TO CURSE IS TO PRAY

By ROBIN GIBBONS

ON THE FEAST OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST, 24 June 404, in the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, the Patriarch, John Chrysostom, began a sermon which denounced in prophetic tones the Empress Eudoxia: 'Again Herodias raves; again she rages; again she dances; again she asks for the head of John upon a charger'.[1] Those present, and especially his enemies, saw this allusion as a direct attack on the court. The result of his rhetorical outburst was his exile and death.

Anyone familiar with his homilies cannot fail to recognize that Chrysostom was a great orator and preacher. Part of his style was to use the diatribe as a natural form of homily: short, pithy sentences with startling questions for the listener. He was quite prepared to tackle not only the message of hope and joy in Christ, consoling and encouraging his people, but also to castigate and denounce (with barely concealed invective) vices and sins against the gospel. It would seem that very little escaped his eye and even less his tongue. As a priest, he saw preaching as the heart of his ministry. His words were always adapted to the circumstances and needs of his people, even if he risked displeasure from them. 'My reproach of you today is severe, but I beg you to pardon it . . . I do not speak in this way out of enmity but out of care for you.'[2]

Chysostom saw ministry in the Church as requiring honesty and directness in dealing with the lives of people in the service of a greater aim: 'Therefore, so that neither you nor I may be condemned, I entreat you to do what I tell you and free yourselves from the habits and ways of the world'.[3] Perhaps we are not used to the bold words of preachers such as Chrysostom, and certainly the contemporary mind finds some of his invective rather difficult and extreme. Nevertheless, his mingling of anger, righteous indignation and reproving tone serves to highlight a lack that we need to tackle within our contemporary understanding of prayer and relationship to God and neighbour. In Chrysostom, and indeed more generally in early Christian literature, zeal for God could go hand in hand with a considered 'nastiness'.

We have to be careful of judging this nastiness by our own standards. Seemingly unpleasant comments often serve to convey a deeper message, as does the curious behaviour of which we often read in the

monastic tales of the early Fathers. In one tale of Abba Poemen, a magistrate, enraged at the Abba's refusal to meet him, put Poemen's nephew in jail, hoping that the old man would come to intercede for his release. Did he? The answer sent back seems horrible in its casual disregard for relationship. 'The old man replied, "Judge him according to the law; if he is worthy of death, put him to death; if not, do what you choose".'[4] We can look at this from the standpoint of contemporary psychology and see it as some form of problematic behaviour caused by desert *ascesis*. But Poemen himself had deeper reasons. In another of his sayings, we can catch a glimpse of what Poemen was really suggesting:

> The old man said to him, 'Passions work in four stages – first, in the heart; secondly, in the face; thirdly, in words; and fourthly, it is essential not to render evil for evil in deeds. If you can purify your heart, passion will not come into your expression; but if it comes into your face, take care not to speak; but if you do speak, cut the conversation short in case you render evil for evil.'[5]

For Poemen, as for all the great figures of desert monasticism, the beginning of real evil is in the heart, prior to expression, prior to action. Had he given in to the magistrate's blackmail, he would have been colluding, however tacitly or understandably, with inauthenticity.

The spiritual teaching of the early Church understands the passions – evil, if one likes – as something to be confronted, named and dealt with. There is much on how spiritual warfare requires a balance between hating the sickness but not the sick person, and on discernment as a matter of proportion. 'There is an asceticism which is determined by the enemy', teaches Amma Syncletica, and the disciple must learn to distinguish between 'divine and royal asceticism' and this 'demonic tyranny'. We must be 'wise as serpents' in the sense of 'not ignoring the wiles and attacks of the devil', and yet be like doves in our simplicity of action (Mt 10:16). The journey is a difficult one, but it will lead to knowledge of the divine fire: 'In the beginning there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing towards God and afterwards, ineffable joy'.[6] Echoes of this occur in many of these early Christian teachings; we find expression of it also in the great western Rule of Benedict of Nursia: 'Having climbed all these steps of humility, therefore, the monk will presently come to that perfect love which casts out fear'. The disciple becomes love's possession, receptive to the Spirit's inspiration.

The cathedral office

What has this collection of remote Christian ancestors to teach us about the problem of curse and anger in prayer? If we are considering the difficulty of using psalmody or scriptural texts that contain unpleasant and even offensive suggestions, a good starting place would be the lives of those whose primary spiritual nourishment was the Psalms. The early period of our Christian tradition can provide a useful quarry for attitudes and expressions that may help us find ways of connecting with seemingly impossible texts. There is little record of exegetical surgery in the lives of the desert mothers and fathers. The Psalter was recited or prayed *in cursus*, many times a day and night. The liturgical life of the city communities reveal another way. The references to psalmody or individual psalm texts in early Christian literature give us an indication of their widespread and varied use in the Christian community.[8] In fact Origen (*c.* 254), in his treatise *On prayer*, gives us one of the earliest references for the use of particular psalms for particular times of day: Psalm 5 for morning prayer, Psalm 141 for evening prayer, and Psalm 118 for midnight prayer.[9] Tertullian (*c.* 220) mentions psalmody as part of Christian common prayer, claiming it to be christological in content.[10]

By the fourth century the Church, in cities and towns, had a form of office (known as the 'cathedral office' because the bishop's church was the centre of liturgical life) in which psalms or sections of psalms were included according to their suitability to the time of the service. Thus we gain the impression that a 'liturgical canon' operated, shaped by the framework of services. It would seem that the christological interpretation of psalmody and the understanding of the 'cathedral office' as the official prayer of the Church meant that a type of censorship would leave the cursing psalm largely untouched. However, the style of preaching typified by Chrysostom, and the robust attitude of the time towards life and hardship in general, give rise to the reasonable supposition that the cursing passages or verses were given a particular gloss or meaning which the hearers would identify with in their own lives and society. Moreover, the use of Scripture in the sacraments of initiation provides us with a rich treasury of scriptural adaptations and typological explanation. Egeria mentions the liturgical setting of this type of Lenten catechesis in fourth-century Jerusalem: 'During these forty days, the Bishop goes through all Scriptures, beginning with Genesis, explaining first the literal and then the spiritual sense: this is what is called catechesis'.[11] Within this context the homilist developed the themes of Christian life with a particular emphasis on the reality of

sin and the devil. Allegorical exegesis went hand in hand with a doctrinal and theological approach. The Church interpreted the Scriptures for the Christian faithful. Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century expresses it succinctly: 'For since not everyone has both the education and the leisure required to read and know the Scriptures, to prevent the soul perishing from ignorance, we sum up the whole doctrine in a few lines'.[12] A reading of this suggests that the content of cursing psalmody would have been modified with this particular approach. This, of course, has happened for most of our Christian history: the original Hebrew meaning has given way to another understanding, one more or less palatable to the Christian.

The monastic use of psalms

It is from the monastic tradition that we discover another approach to the psalms. Monks used the Psalter as a basis for their communal and private prayer, although in the early Christian centuries this distinction would not have been recognized. The early anchorites and cenobites *lived* rather than *celebrated* liturgy. 'The monks' psalms were not chants of praise in the mouth of the Church, as in cathedral prayer, but God's Word on which to meditate before turning to him with prayerful response.'[13] For the *monachoi* the psalmody which formed their liturgical or continual prayer spoke directly to them. A spirituality of *lectio divina*, reading, meditating and letting the Word speak, enabled the cursing psalms to carry different and individual messages to each person.

In the Rule of Benedict we find countless allusions to the psalms. The Abbot for example is joined to say to the Lord, 'I have not hid thy justice within my heart', and to deal strictly with the disobedient and unruly members of the community.[14] Time and time again there are these allusions to the importance of the Word, and in this context the psalms. Some of the sentiments may seem a trifle harsh to our ears, but nevertheless they are the witness of a spiritual tradition which made use of psalms. At one point there is an echo of the way the cursing psalms may have been explained, an explanation which can be traced back to the spiritual teaching which we noticed in the ancient desert tradition: 'When evil thoughts come into one's heart, to dash them at once on the rock of Christ and to manifest them to one's spiritual father'.[15] It does not take much to connect this with Psalm 137:9 (NRSV): 'Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock'. In case the allusion may seem tenuous, one should notice how the Rule distributes the Psalter and discover it as one of the

regular weekly vesper psalms. This type of exegesis does have a particularly strong spiritual appeal. It connects the person with the sentiment expressed and forces an encounter in the heart. Here in the depths, the images conjured up become known, and are named. They are then transformed, channelled, redeemed. This type of understanding actually does help, but it requires a soaking in the discipline and context of a regular contact with psalmody. Moreover, a problem remains: explanations and allegorical exegesis may help us to come to terms with the text, but they do not explain why the curses are there in the first place.

To bless or curse

Contemporary biblical scholarship across the traditions helps us understand the context of the cursing psalms. In one sense we can see them as part of a progression moving constantly towards a greater revelation of who God is, and in the process stumbling through every human situation including anger, murder, jealousy, vengeance and curse. Artur Weiser writes of them in this manner:

> The curse as the counterpart of the blessing has its roots in the same thought-world of magic, and in the form of a ritual act was likewise incorporated in the cult of the tribal confederacy of Israel (Jg 5:23; 21:5; Deut 27, 28). In that cult it served within the range of the ideas associated with the Covenant as a means of the self-purification of the Yahweh community . . . In the psalms the curse is of lesser importance than the blessing.[16]

One explanation given for Psalm 137 is that the psalmist calls for God's punishment on Israel's enemies to show the ultimate power and authority of God, 'even though it is obscured and suppressed by his subsequent words of blind hate and vulgar rage'.[17] Another commentator, Leopold Sabourin, suggests, firstly, that the curses in the psalms can express a hunger for a type of justice and, secondly, that they may be expressing how divine justice is exacted against the unrepentant.

But this still leaves the problem of the excessive language. Listen for example, to psalm 109:

> Make their children orphans,
> their spouses bereaved.
> I want them to wander and beg,
> ruined and homeless.
> I hope creditors take everything,

and strangers eat up their wealth.

Let there be no pity,
no one to comfort their orphans.
I want their line ended!
all future names erased.
(vv 9–13)

Artur Weiser describes this psalm as 'the greatest offender of revealed ethics', although he also speculates that the curses may in fact be on the mouth of 'the enemies'.[18] Sigmund Mowinckel, an influential Norwegian scholar, sets such curses in the context of Israel's liturgy.[19] Ritual curse was used against wrongdoers and enemies. There are, of course, elements of this type of curse in Christian liturgies; the ancient ritual of excommunication is one good example. Mowinckel's interpretation is accepted as important, though other scholars disagree with his emphasis on sorcery and witchcraft. The issue remains difficult. Weiser sets these psalms within a Christian framework:

> Their fundamental motive and idea is the religious passion for justice; and it was by the Holy Spirit that their writers were taught to discern and grasp this essential truth; but the form in which they clothed their desire for its realization belonged to the limitations and modes of thought of their particular age.[20]

Read in this light, verses such as the following can appear as metaphors for the destiny of the wicked:

O God, break their teeth,
rip out the young lions' fangs.
Let them drain off like water,
wither like dead grass,
dissolve like slugs as they crawl;
like the stillborn, never see light.
(Psalm 58:7–9)

The infant dashed to pieces in Psalm 137 – and it may be that the child is a metaphor for all Babylonians[21] – can be seen as a metaphor for whatever in us needs to be purged before we are in right relationship with God. Psalm 109 appears as an individual lament, spoken by a person accused of causing another's death. His only remedy is prayer to God, deploring the accusations and disclosing all his misery, so that he can rise in the presence of the assembly,

> . . . able to testify before the whole congregation with gratitude and joy that God is the Helper of the innocent and oppressed against the unjust judgment of men. It is only when God takes the affairs of men into his own hands that the net woven by human lies and hatred is torn to pieces, and cursing is turned into blessing and fear of man into joy of God, who ensures the ultimate triumph of truth and justice.[22]

To acknowledge the depths

What are we to make of the cursing psalms today? In the reform of the Roman Breviary, the offending passages were removed, and the renewed liturgical offices of groups following other arrangements reflect a similar censorship. Yet one suspects that the real problem lies not with the texts themselves, but rather with our inability to own the reality of our history, to see our experience reflected in the curses, and thus to be open to using these psalms in a different way. Modern psychology has dealt, perhaps inadequately, with the occurrence and manifestation of anger. M. Scott Peck, in his work *The road less travelled*, wrote:

> Truth or reality is avoided when it is painful. We can revise our maps only when we have the discipline to overcome that pain. To have such discipline, we must be totally dedicated to truth. This is to say that we must always hold truth, as best we can determine it, to be more important, more vital to our self-interest, than our comfort.[23]

What makes the psalms important is that they help us to share an experience of the divine. We learn by means of psalms, because they express all aspects of human experience under God. Not only is a psalm evocative; it has an objective content which we can make our own by the use of the image, mataphor and symbol common to us. If this is absent in a psalm then we can only transpose the image and in this way make it subjective.

Often a psalm is evocative for us because we can identify with its objective content, with its imagery, metaphors and symbols. Sometimes, however, such identification is not possible, and we need to adapt. It is only possible for us to identify with the public content of the curses in the psalms in times of collective calamity, disaster or threat, and then only if we are able to live the experience fully under God. But there is still a place for the cursing psalms. There are demons within all of us, and to live in the truth, to search for truth, requires that we confront them. Anger, vengeance, hatred, murder: all these are present in us. If these feelings are not named or acknowledged, their effect will

be all the more insidious; if we can vocalize them before God, they may be redeemed. In this way the spirituality of the cursing psalms can become part of our journey into truth. To acknowledge before God all that is hidden brings it into light and healing.

As we have noted, the Christian tradition is no stranger to strong language or to a refreshing candour before God. The psalms foster an authentic spirituality, in which we own up to what we are really like and call the Almighty to account. However, in its earliest public worship, the Church adopted the tradition of the 'liturgical canon', using only those psalms that were seen as necessary for specific services. The monastic tradition used the psalms in another manner, as expressions of individual spiritual journeys. God is inescapably part of any equation that can be called human life; the restoration of balance must be to articulate and name the problem and in some curious way find a stability in the interested presence of an abiding God. There will always be a difficulty with the presence of the cursing psalms in the liturgy, but at a personal level there may be times when to curse is the only way we can pray.

This is where we begin with the psalms and the difficulties of cursing, not in the arena of public worship, but in that meditative tradition of the Word; in these imprecations all that lies hidden is revealed. In some sense the words we make our own lead us from fear to love, to realize that behind it all is the divine presence-in-adversity. The words of John Chrysostom and Abba Poemen ring true: 'To know evil is to find the remedy and way of healing'.

NOTES

[1] This outburst was one of many that John Chrysostom used to point out the evils of the imperial court. Other sermons contain similar denunciations. Cf T. K. Carroll. *Preaching the Word* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc, 1984), pp 97–127, p 126.

[2] Carroll, p 112.

[3] Carroll, p 113.

[4] Poemen the Shepherd, text found in Benedicta Ward, *The sayings of the Desert Fathers* (London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1975), p 165.

[5] Ward, p 172.

[6] For Amma Syncletica's advice on this question of balance, see Ward, pp 213–235.

[7] See especially Chapter 7, 'The ladder of humility'.

[8] Unlike the present-day concept of variable psalmody with a particular cycle, there are numerous references to different ways of arranging psalmody. One important factor for our consideration is that the liturgy of the hours in both East and West is a product more of gentile Christianity than Jewish tradition. For a full exposition of the history, see R. Taft SJ, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1986).

[9] See Taft, *Liturgy*, p 16, 17.

[10] See text cited in J. McKinnon, *Music in early Christian literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p 44, 45.
[11] *Egeria's travels*, text CCL 175.87.46, cited in Carroll, *Preaching*, p 82.
[12] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, Sermon v.12, cited in Carroll, *Preaching*, p 84.
[13] Taft, *Liturgy*, p 364.
[14] Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 2: 'What kind of man the abbott should be', quoting Psalm 34.
[15] Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 4: 'The tools of good works'.
[16] A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (London: SCM Press, 1962), pp 87–88.
[17] Weiser, *Psalms*, p 797.
[18] Weiser, *Psalms*, p 154.
[19] S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's worship* (New York: Abingdon, 1967), p 48.
[20] Weiser, *Psalms*, quoting from A. F. Kirkpatrick, p 156.
[21] For other references which suggest this type of theme, see Isai 3:15f, Jer 14:1.
[22] Weiser, *Psalms*, p 692.
[23] M. Scott Peck, *The road less travelled* (London: Century, 1987), p 51.