

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 7 November 2007

SAINT JEROME (1)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, we turn our attention to St Jerome, a Church Father who centred his life on the Bible: he translated it into Latin, commented on it in his works, and above all, strove to live it in practice throughout his long earthly life, despite the well-known difficult, hot-tempered character with which nature had endowed him.

Jerome was born into a Christian family in about 347 A.D. in Stridon. He was given a good education and was even sent to Rome to fine-tune his studies. As a young man he was attracted by the worldly life (cf. *Ep* 22, 7), but his desire for and interest in the Christian religion prevailed.

He received Baptism in about 366 and opted for the ascetic life. He went to Aquileia and joined a group of fervent Christians that had formed around Bishop Valerian and which he described as almost “a choir of blessed” (*Chron. ad ann.* 374). He then left for the East and lived as a hermit in the Desert of Chalcis, south of Aleppo (*Ep* 14, 10), devoting himself assiduously to study. He perfected his knowledge of Greek, began learning Hebrew (cf. *Ep* 125, 12), and transcribed codices and Patristic writings (cf. *Ep* 5, 2). Meditation, solitude and contact with the Word of God helped his Christian sensibility to mature. He bitterly regretted the indiscretions of his youth (cf. *Ep.* 22, 7) and was keenly aware of the contrast between the pagan mentality and the Christian life: a contrast made famous by the dramatic and lively “vision” - of which he has left us an account - in which it seemed to him that he was being scourged before God because he was “Ciceronian rather than Christian” (cf. *Ep.* 22, 30).

In 382 he moved to Rome: here, acquainted with his fame as an ascetic and his ability as a scholar, Pope Damasus engaged him as secretary and counsellor; the Pope encouraged him, for pastoral and cultural reasons, to embark on a new Latin translation of the Biblical texts. Several members of the Roman aristocracy, especially noblewomen such as Paula, Marcella, Asella, Lea and others, desirous of committing themselves to the way of Christian perfection and of deepening their knowledge of the Word of God, chose him as their spiritual guide and teacher in the methodical approach to the sacred texts. These noblewomen also learned Greek and Hebrew.

After the death of Pope Damasus, Jerome left Rome in 385 and went on pilgrimage, first to the Holy Land, a silent witness of Christ's earthly life, and then to Egypt, the favourite country of numerous monks (cf. *Contra Rufinum*, 3, 22; *Ep.* 108, 6-14). In 386 he stopped in Bethlehem, where male and female monasteries were built through the generosity of the noblewoman, Paula, as well as a hospice for pilgrims bound for the Holy Land, "remembering Mary and Joseph who had found no room there" (*Ep.* 108, 14). He stayed in Bethlehem until he died, continuing to do a prodigious amount of work: he commented on the Word of God; he defended the faith, vigorously opposing various heresies; he urged the monks on to perfection; he taught classical and Christian culture to young students; he welcomed with a pastor's heart pilgrims who were visiting the Holy Land. He died in his cell close to the Grotto of the Nativity on 30 September 419-420.

Jerome's literary studies and vast erudition enabled him to revise and translate many biblical texts: an invaluable undertaking for the Latin Church and for Western culture. On the basis of the original Greek and Hebrew texts, and thanks to the comparison with previous versions, he revised the four Gospels in Latin, then the Psalter and a large part of the Old Testament. Taking into account the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Septuagint, the classical Greek version of the Old Testament that dates back to pre-Christian times, as well as the earlier Latin versions, Jerome was able, with the assistance later of other collaborators, to produce a better translation: this constitutes the so-called "*Vulgata*", the "official" text of the Latin Church which was recognized as such by the Council of Trent and which, after the recent revision, continues to be the "official" Latin text of the Church. It is interesting to point out the criteria which the great biblicalist abided by in his work as a translator. He himself reveals them when he says that he respects even the order of the words of the Sacred Scriptures, for in them, he says, "the order of the words is also a mystery" (*Ep.* 57, 5), that is, a revelation. Furthermore, he reaffirms the need to refer to the original texts: "Should an argument on the New Testament arise between Latins because of interpretations of the manuscripts that fail to agree, let us turn to the original, that is, to the Greek text in which the New Testament was written. "Likewise, with regard to the Old Testament, if there are divergences between the Greek and Latin texts we should have recourse to the original Hebrew text; thus, we shall be able to find in the streams all that flows from the source" (*Ep.* 106, 2). Jerome also commented on many biblical texts. For him the commentaries had to offer multiple opinions "so that the shrewd reader, after reading the different explanations and hearing many opinions - to be accepted or rejected - may judge which is the most reliable, and, like an expert moneychanger, may reject the false coin" (*Contra Rufinum* 1, 16).

Jerome refuted with energy and liveliness the heretics who contested the tradition and faith of the Church. He also demonstrated the importance and validity of Christian literature, which had by then become a real culture that deserved to be compared with classical literature: he did so by composing his *De Viris Illustribus*, a work in which Jerome presents the biographies of more than a hundred Christian authors. Further, he wrote biographies

of monks, comparing among other things their spiritual itineraries as well as monastic ideal. In addition, he translated various works by Greek authors. Lastly, in the important *Epistulae*, a masterpiece of Latin literature, Jerome emerges with the profile of a man of culture, an ascetic and a guide of souls.

What can we learn from St Jerome? It seems to me, this above all; to love the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. St Jerome said: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”. It is therefore important that every Christian live in contact and in personal dialogue with the Word of God given to us in Sacred Scripture. This dialogue with Scripture must always have two dimensions: on the one hand, it must be a truly personal dialogue because God speaks with each one of us through Sacred Scripture and it has a message for each one. We must not read Sacred Scripture as a word of the past but as the Word of God that is also addressed to us, and we must try to understand what it is that the Lord wants to tell us. However, to avoid falling into individualism, we must bear in mind that the Word of God has been given to us precisely in order to build communion and to join forces in the truth on our journey towards God. Thus, although it is always a personal Word, it is also a Word that builds community, that builds the Church. We must therefore read it in communion with the living Church. The privileged place for reading and listening to the Word of God is the liturgy, in which, celebrating the Word and making Christ’s Body present in the Sacrament, we actualize the Word in our lives and make it present among us. We must never forget that the Word of God transcends time. Human opinions come and go. What is very modern today will be very antiquated tomorrow. On the other hand, the Word of God is the Word of eternal life, it bears within it eternity and is valid for ever. By carrying the Word of God within us, we therefore carry within us eternity, eternal life.

I thus conclude with a word St Jerome once addressed to St Paulinus of Nola. In it the great exegete expressed this very reality, that is, in the Word of God we receive eternity, eternal life. St Jerome said: “Seek to learn on earth those truths which will remain ever valid in Heaven” (*Ep.* 53, 10).

TO SPECIAL GROUPS

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Denmark, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and the United States. My special greeting goes to the members of the pilgrimage group from the Diocese of Rockville Center, led by their Bishop. I also thank the orchestral and choral groups for their uplifting music. Upon all of you I cordially invoke an abundance of joy and peace in Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lastly, I turn my thoughts to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear *young people*, plan your future in faithfulness to the Gospel, letting yourselves be guided by Jesus’

teaching. Dear *sick people*, offer up your suffering to the Lord, so that also thanks to your participation in his suffering he may implement in the world his saving action. And you, dear *newly-weds*, guided by a living faith, seek to form family communities inspired by an intense Gospel zeal.

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 14 November 2007

SAINT JEROME (2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, we continue the presentation of the figure of St Jerome. As we said last Wednesday, he dedicated his life to studying the Bible, so much so that he was recognized by my Predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, as “*an outstanding doctor in the interpretation of Sacred Scripture*”. Jerome emphasized the joy and importance of being familiar with biblical texts: “*Does one not seem to dwell, already here on earth, in the Kingdom of Heaven when one lives with these texts, when one meditates on them, when one does not know or seek anything else?*” (*Ep.* 53, 10). In reality, to dialogue with God, with his Word, is in a certain sense a presence of Heaven, a presence of God. To draw near to the biblical texts, above all the New Testament, is essential for the believer, because “*ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ*”. This is his famous phrase, cited also by the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution *Dei Verbum* (n. 25).

Truly “*in love*” with the Word of God, he asked himself: “*How could one live without the knowledge of Scripture, through which one learns to know Christ himself, who is the life of believers?*” (*Ep.* 30, 7). The Bible, an instrument “*by which God speaks every day to the faithful*” (*Ep.* 133, 13), thus becomes a stimulus and source of Christian life for all situations and for each person. To read Scripture is to converse with God: “*If you pray*”, he writes to a young Roman noblewoman, “*you speak with the Spouse; if you read, it is he who speaks to you*” (*Ep.* 22, 25). The study of and meditation on Scripture renders man wise and serene (cf. *In Eph.*, Prol.). Certainly, to penetrate the Word of God ever more profoundly, a constant and progressive application is needed. Hence, Jerome recommends to the priest Nepotian: “*Read the divine Scriptures frequently; rather, may your hands never set the Holy Book down. Learn here what you must teach*” (*Ep.* 52, 7). To the Roman matron Leta he gave this counsel for the Christian education of her daughter: “*Ensure that each day she studies some Scripture passage.... After prayer, reading should follow, and after reading, prayer.... Instead of jewels and silk clothing, may she love the divine Books*” (*Ep.* 107, 9, 12). Through meditation on and knowledge of the Scriptures, one “*maintains the equilibrium of the soul*” (*Ad Eph.*, Prol.). Only a profound spirit of prayer and the Holy Spirit’s help can introduce us to understanding the Bible: “*In the interpretation of Sacred Scripture we always need the help of the Holy Spirit*” (*In Mich.* 1, 1, 10, 15).

A passionate love for Scripture therefore pervaded Jerome's whole life, a love that he always sought to deepen in the faithful, too. He recommends to one of his spiritual daughters: "Love Sacred Scripture and wisdom will love you; love it tenderly, and it will protect you; honour it and you will receive its caresses. May it be for you as your necklaces and your earrings" (*Ep.* 130, 20). And again: "Love the science of Scripture, and you will not love the vices of the flesh" (*Ep.* 125, 11).

For Jerome, a fundamental criterion of the method for interpreting the Scriptures was harmony with the Church's Magisterium. We should never read Scripture alone because we meet too many closed doors and could easily slip into error. The Bible has been written by the People of God and for the People of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Only in this communion with the People of God do we truly enter into the "we", into the nucleus of the truth that God himself wants to tell us. For him, an authentic interpretation of the Bible must always be in harmonious accord with the faith of the Catholic Church. It is not a question of an exegesis imposed on this Book from without; the Book is really the voice of the pilgrim People of God and only in the faith of this People are we "correctly attuned" to understand Sacred Scripture. Therefore, Jerome admonishes: "Remain firmly attached to the traditional doctrine that you have been taught, so that you can preach according to right doctrine and refute those who contradict it" (*Ep.* 52, 7). In particular, given that Jesus Christ founded his Church on Peter, every Christian, he concludes, must be in communion "with St Peter's See. I know that on this rock the Church is built" (*Ep.* 15, 2). Consequently, without equivocation, he declared: "I am with whoever is united to the teaching of St Peter" (*Ep.* 16).

Obviously, Jerome does not neglect the ethical aspect. Indeed, he often recalls the duty to harmonize one's life with the divine Word, and only by living it does one also find the capacity to understand it. This consistency is indispensable for every Christian, and particularly for the preacher, so that his actions may never contradict his discourses nor be an embarrassment to him. Thus, he exhorts the priest Nepotian: "May your actions never be unworthy of your words, may it not happen that, when you preach in church, someone might say to himself: 'Why does he therefore not act like this?'. How could a teacher, on a full stomach, discuss fasting; even a thief can blame avarice; but in the priest of Christ the mind and words must harmonize" (*Ep.* 52, 7). In another Epistle Jerome repeats: "Even if we possess a splendid doctrine, the person who feels condemned by his own conscience remains disgraced" (*Ep.* 127, 4). Also on the theme of consistency he observes: the Gospel must translate into truly charitable behaviour, because in each human being the Person of Christ himself is present. For example, addressing the presbyter Paulinus (who then became Bishop of Nola and a Saint), Jerome counsels: "The true temple of Christ is the soul of the faithful: adorn it and beautify this shrine, place your offerings in it and receive Christ.

What is the use of decorating the walls with precious stones if Christ dies of hunger in the person of the poor?” (*Ep.* 58, 7). Jerome concretizes the need “to clothe Christ in the poor, to visit him in the suffering, to nourish him in the hungry, to house him in the homeless” (*Ep.* 130, 14). The love of Christ, nourished with study and meditation, makes us rise above every difficulty: “Let us also love Jesus Christ, always seeking union with him: then even what is difficult will seem easy to us” (*Ep.* 22, 40).

Prosper of Aquitaine, who defined Jerome as a “model of conduct and teacher of the human race” (*Carmen de ingratis*, 57), also left us a rich and varied teaching on Christian asceticism. He reminds us that a courageous commitment towards perfection requires constant vigilance, frequent mortifications, even if with moderation and prudence, and assiduous intellectual and manual labour to avoid idleness (cf. *Epp.* 125, 11; 130, 15), and above all obedience to God: “Nothing... pleases God as much as obedience..., which is the most excellent and sole virtue” (*Hom. de Oboedientia*: CCL 78, 552). The practice of pilgrimage can also be part of the ascetical journey. In particular, Jerome promoted pilgrimages to the Holy Land, where pilgrims were welcomed and housed in the lodgings that were built next to the monastery of Bethlehem, thanks to the generosity of the noblewoman Paula, a spiritual daughter of Jerome (cf. *Ep.* 108, 14).

Lastly, one cannot remain silent about the importance that Jerome gave to the matter of Christian pedagogy (cf. *Epp.* 107; 128). He proposed to form “one soul that must become the temple of the Lord” (*Ep.* 107, 4), a “very precious gem” in the eyes of God (*Ep.* 107, 13). With profound intuition he advises to preserve oneself from evil and from the occasions of sin, and to exclude equivocal or dissipating friendships (cf. *Ep.* 107, 4, 8-9; also *Ep.* 128, 3-4). Above all, he exhorts parents to create a serene and joyful environment around their children, to stimulate them to study and work also through praise and emulation (cf. *Epp.* 107, 4; 128, 1), encouraging them to overcome difficulties, foster good habits and avoid picking up bad habits, so that, and here he cites a phrase of Publius Siro which he heard at school: “it will be difficult for you to correct those things to which you are quietly habituating yourself” (*Ep.* 107, 8). Parents are the principal educators of their children, the first teachers of life. With great clarity Jerome, addressing a young girl’s mother and then mentioning her father, admonishes, almost expressing a fundamental duty of every human creature who comes into existence: “May she find in you her teacher, and may she look to you with the inexperienced wonder of childhood. Neither in you, nor in her father should she ever see behaviour that could lead to sin, as it could be copied. Remember that... you can educate her more by example than with words” (*Ep.* 107, 9). Among Jerome’s principal intuitions as a pedagogue, one must emphasize the importance he attributed to a healthy and integral education beginning from early childhood, the particular responsibility belonging to parents, the urgency of a serious moral and religious formation and the duty to study for

a more complete human formation. Moreover, an aspect rather disregarded in ancient times but held vital by our author is the promotion of the woman, to whom he recognizes the right to a complete formation: human, scholastic, religious, professional. We see precisely today how the education of the personality in its totality, the education to responsibility before God and man, is the true condition of all progress, all peace, all reconciliation and the exclusion of violence. Education before God and man: it is Sacred Scripture that offers us the guide for education and thus of true humanism.

We cannot conclude these quick notes on the great Father of the Church without mentioning his effective contribution to safeguarding the positive and valid elements of the ancient Hebrew, Greek and Roman cultures for nascent Christian civilization. Jerome recognized and assimilated the artistic values of the richness of the sentiments and the harmony of the images present in the classics, which educate the heart and fantasy to noble sentiments. Above all, he put at the centre of his life and activity the Word of God, which indicates the path of life to man and reveals the secrets of holiness to him. We cannot fail to be deeply grateful for all of this, even in our day.

TO SPECIAL GROUPS

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Denmark, Japan, Canada and the United States of America. I greet especially the Sisters of St Anne of Tiruchirapalli, who are preparing to celebrate the 150th anniversary of their foundation. Upon all of you I cordially invoke an abundance of joy and peace in Our Lord Jesus Christ.