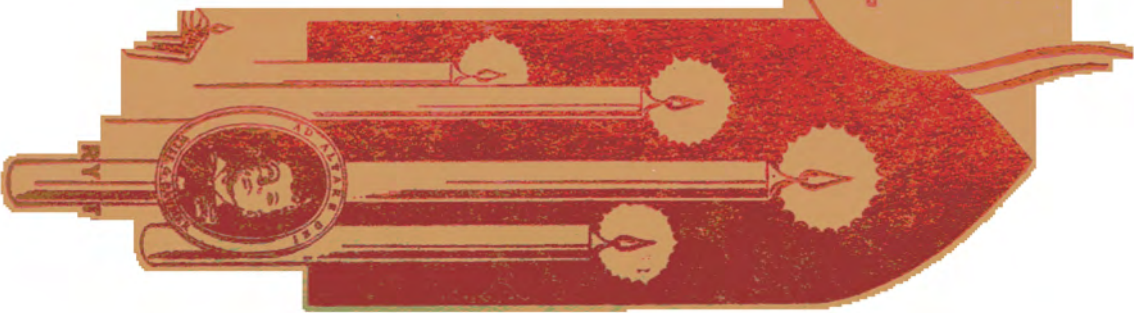


*What Good
Beatitude Is*

AMERICA



the CORD

A FRANCISCAN SPIRITUAL REVIEW

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A Commentary on the Psalms:

Father Jerome A. Kelly, O.F.M.

PSALM 119

The twelve Psalms used at Terec, Sext, None, and Compline—Psalms 119 to 130—share a common title, one which is borne, too, by Psalms 131, 132, and 133, although these latter do not appear in the Little Office. Each of these Psalms is described as a “song of ascents.” Because of the equivalent of this phrase in the Vulgate in the words *cantus graduum*, these fifteen Psalms have come to be called the Gradual Psalms or Canticles.

We would be describing them more accurately, perhaps, by calling them Pilgrim Songs. That is what they really seem to be: songs sung by pilgrims making the trip to Jerusalem, which journey, because of the location of the city upon Mount Sion, was indeed an ascent. Such pilgrimages to the Holy City were a duty laid by the Law upon all male Israelites. “Three times a year . . . all thy men folk shall present themselves before the Lord thy God in the place of his choice; at the three feasts of the Pasch, of Weeks, and of Tabernacles” (Deuteronomy 16:16). It was in fulfillment of this very law, as a matter of fact, that Joseph and Mary went up to Jerusalem that time when Christ was left behind in the Temple.

The observance of the feast being over, Joseph and Mary had started home and, “thinking that he was among their travelling companions, had gone a whole day’s journey before they made enquiry for him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances” (Luke 2:44). I mention these familiar circumstances because they permit us to infer that such pilgrimages were made by large groups of people, regular caravans, as it were, travelling together for the companionship, the encouragement, and the protection such an arrangement would provide.

It was just such a group that Jesus himself was leading up to Jerusalem on the occasion when he “took his twelve disciples aside on the way, and warned them” (Matthew 20:17) of his imminent passion, death, and resurrection. The seriousness of this particular episode of the journey is a reminder that all such pilgrimages were fundamentally religious. There was, nevertheless, a joyfulness about them, too, that prompted the pilgrims to raise their voices in praise of Almighty God. This is precisely the conduct suggested by Isaiah when he says that “men’s hearts are light when they go up, with the flutes playing about them,

to the mountain of the Lord, where he dwells, the strong God of Israel" ("Isaiah 30:29). And it seems quite likely that the songs sung to the happy pipings of the pilgrims were these Pilgrim Songs.

The brevity of these Psalms would naturally recommend them for inclusion in the Office for recitation at the Little Hours. The longest of the twelve, Psalm 121, has only nine verses; the others range in length from three to eight verses. But apart from their brevity, these Psalms, precisely because they are Pilgrim Songs, are beautifully suited to the Little Hours, as you can see by considering the significance of the hours themselves.

Each day of our lives may be likened to a journey, with the hours of the day marking the miles along the way. Every so often we must stop and refresh ourselves if we are going to come safely to the end of the day. This is why, early in the history of the Church, prayers were appointed to be said at various hours of the day. The three watches of the night were sanctified, of course, by the nocturnes of Matins, and the dawn was religiously welcomed by the chanting of Lauds. The day itself, from about nine in the morning until six in the evening, was divided into periods, and these were hallowed by Terce, Sext, and None. Vespers served as a kind of night prayer at the close of the day. In the monasteries, of course, the canonical

hours were actually chanted at the appointed times. In the monasteries, too, the custom developed of chanting Prime before the work of the day and Compline at the completion of it. The hours of the Office, therefore, are stops, along the way of each day's journey when we raise minds, hearts, and voices to God in fervent prayer.

It is quite true today that the nature of our work and the demands upon our times make it nearly impossible so to space Terce, Sext, and None, that they match our progress through the lengthening day. But we must not forget, especially while reciting these hours, that this is precisely what they are supposed to do—to dedicate each division of the working day to God and to bring down his blessings upon it as it passes. The more we attend to this truth, the more clearly we see how fitting it is that on our journey through the day we chant the Pilgrim Songs sung by our spiritual ancestors on their journey to the Holy City. It is doubly fitting, in fact, because all our days are but stages of the journey we are making to "the heavenly Jerusalem, city of the living God" (Hebrews 12:22).

All this having been said, it is rather baffling to find that the very first of these Pilgrim Songs—Psalm 119, which is the first Psalm for Terce—seems little suited for singing by people making a pilgrimage to the Holy City, much less the journey to "the

heavenly Jerusalem." Although the Psalm has only seven verses, two in each of the first two strophes and three in the third strophe, its brevity is not what bothers you. The poem concentrates so exclusively on the personal affairs of its composer that it seems scarcely relevant to anybody else but him. The majority of pilgrims, you imagine, would have a hard time referring the poem to their own lives and circumstances.

Whatever we think about Psalm 119, we have to admit that it does reveal and characterize the man who wrote it, his personality, his train of thought, his imaginativeness, his intense indignation, his grief, and his faith. This disclosure is cleverly achieved both by the structure and by the substance of the poem. It begins as a soliloquy and then surprises us by the suddenness with which it becomes an ejaculatory prayer. The second strophe is an angry apostrophe, as severe as it is short. The final strophe is another soliloquy, a bit longer and much more personal than the one with which the poem opened. The structure of the poem is not accidental; it is a perfect reflection of the agitated workings of the speaker's mind and heart. Suddenly struck by a clear recollection of God's help in the past, he is inspired to appeal earnestly for deliverance from present distress. The mere thought of his troubles enkindles his anger against his

persecutors, whom he vehemently denounces. The blaze of indignation dies suddenly. He sadly faces facts and laments the ever-present and unhappy circumstances of his life. Not a hundred words spoken, yet we know a man and pity him in his troubles.

The words spoken are not ordinary words because the speaker is not an ordinary person. This we discover as we examine his poem. It opens with a verse that states a fact remembered:

In my distress I called to the Lord and he answered me.

Something about the statement—its directness, abruptness, force?—suggests the sudden way that memories have of flashing into mind. It is a bare statement, too, in that it gives no details of the episode recalled. You get the impression that for the speaker the important thing is not what he remembers but what the remembrance does to him, how it affects him. It inspires him to pray:

O Lord, deliver me from lying lip, from treacherous tongue.

And with the prayer the first strophe closes.

The poet binds the second verse of the strophe to its first verse as effect is related to cause; he then links the second verse to the following verses as curiosity is related to satisfaction. I mean that he makes it necessary for us to read beyond the prayer to learn that he is asking to be delivered not from temptations to lying and

treachery but from molestation by liars and traitors. The imaginative quality of these latter

verses he first introduces in verse two, thus contrasting it with the undorned statement with which the poem opens. Rather than call his enemies liars and traitors, the poet uses a figure of speech, synecdoche, to characterize them by reference to their most offensive features, "lying lip" and "treacherous tongue". The expressions make verse two an example of synonymous parallelism because they are but two ways of expressing the same thing. To be delivered "from lying lip" or "from treacherous tongue" is to be delivered from calumny, detraction, slander, perfidy, betrayal of confidence, from all the machinations of men who refuse to love their neighbors and to live in peace with them.

An aspect of the psalmist's prayer that can easily escape notice is that it is not a plea for his deliverance only. In a sense, that would be a selfish act: to beg for his own deliverance but to care nothing for others in the same or in a similar situation. That the evildoers be punished, therefore, is a necessary, although implicit, corollary of his prayer that he be delivered. There must be this connection between the two facts

For the Lord watches over the way of the just,

but the way of the wicked vanishes.

(Psalm 1:6)

This is the logic that leads from the prayer of the first strophe to the malediction of the second. Actually the poet dispels the mood of prayer by the mention of his enemies. Incensed anew at their wickedness, he conjures them up in imagination and caustically addresses them as if they stood in the flesh before him. Here is the question he hurls at them:

*What will he inflict on you, with more besides,
O treacherous tongue?*

The wording of the question is a bit puzzling. Just what is meant by the phrase, "with more besides"? It resembles this formula of a curse sometimes used by Israelites: "May the Lord do such and such evils to you and add still more." Possibly the poet is echoing this formula. Strictly speaking, however, he is not cursing so much as asking a question about the future and answering it. The device, a familiar rhetorical one, is more sophisticated than a simple, straightforward curse would be. In this view of things the phrase means that greater penalties are in store for his enemies than he describes in the answer to his own question. God will punish these men not only

*sharp arrows of a warrior
with fiery coals of brushwood*

but "with more besides" than even the poet can envision.

The anger and contempt of the poet is convincingly expressed by the curt, brusque and almost fierce tone of verse four. The verse also reveals the working of his imagination. Although he directs his attention and addresses his words to men, the poet has not lost sight of God. Behind the words, giving them force and validity is the image of God as David described him, "the Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle . . . the Lord of hosts" (Psalm 23:8, 10). He is the "warrior" who will let loose a shower of "sharp arrows" against the deceitful and the treacherous, who will pour down upon them "fiery coals of brushwood" in condign punishment for their crimes. The image is a familiar one the poet uses rather than an original one he creates.

Even the imaginative details of the verse make it sound like a condensed version of David's description of the Lord of hosts: *A just judge is God,
a God who punishes day by day.
Unless they be converted, God will sharpen his sword;
he will bend and arm his bow,
Prepare his deadly weapon against them,
and use fiery darts for arrows.*

(Psalm 7:12-14)

The punishment God will inflict is, I think, here described metaphorically. If we suppose that the

poet means that his enemies will actually be shot down in battle or overwhelmed with glowing charcoal, are we not weakening his words from a solid threat of what will come to a mere wish for what may come? He is not necessarily speaking of real arrows and real coals. He is saying that God will justly punish evildoers. Whatever the punishment inflicted, it must pierce and burn his enemies because their lies and slanders have pierced his heart and made his soul burn with sorrow and anger.

These metaphors were carefully chosen, I think, to suggest the correspondence that must exist between sins of the tongue and the penalty for them. Liars, slanderers, traitors, and the like should be punished by "sharp arrows" because they are men *who sharpen their tongues like swords,
who aim like arrows their bitter words,
Shooting from ambush at the innocent man,
suddenly shooting at him without fear.*

(Ps.

*They feel themselves,
But God shoots his
suddenly they are
He brings them down
tongues,
all who see their
heads.*

And what makes

suitable punishment for such sins is that "in the lips of the wicked man is a burning fire" (Proverbs 16:27). Ages after the writing of this poem, inspired the words were recorded in which Saint James said "that is what the tongue is, a fire. Among the organs of our nature, the tongue has its place as the proper element in which all that is harmful lives. It infects the whole body, and sets fire to this mortal sphere of ours" (James 3:6).

The final strophe is the longest of the three that make up the Psalm. It is also, I think, the most important. In the first place it is the key to an understanding of the entire poem. In these three verses the poet reveals for the first time the full details of his situation. Once we realize how seemingly hopeless it is, we understand the vehemence of his turning to the Lord in prayer. Then, too, the harsh outburst of the second strophe is rendered more creditable when we know that its occasion is the constant and prolonged irritation to which the poet is subjected.

In another sense the strophe is all-important because it rounds out the poem. What began as a soliloquy here closes as a soliloquy. And in this final act of self-communing the poet discloses facts that make all the preceding parts more logically and psychologically correct. In the light of this strophe, really, the poem is

revealed as a completely unified and comprehensible work of art.

Finally this is the strophe in which the poet drives home to us the pathos of his situation. Recollection has led the way to fervent prayer. Prayer has been succeeded by indignant denunciation. Impotent anger has run its course and collapsed. The weary poet is left with nothing but a heightened awareness of his plight and the dejection into which this plunges him. All but disconsolate he bewails his lot, and by doing so reveals it:

Woe is me that I sojourn in Mosoch, that I dwell among the tents of Cedar.

The rugged territory between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea was called the land of Mosoch—son of Japheth and grandson of Noe—because its savage inhabitants were supposedly his descendants. On the other hand, Cedar—son of Ishmael and grandson of Abraham—was the ancestor of fierce nomadic tribes who roamed the Arabian Desert. The first of these lands is far to the northwest of Palestine; the other lies off the east and the south. The poet is not claiming actually to live among people so widely separated. What he is doing, I think, is using the names of two well-known barbarian tribes, making a kind of parallelism with them, and letting them be symbols of troublesome, hostile, and warlike people in

general. His complaint—and he thus makes it figuratively because he is writing a poem—is that he is forced to live among men who are in their way as odious as the rudest descendants of Mosoch and Cedar.

Verses six and seven make the complaint more precise and specific. His grief is caused as much by the length of his stay among them as by their hateful disposition:

All too long have I dwelt with those who hate peace.

His way of life, the things he does, even the words he speaks, these will provoke trouble and persecution because they are absolutely contrary to the attitudes of the evil men who surround him:

When I speak of peace, they are ready for war.

With that statement the psalmist ends his poem. He has nothing more to say, not, at least, until he remembers something that happened in days gone by. Then he will speak again:

In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.

O Lord, deliver me . . .

What man composed this poem? Who first set it to music and made a song of it? Who first thought of singing it as the pilgrims moved slowly along the moonlit road to Jerusalem? No one can say. Why did those who heard it love it well enough to preserve it among the Pilgrim Songs? Did they find it a touching reminder that the just man will always suffer persecution and must always turn to God for deliverance? Did they recognize that it strikingly reflected the sufferings of their nation and the merciful help that God had given it? Did God lead them to surmise, however dimly, that its message would be repeated, enriched, and strengthened beyond all doubt by his Word: "In the world, you will only find tribulation; but take courage, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). If they did any of these things, they had solid reason for ranking Psalm 119 among their Pilgrim Songs.

Your tiny hands reach for my love,
A paltry, shop-worn top!
Yet that is what You seem to want
Oh Mary's little Boy!
You seek the dark-deep of my heart
With candid, searching eyes,
To light it with unfailing grace
And to make it paradise!

(*Francesca*)

STEPHENMAS

Before the wreaths of holly are dismissed
From windows and from doorways
And packed into tidy boxes for another year,
St. Stephen, we think of you.
Hardly is that tender joy comprehended,
When sternly we are told of stones
That tore your life away from earth
Where Christ so lately clothed Himself as man
Everything is in these two days
To make us draw our Faith about us like a cloak
For, knowing how a vision stopped the pain
Of hatred's stones,
We also know there must have been somewhere,
Between, beyond, before,
A promise upon another hill.
And holly and the stones and heaven's light
All come to us by way of Calvary.
Sister M. Florian, O.S.F.

Index To The Cord

A Franciscan Spiritual Review

Father Honorius A. Santoriello, O.F.M.

In working out an index to the Cord, because of the wealth of material contained in each issue, it seemed best to make four different indices so that nothing might be omitted. In the course of time we hope to present to you these indices under the following headings:

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- INDEX III. - AN INDEX OF POEMS.
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INFANT KING

Infant King:
Hear me sing
Words of worship, awe!

From Your throne—
Crib that's loaned,
Abrogate the Law!

Though You are the Lord on High,
Let me hold You in my arms!
"Til from joy I'd likely die!
So enraptured by Your charms!

Infant King!
Gifts I bring—
Those You seek the most.

Mind and will,
Keep them 'till
You're my Heavenly Host!
Father Bruce Ignatowski, O.F.M. Cap.

SING TO THE LORD A NEW SONG!

Sing to the Lord a new song!
Sing this new song all day long!
Burst with the joy of the saved!
God has become a mere Babe!

Sing of the joy in your soul!
Jesus has come in the role
Of the Redeemer of all.
Sound forth your jubilant call!

Sing as you never have sung!
Sing in divergence of tongue!
Vow that to Him you belong!
Sing to the Lord a new song!
Father Bruce Ignatowski, O.F.M. Cap.