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THE LOGIC OF LENT--5 and PSALMS--4 (A Psalm of Passion)

THE LOGIC OF LENT - 5

On this second-to-last Sunday in Lent, we delve deeper into the mediation of a new covenant between man and God by the death of Christ. Once again, the ancient lesson from the Old Testament provides perspective: the call of Jeremiah (chapter 1), the prophet sent by God to announce his judgments – not against Pharaoh, but against the faithless priests, princes, and people of Jerusalem: “and they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee”. This warning of the prophet’s rejection foreshadows Christ’s own rejection in Jerusalem, and shows us how to read the painful conflict between Jesus and the Jews in today’s gospel lesson (John 8:46-end). It is a controversy over the person and authority of Jesus, his right to speak as he does to Israel. Jesus exercises the ministry of prophet, declaring without compromise the life-giving word that God has given him to speak. All the great themes of his passion are already present – both the sinless obedience with which he honours the Father in all that he speaks and does, and the unbelieving rejection with which his opponents dishonour him, and expose their own sin, in refusing to hear his word. The speaking of the word forces a decision and division, which division God himself will adjudicate. “There is one that seeketh and judgeth”.

The controversy comes down to this question: whether or not he has the right to say “before Abraham was, I am.” The reference to the divine name (“I am”) is an implicit claim to deity; the Jews reject the claim as blasphemy, as their attempt to lynch him demonstrates. The claim will be definitively upheld when the divine Judge rules in his favour, and in favour of those who believe his word, by raising him from the dead.

If the gospel lesson shows us Jesus’ passion in light of his prophetic office, the epistle lesson (Hebrews 9:11-15) shows us his passion as an act of a priest (and victim), offering his own sinless humanity as a sacrifice for sin, and accomplishing “once for all” in his death on the cross that which the countless sacrifices offered in the Temple could never accomplish: the cleansing of the conscience, the remission of sins. In entering by his death into the “holy place” of God’s presence on our behalf, and obtaining an “eternal redemption for us”, Christ is manifest as the Mediator of the new covenant (or testament) foretold by Jeremiah (31:31-34), a covenant in which sinful man and a Holy

God are united in holy fellowship and communion.

PSALMS – 4

A Psalm of the Passion

Perhaps the best known of the psalms of Christ's passion is Psalm 22, *Deus deus meus*. In its Old Testament setting this psalm of David is an anguished lament of a faithful Israelite in great affliction. Only after recounting his sorrows (1-18) does he emerge from this abyss of tribulation, with hopeful prayer and proclamation of deliverance (19-32). Since the earliest days of the Church it has been read as a prophecy of Christ's passion; and this interpretation of the psalm we must trace back to Christ himself, who on the cross made its opening words his own, in the desolating cry of dereliction recorded in the first two gospels: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

The words express a striking paradox. On the one hand they express the despair of one who believes that there is no longer any help for him in God. On the other, in twice calling God his own God, and pouring out the sorrows of his heart to him in prayer, he expresses real faith. In truth it is the prayer of the purest faith, *faith de profundis*, a faith which looks to God even when the darkness of sorrow has obscured all sense of his favour. In its words we glimpse the weight of sorrow "even unto death" (Matthew 26:38) which first fell upon Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. We glimpse the darkness of our godforsaken alienation which he took upon himself, into the bond of love that unites the Son to the Father. At the same time we perceive the perfect obedience with which the Son bears that burden, "too heavy for us to bear". God "hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Along with other texts (such as Psalm 69:21, another great psalm of Christ's passion), this psalm seems to be referred to in Christ's second cry of anguish, "I thirst" (John 19:28), which St. John tells us was spoken in intentional fulfillment of scripture. Looking back on the Old Testament in the light of Christ's death, the apostles saw still more parallels between the psalm and the crucifixion. The mockery of Christ (Matthew 27:43) is foreshadowed in vv. 7, 8: "All they that see me laugh me to scorn; * they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying, / He trusted in the Lord, that he would deliver him,* let him deliver him, if he will have him". Likewise the division of his garments (Matt.27:35; John 19:23, 24) is alluded to in verse 18: "They part my garments upon them, * and cast lots upon my vesture". Later writers also drew attention also to verse 17, "they pierced my hands and my feet".

In these and other Old Testament texts, the apostles, taught by Christ himself, learned to locate the crucifixion in all its horror within the divine purpose of salvation. It is precisely the one utterly faithful to him even in dereliction whom God will deliver. In his suffering we see our sins under divine judgment: in his resurrection we see his vindication as the sinless Son of God, and our justification from all our sins. In taking the words of this psalm into our mouths, the Church draws near to Christ in passion, and is caught up in the Son's prayer to the Father.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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