

Psalm 3

“Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God!”



How many are my foes, O Lord!
How many are rising up against me!
How many are saying about me:
“There is no help for him in God.”

But you, Lord, are a shield about me,
my glory, who lift up my head.
I cry aloud to the Lord.
He answers from his holy mountain.

I lie down to rest, and I sleep.
I wake, for the Lord upholds me.
I will not fear even thousands of people
who are ranged on every side against me.

Arise, Lord; save me, my God,
you who strike my foes on the mouth,
you who break the teeth of the wicked!
O Lord of salvation, bless your people!



Today we are resuming the Audiences in St Peter’s Square and the “school of prayer” which we attend together during these Wednesday Catecheses. I would like to begin by meditating on several Psalms, which, as I said last June, constitute the “prayer book” par excellence. The first Psalm I shall consider is a Psalm of lamentation and supplication, imbued with deep trust, in which the certainty of God’s presence forms the basis of the prayer that springs from the condition of extreme peril in which the person praying finds himself.

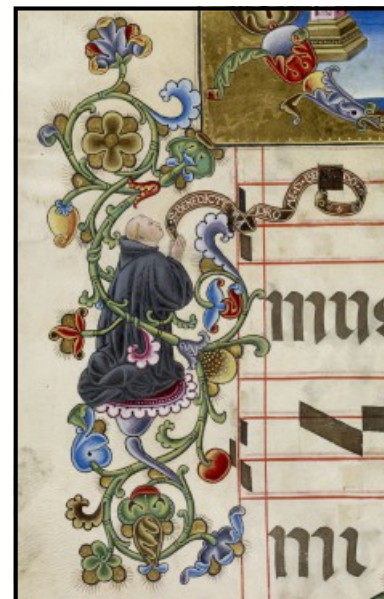
It is Psalm 3, which Jewish tradition ascribes to David at the moment when he fled from his son Absalom (cf. v. 1): this was one of the most dramatic and anguishing episodes in the King’s life, when his son usurped his royal throne and forced him to flee from Jerusalem for his life (cf. 2 Sam 15ff).

Thus David’s plight and anxiety serve as a background to this prayer and, helping us to understand it by presenting a typical situation in which such a Psalm may be recited. Every man and woman can recognize in the Psalmist’s cry those feelings of sorrow, bitter regret and yet at the same time trust in God, who, as the Bible tells us, had accompanied David on the flight from

his city. The Psalm opens with an invocation to the Lord:

“O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of me, ‘There is no help for him in God’” (vv. 2-3).

The praying man’s description of the situation is therefore marked by intensely dramatic tones. The idea of “multitude” is conveyed with the triple use of “many” — three words that in the original text are different terms with the same Hebrew root so as to give further emphasis to the enormity of the danger — in a repetitive manner, as it were, hammering it in. This insistence on the large number of his enemies serves to express the Psalmist’s perception of the absolute disproportion between him and his persecutors, which justifies and establishes the urgency of his plea for help; his oppressors are numerous, they get the upper hand, whereas the man praying is alone and defenceless, at the mercy of his assailants.



Yet the first word the Psalmist says is “Lord”; his cry opens with a call to God. A multitude threatens him and rises against him, generating fear that magnifies the threat, making it appear greater and even more terrifying; but the praying person does not let this vision of death prevail, he keeps intact his relationship



with the God of life and turns to him first in search of help.

However his enemies attempt to break this bond with God and to injure their victim's faith. They insinuate that the Lord cannot intervene, they say that not even God can save him. Hence the attack is not only physical but involves the spiritual dimension too: "there is no help for him in God", they say, targeting the central principle of the Psalmist's mind.

This is the extreme temptation to which the believer is subjected, the temptation to lose faith, to lose trust in God's closeness. The righteous pass the final test, remain steadfast in faith, in the certainty of the truth and in full trust in God; in this way they find life and truth. It seems to me that here the Psalm touches us very personally: beset by many problems we are tempted to think that perhaps God does not save me, that he does not know me, perhaps he is not able to; the temptation to lose faith is our enemy's ultimate attack and if we are to find God, if we are to find life, we must resist it.

Thus in our Psalm the person praying is called to respond with faith to the attacks of the wicked: his foes — as I said — deny that God can help him; yet he invokes

God, he calls him by name, "Lord", and then turns to him with an emphatic "thou/you" that expresses a solid, sturdy relationship and implies the certainty of the divine response:

"But you, O Lord are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy hill" (vv. 4-5).

The vision of the enemies then disappears, they have not triumphed because the one who believes in God is sure that God is his friend. Only the "thou/you" of God is left. Now only One opposes the "many", but this One is far greater, far more powerful, than many adversaries. The Lord is help, defence and salvation; as a shield he protects the person who entrusts himself to him and enables him to lift his head in the gesture of triumph and victory. Man is no longer alone, his foes are not invincible as they had seemed, for the Lord hears the cry of the oppressed and answers from the place of his presence, from his holy hill.

The human being cries out in anguish, in danger, in pain; the human being calls for help and God answers. In this interweaving of the human cry and the divine response we find the dialectic of prayer and the key to reading the

entire history of salvation. The cry expresses the need for help and appeals to the other's faithfulness; crying out means making an act of faith in God's closeness and in his willingness to listen.

Prayer expresses the certainty of a divine presence already experienced and believed in, that is fully expressed in God's salvific answers. This is important: that in our prayer the certainty of God's presence be given importance and be made present. Thus the Psalmist, who feels besieged by death, professes his faith in the God of life who, as a shield, surrounds him with an invulnerable protection; the one who believed he was as good as lost can raise his head because the Lord saves him; the praying person, threatened and mocked, is in glory, because God is his glory.

The divine response that hears his prayer totally reassures the Psalmist; even his fear is no more and his cry is soothed in peace, in deep inner tranquility. "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me. I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me round about" (vv. 6-7).

The praying person, even in peril, in the midst of battle, can sleep serenely in an unequivocal attitude of trusting abandonment. His foes have pitched camp around him, they are numerous, they besiege him, they rise up against him, taunting and trying to make him fall; instead he lies down and sleeps, calm and serene, sure of God's presence. And, on reawakening he finds God still beside him, as a custodian who does not fall asleep (cf. Ps 121[120]:3-4), who sustains him, who holds his hand, who never abandons him.

The fear of death is vanquished by the presence of One who never dies. And even the night that is peopled by atavistic fears, the sorrowful night of solitude and anguished waiting is now transformed: what evoked death became the presence of the Eternal One.

The enemy's visible, massive, impressive attack is countered by the invisible presence of God with all his invincible power. And it is to him that the Psalmist, after his trusting words, once again addresses the prayer: "Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God!" (v. 8a). His assailants "are rising" (cf. v. 2) against their victim; instead the One who will "arise" is the Lord and it will be to defeat them. God will deliver him, answering his cry. Thus the Psalm ends with the vision of liberation from the peril that kills, and from the temptation that can cause us to perish.

After addressing his plea to the Lord to arise and deliver him, the praying person describes the divine victory: the

enemies – who with their unjust and cruel oppression are the symbol of all that opposes God and his plan of salvation – are defeated.

Struck on the mouth, they will no longer attack with their destructive violence and will be unable to instill evil and doubt in God's presence and action. Their senseless and blasphemous talk is denied once and for all and is reduced to silence by the Lord's saving intervention (cf. v. 8bc). In this way the Psalmist can conclude his prayer with a sentence with liturgical connotations that celebrates the God of life in gratitude and praise: "Deliverance belongs to the Lord; your blessing be upon your people" (v. 9).

Dear brothers and sisters, Psalm 3 has presented us with a supplication full of trust and consolation. In praying this Psalm, we can make our own the sentiments of the Psalmist, a figure of the righteous person persecuted, who finds his fulfillment in Jesus.

In sorrow, in danger, in the bitterness of misunderstanding and offence the words of the Psalm open our hearts to the comforting certainty of faith. God is always close – even in difficulties, in problems, in the darkness of life – he listens and saves in his own way.

However it is necessary to recognize his presence and accept his ways, as did David in his humiliating flight from his son, Absalom; as did the just man who is persecuted in the Book of Wisdom and, ultimately and completely, as did the Lord Jesus on Golgotha. And when, in the eyes of the wicked, God does not seem to intervene and the Son dies, it is then that the true glory and the definitive realization of salvation is manifest to all believers.

May the Lord give us faith, may he come to our aid in our weakness and make us capable of believing and praying in every anxiety, in the sorrowful nights of doubt and the long days of sorrow, abandoning ourselves with trust to him, who is our "shield" and our "glory". Many thanks.



Pope Benedict XVI
7 September 2011
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110907_en.html

