

Psalm 8



O Lord, our Lord!



How great is your name, O Lord our God,
through all the earth!

Your majesty is praised above the heavens;
on the lips of children and of babes
you have found praise to foil your enemy,
to silence the foe and the rebel.

When I see the heavens, the work of your hands,
the moon and the stars which you arranged,
what is man that you should keep him in mind,
mortal man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him little less than a god;
with glory and honor you crowned him,
gave him power over the works of your hands,
put all things under his feet.

All of them, sheep and cattle,
yes, even the savage beasts,
birds of the air, and fish
that make their way through the waters.

How great is your name, O Lord our God
through all the earth!



1. In meditating on Psalm 8, a wonderful hymn of praise, we come to the end of our long journey through the Psalms and Canticles that make up the prayerful heart of the Liturgy of Lauds. In these catecheses, we have reflected on 84 biblical prayers whose spiritual intensity we have especially tried to emphasize, without overlooking their poetic beauty.

Indeed, the Bible invites us to start our day with a hymn that not only proclaims the marvels wrought by God and our response of faith, but celebrates them with "music" (cf. Ps 47[46]: 8), that is, in a beautiful, luminous way, gentle and strong at the same time.

Psalm 8 is the most splendid example of all; in it, man, engulfed in night, feels like a grain of sand compared to infinity and the boundless space that arches above him, when the moon rises and the stars begin to twin-

kle in the vast expanse of
the heavens (cf. v. 4).

2. In fact, in the middle of Psalm 8, a twofold experience is described. On the one hand, the human person feels almost overwhelmed by the grandeur of creation, "the work of the divine fingers". This curious phrase replaces the "works of the hands" of God (cf. v. 7), as if to suggest that the Creator had traced a drawing or an embroidery with the shining stars, casting them over the immensity of the firmament.

Yet on the other hand, God bends down to man and crowns him as his viceroy: "you crown him with glory and honour" (v. 6). Indeed, he entrusts the whole universe to this frail creature, so that he may draw from it knowledge and the means for his survival (cf. vv. 7-9).



The horizon of man's dominion over the other creatures is specified, as it were, recalling the opening page of Genesis: flocks, herds, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea were entrusted to man so that in giving them a name (cf. Gn 2: 19-20), he might discover their profound reality, respect it and transform it through work, perfecting it so that it might become a source of beauty and of life. The Psalm makes us aware of our greatness, but also of our responsibility for creation (cf. Wis 9: 3).

3. Reinterpreting Psalm 8, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews discovered in it a deeper understanding of God's plan for humankind. The human vocation cannot be restricted to the "here and now" of the earthly world; if the Psalmist says that God has put all things under man's feet, this means that he also wants him to subdue "the world to come" (Heb 2: 5), the



"kingdom that cannot be shaken" (12: 28). In short, man's call is a "heavenly call" (3: 1). God wants "[to bring] to glory" in heaven "many sons" (2: 10). In order for this divine plan to take place, God had to trace out the life of "a pioneer" (cf. *ibid.*), in which the human vocation could find its first complete fulfilment. This pioneer is Christ.

4. In this light, St Ambrose comments on the Psalm and applies it to us. He starts with the sentence that describes the "crowning" of man: "you crown him with glory and honour" (v. 6). He sees in that glory, however, the reward that the Lord keeps in store for us, when we shall have overcome the test of temptation.

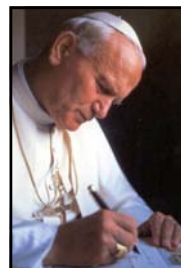
These are the words of this great Father of the Church in his *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam [Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke]*: "The Lord has also crowned his beloved with glory and magnificence. That God who desires to distribute crowns, procures temptations: thus, when you are tempted, know that he is preparing a crown for you. Abolish the heroic fight of the martyrs and you will abolish their crowns; abolish their suffering and you will abolish their blessedness" (cf. IV, 41: SAEMO 12, pp. 330-333).



God weaves that "crown of righteousness" for us (II Tm 4: 8) as the reward for our fidelity to him which we were able to preserve, even when storms batter our heart and mind. But in all seasons he is attentive to his beloved creature and wants the divine "image" to shine perpetually in him (cf. Gn 1: 26), so as to radiate a sign of harmony, light and peace in the world.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews remarked on this subject that the Psalm's words apply in a privileged way to Christ, that is, more specifically to him than to other men. In fact, the Psalmist uses the verb "to make less", saying to God: "you made him for a little while lower than the angels, you crowned him with glory and honour" (cf. Ps 8: 6; Heb 2: 6). For ordinary people this verb is inappropriate: they have not been "made lower" than the angels since they were never above them.

Instead, for Christ it is the right verb, because he was above the angels as the Son of God, and was made lower when he became man; then he was crowned with glory in his Resurrection. Thus, Christ fulfilled completely the vocation of man and, the author explains, he has done this "for every one" (Heb 2: 9).



Blessed John Paul II
24 September 2003
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20030924_en.html