

A POEM, A PRAYER

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"O my God, I shall cry . . ." (Ps. 21, v. 3).



IN THE haunting shadows of sorrow, in the quietness of death, in the pain of rejected love, the Crucified, His eyes closed in an eternal patience, waits for man to turn to Him. Here hangs the fantastic realization of the greatest pain ever suffered, of the greatest love ever proffered. So abysmal is this suffering and love that the human mind is tempted to despair of ever attaining any true knowledge of Him. Can man ever hope to express a like love in return? Yet such knowledge and love are necessary, for it is only through Christ crucified that man is saved. Knowledge and love of this afflicted Figure are so important that St. Paul boasts that he counts everything else as loss, as refuse, for the privilege of knowing and loving his suffering Lord. He says that his goal is to know what it means to share the pain of Christ; going so far as to become in some way molded into the very death of his Saviour—that he might rise glorious with Him (Phil. 3.7-11). Christ on His cross is man's salvation, the bridge spanning the infinite distance between heaven and earth.

Turning clouded and faltering eyes to the supreme object of all love, each Christian must ask one all-important question: How can I know and love Christ, and Him crucified? This is the question that has called forth the magnificent array of Christian heroes and heroines for 2000 years. This question drove hermits deep into the deserts, far from the distractions of men, to contemplate in prayer, and compassionate in penance, the bleeding wounds of their Saviour. It drew monks and nuns into monasteries to dedicate their souls and bodies to the praise and service of their suffering Lord. It charged preachers and apostles with a divine fire that would not be quenched until it had ignited the hearts of all men with some spark of the love of their Leader and Master. This question has evoked the daily sum of effort and sac-

rifice by faithful shepherds of the flock, from the lowest curate to the supreme pontiffs. It has encouraged martyrs to count their pain and blood as nothing in comparison with the fellowship thus gained with Him. It has tenderly enticed the hearts of virgins to the everlasting promise of a love that reaches its true consummation in eternity. This question has penetrated the very heart of the lives of Christians of all conditions and races, calling forth a heroism and love that utterly transcends the pettiness and confusion of their circumstances and attachments. But in all cases, in every life, it begins as a problem which each person has to solve for himself.

*“ . . . thou hast brought me down into the dust
of death”* (Ps. 21, v. 16).

Man, however, is not alone in this dilemma, for Christ Himself comes to the aid of our helplessness, pouring out His Spirit and enlightening His servants. In His last moments on earth, His memory found solace in an ancient prayer of His fathers, in the words of a poem, the 21st Psalm.¹ Through this prayer, in pain and desolation, He lays bare His innermost mind and heart. At the most crucial moment of His life, He reveals His soul in the words of a poem composed for Him from all eternity by the Holy Spirit. This is the Saviour's personal completion of the objective account of His Evangelists. Here man's mind and heart are satisfied and filled with the light and fire of a subjective penetration into the farthest reaches of Christ's humiliation and sorrow. No dry and cryptic description of a few sparse and scattered details, it has the power and force and dynamism of intense poetical feeling. Here His deepest sentiments, His most hidden fears and hopes are expressed in the vivid and living and vital language of poetry. The poetical expression, although in many places deeply obscure, bursts out in flashes of brilliant intelligibility and deeply moving insights that find a response, however weak and impotent, in our own wretchedness and expectations.

From this poem, written for and about Christ, as He Himself testifies when explaining the Scriptures to the apostles (Lk. 24. 44-46), one can come to a true knowledge and love for the Cruci-

¹ One can also study, with great profit, the psalm embodying the very last recorded words of Our Lord, Ps. 30. But the five psalms that treat especially of the passion are Ps. 21, 34, 54, 68, 108. Cf. St. Thomas, *Commentarium in Psalmos*. This should be read for a true and penetrating explanation of these psalms, especially for the more obscure verses.

fied. But certain preliminary steps must be made. One must add reflective, prayerful meditation to long and careful study. A luminous model for this procedure is given us by St. Thomas in his commentary. He points out that the descriptions of Christ and of our redemption in this and in the other 149 psalms are so evident and forceful, that the collection could be regarded more as another Gospel than as a book of prophecy.² Yet many obscurities still remain, especially for us whose minds are weak by nature and from sin; understanding and interpretation remain difficult.

Certain principles, however, can guide us. St. Paul states that the history of the ancient Jews is a symbol whose purpose is to teach us how to live and act. "Now all these things happened to them in figure: and they are written for our correction . . ." (I Cor. 10.11). St. Jerome expresses the same thing in saying that the events of the Old Testament are a figure of Christ and of His Church.³ St. Thomas, using these principles and applying them to the prophets in general and to David in particular, says that the prophets sometimes spoke of contemporaneous things, but what they said did not refer principally to those events. In order that we might not miss this, but be directed to the principal signification of the words, the Holy Spirit caused certain things to be said which transcended the immediate knowledge and circumstances of the prophet. What the prophet said was more than his knowledge and facts could account for. An example of this is seen in the prophet Daniel, who foretold certain things about Antiochus which were completely beyond this man's power, and refer principally, therefore, to the Antichrist. Many examples of the same thing can be found in the descriptions of the kingdoms of David and Solomon, in reference to the Kingdom of Christ. In this poem of David, which was also the prayer of Christ, we see that the principal meaning has reference to Christ, since the complaints of suffering, and confidences of hope wholly exceed the scope and power of David.⁴

"O God, my God, look upon me:

Why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps. 21, v. 2).

Taking these words and attempting to penetrate their meaning, we see that the prayer takes its origin in a setting of dark-

² St. Thomas, *Comm. in Ps., Proem.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Op. Cit.*, Ps. 21. St. Thomas states that the literal sense intends Christ.

ness and confusion, but we also see the true end of such a plea—hope and joy. The desolation of Christ in the anguished and horrible cry of the first verses is the groan and complaint of all men to the Father. These are bold words, but St. Thomas points out why this truth, at once so astonishing and consoling, is really contained in this cry of grief. Christ, Who was God, could utter such a terrible complaint in His pain, not because He was losing His divinity, as certain heretics would have it, but because the Father abandoned Him to His murderers and to extreme pain.⁵ As St. Paul says, God did not spare His own Son, but allowed Him to suffer and die for all of us. "He . . . spared not even his own Son, but delivered him up for us all . . ." (Rom. 8.32). God abandons us when He allows us to suffer some pain or evil, when He does not prevent some trial, when He does not fulfill our requests.⁶ Such was the case with our Beloved in the garden and on the cross.

But there is a more ultimate difficulty in this cry and complaint. If He was God, why did He cry out like this? Why did He complain? Did He not come freely to suffer all this for man? It is possible to be scandalized by an erroneous interpretation of these words. They seem too humiliating, show too much weakness. And yet St. Matthew and St. Mark quote Him as explicitly saying them (Mt. 27.46; Mk. 15.34).

The true explanation is found in the nature of prayer and of man. Prayer is the interpretation or expression of the human will, and is heard when one receives the request of his will. But man is both body and soul, with both lower or bodily and rational or reasonable desires. Further, his reason can demand something which is against his nature, such as when a soldier must advance to death in a battle. Man's lower nature, or his natural self, may desire one thing and his reason an opposed thing. Since Christ had a complete human nature, He acted like a man. He showed that He had a perfect human nature that naturally sought to flee pain and death, the same as our human nature naturally seeks to avoid pain and death.⁷ In this prayer, He showed how truly hu-

⁵ As to the murderers, cf. especially St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 47, a. 3. As to the pain, cf. St. Thomas, *Comm. in Ps.*, Ps. 21.

⁶ I, q. 113, a. 6; cf. also III, q. 21, a. 4.

⁷ Cf. III, q. 21, a. 4 on how Christ's prayer was heard and answered by God. Cf. III, q. 14, aa. 1 & 2 to see how Christ had physical and natural weaknesses. Cf. especially III, q. 18, aa. 2 & 5 on the nature of Christ's will and its conformity with the will of the Father as regards the difficulty of this psalm.

man He was, how close He was to all men, how low He had become in the humiliating degradation of the extremity of His suffering and shame. He found it necessary to beseech God in a piercing cry, in tears (Heb. 4.15; 5.7), thereby giving us an insight into the measure of the true horror that was His passion and death.

*"Far from my salvation are the words of my sins.
O my God, I shall cry . . . and thou wilt not hear . . ."*
(Ps. 21, vv. 2-3).

Pointing in the direction of greater intimacy in the personal use of this passage, St. Thomas offers an additional explanation of these words. Where there is mention of abandonment, sin, and complaining, it is thought that we are talking not about a just man but about a sinner. Therefore, these words are said by Christ in the person of the sinners in His Church. He can do this, for He and His Church are one. And so He deigns to unite Himself to even the most foul and corrupt of His members.⁸ He further condescends to come so close to us in our wretchedness, that St. Paul strikingly states that His Father has made Him into the very likeness of our sinful nature. ". . . God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and of sin . . ." (Rom. 8.3). Becoming even bolder and penetrating even deeper into the mystery, plunging into the intimacy that really exists between this Divine Lover and His wretched creature, St. Paul startlingly declares that His Father has made Him into sin for us that Christ might make us into the holiness of the Father (II Cor. 5.21).

*"But I am a worm and no man: the reproach of
men and the outcast of the people"* (Ps. 21, v. 7).

In the second part of His plea, from verses seven to twenty, He pours out a detailed and graphic description of what He has suffered. This is the description of the horrible monstrosity that is our sin. Here we can come truly to know sin in all its vileness and degradation. The true mirror of our crimes is held up before us by Him that we might be moved to compassion, contrition, and love. Seeing the power and force of the figures which He uses to describe His humiliation, we penetrate slightly into the bitterness and rawness of His soul. This is the Son of God, crying out in complaint that the terror of sin is like a roaring lion ready to close its jaws on Him:

⁸ St. Thomas, *Comm. in Ps.*, Ps. 21.

"They have opened their mouths against me, as a lion ravening and roaring.

I am poured out like water; and all my bones are scattered. My heart is become like wax melting in the midst of my bowels.

My strength is dried up . . . many dogs have encompassed me. . . .

They have dug my hands and feet.

They have numbered all my bones" (Ps. 21, vv. 14-18).

Our sin is so terrible, so heinous, that He is forced⁹ to go beyond His general cry to God and to complain bitterly of the particulars of His humiliation and pain. In His infinite wisdom He chose this particular death in order that we might most clearly see the terrible necessity of staying free from sin, that we might concretely see just how much God loves us and so be moved to love Him in return.¹⁰ In this prayer He shows us our sin and His love in all their awesome detail,¹¹ for as St. Paul says, He was "made a curse for us . . ." (Gal. 3.13).

" . . . when I cried to him he heard me" (Ps. 21, v. 25).

In the third section of His prayer, starting with verse 20, Our Saviour begins a petition to His Father in a rising crescendo of hope that ends in the confident expectation of a glorious eternity. This we must see and clearly recognize in order to understand His prayer which is the model for all of our prayer. The whole truth of His suffering and of our trials ends in hope and confidence. This is the total reality to which we must be conformed. In spite of all sufferings, insults, and contradictions, He is truly heard. Seeing beyond the present pain and sorrow, He knows that all is really conformed to the most loving will of the Father. In the higher reaches of His mind, He recognizes the necessity of such humiliation and simply wills it with all the

⁹ Cf. III, q. 14, a. 2 for the particular manner in which Christ could be forced.

¹⁰ III, q. 46, a. 3.

¹¹ The actual fulfillment of these details, predicted by David 1000 years before they occurred, is seen, of course, in the evangelists. Cf. Mt. 27.35-44; Mk. 15.24-32; Lk. 23.35-39; Jn. 19.23-25.

power of His infinite love. This is our model in contradictions and trials, in pain and in sadness.

*"The poor shall eat . . . and be filled . . .
they shall praise the Lord that seek him:
their hearts shall live for ever and ever"*
(Ps. 21, v. 27).

Speaking now directly of us, as St. Thomas points out, He looks through eyes of pain into the future, and promises the Bread of Life for the poor and humble. He seals His love with the promise and pledge of the Bread of Angels. Man's hope will find its inspiration and sustenance in the food that fills and overflows in spiritual delight and joy. One's happiness will then burst into a song of praise and thanksgiving to God for this most marvelous and powerful nourishment. Further, the lover, strengthened and exulting in his joy, will go on to the completion of his beatitude in an eternity of blissful love (Ps. 21, v. 27).¹²

*". . . to him my soul shall live . . . and the
heavens shall show forth his justice . . ."*
(Ps. 21, vv. 31-32).

In the last verses, He expresses the ultimate perfection of the soul who lives for Him, who has His mind, in whom the Spirit truly dwells.¹³ He says that this end lies in the future, for we are now far from perfect, far from our true state of love, far from the sublime union described here by Him Who perfectly knew and lived it. But the point is that it *is* man's future; it *is* his true life, his only real existence, the only happiness possible for him. Man begins in disorder and darkness, in pain and degradation, in sorrow and despair. He is confused and cannot see hope; tossed about like a straw in the gale, he weakens and fades like the shadows of late afternoon. But our Master has also been weary, has also felt pain and known darkness. Because He has suffered, He has the power to comfort and aid us in all our trials (Heb. 2.18). He has lived our life—and brought it to its true end. He has promised to help man to come close to Him.

In His prayer He teaches us to pray. He opens our minds and inflames our hearts with the concrete reality of His love. But His plea will be used differently by each individual, for each

¹² Cf. St. Thomas, *Comm. in Ps.*, Ps. 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*

will bring certain individual experiences and personal fragments of knowledge to it, and will be given certain individual and personal lights and affections by the one Spirit Who composed it. This is an important principle to remember when using this brilliant, yet darkly opaque inspiration. One must strive for humble perseverance, in docile submissiveness to His Spirit, in simple repetition with reverence and attention, when praying to the crucified Saviour. This is the very nature of prayer, to raise one's mind to the Father and beg for the things we need.¹⁴ The measure of the pressing necessity for us to pray is the measure of the pain and agony of His compelling love (Cf. II Cor. 5.14-19). The weight of His body hanging there presses us onward to seek, to beg. The patience of His pain waits and waits for us to acknowledge that we do not know, but wish to know; we want this knowledge which can only come from the mercy and bounty of the Father. But this presupposes that we have followed true guiding principles, that we have used our minds to give the Spirit something of nature to perfect.

Once we have come to see and know this love in the darkness of His faith, our heart will leap to love. This is the way of love; it will follow what we know. As our knowledge becomes more real and more intimate, so will our love become more effective and intense. Seeking Him, we shall be enlightened, knowing Him, our hearts will be opened, and in this wondrous space His love will burn, cleansing and uniting our nothingness to His majesty and goodness. But this pure and flaming union has its beginning in simple and humble prayer—a plea to His love, a cry to His cross. The poetry of His Spirit, the prayer of His agony, will not allow us to be lost forever in the filth of our own corruption, but will lift us up to the sublimity of His fiery love.

¹⁴ II-II, q. 83, aa. 1 & 17.