

Psalms 20(19)

"Grant victory, O Lord!"



ay the Lord answer in time of trial;
may the name of Jacob's God protect you.

May he send you help from his shrine
and give you support from Zion.

May he remember all your offerings
and receive your sacrifice with favor.

May he give you your heart's desire
and fulfill every one of your plans.
May we ring out our joy at your victory
and rejoice in the name of our God.
May the Lord grant all your prayers.

I am sure now that the Lord
will give victory to his anointed,
will reply from his holy heaven
with the mighty victory of his hand.

Some trust in chariots or horses,
but we in the name of the Lord.
They will collapse and fall,
but we shall hold and stand firm.

Give victory to the king, O Lord,
give answer on the day we call.



1. The final invocation: "Give victory to the king, O Lord, give answer on the day we call" (Ps 20[19]: 10), reveals to us the origin of Psalm 20[19] that we have just heard and upon which we will now meditate. We are looking, therefore, at a royal Psalm of ancient Israel that was proclaimed during a solemn rite in the Temple of Zion. It invokes the divine blessing upon the king especially "in the time of trial" (v. 2); that is, the time when the entire nation has fallen prey to deep distress caused by the nightmare of a war. Indeed, chariots and horses (cf. v. 8) are mentioned and seem to be advancing on the horizon; however, the king and his people put their trust in the Lord who marches with the weak, the oppressed, those who are victims of the arrogant conquerors.

It is easy to understand how Christian tradition transformed this Psalm into a hymn to Christ the King, the "consecrated one" par excellence, "the Messiah" (cf. v. 7). He comes into the world without armies, but with the strength of the Spirit. He launches the definitive attack against evil and guile, against arrogance and pride, against lies and egoism. The words Christ addressed to Pilate, emblem of sovereign earthly power, reverberate in our ears: "I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice" (Jn 18: 37).

2. In reviewing the structure of this Psalm, we notice that it reveals in filigree a liturgical celebration being held in the Temple of Jerusalem. It depicts the assembly of the sons of Israel who pray for the king, head of the nation. Indeed, it opens with a fleeting reference to a sacrificial rite, one of the many sacrifices and holocausts offered by the king to the "God of Jacob" (Ps 20 [19]: 2), who does not abandon "his anointed" (v. 7), but protects and supports him.



The prayer is deeply marked by the conviction that the Lord is the source of security: he goes to meet the confident desire of the king and of the entire community, bound by the terms of the covenant. The threat of war hangs in the air, with all the fears and risks to which it gives rise. The Word of God does not appear as an abstract message, but rather a voice that adapts to



humanity's miseries, great and small. It is for this that the Psalm uses military language and reflects the oppressive climate of war in Israel (cf. v. 6), thus adapting to the feelings of men in difficulty.

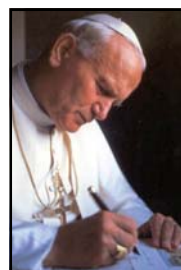
3. In verse 7 of the Psalm, there is a turning point. While the previous verses implicitly invoke God (cf. vv. 2-5), verse 7 affirms the certainty of an answer obtained: "I am sure now that the Lord will give victory to his anointed, will reply from his holy heaven". The Psalm does not specify what sign was given for this assurance.

However, it clearly expresses a contrast between the position of the enemies, who depend on the material strength of their chariots and horses, and that of the Israelites, who place their trust in God; for this they are victorious. Immediately the mind's eye sees the famous scene of David and Goliath: against the weapons and the arrogance of the Philistine warrior, the young Hebrew calls upon the name of the Lord, who defends the weak and defenceless. In fact, David says to Goliath: "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts... the Lord saves not with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's" (I Sam 17: 45, 47).

4. Although tied to the logic of battle in its historical reality, the Psalm can be taken as an invitation never to allow oneself to be attracted by violence. Isaiah himself exclaimed: "Woe to those who... rely on horses, who trust

in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord" (Is 31: 1).

The righteous one counteracts every form of evil with faith, goodness, forgiveness, the offering of peace. The Apostle Paul will advise Christians: "Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all" (Rom 12: 17). When commenting on our Psalm, Eusebius of Caesarea, a Church historian of the early centuries (3rd-4th centuries), will extend his gaze even to the evil of death that the Christian knows he is able to overcome by Christ's doing: "All evil powers and the enemies of God, hidden and invisible, who have turned their backs and fled from the same Saviour, will fall. Instead, all those who have received salvation will rise from their ancient ruin. For this, Simeon said: He "is set for the fall and rising of many" (Lk 2: 34): that is, for the destruction of his enemies and for the resurrection of those who have fallen but through him have risen" (PG 23, 197).



Blessed John Paul II
10 March 2004
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20040310_en.html