

MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU  
FORSAKEN ME?

The opening words of Psalm *xxi*<sup>1</sup> are for us among the most poignant in the Psalter, for we read in the Gospel that Our Lord uttered them as He hung dying upon the Cross. Thus reminded of His Passion in the first line, we find, as we continue to read the psalm, other verses which recall vividly the story of the Passion: so much so that this psalm has become for us a mysterious commentary upon the Passion, written long before Our Lord suffered. We realise that "what was said and done in the Old Testament was wisely so ordained and disposed by God that the past would spiritually foreshadow what was to happen in the new covenant of grace".<sup>2</sup> This is of immense value and we rightly treasure it. But we sometimes fail to realise that the value of this psalm is greatly enhanced by a realisation, also, of its literal meaning. Its literal meaning has even been confused with the spiritual sense in such a way as to distort it. We know that the student of sacred scripture must concern himself primarily with the literal sense,<sup>3</sup> but we do not always realise that the study of the literal sense will enrich the spiritual. On the contrary, the study of the literal sense seems to be regarded with suspicion, as though the result would be to the detriment of the spiritual sense. We know, moreover, that it is only from the literal sense of sacred scripture that we can draw our apologetic argument.<sup>3</sup> From this knowledge there arises the fear that the argument will be too feeble unless the literal interpretation postulates a startling intervention of God. Any such fears are groundless. The consideration of the literal sense of Ps. *xxi* not only enriches its spiritual value for us, but also provides a truly solid link in the chain of the apologetic argument. Let us therefore consider this psalm in its literal meaning, according to the circumstances in which it was written, trying as far as is possible to divine the thought of its writer by considering the ideas which were prevalent at that time.

<sup>1</sup> According to the Vulgate numbering, as in all other references. Since this article is in no way an exegetical commentary on the text, the Latin translation in *Liber Psalmorum cum Canticis Breviarii Romani* (Rome 1945), or the English of C. Lattey in *The Westminster Version: The First Book of Psalms* (London 1939), are accepted without question, although, as is well known, this psalm contains many textual difficulties, particularly in the final verses. Throughout this article I am greatly indebted to A. Feuillet, "Souffrance et confiance en Dieu", in *Nouvelle Revue théologique*, *lxx* (1948), 137-49.

<sup>2</sup> The encyclical *Divino Afflante*, Eng. translation by G. D. Smith, *Stand by the Bible*, C.T.S. 1944, sect. 31.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, sect. 28.

The psalm is clearly divided into two parts.<sup>1</sup> In the first part (*vv.* 1-22), we read the prayer of a man reduced almost to despair by the enormity of the sufferings he must endure, or rather driven to uttering a cry of despair in the hope that God may be compelled to intervene quickly. For in spite of his words, the psalmist cannot but continue to hope : God has so often had mercy upon his forefathers, and is not God's unshakable fidelity, along with His loving-kindness, the quality by which He has always revealed Himself to Israel ? Whatever his precise sufferings may be, they are intense : he is, as it were, persecuted by the rest of mankind, set upon by a whole herd of fierce bulls, a pack of wild dogs, threatened by the sword ; he is wounded, he is stripped, he is reduced to a state bordering upon death. All seems lost, and yet he cannot forget that God took it upon Himself to care for him from the day of his birth : in spite of all he would still continue to cry "Save me".

The second part (*vv.* 23-32) shows us the reward of such confidence. The psalmist's prayer has been heard and he must give thanks. It will not consist merely in words, but in revealing God's mercy to his brethren, that they too may know Him, that the poor who are hungry may learn that God invites them to His banquet. And not only his brethren but all the nations of the earth will be led to the knowledge and worship of God. That someone in suffering should call upon God to have mercy and deliver him is not surprising ; that an Israelite should describe his sufferings in the series of vivid metaphors we read in this psalm is not unusual<sup>2</sup> ; but that he should confidently believe that by his sufferings he was assisting in the establishing of the kingdom of God—a firm belief, although he cannot explain the connexion between the two—that would truly seem astonishing, if we did not realise the progress of God's revelation, and the stage which it had reached when this psalm was written.

But the psalmist himself indicates the way : he reveals his thoughts in the very expressions he uses, for they are unmistakably reminiscent of the songs concerning the Servant of Yahweh in the second part of *Isaias*. Thus the Servant is reduced by suffering to the state in which he can scarcely be called a man : rather, he is a worm, deserving only of contempt. "Even as many were appalled at him, because his aspect was marred from that of men and his form from that of the sons

<sup>1</sup> Some, e.g. Duhm and Schmidt, have maintained that the psalm is composed of two independent psalms, though the latter admits that the second one is closely related to the first and from the same author ; Briggs (*Commentary, ad loc.*) decides that *vv.* 24 *sqq.* have been added later. The original independence of the two parts is not proven, but in any case it can hardly be presumed that they were joined quite arbitrarily by the compiler, without any recognition of the sequence of ideas.

<sup>2</sup> *Cf.* Pss. xxxiv.21, vii.3, ix.30, xvi.12, lviii.7-15 ; Am. iv.1.

of men". "He was despised and aloof from men, a man of pains and familiar with suffering, and as one who hid his face from us ; He was despised and we esteemed him not". He was smitten and afflicted, he was wounded, he was bruised, he was cut off from the land of the living.<sup>1</sup> Without any doubt, the psalm immediately puts us in mind of the Suffering Servant of Isaias. The psalmist has evidently been influenced by these passages. Whether he consciously borrows from them, or is merely influenced by them indirectly, is a question which it is difficult, if not impossible, to decide. Nor is it of any great importance ; what is important is the fact that there is some connexion between the two. Some have even been led to the conclusion that in Ps. XXI we have the prayer of the Suffering Servant in person ; in other words, that the author wrote this psalm as a prayer upon the lips of that unique and mysterious person who was to appear sometime in the future and to bring salvation to the whole world.<sup>2</sup> In the light of subsequent events such a conclusion seems eminently reasonable. But it is precisely the help of our knowledge of subsequent events which we must deny ourselves if we are endeavouring to discover the literal meaning of the psalm : the meaning which its author intended it to have. God could and did reveal to writers in the Old Testament the establishing of His Kingdom, and even the person of Him who was, at some time in the future, to bring about the salvation of the Gentiles. But in order to credit the writer with this prophetic insight we must have some indication that, at the time he was writing, he was indeed looking forward to that future salvation. There are no such indications in this psalm. There is no suggestion whatever that the psalm was written in the name of another : the whole character of the psalm, and its resemblance to others of the same kind,<sup>3</sup> lead us to think that the psalmist himself is the sufferer, that the psalm reveals the personal sufferings and the prayer of its author. But does not the obvious relation with the "Servant Songs" demand that in spite of superficial appearances we should understand the psalm as written for the Servant himself ? If the sufferer of Ps. XXI could be identified with the Servant in at least the important traits, then this conclusion would be assured, for

<sup>1</sup> The "Servant Song" with which we are concerned is the fourth, Is. LII.13-LIII.12. Quotations are from the translation of E. J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah* (Dublin 1941).

<sup>2</sup> The identification of the Servant of Yahweh is one of the most difficult problems in Old Testament studies. The Servant is an ideal figure, who in the fourth Song is personified, and whose mission is eschatological, linked with the future role of Sion. Cf. R. J. Tournay, "Les chants du Serviteur", in *Revue biblique*, LIX (1952), 355-84, 481-512.

<sup>3</sup> Some have referred the psalm to the sufferings of the community taken collectively ; but apart from the fact that the description of the sufferings points rather to an individual (cf. Pss. III, V, VII), the psalmist explicitly distinguishes himself from his brethren (v. 23).

the sufferer would emerge as a unique figure who could be no-one else but the Servant. But an essential element of the portrait of the Servant is absent from the psalm. The Servant is a saviour: his sufferings are *vicarious*. He is an innocent victim who suffers voluntarily for the sins of men, and who, by his sufferings, wins for them their reconciliation with God and the blessings of the Messianic Kingdom. "But it was *our* sufferings that he bore, *our* pains that he endured. . . . He was wounded for our rebellions, He was bruised for *our* sins; upon him was the chastisement which made us whole, and by his stripes we were healed. . . . Yahweh made to light upon him the iniquities of us all. . . . Because he shall have poured out his soul to death, and been numbered with the rebellious, so shall he take away the sins of many, and make intercession for the rebellious".<sup>1</sup> In the psalm there is no hint that the sufferings are vicarious. The psalmist is indeed an innocent sufferer; his sufferings cannot be the punishment of his sins. What is the reason for them? The psalmist, who in keeping with the ideas of his time regarded suffering as the consequence of sin, must have felt the urgency of this question. Yet he gives no hint that the answer lies in any vicarious quality of his sufferings. The only explanation he can suggest is the wickedness of his unjust persecutors.

The psalm was not written as a prayer of the Suffering Servant. The psalm is the personal prayer of its author; but there are no indications whereby we may identify the author with any particular person.<sup>2</sup> The psalmist is some unknown member of the Israelite community. He is a man of eminent piety, who in his distress models himself according to the image of the Servant of Yahweh whose coming he eagerly awaits.<sup>3</sup> This new attitude towards suffering was a startling development in Israelite piety at this time. The small group of Israelites who, in the period of the second temple, after the return from Babylon, remained faithful to the teaching of the prophets, had begun to realise that it was necessary to resemble the Servant in order to gain admission to the Messianic Kingdom. The historical period to which this psalm belongs was one of disillusionment. The return from the exile in Babylonia seemed like the coming of the Kingdom: and yet how differently things had turned out. There was not only the continua-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Is. lmi.

<sup>2</sup> The title (*leDawid*) does not indicate authorship: cf. H. Cazelles in *Revue biblique*, lvi (1949), 101.

<sup>3</sup> The psalm was written later than the second part of Isaias; it seems to be related also to *Job*, and the references to the "Fathers" and "the assembly" of the Temple (vv. 23-26) all suggest the period after the Exile, when there were deep divisions among the community, when the just among them never ceased to search the Scriptures for enlightenment and consolation: hence the reminiscences of 2 Is., which are found in other psalms of lamentation and in *Job*.

tion of persecution from other nations, but there were grievous divisions among the Israelites themselves, and the good and the upright were reduced to a small community, isolated from and often persecuted by their less pious brethren. It was only natural that these circumstances should awaken in them the realisation that God had shown them a different portrait of the just man : those who would be admitted into the Kingdom of God must be humble and contrite of heart. "Such a one as this will I regard : one that is humble and contrite of heart, and that trembles at my word".<sup>1</sup> "In a high and holy place I abide, and with the contrite and humble in heart".<sup>2</sup> No longer would it suffice to claim Abraham for one's father : more was required than Israelite blood : a contrite heart, an afflicted spirit<sup>3</sup> were the qualities necessary in order that one might share in the new life of the Messianic days. In other words, the more like to the Servant one became, the more sure one was of enjoying the blessings He would bring, for it was the Servant who displayed these qualities pre-eminently, who would be pre-eminently contrite and humble of heart. "Smitten by God and afflicted ; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter . . . he opened not his mouth ; therefore will I give him a portion with the mighty. . . . He shall see a seed that shall have length of days".<sup>4</sup> The psalmist therefore has taken the Servant as his model, and precisely because of this he has every reason to hope, every reason to believe, that he will see the establishing of the Kingdom.

He expresses this belief with every confidence in the second part of the psalm. As a result in some way of his sufferings, not only his brethren will be led to the realisation of God's mercy, but the very ends of the earth will adore God and acknowledge that He is king. The just man, in spite of his sufferings, will nevertheless have a spiritual posterity which will in its turn proclaim the mercy of God. The last verses undoubtedly refer to the establishing of the Messianic Kingdom, but the speaker in this second half is no more the Messiah in person than he was in the first. In the second part of *Isaias*, the Servant will be glorified and will occupy a place of honour in the Kingdom : he will gather the nations around him.<sup>5</sup> The just man of the psalm claims no such position for himself : the nations will be converted *to the Lord*. This, it is true, will follow upon his sufferings, but his confidence rests upon faith ; the connexion between the two remains obscure, understood only so far as he can grasp the meaning of the Servant's redemptive mission. The fact that God will accept the sufferings of the Servant in expiation of the sins of men and gather them into His Kingdom leads the psalmist to hope that his own suffer-

<sup>1</sup> Is. LXVI.2.

<sup>2</sup> Is. LVII.15.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ps. L.12.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Is. LIII.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Is. LIII.12.

ings, borne after the example of the Servant, will not only win for him a place in the Kingdom but will also play their part in bringing about the return of the ends of the earth unto Yahweh ; they will at least be a *motive* of conversion, an example which will lead generations to come to declare God's justness.

Ps. xxi, therefore, is the prayer of the just man who, from a deep knowledge of God's revelation in the second part of Isaias, strove to resemble, as far as in him lay, the Servant to come, and thereby to assist in the establishing of God's Kingdom. Is it then surprising that the evangelists thought of this psalm when they were writing the story of the Passion ? Is it surprising that Our Lord Himself thought of this psalm when he was hanging on the Cross ? Even if Our Lord had not quoted the opening verse of the psalm, even if the evangelists had made no reference to it, would not we ourselves have applied the psalm to Our Lord, since He is the just man, the innocent sufferer<sup>1</sup> by whose sufferings the Kingdom of God is established ? He is not merely one of the many who like the psalmist had listened to the teaching of the prophets and modelled themselves on the Servant : He is the Servant in person, and the psalmist, though he did not know it, was a reflexion of Jesus Christ. Christ upon the Cross knows that this is His psalm, and He claims it as His own when in the hearing of the bystanders He begins to recite it.<sup>2</sup> He too, like the psalmist before Him, in the violence of His sufferings, begins His prayer with the cry that God had forsaken Him ; but He too, like the psalmist, and infinitely more than the psalmist, knew that such a thing could not be, since God dwelt with Him, had always heard His prayer before, and must continue to hear since He was His Father. The cry "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me ?" had been no cry of despair even on the lips of the psalmist, else it would have been futile to continue his prayer for help ; still less would he have realised the glorious reward of his sufferings. And never had any one made use of this prayer more fittingly than Our Lord. So it appeared to the evangelists, and the psalm was obviously running through their minds as they wrote their accounts of the Passion. Thus the mockery of Our Lord's enemies reminds them of the taunts which the just man endured : Matthew and Mark describe their conduct in the words of the psalm ("They wag their heads"), and the former reports<sup>3</sup> their mocking gibes according to the words of the psalm<sup>4</sup> ("He committed himself to Yahweh : let him deliver him . . . for he delighteth in him"). When the Roman soldiers exercised their customary right of sharing out the clothes of the prisoner they were executing, how

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Acts viii.30-5.

<sup>3</sup> Mt. xxvii.43.

<sup>2</sup> Mt. xxvii.46.

<sup>4</sup> vv. 8-9.

could the evangelists avoid thinking of that verse in the psalm which was then a metaphor but now a reality ? The synoptics all quote *v.* 19 *ad sensum*, and John draws the parallel even more closely when he distinguishes between the garments and the tunic.<sup>1</sup> John moreover notes the fact that Our Lord "in order that the scripture might be fulfilled said 'I thirst'".<sup>2</sup> Was he thinking of the complaint of the psalmist, "My palate is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws" (*v.* 16) ? On the other hand it is interesting to note that the actual crucifixion of Our Lord is stated quite simply by all the evangelists : no reference to His hands and feet, no mention of the piercing of the nails, no thought, it would seem of the psalmist's complaint, "They dig into my hands and my feet" (*v.* 17). They evidently did not connect this particular metaphor with the idea of crucifixion, and in truth it is difficult to decide what the original verse was, for the Hebrew text is corrupt.<sup>3</sup> That details of the psalm should be found in the story of the Passion is due not only to the evangelists, reminded by Our Lord Himself (if indeed they needed any reminding) that this was His passion psalm, but also, we may believe, to the Providence of God, which directed the psalmist in his choice of metaphors. But details are of slight importance : it is the whole psalm which reminds us of Christ. The author was unconsciously modelling himself on Jesus Christ, as he modelled himself, consciously or unconsciously, upon the Servant. It is only when Our Lord utters the psalm that we—and the psalmist—can understand more clearly the link between its two parts : now we see that the redemptive sufferings of Christ give their value to all other sufferings modelled upon His.

We have considered this psalm in its literal sense, in the historical situation of its time and according to the meaning given to it by the sacred author. Have we destroyed its value by refusing to place it, in its origin, upon the lips of the Messiah to come ? We have refused to see in this psalm a prophecy concerning the Passion of Christ because it did not point to the Passion of Christ at the time it was written : it was the record of the sufferings of its author—sufferings which were considered as resembling those of the Servant to come, but which were yet not the Servant's but the author's. Only when the Passion of Christ becomes known to us do we see that the just man did indeed represent Christ. But the value of the psalm, far from being diminished, is greatly enhanced when we build upon the solid foundation of its literal meaning. It shows us that God's revelation slowly and gradually and more clearly pointed towards Christ as the Saviour to come, and not only as the Saviour of the world, but as the model for each one

<sup>1</sup> Jn. XIX.23-4.

<sup>2</sup> Jn. XIX.28.

<sup>3</sup> The translation "They dig" is according to the Septuagint.

who wishes to be saved. In this psalm we have the example of the just man who long before the coming of the Messiah was, under God's guidance, sanctifying himself by the imitation of Christ. The divinely inspired hopes of the psalmist can only be adequately satisfied in the person of Christ the Redeemer. We have nothing to lose by refusing to force details of Christ's portrait into the Old Testament. To anticipate the progress of God's revelation is not only an unwarrantable interference in God's plans : it results in the destruction of any apologetic argument, it is nothing more than a *petitio principii*. Christ is the fulfilment of prophecy ; prophecy points the way, but of its very nature it does not reveal Christ in all His perfection ; we can hardly expect it to defeat its own purpose, which is the gradual preparation for the coming of Christ. If we but consider the development of revelation according to the broad outlines which the Old Testament gives us, we shall have no need to insert details *ex eventu*, for we shall realise quite clearly that Christ and His Kingdom are the only adequate and definitive fulfilment of all the hopes and longings of Israel.<sup>1</sup> By realising the literal meaning of Ps. xxi we see how it played its part in the preparation for the coming of Christ. Though it is not directly concerned with prophecy, it shows the practical consequences of the prophecy concerning the Servant in the second part of *Isaias*.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Tournay, *loc. cit.*, 508.