

THE CATHARTIC CURSING PSALMS: A Personal Approach.

Abbess Paula Fairlie

The years after Vatican II, the period from 1966 to 1970, were, in many ways, revolutionary: they literally changed our approach to the liturgy. 'The Liturgy' had both been on a pedestal and confined to the musty corners of the local Church. The Latin texts had made it largely incomprehensible to the laity, and the sacred rites were performed by the priest and his altar server in a hallowed mutter. Many Catholics followed the Mass in the Missal, and the readings were read in Latin and then translated into the local vernacular. Devotion was intense, with Exposition, the Forty Hours, the saying of the Rosary, the following of the Via Crucis, with the high-light of many a Sunday being Benediction. Many a convert only felt fully Catholic as the Blessed Sacrament was elevated amid the glow of candles, the perfume of incense and the chiming of bells. The act of reverence was accentuated by the priest wrapped in many layers of sacred cloth, with the Monstrance only elevated by a shrouded hand.

The introduction of the vernacular into the Mass was not welcomed by some priests or religious: the hallowed mutter was to be replaced by words the congregation could follow, and the closed Bible opened to the laity. Endless questions would be asked, and the lack of scriptural knowledge would become obvious. The changes in the rite, the gradual 'doing away with' extra-liturgical practices like Benediction, the directive that the words of Mass were to be followed, and not accompanied by the telling of the beads, were not welcomed by all, even at parish level.

One who was a recent convert but had experienced some Catholic life at university while Vatican II was in session, and who entered religious life in 1966 in Italy, speaking neither the prevalent vernacular nor familiar with Latin, missed much of the turmoil and excitement. But enough percolated through, and the saying of the Office in Italian instead of Latin was a revelation because of the change in the Sisters: they were amazed to discover what sort of words they had been praying so long with little comprehension but much devotion. Now it was essential to study the Scriptures, and to try to understand why the psalms contained such very primitive sentiments: how could Christians pray them at all? The emasculation of the psalms in the Roman Office prevented some serious shocks but, in the end, there were few psalms which we would term 'fully Christian', even though we tagged the 'Glory be' to the end of them.

However, this foretaste of religious life did reveal some attitudes and dispositions in the Sisters and oneself which certainly needed redeeming. As someone remarked 'Hell is other people'. The internal response to other people revealed that the path to hell was within oneself, in the form of anger, jealousy, envy, lust and even spite, as well as a great difficulty in forgiving both oneself and those around one. The early years in religious life revealed aspects of one's nature one would not have discovered in professional life: but is that true? No, not really, but one can walk away from uncongenial company at work but not in a religious community: there you have to face your demons, and either

overcome them or become hateful and unloving, bitter and resentful yourself.

The next stage was entry into a large and flourishing Benedictine monastery in England, where everything opened out and a sense of reality prevailed. The liturgy had already been reformed, with only Vespers retaining its former character. The historic heritage of Gregorian chant was maintained, studied and taught, and Latin taught by a Classics scholar. One could say that the best of the old and the best of the new Divine Office flourished side by side. Everything we were taught in the novitiate was an exploration into the revealed Word of God, and our personal response of prayer was left free, although our reading was guided. It was an intoxicating experience but also a deeper plunge into reality. The psalms revealed themselves as the chameleons they are, adapting themselves to liturgical need and personal insight, and their variety covered every mood and impulse of the human heart.

We prayed the psalms from the Grail Psalter, and the only change of text occurred in Psalm 57:9 when the words: *let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime: like a woman's miscarriage that never sees the sun...* were changed from *a woman's miscarriage* to *an untimely birth*. For the rest, we had the psalms as they were presented in the Psalter, and learned to live with what seemed self-righteous and what seemed hateful. At this stage of development it was not so much the cursing psalms which came to the fore but the psalms of anguish and alienation, the laments of Friday and the cries of desolation. Anger and hatred had not yet been faced, perhaps because they were so deeply feared. An immature person was too conscious of personal inadequacy to turn to God for vindication when she deserved none.

This phase of liturgical delight was followed by another move and the experience of the Office as traditionally prayed in the Monastic Breviary, all in Latin, with only Prime suppressed. But this phase was short, and slowly the smaller community in Wales adopted the vernacular, beginning with Compline, then Midday Office, and finally Morning Office, which combined Matins and Lauds. Once again, we were reciting or singing the entire Psalter in English, except for some psalms which were used for Vespers or only on certain special days.

Once again the freshness of new understanding blossomed, before familiarity blunted the spiritual palate. We prayed the psalms of both anger and desolation, with the keen edge of personal betrayal on Thursdays, and the sense of outrage at being deserted by God on Fridays. Sometimes the clash of personalities in community life, the sense of being misunderstood and maliciously represented, could be cleansed by hurling the words across choir as though they were spears and javelins. When all emotion was spent, a more rational acceptance could be reached. But the sense of being betrayed by a companion could surface for many years, and thus a closer sense of understanding of what Christ suffered by the betrayal of his friends could also develop. These raw human emotions gave insight not only into the human condition but into the human heart of Christ. He himself prayed these Psalms, identifying himself with our human lot, but also transposing anger, pain and anguish into a cleansing compassion.

It was obvious that mere empathy with the sentiments of the Psalmist is not enough: we also needed to understand the strong sense of morality which formed them. The psalms were never mere emotional outbursts of self-pity or hate but a reaction to apparent wickedness as seen from the point of view of the Lord God - or reactions to goodness, resulting in exultant praise. The Psalmist, on the whole, was trying to view the human condition from the divine point of view, although much appears to be the interpretation of anthropomorphism.

The great significance of the psalms both as expressions of the human condition and shouts of prayer were glimpsed in the Gospels, although already taken for granted and not studied. The foundations of the human character of Christ were to be found in the Scriptures, and his sense of fulfilling the plans of God the Father. In the preparation and inauguration of his ministry the Prophet Isaiah was quoted, and Psalmist and Prophet have always complemented each other. Mark quotes Isaiah again when Jesus considered the tradition of the Pharisees: *This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me..* This emphasis upon the **heart** was to be the key to much of the monastic undertaking, a veritable venture into the interior. Before that the clarion call to monasticism may have been the proclamation: **'The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'**

It is in the accounts of the Passion, and its preliminary stages, that the prophecy and insights of the psalms play a significant role. The processional song of praise, Psalm 117, provided many of the descriptions applied to Christ, including his 'crushing' of the enemy after being encompassed by the nations. A prophetic psalm indeed but also a psalm of conflict with the enemy, and the enemy is never shown any mercy. Even psalm 109 begins with the verse: *The Lord's revelation to my Master: 'Sit on my right: your foes I will put beneath your feet.'* By the time we were praying these psalms we really needed to ask ourselves: Who is my enemy?

The Rule of Saint Benedict provided a key in the use of a blood-thirsty verse of Psalm 136:8-9 against Babylon ... *he is happy who repays you the ills you brought on us. He shall seize and shall dash your children on the rock!* This is found in the inter-weaving of psalm texts in the Prologue, and appears in RB 1980 as:

He (the monk) has foiled the evil one, the devil, at every turn, flinging both him and his promptings far from the sight of his heart. While these temptations were still young, he caught hold of them and dashed them against Christ.

In RB 4:50 we have:

As soon as wrongful thoughts come into the heart, dash them against Christ and disclose them to your spiritual father.

So the hatred expressed towards enemies, and the desire for their total annihilation, has been transposed into hatred of the temptations of the 'evil one', and a practical instruction how to counter temptation in spiritual warfare. This constant state of war between the grace of God and the promptings of the devil had, somehow, slipped away from our consciousness in the society of the late twentieth century, when the need to be 'nice and charitable' seemed more important than the truth about oneself, and the corresponding

truth about others: we are still capable of hatred, loathing, jealousy and spite.

At the beginning of our religious life, and after some searing experiences engendered both by immaturity and lack of insight, as well as lack of virtue, we tend to cast ourselves into the innocent victim role. There are plenty of psalms which support us in this stance, and one of the first verses recommended to a novice by a senior nun was *'Be a rock of refuge for me, a mighty stronghold to save me...'* which the novice found rather chilling, finding for herself the warmer imagery of sheltering wings: *Have mercy on me, O God ... for in you my soul has taken refuge. In the shadow of your wings I take refuge till the storms of destruction pass by.*

The military imagery predominant both in the psalms and the Rule was largely ignored but as the years go by and terrorism and war seem endemic, the violent aggression within us has also surfaced in society. Aggression is part of self-protection, and anyone who denies this instinct will tend to be a door-mat, the very people who are the footstools of the victors. Shields and swords may no longer protect us from bombs and biological warfare but a well prepared person will know how to avoid, or fight off, temptation. We still need the armour of faith, and the example of those committed to combat evil within themselves. We cannot do much about the evil around us: the only person we are answerable for is ourselves. We cannot be peace-makers until there is a semblance of balance and harmony within ourselves, and that may only come after interior struggles and defeats, when we no longer rely upon our own strength. No, the struggle continues, and most of us limp like Jacob after the long struggle with God at the ford of Jabbok.

In rejecting evil and seeking good we are faced with two possibilities: cursing and blessing. We may consider cursing as 'un-Christian' but the parable of the Last Judgment contains these words: *Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.* And the non-doers of justice were told: *Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*

We may be more sophisticated in our imagery but the meaning is the same: eternal life or death are offered us. What do we choose? If we choose life, then the heart will be the place of conflict and combat, until, in quieter moments, we hear the words: *Blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God.* Yes, the acceptance of the truth about our human condition means the daily struggle with that which is opposed to the love of God and the love of our neighbour, and the praying - many times a day - *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, and lead us not into temptation...*

The prayers of humanity, in all their apparent ugliness, can be cathartic, and with this purging and cleansing of our emotions we may be receptive both to wisdom and grace. There is never a day when we can sit down and say: I have done enough!