

August 3, 2014
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings
Thursday Agony

According to the structure of the Canonical Hours in Western monasticism, two specific psalms were traditionally appointed for Thursday Matins: Psalms 87 and 89 (Hebrew 88 and 90) (Cf. The Rule of Saint Benedict, Ch. 13). The choice of these two psalms appears to be related to the Lord's Agony in the Garden, which took place on Thursday.

Thus, the "voice" (prosopon) in Psalms 87 and 89 is that of Christ, who, in his assumption of man's sin, felt the full measure of the divine wrath. St. Luke calls this utterly mysterious experience an agony, which prompted our Lord to pray "more earnestly." His prayer was so intense that "his sweat became as large drops of blood falling to the ground" (22:44). This was the context envisaged by the Church in the choice of Psalms 87 and 89 for Thursday Matins. Believers who pray those two psalms in that context enter into "the mind of Christ" (nous Christou, sensus Christi) and share his experience.

In both psalms the divine wrath is revealed in the staggering realism of death. Thus, Jesus prays in Psalm 87, "My soul draws near to the realm of the dead (sheol, hades); I am numbered among those descending into the pit." In this prayer he freely assumes the mortality of fallen man. "I am helpless, adrift among the dead, like the slaughtered lying in the grave."

According to St. Paul, "sin reigned in death" (Romans 5:21). Christ's agony consists in his confrontation with death, which is the inheritance bequeathed to this world by man's sins, beginning with Adam. This is the revelation of the divine anger, because "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (1:18). Jesus, in his agony, experiences the force of that wrath manifested in death. Thus, he prays, "You placed me in the deepest pit, in darkness and the shadow of death. Your anger lies heavy upon me."

In this psalm there is no relief from the experience of the divine wrath. Even at the end, it is still the case that, “Your fierce anger has come upon me; Your terrors have cut me off.”

In the Western monastic tradition, however, Psalm 87 is not the last word on the subject of God’s anger. It is invariably followed by Psalm 89, which continues the theme of anger/death but then, near the end, takes it in a new direction.

Psalm 89 begins with the shortness of life, which is cut off by death: “In the morning [men] grow like the grass; they flourish and blossom, but then they pass away. They dry up and wither.” This path to corruption reveals the divine indignation: “For we are consumed by Your anger; / we are terrified by Your wrath. / Our iniquities You have set before You, / our secret sins in the light of Your face. / All our days pass away in Your anger. / We finish our years with a sigh.” The praying Christ, contemplating this inevitability of death, asks his Father, “Who knows the power of Your wrath? Feeling Your terror, who knows Your anger?”

Near the end of this psalm, however, our Lord prays (and we pray with him) for the light that overcomes the darkness of death: “Have compassion on Your servants. . . . Fill us soon with Your mercy, / that we may rejoice and be glad all our days! . . . And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us!”

Psalm 89 is clearly a morning psalm, a prayer before the day’s work; this is the reason it is traditionally positioned at Matins.

However, its deliberate sequence after Psalm 87 on Thursdays makes it something more. It becomes the second half, as it were, of a single prayer, the prayer of the agonizing Christ as he faces the divine wrath revealed in the mystery of death.

In these two psalms taken together, we discern the narrative structure of the scene in the Garden of Olives. At the first, Jesus declares, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death.” He cries out in anguish, “Let this cup pass me by!” As he continues in prayer, nonetheless, repeatedly expressing his willed obedience to drink the cup—to “taste death” for each of us—submitting his human will to that of the Father, Jesus is changed

through the experience. At the end of the Agony, he has grown in his resolve. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, he “learned obedience by the things he suffered.” “Arise,” Jesus tells the disciples, “we must be on our way.”

©2014 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php