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The Fourth Sunday in Lent

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THE LOGIC OF LENT--4 and PSALMS--3

THE LOGIC OF LENT - 4

The Church's preparation for Easter falls into three phases, each of them three Sundays. The first three Sundays before Lent mark the beginning of the journey or pilgrimage to Jerusalem, with images of disciplined effort and labour, the exercise of the virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The second phase, the first three Sundays in Lent, mark the hazards of the journey, namely conflict with diabolical lies and illusions. Today, sometimes called "Midlent" Sunday, marks the turning point, the beginning of the third and final phase, the last three Sundays in Lent. It marks the completion of our journey up to Jerusalem, the place of mediation and sacrifice, where man, is redeemed from his bondage to alienation, is reconciled to God in freedom of the Spirit. In the Old Testament Lesson (Exodus 3) - the sending of Moses to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage, and to bring them into the promised land - we see foreshadowed God's plan to deliver his people from spiritual bondage of sin into the liberty of the Spirit. Accordingly, in the epistle lesson, the Apostle tells us that we are the citizens of "Jerusalem which is above", the free mother of the free (this gives this Sunday the name of "Mothering" Sunday). And he exhorts us to "stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage". Finally, in the gospel lesson, Jesus shows himself to be the new and greater Moses, the one to accomplish a new spiritual exodus in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31), who feeds the multitudes in the wilderness with the life-giving Bread of his Word (whence the name "Refreshment" Sunday).

PSALMS - 3

What is it that sets apart the Psalter - the book of Psalms - from all others in the Bible? Other books of the Bible we read, or hear: only with the Psalms do we take its words into our mouths, and make them our words. Like all other Scripture, the Psalms set forth God's word to man. Only the psalms also set forth Man's word to God. The Psalter is the Bible's own Prayer Book, and as such has been central to the worship of God since ancient Israel, when the psalms were sung in the Temple by specially-trained choirs of Levites. Treasured by the Church in ancient, medieval and early modern times, it is only in our deracinated age have they become strange to us, and sadly neglected.

What do we find in the Psalms? Poems that run the gamut of human

emotion – from pathos to exaltation; from visceral anger and fear to exultant gratitude and praise. Yet the psalms are not mere emotional introspection. Within an overarching movement from lament to praise, we find all themes of Scripture – law and gospel, history and prophecy, wisdom and devotion. That is why Athanasius called the Psalter an epitome of Scripture, and why Basil the Great called it a compendium of all theology.

And what is its chief theme? The psalms – many ascribed to David - portray the one who is both God’s anointed king, victorious over the enemies of God and Israel, and at the same time the Lord’s servant, suffering for his faithfulness to the Kingdom. In both capacities the psalmist is fully representative of God’s people Israel, so that the perspective of the psalms shifts constantly from the individual to the people and back again. What is for the Old Testament psalmist primarily outward - the earthly kingdom of David in the land of promise - becomes for the New Testament primarily inward – Christ’s heavenly kingdom of the Spirit. In the New Testament, the psalms are read as prophecies or allegories of Christ, suffering and triumphant; and it is his voice - speaking either in himself, or in his Church, among the company of saints or in individual Christians – that Christians listen for. When we speak or sing the psalms, Christ speaks in us; we speak in Christ. So for instance when the psalmist prays against his enemies (in the “imprecatory” psalms), his prayers are to be heard as the zeal of Christ for the glory of God and the victory of his kingdom and the right order of his world against all those false and lying spirits, that would corrupt this right order and destroy this kingdom and efface God’s glory. And in the judgments that he seeks against his enemies we see the ruin that comes to those who finally set themselves against God and his will for us.

The great 16th century divine, Richard Hooker, asks, “What is there necessary for man to know which the Psalms are not able to teach?” His answer is a marvelous invitation to the psalms: “Heroical magnanimity, exquisite justice, grave moderation, exact wisdom, repentance unfeigned, unwearied patience, the mysteries of God, the sufferings of Christ, the terrors of wrath, the comforts of grace, the works of Providence over all this world, and the promised joys of the world which is to come, all good necessarily to be either known or done or had, this one celestial fountain yieldeth. Let there be any grief of disease incident unto the soul of man, any wound or sickness named, for which there is not in this treasure house a present comfortable remedy at all times read to be found. Hereof it is that we covet to make the Psalms especially familiar unto all. This is the very cause why we iterate the Psalms oftener than any other part of Scripture besides; the cause wherefore we inure the people together with their minister, and not the minister alone to read them as other parts of Scripture he doth” (Laws V. 38.1).

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