

Of Grass and Trees
The First Sunday after Epiphany
(From the Psalms: *Ps. 92*)

IT is a good thing to give thanks unto the LORD, and to sing praises unto thy Name, O Most Highest;

2 To tell of thy loving-kindness early in the morning, and of thy truth in the night season;

3 Upon an instrument of ten strings, and upon the lute; upon a loud instrument, and upon the harp.

4 For thou, LORD, hast made me glad through thy works; and I will rejoice in giving praise for the operations of thy hands.

5 O LORD, how glorious are thy works! thy thoughts are very deep.

6 An unwise man doth not well consider this, and a fool doth not understand it.

7 When the ungodly are green as the grass, and when all the workers of wickedness do flourish, then shall they be destroyed for ever; but thou, LORD, art the Most Highest for evermore.

8 For lo, thine enemies, O LORD, lo, thine enemies shall perish; and all the workers of wickedness shall be destroyed.

9 But my horn shall be exalted like the horn of an unicorn; for I am anointed with fresh oil.

10 Mine eye also shall see his lust of mine enemies, and mine ear shall hear his desire of the wicked that arise up against me.

11 The righteous shall flourish like a palm-tree, and shall spread abroad like a cedar in Lebanon.

12 Such as are planted in the house of the LORD, shall flourish in the courts of the house of our God.

13 They also shall bring forth more fruit in their age, and shall be fat and well-liking;

14 That they may show how true the LORD my strength is, and that there is no unrighteousness in him.

Why are such texts as today's Psalm so important for contemporary believers? I find myself clinging to such passages as these. Why...? In all of their strong emotional statements, their praises, their condemnations, they are actually also providing me with doctrinal sustenance. Yes, we do need the catharsis of expressing our feelings through the emotions of the psalms. We need to be able to sing, and rejoice, and make every effort to lift our sagging spirits and hearts through the means they provide: *Praise ye the Lord. Praise, O ye servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord*, says Psalm 113:1, for example. We even need to express our indignation over sin and wickedness: *It grieveth me when I see the transgressors; because they keep not thy law* (Ps. 119:158). But we also need the helpful assurance of the clear, practical, truth-revealing character of these texts. They tell us things we must know, in order to make sense of life in these times of drastic change. This is God's Word. It is an absolutely dependable rule, setting that standard from which all human behavior will be judged.

This psalm compares the lot of the ungodly with that of the righteous. After opening with words of grateful praise to God, the psalmist explains why his heart is so full. He is greatly encouraged by what God has shown him. *O LORD, how glorious are thy works! thy thoughts are very deep*, he says. Having observed the *ungodly* and the *workers of wickedness*, he has seen that they are *as green as the grass* and *flourishing*. Grass, after all, during the warm months, is everywhere. It grows fast, and spreads rapidly. In its vigor and apparent vitality it seems to surpass

all other growth. In its season, it commands attention and admiration: “Oh, look! It’s covers the hills and the fields. It surrounds every home and building. It fills the land!”

And so it is with the rise of sin and lawlessness and rebellion. When given half a chance, it spreads all over the place. Its development seems to know no bounds. It runs through the cities and streets of the nation. Like crabgrass, it pushes everything else out of the way, and grabs the best spots. It spreads into the highest halls of government, onto the thrones of power, and even the seats of justice. It metastasizes like cancer, and enters the homes through a thousand portals, where more often than not it is welcomed and even encouraged.

Worst of all, it invades the hearts of men, where it finds fertile ground. These are hearts for whom the things of God have become ever more distasteful and bothersome. These are hearts that have become cold and dull to truth and goodness, where the good seed of the Gospel (Matthew 13:24 ff.) encounters nothing other than stony, infertile resistance. Sad to say, this gloomy state of things appears to be just short of universal. For the righteous --for those clinging desperately to God and to His Law-- defeat appears to be the order of the day. All that a once noble country had cherished has been driven off into the shadows, while the citizenry rejoice and celebrate and cavort in their newfound liberty... the deadly “liberty” of godlessness.

But just like the green grass which spreads abroad in the sun, the season for growth is short, and limited:

An unwise man doth not well consider this, and a fool doth not understand it. When the ungodly are green as the grass, and when all the workers of wickedness do flourish, then shall they be destroyed for ever. (v. 7)

It is this promise to which we much hold fast in our times. The end of the unchecked growth of evil is its *destruction*. In spite of its phenomenal growth, the successful influence it wields over the minds and opinions of men, its arrogant disregard and even contempt for righteousness ...in short, its almost complete takeover... it is doomed. Only the foolish fail to perceive this, even if it were written in mile-high letters and placed before them in full view. But since this present day is now very much the season for grass, which is enjoying its time of ascendancy and preeminence, we, as a people of faith, must set our hope in what God’s Word says.

If we persist, and don’t give up, we will see the table turned:

For lo, thine enemies, O LORD, lo, thine enemies shall perish; and all the workers of wickedness shall be destroyed. But my horn shall be exalted like the horn of an unicorn; for I am anointed with fresh oil. Mine eye also shall see his lust of mine enemies, and mine ear shall hear his desire of the wicked that arise up against me. (vv. 8, 9)

In fact, we are promised an enduring, even eternal, season of growth and development, one compared not to grass, but to *palm trees* and *cedars*: strong, well-rooted plants that are the picture of endurance and permanence. But notice that our nurture and development will be protected, safely sheltered within the *house of the Lord* and the *courts of the house of our God* (v. 12). Even trees

start very small. They need nurture and care and protection. Surely the Church, through the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments, and the fellowship it provides, is a part of that structure which is God's *house* (see e.g. 1 Peter 2:5; 1 Corinthians 3:9).

While the world runs desperately from one leader to the next, stumbling about in the confusion and disappointment of false hopes and dashed expectations, looking everywhere other than to God Himself, the righteous are given a marvelous and rich promise: *They also shall bring forth more fruit in their age, and shall be fat and well-liking, or they will stay fresh and green*, to use a more modern rendering of the verse (the *New International Version Bible*).

What is the purpose of *the righteous*? What is their end? For what reason have they been so carefully tended and taken care of? *That they may show how true the LORD my strength is, and that there is no unrighteousness in him* (v. 14). In a time when the desperately hasty growth of mere grass appears to be out of control --all which is of a grossly inferior order, that men are eagerly accepting as true, and flagrantly promoting as the replacement of divine will-- it is the place of God's people to provide evidence to the contrary. When God is accused, we must be able to boldly declare, both by the quality and character of our lives, and the proclamation of His Word: *there is no unrighteousness in him*.

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