

PSALM 85 AND THE MEANING OF PEACE

By DENNIS J. MCCARTHY

THE GOOD NEWS bible before me calls this psalm 'A Prayer for the Nation's Welfare'. Accurate enough, but one must try to understand the circumstances which made this a special prayer. It is what scholars rather unhappily call a 'lament', because this type of psalm begins with a call for help and a plaint describing the petitioner's troubles: a straightout 'Save me from my enemies, my God', or 'Save me, O God. The water is up to my neck' (Pss 59,1; 69,1). Psalm 85 is not quite like this, and that is important; but it is still an example of the 'lament', the commonest of psalms far outnumbering the hymns of praise and thanksgiving and the like. Further, it is typical in being a plea for peace, for relief from the troubles of war and invasion. Thus the second stanza¹ calls for strength and return from exile:

Bring us back, O God our saviour,
 and stop being displeased with us!
 Will you be angry with us for ever?
 will your anger never cease?
 Make us strong again,
 and we your people will praise you.
 Show us your constant love, O LORD,
 and give us your saving help (vv 4-7).

Disruption is characteristic of all war, and in the ancient world enslavement and deportation were the usual fates of the defeated. Hence the constant pleas of the psalter; for the tiny realms of Israel and Judah had no chance in a major war apart from God: 'We put our hope in the LORD' (Ps 33,20) alone, for his loving help could undo the seemingly inevitable.

¹ Psalm 85 has four clear divisions, which for the sake of convenience will be called 'stanzas': viz., Stanza one — vv 1-3; Stanza two — vv 4-7; Stanza three — vv 8-9; Stanza four — vv 10-13.

Thus the call for help comes from a concrete need. From the time of the judges through the terrible suffering and partial rescue under Sennacherib (2 Kg 18,13-19.36), to the fall of Jerusalem and after, the Hebrews had known invasion and suffering in war. A people living at the crossroads of a violent world was ever a prey or a battle-field. Besides, there were the internal problems — civil wars, palace revolutions, and general unrest: . . . ‘I see violence and riots in the town’ (Isai 55,9). There was oppression. The strong used their position to undo the little man to increase their own power and wealth (Amos 3,10-11; Isai 5,8-10). The extremes are illustrated in the first book of Kings (21,1-16): an Israelite suffers judicial murder so that the powers that be can enjoy a garden!

Still, the psalm presents a petition not just for a particular time. It speaks for the nation which is the people of God, the forerunner of the Church, and, potentially for all mankind, since ‘God wants everyone to be saved’ (1 Tim 2,6). The prayer, composed for a particular need, perhaps during the Exile after the fall of Jerusalem, thus becomes universal: a fact emphasized even by its use in Old Testament times when, as part of the hymnal and prayer-book of the Second Temple, it was repeated over and over to be applied to ever new needs; a usage which has continued in the Church and in Judaism. From a particular plea it has become an all-embracing call for help in time of need, partly from usage, partly from the richness of its assertions.

This gives it a wide validity; but to appreciate this, one must keep a feeling for the psalm’s concrete origins — and its significant variations from the standard fruit of those origins. It belongs to a standard class and handles a standard theme; but this formulation is not standard. The ‘lament’ normally begins with a cry for help, a vivid, even lurid, picture of the need at hand, and then gives reasons why help should come. This relative rigidity makes the psalmist’s opportunity. He understates the picture of need in the stanza quoted above (vv 4-7), and, more strikingly, he reverses the usual, logical order. Rather than cry for help, his first stanza quietly affirms that God has saved in the past:

LORD, you have been merciful to your land;
 you have made Israel prosperous again.
 You have forgiven your people’s sins
 and pardoned all their wrongs.
 You stopped being angry with them
 and held back your furious rage (vv 1-3).

Let him who has ears hear: the Lord who has shown himself to Israel is celebrated in literature and cult as a rock of salvation. The first stanza is a solid reason for hope. It needs no explanation, and its unusual position emphasizes the petitioner's confidence. He need not articulate his need to this saving God. So his second stanza can simply present the difficult situation without dramatics in an aura of hope.

The Lord has always been a God of Salvation, and he will infallibly respond to the new need. This may have been well enough in the past; but we live in a time when five years constitute a generation. History, the unexperienced past, is unreal. However (or therefore?), the psalm does not stop with vague allusions to a remote past. It turns in its third stanza to the word of God which *is* speaking to us:

I am listening to what the LORD God is saying;
 he promises peace to us, his own people;
 if we do not go back to our foolish ways.
 Surely, he is ready to save those who honour him
 and his saving presence will remain in our land (vv 8-9).

It is given to us in the liturgy through which God has always spoken to his people: 'I will give you peace . . . and you can sleep without being afraid' (Lev 26,6). It even speaks within us as Jeremiah and Ezekiel promised, and the New Testament fulfils (Jer 31,33; Ezek 36,26-27; e.g., Rom 8,5; 1 Cor 2,10-13). One can have confidence not simply because God has helped his people in the past, but because he is ever with that people to guide them. However, his demands are great. The text from Leviticus, cited above, offers peace, to be sure — but to the people who have been entirely faithful to God's law. It is a promise with a demanding condition tied to it; for only a fool or a boaster can feel pure and whole before the Almighty. Still, this is not the only word of God's peace by any means. The continued prayerful dialogue with God which is the Psalter reassures us. 'The LORD is righteous'; and surely that note of fear creeps in at the words, since none can stand before the totally demanding justice — except that the just Lord is 'merciful in all his works' (Ps 145,17). Then there is that prophetic spirit which never leaves the people of God. It affirms that mercy marches with his justice — and overwhelms it. Though you people 'refuse to return to me . . . how can I give you up . . . ?' (Hos 11,5.8).

The word of God may seem fearsome in its demands, but it is

always turning back to love and forgiveness and hope. An arrogant and frightened people refuse God's call through Isaiah to 'come back and quietly trust me' (30,15), but put their faith in the power of forbidden alliances. This is an ancient example of an on-going story we have all experienced. We hear the word of God, but we cannot respond entirely. It calls for selfless giving, and we seek a modicum of security elsewhere. This is a kind of idolatry, *the* capital sin of putting self and created power and influence ahead of God. But he will not be denied. He condemns this idolatry in Isaiah's clear words, and then in a few chapters comes back with the promise: 'Once more God will send his spirit. . . . Everywhere in the land righteousness and justice will be done' (32, 15-16). Whoever listens to the word of God, whether the open promises proclaimed in liturgy and prophecy, or in the still movements of the Spirit in our hearts, must be reassured. This is a God who *will* give us peace; almost, it seems, in spite of ourselves.

Thus the confidence in God's word in stanza three explicitly confirms the implicit assurance drawn from history in the opening stanza: the word is always present if we will but listen, never remote like the events of history. So the peace sought in the second stanza must come. This sets the stage for the final stanza, so powerful and consoling: 'Love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will embrace' (v 10), and there will be quiet prosperity for all. We can end with full reassurance.

Or can we? It is easy to read and pray the psalm in this direct way. We have a plea for release from troubles, we are given the evidence that God is faithful in saving his people, and the beauties of salvation which must come are laid before us. There certainly is consolation in this, but the psalm's meditation on peace will be richer if we go deeper into its problems. Thus far, God's gift of peace is apparently the simple expression of his mercy, a mercy on which we can depend utterly. It is the gift of a lover whose love demands that he give. But on a closer look it seems to be something else besides. It may not be a gift but a reward, 'if we do not go back to our foolish ways' but 'honour him'. Here is a problem and a danger. The problem is combining loving gift and earned reward. The danger is in choosing the second. One can easily *say* with the psalmist that he relies on God's word and works; but in fact we are more comfortable with reliance on ourselves, with the feeling that we have done all we can and that this is not too bad. In fact, our loyalty does almost 'reach up from the earth' (v 11) to call down God's just reward. We feel better

if we can feel secure in our own good will and not have to rely on a promise.

This is a strong temptation to err. But it is error; for who would really stand in his own person before the Lord and make claims on him rather than rely on the goodness of the Most High? Righteousness, love, wisdom, fidelity; all that the psalm praises and that we would like to claim for ourselves are first of all in the Lord, and only come to us from him; for he is the righteous God and all righteousness comes from him (Pss 31, 1; 72, 1; Isai 5, 16). It is this dependence that lies behind all biblical knowledge of God. It is God who calls Abraham to a great and righteous and unearned destiny, God who appears as sovereign at Sinai to teach a reluctant people how to live a truly human life: that is, one in accord with his. Always it is the Lord who makes the approach and we who respond to him. The approach may be to recall his saving works (stanza one) or to repeat his promises (stanza three) or to combine the two in a fulfilment for us (the New Testament). In no case do we earn this approach, this nearness. It is God's mere gift and we can respond.

What does this mean for us? The call of the Lord who shows himself in his works and is present in his word is there in the psalm. In the poetry, 'is' is rather elliptic. There is no prosaic explanation, no argumentation. The statement is enough for one who truly seeks. The Lord is present, loving, merciful, ready for my response. The problem is that of any creature. How can he respond in any meaningful way to the Almighty? As so many of our offertory prayers say, our gifts to him are simply his gifts to us. But as those prayers also assure us, he is ready to accept our feeble will to give. So love and faithfulness can meet; righteousness and peace can embrace in the union of God with his children who hear and respond. Peace will come if we wait on the Lord, and answer as we can his call.

But what, then, is the peace offered? Are all the glories spoken of in the last stanza merely means to remove violence and allow a modicum of earthly prosperity — 'The LORD will make us prosperous, and our land will produce rich harvests'? (v 12) This would be an anticlimax of the worst sort. In the biblical vocabulary, faithfulness is total dedication, perfect union. Surely there is more here than simple prosperity. Union *is* peace. Righteousness *is* proper order, justice and co-operation: once again peace. And, of course, where there is love there is peace.

However, peace is many-faceted. What facets are important here?

There is that freedom from outside interference to allow an undisturbed life. This is what the people of God asked for first and most often, and our Psalm is in the tradition. It is the last stanza that finally carries it far beyond this. It turns to a peace which is harmony, first of all between man and God. Love and faithfulness are to meet: that is, we are to give ourselves to him who is overwhelming love and fidelity (Hos 2,19;11,8; Isai 49,14-16). God even 'goes out to do battle' for his people when it is necessary (cf Deut 4,34). We are to follow the Righteous One who gives the righteousness he asks, for he is Righteousness itself: Isaiah (5,16) identifies God's righteousness with his holiness: that is, with God himself; for the Holy One is his name; that is, in hebrew thought, his very self. This is the meaning given by the context of this verse in the psalm, and in the whole of the Old Testament; God meets his people and calls for a response. That response is to live as he will have them, in union with him. The people then will be like him; and so love and fidelity and justice shall meet. This response, halting and faltering as it must be in the creature, is enough. God does not demand more than can be given. Hence, in this response, there is the peace of union with God, the nearness to him so often sought: 'Hear my prayer, Lord God almighty . . . better a day in your Temple (that is, with you) than a thousand elsewhere' (Ps 84,8.10).

Indeed, only acceptance of God, response to his constant presentation of himself, can end the striving for false goals and unsatisfying reward which fills us with unrest. This is not a question simply of sin but of anxiety, self-doubt, insecurity about one's aims and motives and status, and ultimately the near-despair which will come should we achieve our false aims. Only in God's hands am 'I content and at peace, . . . my heart quiet within me' (Ps 131,2). It is only in responding to God that there is realism, the avoidance of false hopes and empty ambition. Some psalms give an almost awesome picture of the inner security this union with God gives; for they tie it to the order of the cosmos. For example, 'Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which can never be moved' (Ps 125,1). Behind this stands the biblical confidence that the whole world could literally fall to pieces, dissolve, while those who remain with God are secure; for the line is taken from Old Testament creation imagery. In that imagery all was chaos apart from God. Only his commanding hand held it in order. Amid that threatening cosmic disorder the mountain of God, Zion, symbolized his enduring power, the absolute assurance of his control over all contentious forces; and so

the security of the people of Zion. In sum, coming to terms with the God who offers his covenant to all is the sufficient, the only way to peace: with oneself and with the world as well as with him. Only this offers security from anxiety induced from within or without.

But of course such individual tranquillity is not the end of it all. The psalm speaks of peace in the homelier sense, too: negatively, freedom from strife and interference, positively, the chance to live and work in peace and to enjoy the fruits of such living. Love and justice must extend to all, and thus work true peace, freedom and right for all. The peace of the God of Israel turns out not to be simply the security of trust in him, or peace and plenty for a chosen group. This peace will be driven by love and justice to extend its benefits of an undisturbed, productive and anxiety-free life to all.

This brings us full circle. The genre of this prayer is a plea for deliverance from real physical violence, and this example of the genre is true to type. It goes beyond it, but it still seeks freedom from disturbance and alienation. This is not an ancient but a very modern realism; for our social world is as it always has been, a world of injustice and violence. Is there a solution in a sincere but individual and quiet response, a participation in the love and righteousness which God stands for; which, in fact, he is? Perhaps, but one cannot help returning to Isaiah's words (Isai 32,15-17). The promise is much the same as what we read in the last stanza of our psalm. However, the words of the prophet are soon followed by another picture, that of the wasteland (Isai 34), where the waste is an uncanny horror created as a punishment for lawlessness. Indeed, this last chapter has overtones of the end of days, the final terrible but saving work of the Lord. Is this the wasteland to which the promise of renewal is given? And if so, must the wasting still come as a prelude to redemption? It may indeed be so; or it may be a true but limited vision from incomplete Old Testament revelation.

Again, perhaps the ultimate wasteland has been found and visited, as Jesus in the garden wrestled with his destiny; so that beyond the wasteland, and through him and his perfect response, the Spirit could bring new peace, new life to those who will accept it. It is certain that the Old Testament prayers and promises like this psalm do not paint such fulfilment in sharp outline; and doubtless the darkness of their divinely-directed but human vision extends to us who share with them humanity and the mysteries of revelation. The direction has been given, but do we realize the ways that must be transversed, the giving that must go on, that we and all our brethren may find the peace of God?