

EXQUISITE PRAYER

CHRYSTOM SEERY, O.P.

Venite adoremus. Come, let us adore and fall down, and weep before the Lord that made us. For He is the Lord, our God, and we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

(Ps. 94:6-7.—The Invitatory).



HIS is the exquisite prayer we chant daily before the altar of our God. It gives expression to that depth of feeling David must have known when he uttered it. To ponder it is to set the heart afire with love for God and had there been no fire in David's heart, none could be transmitted by his words, for these words could never have been spoken from a heart that was cold. As John was a prophet and more than a prophet, so David was a poet and more than a poet. For this prayer transcends poetry. Why do I say this? Poetry has been called "the ecstasy of a moment ensnared in words." This is altogether true because without ecstatic experience, without intensity of feeling, the travail of the writer begets little more than ephemeral trivia. But you may say:

Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.

To which I reply that great poetry was never begotten of a mole hill, whereas with the mountains there is always the possibility. However, David's prayer does fulfill the conditions of the definition and it does more than this.

Let us examine. Firstly the subject-matter, treating of an intimate relation to God, is for the most part, beyond and above the conventional subject-matter of poetry. True there are exceptions, for instance Edna Millay's

"Oh God, I cried, no dark disguise
Can e'er hereafter hide from me
Thy radiant identity! . . ."

But for the most part poets content themselves with the shadows of divinity, forgetting the Creator for the creature. Secondly, the depth of feeling which is sounded far surpasses that of any poem I have read.

"Purely subjective," you say. "Did not Hillyer change his attitude about Miss Dickinson, when, as he said, he had matured? He is a novice in his first fervor. He will cool off."

"God forbid!" I say with all my might.

Let us now pass on from these less important things to a consideration of the elements of the prayer. Let us imagine ourselves in the great choir at Clairvaux in the days of good St. Bernard. It is the evening hour. The monks are assembled from the fields and the shops of the monastery for their meditation. You and I are two of these monks and tonight we have selected David's Invitatory, specifically verses the sixth and seventh, for the subject of our meditation. Only this morning in his chapter, our blessed Abbot brought these to our attention, remarking that, for those lovers of God, still apprentices in the art of meditation, passages such as this make progress toward perfection in this observance comparatively easy and altogether delightful. We have heeded his direction and begin.

Come, let us adore and fall down, and weep before the Lord that made us. For He is the Lord our God, and we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Let us adore. Creatures? No. The products of fantastic imagination run riot? No. Who, then? Him, Who is our Alpha and our Omega! Him, Who, because of His Absolute Goodness, has deigned to give us the breath of life; Him Who has called us into His house, for we monks are His especially beloved and jealous is He of our homage and our love.

. . . and fall down . . . Why? Because we are most lowly and He is most high; because He has given us an example. Being the Creator of the universe, He chose to be born in a hovel whereas He might as easily have chosen a citadel the like of which had never been seen on the earth. We, humbling ourselves before Him, shall one day be exalted by Him.

. . . and weep . . . "Blessed are ye that weep now," says St. Luke, "for you shall laugh." You shall not laugh as men laugh now, at incongruities, but you shall laugh the laughter of heaven for sheer joy at having attained that for which you were brought to life on earth. ". . . Eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man what things God hath prepared for them that love Him," writes St. Paul in his first Epistle to the Corinthians.

. . . for He is the Lord our God . . . David says this not because he wishes to point out a new fact but because he wants to bring forcefully before our minds the relationship between God and us. He wants us not only to know this but to realize and comprehend it, to make it a part of ourselves so that we may always act in view of it.

We must do this. St. John Chrysostom, crying out against Christian mediocrity, because his flock could not by any means be distinguished from pagan folk, sounded this very note of knowing and not doing. In former times the world would remark how the Christians loved one another. In these times one does well if he obey the commandments of Christ and His Church, not even considering the practice of the virtues which lead to Christian perfection. However, let us not say that former times were better than the present, for this is idle talk. Let us instead pursue charity in our hearts, making our actions reflect that charity and thus we will press on to the goal.

... and we are His people and the sheep of His pasture ... What better analogy could our Lord have used when He said, "I am the Good Shepherd"? None, I say, because it was God Who was speaking. By these words He tells us that He has a care for us, that we are uppermost in His consideration. Happy thought! "For though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evils, for Thou art with me." David says this in another place.

The bell in the tower tells us meditation is at an end, that we must go to our evening repast and as the lines move out of the chapel we determine to carve these beautiful and pregnant words into our hearts and very often recall them so that we may the more easily elicit deeper and deeper love for Him Whose love for us was deepest, for He gave that for us which men hold dearest, even His life.