

UNDER HIS WINGS

A meditation on Psalm 91

Part Two of a Three Part Series



The Psalmist has used an image right at the beginning of the Psalm, an image which Our Lord Himself used as He approached His Passion. As He stood gazing at Jerusalem with love and grief, He described Himself as a bird with protecting wings, and with the powerful instincts of a mother¹. As we examine what the Psalmist, this inspired, spiritual poet, has tucked into this image and the way he used it, we may be surprised.

In the 15th Chapter of the Gospel of John, Our Lord speaks very clearly about what it means to abide in Him². In this discourse, right at the end of the Public Ministry of the Lord, He instructs His disciples on the mutual abiding which is essential if they are to remain in His Love. It is this mutual indwelling, this union, which is at the heart of the gift of Our Lord of Himself to us in the Eucharist. When the sad disciples turn to the Stranger on the road to Emmaus and say to Him “Abide with us Lord, for it is towards evening and the day is far gone³” it is the moment just before Our Lord breaks the bread for them⁴, and gives Himself to them in the form of the Eucharist. As He does that, they see Him for who He is. S Hilary of Poitiers writes on the Trinity: “If the Word was truly made flesh, and if we truly receive the Word made flesh in the Lord’s food, why should we not hold that he remains with us naturally?... He is in us through the flesh, and we are in him; and, being united with him, what we are is in God⁵”

It is the nature of the path to Divine Life that we should abide, and pass the night of this world’s darkness, in the One who described Himself as the Life, while we make our pilgrimage through time. It is also precisely this mutuality, which is hidden in the image of the wings of the bird, which is the essence of this Psalm.

¹ Matthew 23.37 and Luke 13.34

² John 15.1-17

³ Luke 24.29

⁴ Luke 24.30

⁵ S Hilary of Poitiers *On the Trinity*: Book VIII, para 13

What is this shadow mentioned in the opening words? The shadow is beneath the wings of the bird, of the Lord. It is also therefore to be as close as possible to the heart of the bird, to be underneath its wings. The heart is just behind the rib cage, the pulse is audible... *Betsel* בצל is the word used. This concept of shadow is from the root צלל and it contains the *sense of tingling, of quivering, of protection*. To be under the Divine wings is to feel the vital Presence of the Lord, it is to tingle and quiver with Divine Life. At the Last Supper, the night before Christ died, John leans back on the breast of the Lord to ask Him who it is who will betray Him⁶. At that moment he is close to the heart of the Lord and spiritually under His wings. Surely it is the place of true contemplation which John was given when he rested his head upon the breast of the Lord at the Institution of the Holy Eucharist. The Church Fathers talk of John's Gospel being conceived from the breast of Jesus, upon which his head rested⁷.

The Shadow of God, or the overshadowing by God, is also the moment of the Annunciation⁸. It is the Incarnation in time through the power of the Holy Spirit. Another example of an annunciation was at the **place** where Moses saw the Burning Bush. In this bush the Lord announced Himself to Moses as the *One Who Is*⁹. The place was called, in the language of that land, *the Shadow of God*¹⁰. So to be under the shadow of the Lord is to receive the Truth, to be given knowledge, to come to know, to contemplate.

Now let us begin to examine what is so surprising in the way the Psalmist used the image of the bird. And we will complete this aspect in the third part of this meditation in the New Year as we develop it in terms of Christ.

The Psalmist uses the metaphor of the bird, of the wings, for an image of Divine protection, as did Christ Himself just before His Passion, as we said earlier. The Psalmist says that the Lord will cover you with His feathers¹¹. A feather cannot protect. We understand that. It is too fragile. Yet the promise is of Divine protection. Further the Psalmist says that we will be

⁶ John 13.25

⁷ Cf Origen: Commentary on the Gospel of John, Book 1, para 6: 'We may therefore make bold to say that the Gospels are the first fruits of all the Scriptures, but that of the Gospels that of John is the first fruits. No one can apprehend the meaning of it except he have lain on Jesus' breast and received from Jesus Mary to be his mother also'. Cf also S Augustine, Sermon 70 on the New Testament, para 1: 'For this same St. John the Evangelist is he whom Jesus specially loved; insomuch that he lay on His Breast at supper. There was this secret, that therefrom might be drunk in, what in the Gospel was to be poured forth'. And in his Tractate 124 on the Gospel of John we read in para 7: For the whole body of the saints, therefore, inseparably belonging to the body of Christ, and for their safe pilotage through the present tempestuous life, did Peter, the first of the apostles, receive the keys of the kingdom of heaven for the binding and loosing of sins; and for the same congregation of saints, in reference to the perfect repose in the bosom of that mysterious life to come did the evangelist John recline on the breast of Christ. For it is not the former alone but the whole Church, that binds and looses sins; nor did the latter alone drink at the fountain of the Lord's breast, to emit again in preaching, of the Word in the beginning, God with God, and those other sublime truths regarding the divinity of Christ, and the Trinity and Unity of the whole Godhead. which are to be yet beheld in that kingdom face to face, but meanwhile till the Lord's coming are only to be seen in a mirror and in a riddle; but the Lord has Himself diffused this very gospel through the whole world, that every one of His own may drink thereat according to his own individual capacity.

⁸ Luke 1.35

⁹ Exodus 3.14

¹⁰ Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, Tan Books, Vol 1, page 148

¹¹ Psalm 91.4

protected against the snare of the fowler¹². But the fowler is hunting the bird, and the Divinity is described as the bird. Therefore how is the One who is hunted by the fowler to protect those gathered under His wings?

We pray this psalm each night, but do we understand the depths of these comparisons? There is profound irony in this Psalm if you look at it in one way. But in another way it is actually describing how vulnerable Our Lord made Himself, and being subject to suffering and death Himself, He still offered us protection. Our Lord must have had this Psalm in His mind as He wept over Jerusalem. Further, He knew that His hour had come¹³. Yet He still offered protection.

If we glance at verses 11 and 12 for a moment, the central image was actually used at Christ's Temptation in the wilderness¹⁴, by Satan. It was a temptation to avoid His own humanity and His own vulnerability.

These two verses are referred to by Our Lord Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane when He heals the wound to the ear of the servant of the High Priest. Peter had sliced off the ear with his sword, and Christ says: *"Put your sword back, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father who would promptly send more than twelve legions of angels to my defence? But then, how would the scriptures be fulfilled that say this is the way it must be?"* Then all the disciples deserted him and ran away¹⁵.

In this incident, when the allusion is once again to the Psalm we are meditating on, something enormous, demanding and challenging is being opened up for us as human beings who are called to love the Divine. And again when Christ is actually hanging upon the Cross this same insistent invitation is held out to us: come closer to the Mystery and learn. As Our Lord hung upon the Cross, He was taunted by the Temple hierarchy and the mob to 'come down from the Cross¹⁶'. In some ways it echoes these verses ... *He will give his angels charge over thee to keep thee in all thy ways..... they will lift you up in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone...* and so on. But Our Lord's feet were nailed to the Cross.

To be continued in the New Year.

¹² Psalm 91.3

¹³ Mark 14.41; John 12.23, 17.1

¹⁴ Matthew 4.6; Luke 4.10-11

¹⁵ Matthew 26.53-56

¹⁶ Matthew 27.40, 42; Mark 15.30,32; and compare Luke 23.35 where the actual phrase 'come down from the cross' is not used, but where the same idea of 'save yourself' is present.