let us ask that our prayers and the whole of our life be illuminated by the word of God, the lamp to light our footsteps and a light on our path, as Psalm 119 (cf. 105) says, so that we may walk safely in the land of men. And may Mary, who generously welcomed the Word, be our guide and comfort, the polestar that indicates the way to happiness.

Then we too shall be able to rejoice in our prayers, like the praying person of Psalm 16, in the unexpected gifts of the Lord and in the undeserved legacy that fell to us: "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup... the lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage" (Ps 16:5, 6).

Pope Benedict XVI  
9 November 2011  
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