

Sermon-Alfred, Maine Clericus, June 6th, 2013

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(From the Lectionary, Trinity 1, Thursday)

Psalm 39. Dixi, Custodiam.

*I SAID, I will take heed to my ways, * that I offend not in my tongue.*

*2 I will keep my mouth as it were with a bridle, * while the ungodly is in my sight.*

*3 I held my tongue, and spake nothing: * I kept silence, yea, even from good words; but it was pain and grief to me.*

*4 My heart was hot within me: and while I was thus musing the fire kindled, * and at the last I spake with my tongue:*

*5 LORD, let me know mine' end, and the number of my days; * that I may be certified how long I have to live.*

*6 Behold, thou hast made my days as it were a span long, and mine age is even as nothing in respect of thee; * and verily every man living is altogether vanity.*

*7 For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain; * he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them.*

*8 And now, Lord, what is my hope? * truly my hope is even in thee.*

*9 Deliver me from all mine offences; * and make me not a rebuke unto the foolish.*

*10 I became dumb, and opened not my mouth; * for it was thy doing.*

*11 Take thy plague away from me: * I am even consumed by the means of thy heavy hand.*

*12 When thou with rebukes dost chasten man for sin, thou makest his beauty to consume away, like as it were a moth fretting a garment: * every man therefore is but vanity.*

*13 Hear my prayer, O LORD, and with thine ears consider my calling; * hold not thy peace at my tears;*

*14 For I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, * as all my fathers were.*

*15 O spare me a little, that I may recover my strength, * before I go hence, and be no more seen.*

I like the Psalms very much, because they are often so profoundly unspiritual. What do I mean by that? They don't put on airs. They don't describe some constant state of blissful religiosity that is totally outside my reach. They don't compel me to try to act like I'm perfect. They don't encourage me to lie to others, and lie to myself, about what I really am.

The psalmist often simply feels the pain of his immediate experience, and doesn't edit his reactions to it in order to be..., well, let's coin a new term: "spiritually correct". How many of us, after all, are relaxed enough in times of emotional turmoil and all the distresses of life to offer a calm, self-confident theological dissertation? His anguish is so present, and so real, that he certainly has no time even to take a quick look in the mirror to straighten out his hair and make himself presentable either to himself, or to others, and especially to God, before Whom he knows he simply *must* be honest. He has no choice.

How I long for this sort of transparency in Christian fellowship! Too often I am driven by what I think are others' expectations of me. I yearn to be accepted, and respected, and thought well of, and so I am always trying to play my best game. Someone slaps the flush of his accomplishments down on the table, and I'm desperately hoping I can at least match him, or maybe even display a better hand. After all, I've got to have something to show for myself, don't I? The idea of having *nothing* to speak for me is unendurably embarrassing! Are we all perhaps chained to this sort of unspoken standard of performance, effectively preventing ourselves from dismissing from our clergy fellowships those compulsions which we are in desperate need of escaping when we come together. But we simply must get off the race-track. I need you to tell me, and I need to tell you, that here, if anywhere, the pressure is non-existent. "Here, there is no whip behind you, wielded by anyone, driving you on to impossible speeds. And you may lay down that switch with which you scourge yourself. No one will abuse you. And we won't tolerate your abusing yourself." When such ground-rules are laid, just think of what can happen!

Circumstances have forced the author of this Psalm to some very basic recognitions about life that we also do well to consider. He is just a bare soul. He has cast aside his pretensions so that we can see him as he really is. God has applied a very heavy chastening to the life of this man: *11 Take thy plague away from me: * I am even consumed by the means of thy heavy hand.* He does not tell us any specifics, neither the nature of his trials, nor why God has brought them, except that... *12. When thou with rebukes dost chasten man for sin, thou makest his beauty to consume away, like as it were a moth fretting a garment.* Perhaps he has undergone a serious illness, or experienced some terrible reversal in his business. We just don't know. So great have been his afflictions that he has been reduced to that most basic of questions, one that is awaiting every single one of us, no matter how cleverly and earnestly we try to put it off: *5 LORD, let me know mine end, and the number of my days; * that I may be certified how long I have to live.* So complete is his humiliation, so profound his loss, he barely has enough sense of presence, of dignity, of self-consciousness to be able to restrain his tongue in the presence of the wicked. There is no composure in such a place, no time to invent a host of convincing, self-justifying explanations to explain one's miserable state both to oneself, and to others.

May I suggest that once having visited such a place of awful reality, and having learned to willingly subject oneself to God's chastening hand while in it, there is an indelible stamp placed upon the character. It is the mark of genuineness, of certification by God: "This person is a *real* Christian! He has been brought down, through the severity of his experience, to the basics. He maintains no illusions about himself, nor of life in

general”:

*6 Behold, thou hast made my days as it were a span long, and mine age is even as nothing in respect of thee; * and verily every man living is altogether vanity.*

*7. For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain; * he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them.*

We might be tempted to pity him, and hope desperately that we might be spared what he went through. Having arrived there through the medium of God’s dealing, however, one is well advised to remain there, because it represents the actual condition of all men before God.

But it is a lonely place, because it is generally so carefully avoided. It is also silent, and perhaps even somber, because it is beyond the influence of the tens of thousands of distractions that men invent for themselves to make sure they will never arrive there. It is barren and plain by the world’s standards, peopled as it is by those who have ceased trying to hide from themselves and from others those things which they know will ultimately be revealed, anyway. It is the temporary dwelling of the *stranger* and *sojourner*, a home away from Home.

But uncommon love dwells there. Honesty and sincerity abound. It is a place of profound relaxation, because striving has ceased. The only standards of attainment that are recognized and applauded are the display of the wounds that can no longer be successfully hidden. These may include a lifetime of frustrated agendas, of unfulfilled dreams that one has been forced to abandon. Or visions of perfect families, ideal outcomes, unparalleled success that after long, hard years have been cast aside. By all outward, superficial examination, such things appear to be the tokens of failure. But all are in fact the evidences of a life upon which God has laid His holy hands. Now look around at the faces and forms of those few you find. There are tears, and weariness from the mere effort at keeping up appearances: *7 For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain; * he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them.* But there is also hope, gained at the expense of losing everything else: *8 And now, Lord, what is my hope? * truly my hope is even in thee.* And there is...God: *For I am a stranger **with thee.***

I think I need to go there, too, but I don’t want to go there alone.

Would you go with me?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.