

# WE HAVE SEEN HIS GLORY

By EVERETT DIEDERICH

**I**N the Christmas liturgy psalms are used which help us not merely to commemorate the Incarnation as an historical event but to participate in it as the eternal mystery of our redemption, and to glorify it as the earthly consummation of God's plan for man's salvation, a plan which will be perfected by that new heaven and that second coming for which the faithful should at this season most of all hope and long.<sup>1</sup>

In the very first words of the first Mass of Christmas day, Psalm 2 proclaims that this day the Lord has begotten a Son who will triumph over his Father's enemies.<sup>2</sup>

It is agreed that this psalm was composed before the Babylonian exile, and probably celebrated the enthronement in Jerusalem of a new king; but it is quite clear that it was inspired by the prophetic words spoken by Nathan to David.<sup>3</sup> It presents in dramatic form Yahweh enthroned as king in the heavens, establishing his visible representative, his king, in Jerusalem. It proclaims that this king is divinely adopted, and henceforward has a new existence as Yahweh's vice-regent.

The prayer of the primitive Church applies the first six verses of Psalm 2 to the conspiracy of the gentiles and the peoples of Israel against Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Verse 7, 'You are my son: this day I have begotten you' seems to be cited implicitly at the baptism of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Paul interprets the words as fulfilled in the raising up of Jesus by the

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<sup>1</sup> Every psalm used in the Christmas liturgy is not examined here, but only Ps 2, 18, 44, 92, 97, 109, 129 and 131 - a selective but representative group. The Mass formularies of Christmas day, of the Sunday within the octave of Christmas and the octave of Christmas are drawn from Ps 44, 88, 92, 95, 97, 109, 117. Christmas matins contains Ps 2, 18, 44, 47, 71, 84, 88, 95, 97, and Christmas vespers have Ps 129 and 131 as proper to the feast. The matins of the octave of Christmas has Ps 2, 18, 23, 44, 86, 95, 96, 97, 98. With one exception, namely Ps 117, the psalms from which the Mass formularies of Christmas are taken deal either with the kingship of Yahweh or that of his chosen representative. Of the Christmas matin psalms all except three, Ps 18, 47 and 84 deal with the same theme. Finally, of the psalms for the matins of the octave of Christmas all except two, Ps 18 and 86, deal with the same theme.

<sup>2</sup> Vv 1 and 2 are used in the entrance psalm of the first Mass of Christmas, v 7 as the antiphon of the entrance psalm and as the alleluia chant for the gradual.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Sam 7, 11 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 4, 25 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Lk 3, 22.

Father.<sup>1</sup> In the Epistle to the Hebrews the Father addresses these words to his Son, thus indicating the Son's superiority over the angels.<sup>2</sup> Finally the Apocalypse sees verse 9, 'You shall rule them with an iron rod', as fulfilled in the reign of the glorified Lord.<sup>3</sup>

In this *introit* the Son made man is presented to us as the visible kingly representative of the Father, the Son, victorious through the Father's power in the struggle with the forces of evil, the Son now reigning over the nations and destined to reign even more fully. As we begin to celebrate Christmas, we are enabled to enter into God's plan for man's salvation, the eternal decree uttered by the Father and given over for execution to the incarnate Son and to all who believe in him.

The festal occasion for Psalm 109, closely related thematically with Psalm 2, was again the enthronement in Jerusalem of a king. The first verses reveal the sources of the marvellous bond between Yahweh and his representative. The king is to take his place at Yahweh's right hand; his birth is mysterious and heavenly: 'Before the day star, like the dew, I have begotten you'. These are the words of Yahweh which reveal his power; so we are reminded of the word of Genesis which brought a cosmos out of chaos.

Of all the psalms, Psalm 109 is most often quoted in the New Testament. Jesus applied the psalm to himself when teaching in the Temple<sup>4</sup> and again at his trial before the Sanhedrin.<sup>5</sup> In his Pentecostal discourse Peter interpreted this psalm's opening words as fulfilled in the Father's glorification of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> The formula 'seated at the right hand of the Father' appears in many places in the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> The psalm is also cited in the Epistle to the Hebrews when the author deals with the priesthood of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

This psalm, the *introit* for the second Mass of Christmas day, asks us to contemplate an historical event, so that we may recognise the glory of God in the appearance among men of his Son.

The theme of Psalm 131, recited at vespers on Christmas day, is the covenant of Yahweh with David the king. Yahweh revealed his choice of David and his line through the prophetic word of Nathan.<sup>9</sup> He also chose Jerusalem as his dwelling-place.<sup>10</sup> This psalm associates the divinely elected king and the divinely chosen sanctuary; together they constitute the full sign of Yahweh's presence in Israel.

<sup>1</sup> Acts 13, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Heb 1, 5; 5, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Apoc 2, 27; 12, 5; 19, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Mk 12, 35-37.

<sup>5</sup> Mk 14, 62.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Acts 7, 55-56; Rom 8, 34; Eph 1, 20; Col 3, 1; Heb 1, 13; 8, 1; 19, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Heb 5, 6; 7, 17.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Sam 7, 8-16.

<sup>10</sup> Ps 131, 13-16.

So, through the Incarnation, the Word begins to dwell in our midst; and the psalm enables us to enter into the meaning of the presence of the invisible God among us. The Word made flesh, contemplated by faith, is the visible sovereign Lord representing the invisible God. He is the new Temple, the new House of God.<sup>1</sup>

Psalm 18 is not contained in any of the Mass formularies for Christmas, but it is used in the office for the feast.<sup>2</sup> The psalm is made up of two separate poems traditionally joined, the first celebrating creation as a revelation of the glory of Yahweh, and the second celebrating the Law. The word 'glory' has a long history in the Old and New Testaments. Glory is an attribute of God which can be revealed to man; it commands his respect and admiration and calls forth worship from him. And his response is also called 'glory', the glory which is given back to God. God's glory is made manifest when his infinite goodness and wisdom are revealed to man. When, through God's initiative and man's response, God's design is perceived in a human event, then his glory is revealed.

Thus in Psalm 18, the manifestation of God's glory, which is the theme of the first poem, is not simply the external, physical beauty and splendour of the visible world, but it is creation seen as obedient to the divine will and showing forth the power of the divine Word.<sup>4</sup> This same glory is even more effectively manifested in the second poem, through the Law. Nature, though it has no voice, no utterance, is able to manifest the divine will, and therefore the divine wisdom and goodness; but the Law can do this better. For the Law is a word that refreshes the soul and gives wisdom; the Law is clear, it enlightens the eye and rejoices the heart. The saving design of God, and therefore his wisdom and goodness, are clearer to man in the Law than in nature. When God's goodness and wisdom, as made manifest in the Law, are perceived by the pious Israelite through faith, he is constantly led to glorify God.

In the liturgical use of the psalm, attention is focussed on verse 6:

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<sup>1</sup> Ps 109, vv 1 and 3 is used in the gradual psalm of the first Mass of Christmas; v 3 is used as the communion antiphon of the same Mass.

<sup>2</sup> Ps 18 is the second in the first nocturn of Christmas, the antiphon of the psalm being v 6. The Magnificat antiphon of the first vespers for Christmas is also adapted from this same verse.

<sup>3</sup> Vv 1-7 have as their theme God's glory revealed in nature; vv 8-15 the revelation of God's glory in the Law.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Jer 31, 35-36.

'the sun comes forth like the groom from his bridal chamber'.<sup>1</sup> Here, the coming of Jesus is likened to the coming of the sun. Both bring light to a darkened world. Jesus calls himself the light of the world.<sup>2</sup> He is the radiance of his Father's splendour.<sup>3</sup> It is his mission to manifest the glory of the Father.<sup>4</sup> This he does by revealing and carrying out the Father's plan for man's salvation. He is the Father's Word, spoken not only in eternity<sup>5</sup> but also in time to men.<sup>6</sup> His whole life, and especially the hour of his suffering and humiliation, effects the Father's saving love and reveals his manifold wisdom.<sup>7</sup> The Christmas liturgy, then, directs our attention to the Son's glory, not only in his coming into the world but also in the hour of his knowing, loving submission to death on the cross. There is glory here because Jesus is luminous; there is glory in this hour because, knowing his Father's will and embracing it with love, he is light to those with faith. God's goodness and wisdom are here manifested as transforming evil into the victory over sin and death, and this is his glory given to him by the Father as a reward for his obedience.<sup>8</sup>

It is generally conceded that Psalm 44, the gradual psalm for the Sunday after Christmas, was occasioned by the wedding of a king. God's relationship to his people is frequently described as the love of spouse for bride; and so this psalm is the celebration of God's love for his people.<sup>9</sup> The king is praised for his beauty and his bravery, for his love of justice and his hatred of wickedness, and for this God has rewarded him by anointing him with the oil of gladness.<sup>10</sup> In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the epistle for the third Mass of Christmas day, these praises are addressed to the Son, who is also called the radiance of the Father's splendour and the full expression of his being.

In the Christmas-Epiphany liturgy another group of psalms is used which also celebrates the kingship of Yahweh, but makes no mention of any earthly ruler. Of these, two will be considered here because of their extensive use in the Mass formularies for Christmas day.<sup>11</sup> Psalm 92 proclaims Yahweh king over all creation, who has

<sup>1</sup> V 6 is used in an accommodated form as the antiphon for Ps 18 in Christmas matins. It is used in the same form as the Magnificat antiphon for first vespers of Christmas.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 8, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Heb 1, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 17, 1-6.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 1, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Heb 1, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Eph 3, 8-11.

<sup>8</sup> Phil 2, 5-11.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Augustin George, *Prier les Psaumes* (Paris, 1960), pp. 154-157; Pierre Guichou, *Les Psaumes commentés par la Bible, Ps 1-50*, (Paris, 1958) p. 259.

<sup>10</sup> Vv 2-8.

<sup>11</sup> Ps 92 is used in the *introit* psalm, alleluia and offertory anthem of the Mass at dawn

established that which was by nature unstable and has emerged victor in the struggle with chaos which is represented by the waters. '*Et formavit orbem terrarum qui non commovebitur*'. This victorious power gives the Israelites grounds for complete trust: '*testimonia tua fide digna sunt valde*'. These decrees bring the sovereign Lord of creation closer to men, for he has his house among them, where he is present to be worshipped in holiness.

In the Christmas liturgy this psalm proclaims Christ as king. The source of his kingship, as we have seen in Psalms 2 and 109, is in the Father. His kingdom is now established in Jesus who has carried out his mission and manifested his Law to men. Through the sending of the Spirit of the Father and the Son this Law is written in men's hearts. When we pray this psalm at Christmas we consciously ratify in our worship this new order.

Psalm 97 calls for a new song to celebrate the kingship of the Lord, and it proclaims him king not only of Israel but of all peoples, whom he will rule with justice and equity in a dispensation yet to come.<sup>1</sup>

As in Psalms 95, 96 and 98, the occasion for the new song is Israel's redemption from Babylon. So in St. John's vision, a new song is sung to the Lamb hymning the great redemption that has been accomplished through his blood,<sup>2</sup> paying to him that perfect worship which the redeemed of every people and every nation will offer to him at the end of time. The coming of the Son of God ushers in a new world which calls for a new song; and in the Christmas liturgy we are now singing this new song to God our saviour who has come to dwell amongst us; 'not because of anything we had done for our own justification but through his own merciful plan'.<sup>3</sup> To pray Psalm 97 in the Christmas liturgy should make us more concerned than usual with the quality of our worship. We have been made into a kingdom of worshippers. Out of every tribe and tongue come a people and nation, and the blood of the Lamb present here and now under the sacramental sign has made of us a royal priesthood.<sup>4</sup>

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on Christmas day. Psalm 92 is used in the *introit* psalm, gradual psalm and communion anthem of the third Mass. Verse 2 of Psalm 97, 'The Lord has made his salvation known', is used as the versicle and response of lauds and second vespers of Christmas day and its octave, in the *responsorium breve* of sext and in the versicle and response of the third nocturn of the octave of Christmas.

<sup>1</sup> V 9.

<sup>2</sup> Apoc 5, 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Tit 3, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Apoc 5, 9-14; 1 Pet 2, 9-10.

Hence the use of this Psalm in the Christmas liturgy focusses our attention on the whole of the divine plan, which includes a new heaven and a new earth. Just as the first new world was inaugurated by Christ's first coming, there is to be another heralded by his second coming. The salvation already accomplished by our Lord's life, death and resurrection is to find its fulfilment in his second coming, to which in our faith and hope we look forward. Then 'God himself will be our God. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning nor crying, nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away'.<sup>1</sup>

We are so accustomed to associate the *De Profundis*, Psalm 129, with the liturgy of the dead, that it comes as something of a surprise to find it in the joyful setting of Christmas vespers. But it is entirely appropriate because of the certain hope of redemption which it expresses.<sup>2</sup> 'More than the watchmen wait for the dawn, Israel waits for the Lord's coming' and this coming is the dawn of salvation which every faithful soul confidently expects.

When St. Augustine was writing of the cure of the woman with the issue of blood, and of the Lord's words on this occasion, 'Who was it that touched me; for power is gone out from me?' he remarked: 'Do you wish really to touch Christ? Then think Christ – *intellige Christum* – where he is, co-eternal with the Father'.<sup>3</sup> The liturgical celebration of Christ's coming invites us and helps us so to touch and to understand Christ. It makes the Son present to us in his relationship with the Father: 'through the mystery of the Incarnate Word a new light, streaming from his radiance, enlightens the eyes of our minds'.<sup>4</sup> As we pray these psalms we affirm afresh that in our adherence to him we are not only the willing and loving subjects of the Father's kingdom established by the Son's ransom, but we are coheirs and victors with him. 'If you continue to believe in him, how you will triumph':<sup>5</sup> our celebration of Christmas testifies to this continuance and intensification of our adherence. In the Christmas liturgy we recognize that this Word of God is born and shines forth in our hearts:<sup>6</sup> it is the confession of our faith and hope that 'it will go on shining, like a lamp in some darkened room, until the dawn breaks and the day star rises in your hearts'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Apoc 21, 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Vv 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Sermo CCXLIII*, 2; PL 38, 1144.

<sup>4</sup> Christmas Preface.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Pet 1, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Second Mass of Christmas day, prayer.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Pet 1, 19.