

August 10, 2014  
Lawrence of Rome

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings  
Friday Anger

The same monastic tradition that determined the psalms to be prayed at Thursday Matins also prescribed Psalms 75 and 91 (Hebrew 76 and 92) to be recited at Matins of Friday (Cf. The Rule of Saint Benedict, ch. 13). Because this sixth day of the week is “the day on which the Bridegroom is taken away” (Mark 2:20), the Church has always, from apostolic times, kept it as a fast day (Didache 8.1). Consequently, it is hardly surprising to find the theme of the Lord's Passion in Psalms 75 and 91.

The emphasis on the divine anger in these two psalms, however, differs considerably from that of the Thursday psalms. Whereas Jesus faces God's wrath in Psalms 87 and 89, in Psalms 75 and 91 he becomes the agent of that wrath.

Prior to an examination of these latter psalms, however, perhaps a brief and more general word is warranted, respecting the presence of “enemies” in the Psalter. In biblical prayer, it must be said, there is a good deal of enmity. Whether as the participial substantive ‘oyev or as some variant of tsar, the word “enemy” appears nearly 100 times in the Book of Psalms.

Consequently, if the Christian is to pray the psalms correctly and with understanding, it is very important to identify these enemies. They are man's spiritual enemies, the adversaries of the soul, which include those hostile forces spoken of in the very first verse of Psalm 1—“the counsel of the ungodly.” The Psalms encourage the remembrance that, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). The chief of these enemies is, of course, death itself.

It was to defeat these hostile forces that Christ ascended the Cross on the sixth day of the week. Thus with Asaph the Seer (the composer of Psalm 75) we pray to the conquering Christ, “You shine forth in splendor from the

eternal mountains.” The gates of the realm of death quake at his approach, unable to resist him: “For you are terrifying, and who can withstand you when your anger is aroused?”

The sundry enemies of God, symbolized in Pharaoh’s charioteers, fall back at his attack: “At your rebuke, Oh God of Jacob, the horsemen were stunned.” At the victorious death of Christ, we know, “the earth quaked, and the rocks were split” (Matthew 27:52). Asaph the Seer foresaw this: “From heaven you made judgment resound. The earth trembled, then became quiet, when God arose unto judgment (en toi anatenai eis krisin ho Theos), in order to save (tou sosai) the meek of the earth.”

In the Western monastic tradition, this visionary prayer of Asaph is followed immediately by Psalm 91 (followed, in turn, by the ode in Habakkuk 3). In this psalm we have a prayer of Christ. In the very act of defeating the forces of darkness, he says to his Father: “You, Lord, are the Most High forever. For behold, Your enemies will perish; / All who work iniquity will scatter. / But my horn will be exalted like a unicorn.”

Psalm 91 takes up another theme important to the mystery of the Cross: God’s deception of the powers of darkness. The demonic enemies, not knowing that the death of Jesus would bring about their own defeat, instigated the plot to kill him. It was, after all, the devil that “put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray [Jesus]” (John 13:2). The demonic forces did not know God’s plan for their defeat, “for, had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8). This insight into God’s plan prompted the Apostle to speak of “the wisdom of God in a mystery” (2:7).

Foreseeing this divine deception, the author of Psalm 91 marvels at God’s wisdom: “How awful are Your works, Oh Lord, how exceedingly deep Your thoughts. The one without discernment does not know these things; the dullard perceive them not. Though the sinful abound like the grass, and all who do iniquity preen themselves, they shall perish forever. “

Whatever the demons thought about the true identity of Christ, it seems clear that regarded him as only a human being, no matter how highly exalted,

no matter how favored by God. Had the demons suspected his death would be their undoing, they would never have conspired to bring it about. Not appreciative of God's love for mankind, they did not suspect he was God's very incarnate Son. To them he represented, rather, the clearest example of God's loyal servant and friend. And for this they hated him and schemed at his murder.

At Jesus' death, therefore, the demons were on the point of congratulating one another; they had just succeeded at proving God's inability to save His loyal servant and friend. At that very moment, however, they discovered themselves undone. Their supposed Victim began to raid the realm of death as a mighty and victorious Warrior. Indeed, "victory" was the most appropriate word to describe what Jesus of Nazareth accomplished on the Cross.

What finally happened on the Cross was not only the culmination of a pitched battle; the outcome had also what Anscar Vonier called "the surprise aspect." Leo I of Rome describes the consternation of the demons at their too-late discovery. He says of Christ,

And that he might loose the human race from the bonds of mortal transgression, he concealed from the Devil's fury the power of his own majesty and opposed him in the weakness of our own lowliness. For if the cruel and proud enemy had understood the plan of God's mercy, he would have determined rather to soften the minds of the Jews unto gentleness than to enkindle them unto unrighteous hatred, lest he should lose dominion over all his captives, while attacking the freed of the One who owed him nothing. So he was cheated by his own malice; he brought on the Son of God a punishment which was to be turned to the healing of all the sons of men. He shed righteous blood, which was to be a ransom and a cup for the reconciliation of the world. What the Lord chose according to the purpose of His own will, that he took upon him. He submitted himself to the impious hands of angry men, who, preoccupied with their own wickedness, were doing the Redeemer's behest" (Leo of Rome, Sermons 62.3; Cf. Tertullian, Against Marcion 5.6; Augustine of Hippo, Tractatus in Joannem 17.3).

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