

“Until” . . . Endlessly Enacted, Now Urgent

Psalm 73; Luke 15:11-32

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Psalm 73 stands at the center of the Psalter, the first Psalm of the third “book.” It stands, moreover, at the center of the pietistic tradition of faith in which I have been nurtured and in which I gladly stand. I am aware that Psalm 73 does not really fit the theme of this colloquium, but this is my last chance.¹ Besides that, Psalm 73 may be the model for all television commercials that are organized as “before” and “after,” so consider this remarkable statement of faith.

I.

The premise of the Psalm in v. 1 is the premise of Old Testament faith, the premise of the faith in which we stand: Truly God is good to Israel. This attestation knows that God is deeply, genuinely, abidingly, reliably committed to God’s people. This is the creator God who does good and gives good abundantly. This is the electing God of Exodus who has settled on this community of the beloved. This is the God of wisdom who keeps the world functioning generously. This is the God of whom the church confesses, “That all things work together for good for those who love God who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

II.

But some doubted (Matt 28:17)! Among those who doubted is this Psalmist. He did not doubt out of careful reasoning. He simply found another practice of life more attractive and more compelling. He was an Israelite under Torah discipline; when he looked beyond his own rigorous practice, however, he noticed those who held Torah loosely, who got along very well indeed, without all the restraints that he had learned to take as normative. He watched them carefully . . . and envied them:

For they have no pain;
their bodies are sound and
sleek.
They are not in trouble as others
are;
they are not plagued like other
people. (Ps 73:4-5)

They lived very well. They are easy with casual morals; they are not worried about their neighbors; but they go from strength to strength, from party to party, from portfolio to portfolio. And out of that carefree way in the world, they become celebrities:

Therefore the people turn and
praise them,
and find no fault in them. (Ps 73:10)

Eventually they are so successful and so full of themselves that they scoff at the notion of a God who watches and monitors and judges. Our speaker noticed them; he disapproved of them; and then he wanted what they wanted. He wanted to be like them! He could not keep his eyes off them. He decided to give up his Torah piety because it wasn't worth it:

All in vain I have kept my heart
clean
and washed my hands in
innocence.
For all day long I have been
plagued,
and am punished every
morning. (Ps 73:13-14)

I imagine this Psalm to be the voice of a pastor who is required to go to church seven days a week, not treated very well or paid very well, who eventually notices how well off are those who do not live that way, who at least have free weekends! There is an aching ambivalence in this utterance when faith becomes too expensive and other ways tempt and seduce, so that faith relaxes and Torah is compromised.

III.

But then, beginning at verse 18, speaks a second voice in the Psalm, a contrasting voice that comes out of the same mouth. For this Psalmist, like all of us, is double-minded and double-tongued. This is the "after" as I have just characterized the "before." Now the Psalmist is in a new place. He is a convinced, confirmed child of the covenant, confident of Torah, glad for his identity as a child of God. He now knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the mad pursuit of *commodity* by his consuming neighbors is not all it's cracked up to be. He now knows that the wild life of eager self-indulgence cannot be sustained, and even while it is sustained, it cannot bring joy or well-being. He now knows that easy living without caring much is risky. He had seen the model of life at ease and with no pain. But now, on second thought,

Truly you set them in slippery
places;
you make them fall to ruin.
How they are destroyed in a
moment,
swept away utterly by terrors! (Ps 73:18-20)

Such a life has no staying power, no gravitas, no quality of existence that one would finally envy. Such a life is a fantasy created by image-makers who readily dupe naive Torah-keepers. It cannot be sustained!

So he says, I woke up to reality, and discovered that I had been a real jerk to be attracted to that way of life. Well, not a jerk, but a "brute beast," stupid and ignorant. This Psalmist reviews the slippery slope he had gone down but had stopped before his life was completely shattered, just in the nick of time.

As a rhetorical trigger concerning that other way that he now dismisses as phony, he utters his great evangelical “nevertheless”:

Nevertheless I am continually
with you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive
me with honor. (Ps 73:23-24)

The Psalmist has come to the judgment that while the others are in slippery places his right hand is held by God, the God of Torah, so that he cannot slip. He now knows that this God is an adequate guide, quite in contrast to those who are sadly and destructively misguided. And then he arrives at one of the most eloquent statements of faith in all of our tradition:

Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth
that I desire other than
you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my
heart and my portion
forever. (Ps 73:25-26)

Whom indeed in heaven but you: *No one!* What on earth, but you: *Nothing! Only you,* only this God as the source and center and clue to life. He says, “God is my portion,” and “portion” here means property, estate, entitlement. The speaker is clearly willing to forego all of the *commodities* of his seductive neighbors for the sake of this *communion* that is the complete fulfillment of his destiny.

His conclusion is that the very best thing is to be near God who is safe refuge and utter guarantee. The contrast between communion with God and that other tempting way of life is total and unqualified. And so, like Israel frequently does, the Psalm ends in praise:

I have made the Lord God my
refuge,
to tell of all your works. (Ps 73:28b)

IV.

This Psalm is a rather naive statement of the seductions and settlements of faith. It states a single either/or of *commodity* or *communion* and comes down on the side of the covenant. It echoes, surely, the teaching of Deuteronomy about the way of life and the way of death, always a chance, always a decision, and here is a model articulation of faith well embraced.

What should interest us, I imagine, is how to get from *commodity* to *communion*, for it is a travail that we and our children and our grandchildren face. Clearly our nation has become a market in which everything and everyone is reduced to a tradable

commodity, and now a market embedded in an empire. It is primarily the ones “without pain” who “increase in riches” who are the war planners and the stockholders and the decision-makers—and all of us who invest in imperial “growth.” Clearly the church is tempted to transpose its practice of good news in order to compete for a share of the market. And who among us does not have the simplicity of our faith made seductively complex by attractions that are shrill and loud and constant, promises of well-being and comfort and communion without the shadow of the cruciform entering in? My judgment is that the travail of the Psalmist is not remote from the church, its practices, its pastors and its would-be pastors, not distant from many men and women and children who name the name, that name being enmeshed so powerfully now in a commodity enterprise.

V.

At the center, the Psalmist tells us how he moved from seduction to confidence, from commodity to communion. It was not an easy move:

But when I thought how to
understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome
task. (Ps 73:16)

It was, however, a move he made:

until I went into the sanctuary of
God;
then I perceived their end. (Ps 73:17)

This is the big *until* that breaks the spell of consumer ideology. This is the barbed rhetorical inconvenience that questions the magic of the market and is supportive military apparatus. This “until” is the big, jarring disruption that makes alternative life possible. “Until I went to the sanctuary.” Maybe he went out of habit: “I was glad when they said unto me . . .” But even if out of habit, this time there was a seriousness and an urgency, a wondering and a receptiveness. When he was there, in any case, it all became clear. Perhaps he was long nurtured to be ready for this flash of understanding. Or perhaps it was an abrupt new claim that came to him right out of God’s holiness. In any case, the speaker arrives at a deeply new orientation. The Psalmist does not tell how it happened:

- Maybe it was a mystical visionary encounter like that of Isaiah in the year that King Uzziah died. Maybe.
- But the custodian had noticed, in 1 Kings 8:9, that there was no “presence” in the ark, only two tablets of Torah. So perhaps the “until” was only a new hearing of the commandments he had heard long ago in his family. The Psalmist does not tell us, but he comes away from that moment focused and grounded and no longer captive to the slickness of the alternative.

- Or if we transpose the “until” into Christian parlance, it is “until,”

The word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

We have looked into the face of Jesus and have seen the ultimate offer of communion, grace and truth, generosity and reliability that the cheap self-indulgence of the community around cannot make on its way to death.

Either way:

- *until* a vision of God in the temple, or
- *until* a re-entry into the commandments, or
- *until* seeing the face of the crucified . . .

Either way . . . until I went into the sanctuary and perceived their latter end.

VI.

At the core of our faith is a gift to be received, a gift to be received in an upstream decision that contradicts the easier decisions of our culture. I judge that the church in the U.S.—in a market-driven, war-hungering, empire-thirsting environment—is at the brink of a great “until” that lets us see that the promises of this deathly ideology are indeed deathly promises, and that the alternative is the one who is endlessly our true home, our best portion, and our deep desire.

Now I was aware that Professor Cousar would be sitting up here, so I mention this New Testament text of the Prodigal. It occurred to me that this story is Jesus’ midrashic commentary on Psalm 73 in which the son plays the role of the Psalmist. He is, “before,” a practitioner of commodity:

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’” So he divided his property between them. (Luke 15:11-12)

And he ends that scenario in a failed pursuit:

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. (Luke 15:14-16)

Then we are witnesses to his “after” when he returns home:

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf

and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:20-24)

He now is a celebrated child of the household and has come to the place where he ought to be.

But what interests us is the hidden turn of the narrative that is reported—like in Psalm 73—but also like Psalm 73, not described: When he came to himself (v. 17).

What an incredible phrase! We do not know how that happened, anymore than we know how the "until" in the Psalm worked. The teller of the story might have said, "Until he came to himself," because it is the same "until."

But, of course, the son does not just come "to himself." He comes to "himself" in his true identity. He comes to *himself as a beloved son* of the father. He in fact comes in his "until" to recognize that his father was the only one he wanted to be with:

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth
that I desire other than
you.

My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my
heart and my portion
forever. (Ps 73:25-26)

It did not matter anymore to this son that his older brother got the farm as his "portion," because the father is the son's "portion," and the only thing he wants in heaven or on earth. The son "coming to himself" is a decision grounded in the father's love that permits him to slough off his false self and become finally who he is. It is clear that in this telling that Jesus fully understood the Psalm. Indeed, Jesus' engagement in ministry is, among other things, that we should be weaned from the seductions of *commodity* for the gift of *communion*, a presence that leaves us in joy and well-being.

Such a poem of piety as this Psalm is of course remote from our concern with the emerging world order in all of its rich complexity. Except that it is worth noting that the surge of "globalization" that besets the world church is indeed a pursuit of commodity, an overriding of local cultures in the interest of market control, and the necessary support of militarism. The world writ large is caught, as was our Psalmist, as was the wayward son, in a death script. The news is that it need not be so. The news is that a powerful "until" can lead to a buoyant "nevertheless." The church, in all the complexities of globalization—and now imperialism—knows about this modest "until" and knows that everything depends upon it. Imagine that the church is the carrier of this "until" that permits well-being while the way of death and all of its terrors vanish like a phantom. We are "until" people with much to decide because we know about the "after" of life with God, our heart's true home.

Note

¹This sermon was preached at the Columbia Theological Seminary Colloquium on "Shaking Earth and Heaven," April 21, 2003. It is offered with special thanks to my colleagues, Beth Johnson and Kathleen O'Connor.