

October 31, 2010

Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The outline of Psalm 107 (Greek and Latin 106) is given early: "From the regions He gathered them—from east and west, from the north and from the sea." The "four corners of the earth"—expressed in the ancient Greek text in this unusual way—indicates the fourfold progression in a poetic narrative of redemption. Four times we read, "they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, / And He delivered them from their distresses." This is an historical meditation for attaining contemplative wisdom; its final line asks, "Who is wise and will guard these things, and will understand the mercies of the Lord?"

The four "distresses" in this psalm are the wandering in the desert, a situation of imprisonment or bondage, a sickness, and a storm at sea. The last of these, the storm at sea, explains why, in the four directions listed at the beginning of the psalm, we read of "sea," instead of the expected "south." Just as the people are delivered four times, so they are four times summoned to the praise of God: "Let them confess the Lord for His mercies, and His wonders to the sons of men."

These four distresses may be understood literally or as metaphors, or as combinations of these.

Thus, for instance, when our psalm speaks of suffering in a waterless, trackless wasteland, this may be understood as referring to the return from the Babylonian Exile as well as to the earlier wandering in Exodus.

It may also include any experience of being lost and trying to find one's way back home. Thus, it may describe the journey of a reckless son lost in a distant country and already given up for dead (Luke 15: 13, 24). This son, in turn, may be Jacob exiled in Harran, where the drought consumed him by day, and the frost by night, and sleep departed from his eyes (cf. Gen. 31:40).

And it may likewise be any one or all sinners, exiled from the Garden and wandering away from the face of God: "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

Similarly, the psalm's next part, dealing with bondage or imprisonment, may refer to Joseph sold into slavery, fettered in a foreign land and presumed already to have perished (Gen. 37). Or it may be descriptive of Micaiah (1 Kin.

22:26, 27), or Jeremiah (chapters 37-39), or John the Baptist (Matt. 11; 14), or the Apostle Paul (Acts 23-26). And it may refer to our spiritual captivity, of which Jesus said that He came to set the oppressed at liberty (Luke 4:18).

Then there is the section of the psalm describing conditions of sickness, which is potentially manifold in its applications. This could be a prayer during the deathly illness of King Hezekiah, for instance, or the affliction of the paralytics of Capernaum (Mark 2) and Bethesda (John 5), or the woman with chronic bleeding (Mark 5), or the lame man at the gate called Beautiful (Acts 3). To Jesus, after all, they brought "all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them" (Matt. 4:24). And the Lord's healing especially concerns the forgiveness of sins (cf. Mark 2:5; John 5:14). This part of the psalm, then, is also a metaphor of our own illnesses.

Likewise, when our psalm speaks of enduring a storm at sea, it may refer to the storm suffered by the shipmates of Jonah, or St. Paul, or the disciples on the Lake of Gennesaret, while Jesus yet slept in the stern of the boat. The fierce storm of this story may also indicate all of us as "children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting" (Eph. 4:14). Many and diverse are this world's storms and hurricanes.

Our psalm is addressed to "those redeemed by the Lord." Its historical meditation is directed to those who stand already "within" that history, the beneficiaries of its blessing. This is the Church, made up of "those whom He redeemed out of the hand of the enemy," those whom He gathered from the four regions of the earth.

This psalm summons such as us to meditate on what the Lord has done in our midst and on our behalf, "that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1 Cor. 2:12). Psalm 107 is a call to that profound effort of reflection and praise.

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