

Psalms 21(20)



"For the king trusts in the Lord!"



Lord, your strength gives joy to the King;
how your saving help makes him glad!
You have granted him his heart's desire;
you have not refused the prayer of his lips.

You came to meet him with the blessings of success,
you have set on his head a crown of pure gold.
He asked you for life and this you have given,
days that will last from age to age.

Your saving help has given him glory.
You have laid upon him majesty and splendor,
you have granted your blessings to him forever.
You have made him rejoice with the joy of your presence.

The king has put his trust in the Lord:
through the mercy of the Most High he shall stand firm.
His hand will seek and find all his foes,
his right hand find out those that hate him.

You will burn them like a blazing furnace
on the day when you appear.
And the Lord will destroy them in his anger;
fire will swallow them up.

You will wipe out their race from the earth
and their children from the sons of men.
Though they plan evil against you,
though they plot, they shall not prevail.

For you will force them to retreat;
at them you will aim with your bow.
O Lord, arise in your strength;
we shall sing and praise your power.



1. At the heart of Psalm 21[20], the Liturgy of Vespers has left out the part we have just heard and omitted another section with an imprecatory tone (cf. vv. 9-13). The remaining preserved part speaks in the past and in the present of the favours God has granted the king, while the omitted part speaks of his future victory over his enemies.

The text that is the subject of our meditation (cf. vv. 2-8, 14) belongs to the category of the royal Psalms. It is therefore centred on God's work for the Hebrew sovereign, perhaps portrayed on the solemn day of his enthronement. At the beginning (cf. v. 2) and at the end (cf. v. 14), the acclamation of the entire gathering almost seems to ring out, whereas the heart of the canticle has the tone of a thanksgiving hymn which the Psalmist addresses to God for the favours he has granted the king: "goodly blessings" (v. 4), "length of days" (v. 5), "glory" (v. 6) and "joy" (v. 7).

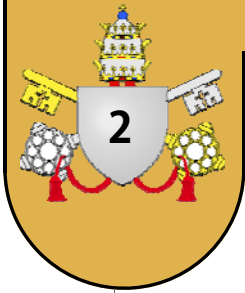
It is easy to perceive that this hymn, as occurred with other royal Psalms in the Psalter, was given a new interpretation when the monarchy in Israel disappeared. In Judaism it had already become a hymn in honour to the Messiah-king, thus paving the way to the Christological interpretation which is precisely used in the liturgy.

2. However, let us first take a look at the original meaning of the text. Given the solemnity of the event, we breathe a joyful atmosphere in which songs ring out: "In your strength the king rejoices, O Lord; and in your help how greatly he exults!... We will sing and praise your power" (vv. 2, 14).

Then comes a reference to God's gifts to the sovereign: God has heard his prayers (cf. v. 3), sets a crown of gold upon his head (cf. v. 4). The splendour of the king relates to the divine light that enfolds him like a protective mantle: "Splendour and majesty do you bestow upon him" (v. 6).

In the ancient Near East, it was believed that kings were encircled by a luminous halo that testified to their participation in the very essence of divinity. Of course, for the Bible the sovereign is indeed a "son" of God (cf. Ps 2: 7), but only in the metaphorical and adoptive sense. Thus, he must be the lieutenant of the Lord who safeguards justice. It is for this very mission that God surrounds him with his beneficial light and blessing.

3. The blessing is an important subject in this brief hymn: "You meet him with goodly blessings... you make him most blessed for ever (Ps 21[20]: 4, 7). The



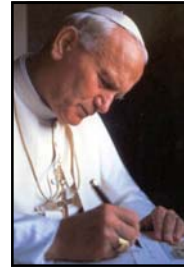
blessing is a sign of the divine presence active in the king, who thereby becomes a reflection of God's light in humanity's midst.

The blessing in the biblical tradition also includes the gift of life, which is precisely poured out upon the consecrated person: "He asked life of you; you gave it to him, length of days for ever and ever" (v. 5). The Prophet Nathan had also assured David of this blessing, a source of stability, support and safety, and David had prayed in these words: "May it please you to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue for ever before you; for you, O Lord God, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed for ever!" (II Sam 7: 29).

4. As we recite this Psalm, we can discern behind the portrait of the Hebrew king the silhouette of the face of Christ, the Messianic King. He "reflects the glory" of the Father (Heb 1: 3). He is the Son in the full sense of the word, and therefore, the perfect presence of God in humanity's midst. He is light and life, as St John proclaims in the Prologue to his Gospel: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (1: 4).

Along these lines, St Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, commenting on this Psalm, was to apply the theme of life (cf. Ps 21[20]: 5) to Christ's Resurrection: "Why does the Psalmist say: 'Life you have asked for', since Christ was about to die? In this way, the Psalmist proclaims his Resurrection from the dead and his immortality after rising from th dead. In fact, he entered life in order to rise again, and through the space of time in eternity, so as to be incorruptible" (*Esposizione della Predicazione Apostolica*, 72, Milan, 1979, p. 519).

It is also on the basis of this certitude that Christians foster their hope in the gift of eternal life.



Blessed John Paul II
17 March 2004
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20040317_en.html

