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PRAYING THE LAMENTS AS CHRISTIANS

The curse as a sign of commitment: The function of the curse within a lament, as we have seen, is to mobilize the energies of the psalmist and the community to be thoroughly committed to the side of God and to justice. The curses replace the blows. The psalmists do not take justice into their own hands. Instead, through the curse, they commit the redressing of injustice to God. What can we glean from this backdrop to the meditation of one's enemies and the declaration of curses in the psalms of lament, particularly from the viewpoint of the Christian message?

a) In the context of the laments, the purpose of meditating on one's enemies is to articulate and give expression to oppression both in one's life and in the world at large. This oppression is personalized into ravaging enemies who are godless. This articulation of oppression is done in order to bind the psalmist more intimately and more radically with the cause of the Lord. In the background of these laments lies a firm conviction that arises from the experience of the exodus. "The Lord hears the cry of the oppressed and attends to the voice of the poor." Furthermore, the separation of the psalmist from the wicked in this meditation of the lament is a means for the psalmist to root out of the self the tendencies towards idolatry in order to be more firmly rooted in the life of God.

b) The curse in the laments is used as a sign of the psalmist's radical commitment to the side of God, much as a promise is ratified and bolstered by the curses that are pronounced in political treaties. In other words, by appealing to the Lord's justice and goodness, the psalmist is enlisting the power of God's ways in the struggle for liberation and faithfulness. By asking for God to intervene in the crisis, the one praying is avoiding personal vengeance, yet is clearly committing himself to the cause of right through curses. The curses contain the psalmist's way of bringing the deep bitterness that oppression has caused into the purview of God's horizon.

c) Curses have a distinct theological purpose over and above retribution - that of conversion. This is perhaps what seems most foreign to us. Yet this method for eliciting conversion is as old as ancient treaty formulations. The violence and suffering that is called forth in the curses are uttered from the context of salvation history. God uses the pain of human experience to turn people back to the covenant.

d) The curses in the Psalter testify to the justice of God here and now. This is conceived in such a manner because of the particular perspective of retribution that Israel held, namely a retribution limited to space and time. Confidence in the justice of God would take particular shape according to the context of retribution. In the NT the present context is the battle ground for the hearts and minds of people. "The Lord lets the sun shine and the rain fall on good and evil alike." (Mt 5:45, 13:24-30) The future is the locus for absolute retribution which in one sense is far more devastating than the curses in the psalms. The present then is a time for forgiveness which calls for conversion. This feature of the call to forgive in the NT corresponds to the call to conversion which the curses attempt to call forth from the context of the covenant.

e) Finally in the curses of the psalms, the psalmists, far from taking vengeance into their own hands, take all the bitterness, the anguish and the oppression which they feel in the core of their being and place all of the pain into the hands of God and into the justice of the Lord. This complete and profound trust in God directs the anger away from that of taking action of personal vengeance to a commitment to the cause of God. This is an activity that of course we are never in lack of needing in our own time. In the curses of the laments, the psalmists were laying down their lives squarely on the side of God rather than on the side of personal vengeance and retribution.

When we pray the section of the psalms that describe the enemy and the wicked people who threaten the psalmist we are called to reflect on the sources of evil in our own lives, on the sources of oppression and opposition of the good that we want to do. The psalms go out of their way to characterize the enemy in general terms of wickedness. We likewise should not go out of our way to brand a group or individuals in our society that we happen to be in opposition to as the wicked, godless enemy. Alonso Schökel comments on Psalm 58 that only the lazy spirit always identifies the just one with our group and all one's opponents in life with evil enemies. (Sirach 21:27, "When an ungodly man curses his adversary, he curses his own soul".)

In critical moments of life we are called upon to face dynamics of evil and of oppression. In these situations the psalms of lament call us to feel intensely our rage and the rage of God at the injustice perpetrated. We cannot remain aloof and passive just as God does not remain still, but raises people up to lead. Precisely here the laments can help us place into perspective our rage -- the holy anger -- that all will experience who are committed to Christ and to welcoming the kingdom of justice.

Meditating on our sources of oppression is a challenge first of all because we would rather not face the issues. Secondly, experiencing the rage of oppression often brings bitterness that can easily reduce us to being like our enemy. How important it is to distinguish the dignity of all persons from the oppression that people commit themselves to, or find themselves enmeshed in. "Be angry, but sin not" (Ps 4:4) is not an easy command. We have to be rooted and grounded in God.

For this reason in the psalms of lament, the meditation on one's enemies is preceded by a declaration of trust in God, even if this is only implicitly stated in the address. What is important in the psalms is that the bitterness and oppression that one expresses in describing the power and wickedness of the enemies is prayed in the presence of God. The purpose of this focus is to place one's life and all its forces into the service of God and pray that God enter with power into the dynamics of our lives. This meditation demands a great deal of honesty and fearlessness. It demands fearlessness not to close our eyes from the power of oppression that exists around us. It demands honesty to recognize the forces of evil and to recognize even within the self the desire for direct retaliation. This is the fearlessness and honesty that Jesus asks of his followers, when he commands, "Love your enemies". Honesty is needed first of all to recognize evil for what it is and to recognize the source of division between oneself and opponents. Fearlessness is needed to be committed to the conversion and transformation of evil to good. Only such fearlessness and honesty which is based on trust in God will allow the Christian to reject both a turning against the enemy with vengeful anger and a false complacency that refuses to look at and acknowledge oppression and division in our midst.

When we come then to the sections of the laments which deal with the demise, destruction and thwarting of the enemies we must bear in mind what is being called forth in us. The context of a lament is one of crisis - a real external crisis in which our tense environment calls forth radical decision and faithfulness, or an internal crisis in which our own conscience and integrity is the battleground for emerging values. The laments do not endorse personal vengeance. On the contrary, the psalms call us from the midst of a critical situation in which we have myriad feelings and tendencies, to trust in the cause of God and the Lord's ways. The prayer for the destruction of the enemy is a prayer for the destruction and defeat of evil which threatens the self or others. The curse is an ancient, and perhaps not so ancient, Hebrew way of galvanizing and mobilizing the forces of one's heart onto the side of God in the midst of a critical situation. To hate those who hate God with pure hatred (Ps 139:22) is to be committed wholeheartedly to the kingdom which builds up the dignity of human beings. The curse directed towards oneself was a sign, a ratification of the seriousness of one's commitment to one's word. The curse of the future in the covenant was both a ratification of one's adherence to the agreement as well as a call to conversion when the suffering of the curses takes root in history. Similarly in the laments, the prayer for the defeat of evil, of one's enemy at the

hand of God, is a cry that comes from the heart of the psalmist that at once places all trust and hope in the power of God as well as elicits a personal and communal commitment to the justice of God.

When we pray the prayer that the Lord taught the disciples - thy kingdom come - what are we actually praying for? The coming of the kingdom presumes and implies the facing of its opposite. The kingdom implies the victory over evil. We have ample evidence of such dialectics in the NT both in Christ's teaching in the Gospels and in the apocalyptic work of Revelation. It is true that war-like imagery dominates the curses, and it is this form of imagery that we so much want to overcome. But we must distinguish imagery and figurative speech from the reality called forth in the curses. It is important then not to take the curses as a call for personal vindictiveness, or as a justification of the hatreds and bitterness that we might harbour in ourselves. The real conflict is a conflict between the love of God and all forms of fear. The curses call us to place our trust and hope on the side of the love, the justice and the power of God.

When we sit down to pray a lament, particularly if we are in a situation of crisis, we bring unarticulated and ambiguous feelings. The meditation on one's enemies and the prayer of the curses within these prayers of crying trust can bring us to place before God our bitterness and feelings of revenge. They can help us clarify the sources of division. And above all they can bring us to be more deeply rooted in the justice and mercy of God. Not to pray these powerful and even at times ambiguous psalms may mean we have rendered Christ's call to love one's enemies meaningless. To pray them in the context of Christ's victory over death is to pray from the depths of one's being for the coming of the kingdom.

