

March 29, 2009

Saint John the Climber

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Psalm 64 (Hebrew 65) is not easy to take in at first, because it contains so many disparate elements the mind does not readily join together.

For example, there is an initial impression that the psalm's topography is confused. It begins in Jerusalem: "Thou, O God, art praised in Sion; and unto thee shall the vow be performed in Jerusalem" (Coverdale Psalter). Although the psalmist is happy, for a few verses, to "dwell in thy court" and "be satisfied with the pleasures of thy house, even of thy holy temple," the psalm rather soon moves to wider spaces, referring to those who "dwell in the uttermost parts of the earth."

If the place of this prayer is unclear, so is the time: "Thou that makest the outgoings of the morning and evening to praise thee." Although the liturgical usage of Holy Church rather early decided to make this a morning psalm, its general sense is by no means tied to the morning.

The mood of the psalmist changes too. At first he seems overwhelmed by his sins: "My misdeeds prevail against me: O be thou merciful unto our sins." Before long, nonetheless, he turns his attention to the moral failings of others, speaking of "the madness of the peoples."

Much of this psalm revels in the wonder of nature, the strength of the mountains, the raging of the seas, and the rain falling "into the little valleys." Unlike so many of the "nature psalms," however, Psalm 64 begins indoors, so to speak---under the porticos of the temple. The psalmist commences, not out on the mountaintop---"Who in his strength setteth fast the mountains"---but in the temple in Jerusalem.

It is difficult to imagine the psalmist standing in the temple and bewailing his sins, without thinking of that Publican of the parable, who went up to the temple to pray, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." When we recall this publican, however, we do not readily associate him with prayers inspired by nature. In the experience of most of us, these points of attention are very different and mutually alien.

One suspects many modern people would be content to go right to the latter half of Psalm 64, in which the wonders of nature are transformed into images of human abundance: the "fatness" dropping from the clouds, the folds full of

sheep, the valleys thick with corn, and the "little hills" rejoicing on every side. These themes of beauty and abundance are attractive in any age.

For the religious taste of many modern people, however, beauty and abundance can pretty much stand on their own, as it were. There is little or no perceived need to relate these themes of nature to the institutions of history, such as the Jerusalem temple. And, emphatically, modern folks are little disposed to spoil the attractions of beauty and abundance with the repentant remembrance of their sins.

I am thinking of the line I have heard times out of mind during my sojourn on this earth: "I can worship much better out in the woods (or at the beach, or on the mountains, or on the golf links---take your pick) than I can in church." Well, yes, of course, you can, dear. Indeed, if I get a Sunday off, I may come out to the woods and join you there---on our knees together, eyes to the sky, faces to the rising sun, arms outstretched to the horizon, minds rapt in wondrous contemplation at the grandeur of it all.

What we won't be able to claim for that religious enterprise, however, is the support of Psalm 64. This prayer, in which God is praised in gratitude for the beauty and abundance of His creation, does not begin with nature, but with an important and stable institution of history. That is to say, the temple: with all its ritual, its rules and rubrics. The temple: with the very mixed and often tragic history embodied in its stones and thrust upward in its arches. The temple: where sinful Israel regularly assembles to beat her breast and remember who she is. It is to the temple that all flesh is summoned---*omnis caro veniet*---to praise, render vows, and repent of sins.

When this is done---and in the context of its doing---we then may safely stride across the plentiful fields and climb those mountains girt about with strength. It is important to be sure that when the valleys "laugh and sing," their hymn ascends to the God of the temple, and not to Pan or Baal or Mother Earth or others who rashly advance their claims on nature. Otherwise, I'm afraid, there is precious little difference between "the raging of the sea, and the noise of his waves, and the madness of the peoples."

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