

8th Chapter of the OCist Abbot General for MFC - 03.09.2013

We have seen the level of the work of God in which God is the creator of all beings.

But the Psalms describe another level which is more personal; one in which the Lord works in human history. The work of the choice and salvation of the people of Israel is the culmination and the paradigm of this work of God. The Psalms are born and express themselves within the scope of this work of God's special love for Israel and King David. Within this work, the level of the work of creation finds its full meaning, as well as the future work of the Redemption in Christ and through the Church that the Psalms foretell.

What the Psalms express regarding the personal relationship of God with the people of Israel and with David teach us to feel the closeness of God in our lives, his work of salvation in us, as He accompanies each of us on the dramatic journey of life, through the many trials which life asks of us or permits us to pass through.

I would say that this level of God's work is a "pastoral" level, in which God is our shepherd and guide on our path of life: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want (...). Even though I should walk through a dark valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me." (Ps 22/23:1, 4)

The work of God par excellence that the Psalms sing about and remember is the creation of his people. It is a work that coincides with a history. The people of God were created through the path along which the Lord had them go. A journey that began with the call of Abraham to leave his land and his home in order to go to a land chosen by the Lord. Abraham consented to this work of the Lord with a faith that looked beyond all appearances to see the work that God would do of creating a numerous people through his only child. Through the twists and turns in the history of the people of Israel, the faith of the patriarchs, of Moses, of the prophets, of David, has allowed God to carry out his work in his people.

The Psalms look at this creation through history as a marvel of God, a marvel not to be forgotten, even when it seems to be less than a marvel, and to which they return when the people are unfaithful, when they forget or betray it, or when they are persecuted.

I'll just mention a few quotes as this is a theme that runs through the Psalter, and you yourselves can do this research, or be attentive to this aspect when you pray the Psalms.

Psalm 99/100 is a beautiful hymn of praise. It calls out to everyone saying: "Know that the Lord alone is God: he made us, and we are his, his people, the sheep of his pasture" (99/100:3). Let's take some passages from the invitatory, Psalm 94/95, that St. Benedict has us sing every night at the beginning of Vigils. This psalm also describes the passage from the work of the creation of the world to the work of the creation of the people: "In his hand are the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains are his. The sea is his, it is he who made it, his hands formed the dry land. Enter, prostrate yourself, let us

worship, kneeling before the Lord who made us. He is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock that he leads." (94/95:4-7)

St. Benedict has the Office begin with this psalm each day. With it we remember once more the work of God, the presence of God who does everything, and does everything in a crescendo of belonging to Him. First, he creates the world, the earth and the sea, then he creates humans, each one of us, in order to form a people that He leads as a shepherd leads his flock. What fulfills the work of God in the creation of the world and of humans is this membership in the communion of a people in which all humans let themselves be led by God as the Good Shepherd, in which belonging to God consists in the freedom to follow him, to let ourselves be loved by Him, to let ourselves be guided by Him towards the fullness of life. This is the reason why God has made everything.

In fact, Psalm 94/95 continues insisting on the freedom that each person must exercise in order to listen to the Lord and obey him: "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (94/95:7-8).

The Psalms abundantly sing of this work, which is the work of salvation, in order to open us to this freedom to be docile to the work of God who creates and accompanies his people. Just think of the psalms that trace the history of the Covenant, such as Psalm 104/105 that goes from the call of Abraham to the entrance into the Promised Land. Psalms 105/106 and 106/107 take up this theme again, insisting on the uneasy relationship of the people with God in the desert.

Psalm 43/44 sees in this history of the Covenant the sign of God's love for his people, "God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us of the work that you did in their days, in ancient times. To plant them you with your hand have eradicated the Gentiles, to make them prosper you destroyed peoples. Not with the sword, in fact, did they conquer the land, nor was it their own arm which saved them; but it was your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them" (43/44:2-4).

This work of God that forms, defends, affirms, and leads his people is the great wonder that the Psalms sing about, especially when they celebrate the liberation from Egypt. In fact, the psalmist invites all to praise God, as in Psalm 65/66: "Say to God, 'How awesome are your works! Through the greatness of your power your enemies cringe. Let all the earth prostrate itself before you, let it sing hymns to you, let it sing to your name.' Come and see the works of God, awesome in his deeds among mortals. He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the river on foot: this is why we rejoice in him." (65/66:3-6)

Or in Psalm 76/77: "I remember the miracles of the Lord, yes, I remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your works, and muse on your mighty deeds. O God, holy is your way. What god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders; you showed your power among the peoples. You have redeemed your people with your arm, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph." (76/77:11-15)

But a theme also appears in this Psalm that the Psalms do not censor. The people often have the impression that God abandons and forgets the work of salvation in their regard: "How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to despise your name forever? Why do you withdraw your hand and keep your hand in your bosom? Yet God is our King from of old, he has worked salvation in our land. You divided the sea with power, you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters." (73/74:10-13)

"Has God forgotten pity? Has he in anger shut up his mercy? And I said, 'This is my torment that the right hand of the Most High has changed.' I remember the miracles of the Lord, yes, I remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your works, and muse on all your mighty deeds." (76/77:9-12)

But much more than the forgetfulness of God, the Psalms often speak and complain about the forgetfulness of the people. The people often forget the work of salvation wrought by the Lord, they forget the Covenant. Therefore, God reminds them and provokes them to return to the memory of his wonders.

"They did not remember his power, or the day when he redeemed them from oppression, when he worked his signs in Egypt, his wonders in the region of Zoan." (77/78:42-43)

"Harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as on the day of Massah in the desert, where your ancestors tempted me: they tested me though they had seen my works." (94/95:8-9)

"But they soon forgot his works, they did not have confidence in his project (...). They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, wonders in the land of Ham, and terrible things by the Red Sea. (...) But they mingled with the nations, and learned to do as they did. They served their idols, and these were a trap for them." (105/106:13,21-22,35-36)

Here we see that forgetfulness of the works of God makes us slaves of the "works of the nations," that is, of idolatry. Those who do not remember God's work of salvation lose their freedom with respect to idols. And idols, whatever kind they may be, are a "trap", a deception, because they are the work of humans who pretend to be God, and therefore, they do not keep their promise of salvation as the Lord keeps his.

In the Divine Office, we are given and asked to live this memory of the Lord's wonders of salvation. This allows God to continue doing them for us, freeing us from idols that deceive us. For St. Benedict, the Divine Office is the memory that allows the Lord to continue the Covenant's Work of God in us and among us. The Office, the Psalms, as well as all the biblical and liturgical texts that the Office proposes to us, renew the work in which God creates and leads his people to salvation in the Covenant with Him. He educates our freedom to always remember this work in progress and to never forget it.

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