

*“Turn us, O God”: Advent Meditations on Psalm 80 & 85*  
*December 2015*  
*(Fr. David Curry)*

*First Meditation:*

*“Turn us again, O God;/show the light of thy countenance, and we shall be whole”*

The Psalms are the most familiar and the most used parts of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Christian liturgy and yet they are easily and often taken for granted. What are the Psalms? The Psalms are prayers and praises and they play an important role in the Christian understanding of the Gospel. The two psalms which stand out for consideration in our Advent meditations are Psalms 80 and 85. They are two of the most used Psalms in the Christian liturgy during the season of Advent.

Psalm 80 is used on *The Sunday Next Before Advent* at Morning Prayer, on *The Second Sunday in Advent* as the Introit at Mass, and on *The Third Sunday in Advent* as the Gradual. Psalm 85 is used as the Introit and Gradual Psalm on *The Sunday Next Before Advent*, as the Gradual Psalm on *The First Sunday in Advent* and as the Gradual Psalm for *The Advent Ember* days. It is even the Psalm appointed in its entirety for the evening service on Christmas Day - not the most highly attended service, to be sure. But there it is.

Our initial focus will be on Psalm 80. Augustine notes about Psalm 80 that *“the song here is of the Advent of the Lord and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of His vineyard.”* This interpretation alerts us to an intriguing and important feature of the Psalms. They are at once the hymn book and the prayer book of Israel but become the hymn book and the prayer book, too, of the Christian Church. In a way, the Psalms gather together into song and prayer the teachings of the Law and the Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures at the same time as illuminating something of the meaning of Christ and his Church. That is really Augustine’s point.

Psalm 80 signals the important meaning of the Advent for Israel and for the Christian Church, namely, the idea of God’s Word coming to us, the Word in which we find wholeness and healing in the face of suffering and hardship, the Word which is salvation and life, the Word which is hope and life. *“Turn us again”* is the repeated refrain which is further intensified in the piling up of descriptive terms of the God to whom we are speaking. *“Turn us again, O God”*; *“Turn us again, O God of hosts”*; and again as repeated, *“Turn us again, O God of hosts”*; before reaching the final crescendo of prayer, *“Turn us again, O Lord God of hosts”*. Within that sense of mounting intensity, the prayer itself, however, remains the same. *“Show us the light of thy countenance, and we*

*shall be whole.*" Four times we hear those words that conclude the four sections of the Psalm.

Advent is about the turning of God to us without which we cannot be turned to God. In the Christian understanding that turning of God to us has its fullest expression in the coming of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, in whom the Law and the Prophets and the Writings of the Hebrew Scriptures are in some sense fulfilled and transformed. Not repudiated but transformed.

Psalm 80 captures something of the Advent theme of the redemption of human desire. The darkness of Advent is our awareness of our own limitations, the darkness of sin and ignorance, the darkness of death and despair, and the even greater darkness of the despair of desire. Yet this awareness opens us out to the hope and love of God, the one to whom in the Psalm we look for salvation and healing.

If Advent is about reason as revelation, then it begins with this awareness of our own darkness. In that awareness there is the prior acknowledgement of the reality of God as *"the Shepherd of Israel"* who *"leadest Joseph as a flock,"* and the one who, as the transcendent principle of all reality *"sittest upon the Cherubin"; "the seat,"* Augustine explains, *"of the glory of God and [which] is interpreted the fullness of knowledge."* Out of the awareness of the limitations of our reason and knowledge, we look to the light and the fullness of knowledge that is God's alone. Only in his light can we hope to see light.

Only in his turning to us can we hope to be turned to Him in prayer and praise. *"O, let us live, and we will call upon thy Name,"* the Psalmist says, before concluding with the last and great refrain.

*"Turn us again, O Lord God of hosts; / show the light of thy countenance  
and we shall be whole"*

*December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015*

*Second Meditation:*

*“Turn us, O God our Saviour,/ and let thine anger cease from us”*

The Psalms of David are the prayer Book and hymnal of both Jews and Christians alike. Classified in the Jewish understanding as one of the *Writings*, as distinct from the *Law* and the *Prophets*, the Psalms embrace a wide range of poetic forms of expression and provide a way of praying the Scriptures.

Among the many treatises of Augustine, one of the most charming and instructive devotionally is his *Enarrations* or *Expositions on The Book of Psalms*. For the English reader, it was only translated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of the project of recovering the Patristic heritage of the Church, an interest both in England and on the continent. E.B. Pusey, one of the outstanding figures of the Oxford Movement, provided in December of 1857 an advertisement for the translation into English of Augustine’s work on the Psalms. As he remarks,

*St. Augustin was so impressed with the sense of the depth of Holy Scripture, that when it seems to him, on the surface, plainest, then he is the more assured of its hidden depth. True to this belief, St. Augustin pressed out word by word of Holy Scripture, and that, always in dependence on the inward teaching of God the Holy Ghost who wrote it, until he had extracted some fullness of meaning from it. More also, perhaps, than any other work of St. Augustin, this commentary abounds in those condensed statements of doctrinal and practical truth which are so instructive, because at once so comprehensive and so accurate.*

This doctrinal and practical sensibility about the Psalms means, of course, that they are read in the light of a certain theology of Revelation. They are not read as a mine of historical information and they are not read ‘*critically*’ as that term has become to be used by the schools of biblical and historical criticism, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They are read with a certain insight into the nature of Scriptural Revelation. In Augustine’s case, they are read entirely from a Christian perspective as bearing constant testimony to Jesus as the fulfilling of the Law. This point is made explicitly in the beginning of his commentary on Psalm 85.

*Its title is, “A Psalm for the end, to the sons of Core.” Let us understand no other end than that of which the Apostle speaks: for “Christ is the end of the law.” Therefore when at the head of the title of the Psalm he placed the words, “for the end,” he directed our heart to Christ. If we fix our gaze on Him, we shall not stray: for He is Himself the Truth unto which we are eager to arrive, and He Himself the Way by which we run ...*

What this means is a necessary emphasis on a multi-layered approach to the reading of the Psalms: allegorical, moral, and mystical. It means a way of reading the Psalms that identifies different voices: the voice of Christ, the voice of the human soul, the voice of the Church. As Augustine remarks on Psalm 139: “*Our Lord Jesus Christ speaketh in the*

*Prophets, sometimes in His own Name, sometimes in ours, because He maketh himself one with us.*" The Psalms are seen, in other words, through the lense of the doctrine of the Incarnation and with constant reference to the doctrine of the Trinity implicated in the Incarnation and to various aspects of the doctrine of Redemption, particularly, the passion and resurrection of Christ.

The Christian Church inherited the psalms and their use in prayer and praise from the Jewish synagogue but saw in them the figure of Christ as the fulfilment of the Jewish hopes and expectations and sensibilities about the Law, the Torah. As such the use of the Psalms in the early Church belongs to the development of Christian doctrine.

The task of defining and working out the nature of Christian doctrine was the great achievement of the Patristic Period. Augustine is a seminal figure with respect to that accomplishment. His treatment of the Psalms is a kind of summing up of much of the Patristic development, particularly in its western and Latin expressions. The Psalms in *The Book of Common Prayer* self-consciously retain that sense of connection to the continuum of praying the Scriptures by virtue of their Latin titles – the first few words or line of the Psalm – provided at the outset of each Psalm.

Augustine's *Enarrations* are not merely an academic exercise. But then again, hardly anything he wrote ever was. Almost everything he wrote was occasional and not principally academic, by which I mean he wrote for particular circumstances and to address contemporary questions. Paradoxically, the only work not written so occasionally is his *Confessions*.

The treatment of the Psalms belongs to Augustine's life and work as a preacher and pastor, to his teaching ministry, as it were. Contained in his reflections on the Psalms is a form of doctrine in devotion. And, as Pusey has suggested, "*the condensed statements of doctrinal and practical truth*" that his commentary presents is "*so instructive, because at once so comprehensive and so accurate,*" accurate, that is to say, within the interpretative framework of creedal doctrine. Almost all of the *Enarrations* were sermons and they have that sense of immediacy and topicality. In Augustine's view, they all speak of God and Christ, of Christ and the Soul and of Christ and the Church.

Among the Psalms that are used liturgically in the Church during the season of Advent is Psalm 85, used for instance as the gradual on *The First Sunday in Advent* and on the Advent Ember Days, but also used as the introit and gradual psalm on *The Sunday Next Before Advent*, not to mention at Evensong on Christmas Day.

In each case, a particular line or phrase connects and contributes to our prayerful adoration of God's coming to us. In the case of Psalm 85 there are several outstanding phrases that comment on various aspects of the mystery of God's engagement with our humanity.

*Benedixisti, Domine.* God has blessed our land and “restored the fortunes of Jacob”. It is an image, quite literally, of the restoration of the land, the restoration of the fortunes of Jacob – Israel. It belongs to the Advent theme of God’s light and love restoring us to grace and salvation out of the darkness of our confusions and in the chaos of our intentions. How? God’s forgiveness of our darkness named as sin; God’s turning himself away from his wrathful indignation. God’s turning both *to* us as light and salvation and *away* from us in terms of his wrath and anger. It is only upon that basis that the Psalmist can pray “turn us, O God our Saviour,/ and let thine anger cease from us.” We turn to the God who turns to us in love.

This turn-about is further emphasized in ways that highlight the mercy of God in contrast to human sinfulness. What is the point? God’s forgiveness triumphs over human sin and wickedness. The prayer of the Psalm opens us out to one of the recurring phrases of the Prayer Book liturgy at the Offices. “O Lord, show thy mercy upon us, and grant us thy salvation.” It leads us into some of the most poignant and powerful prayers of the Psalm.

First, there is our listening to “what the Lord God will say,” our openness to the pageant of God’s Word as light and truth conveying peace. “For he shall speak peace unto his people and to his saints, and unto them that turn their heart to him.” Once again there is an emphasis upon *metanoia*, the turning of our hearts and minds to God; in short, repentance, a kind of circling back to him from whom we have turned away.

Why? Because in him is found our salvation. “Surely his salvation is near them that fear him,/ that glory may dwell in our land.” The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Fear refers to the awe and wonder of God in his majesty and truth and to the awe and wonder of God being with us, dwelling with us. The Christian understanding of that awe and wonder are invoked even more fully in the lovely image of “mercy and truth hav[ing] kissed each other,” terms which have their fuller meaning in Christ’s Incarnation, in the union of heaven and earth, of God and man. “Truth springeth out of the earth;/ and righteousness hath looked down from heaven.”

By God’s turning to us and looking upon us, we shall be turned and made whole. Advent is about our turning to God because God has turned to us in Jesus Christ. The Psalms show us something of the dynamic of prayer as doctrine in devotion by way of the stirring of hearts and the enlightening of minds. Psalm 85 belongs to the Advent of our being turned to the God who has turned to us.

*“Turn us, O God our Saviour,/ and let thine anger cease from us”*

*December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015*