

# THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PSALMIST\*

By LUIS ALONSO SCHÖKEL

CONTEMPLATE HIM and be radiant.<sup>1</sup> We all know the prosaic side of life: our daily to-ing and fro-ing, the housewife's toil, the thankless workshop, waiting in the shopping centre, the endless bills. But we also need to make room for the poetry of life. A time to seek it – and even to find it – is at the week-end or during our annual holidays. Without despising the prosaic elements, which have permanent value, we ought to be serious in our search for the poetry around us. One place to look for this poetry is in nature; and one way of finding it is to see nature as creation. It is at this point that the writers of the bible part company from greek thinkers; what the Greeks call *physis* the bible regards as *ktisis*.

Modern man in the West is very well equipped to exercise his lordship over nature; he does so by exploitation. Nature is the source of raw materials, and technology is the means by which he extracts them. Now there is nothing wrong with this; on the contrary, it is in accordance with the command in Genesis to 'rule the earth'.<sup>2</sup> Evil comes when this particular relationship between man and nature excludes all others. When that happens, man has cut himself off from a profound and healthy relationship with his world; then nature begins to be threatened by man. The ecological problem has brought this threat home to us: rivers have become sewers, fields are turned into rubbish-tips and the good clean air is used as a chimney. Although the gospel is not going to give us specific prescriptions to cure the problems of ecology, it is my belief that the bible can offer a solution if we honestly want it.

We can call the non-utilitarian relationship between man and nature the contemplation of creation. In this phrase the first term –

---

\* This article originally appeared in Spanish in *Sal Terrae* to whom the editors offer grateful thanks and acknowledgments. It has been translated by Nicholas King and George Earle.

<sup>1</sup> Ps 34, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Gen 1, 28.

contemplation – refers to man's part, while the second – creation – tells us something more about nature, its deepest reality and symbolic structure. The romantic movement has bequeathed to us a particular way of perceiving nature, but the capacity for contemplation is not a modern invention. It is fascinating to observe how the Israelites express their excited contemplation of creation when they sing hymns of praise to their creator. (In saying this I am not denying the influence of Akhenaton and other currents of less decisive importance.)

The author of the first chapter of Genesis presents the Creator to us as an artist who brings his works into being by the paradoxical and powerful agency of his word. As he completes each one he contemplates it with satisfaction; when he has finished them all he contemplates them with extreme satisfaction and takes his rest. Starting with the heavens, he clasps the whole of creation in one global embrace. God's image on earth will have to follow this example; namely contemplate and take his rest. He will not be able to take the same satisfaction as the Creator, for this is not his own work. What he can do is to congratulate the artist and so share in his satisfaction. In his desire to congratulate the artist he enlarges his contemplative gaze, so that he can discover and enjoy the works of creation, then rest in his discovery and praise.

If the man is a poet he will be able to transform his discovery and praise into words, so that others can make his meaning their own and thus join him in a choir. In this way God's image and likeness will give back to the Creator a reflection of his splendour and glory in the form of words. These words will be poetic ones: God made the beauty of creation and man articulates the poetry of creation.

I have yet more to say, which I have thought upon,  
and I am filled, like the moon at the full.  
Listen to me, O you holy sons,  
and bud like a rose growing by a stream of water;  
send forth fragrance like frankincense,  
and put forth blossoms like a lily.  
Scatter the fragrance, and sing a hymn of praise;  
bless the Lord for all his works.<sup>3</sup>

Man does have something to offer the Creator artist: a song which is also a work of art in his image and likeness. Man can take satis-

---

<sup>3</sup> Sir 39, 12-14.

faction in his own creation in words; but even more he wants God to take satisfaction in his poem. At the end of his poems he sometimes adds:

May my meditation be pleasing to him,  
for I rejoice in the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in thy sight.<sup>5</sup>

The last stanza is helpful to those of us who are not poets and who cannot translate their acts of contemplation into poetic words. If we are in this position we can do two things. On the one hand we can adopt someone else's words, appropriate them to ourselves, recite them in chorus and chant them in refrain. On the other hand we can meditate in our heart, on our own and without finely wrought words; that is to say, we can contemplate in silence and soundless wonder as our praise becomes ever deeper and more intimate. This silence can also reach God who listens to the thoughts of man.

For the sake of greater clarity we can distinguish a number of stages in this contemplative process. The first is to go beyond the utilitarian approach so as to open the way to a contemplative view of nature. The second stage is to go beyond mere gazing so as to recognize nature as creation: in other words, to discover the manifestation of God in his work. In the third stage there is praise by the individual alone or as part of a group, by outward expression or in the secret of the heart.

So far as the *first stage* is concerned, some people imagine that a contemplative attitude has to be learnt later in life. This is far from certain, because a child is capable of wondering and astonished discovery, and only later acquires a utilitarian relationship with nature. For the child it is sufficient to stare and give names: That's a river! That's a bird! And it is a marvellous experience to give newly-minted names, thrilling with the joy of discovery, concentrating a whole life into a few sounds. That is precisely why other people say that the contemplative attitude is mere primitivism, and that the utilitarian stance of modern technology represents maturity; as though everything could be broken down into successive stages and as though man could only adopt one attitude at a time. The

<sup>4</sup> Ps 104, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Ps 19, 14.

man in whom the child has utterly perished is a sad and impoverished being, while the poet is only a child come to maturity. 'Thou hast brought forth praise from the mouth of children'.<sup>6</sup> The psalmist says, 'There is the sea!', as if he were pointing to it with his finger like a child. Then he goes on with deeper awareness, 'Great and wide, which teems with things innumerable, living things both great and small'. And he ends with a mythological allusion, 'There go the ships and Leviathan which thou didst form to sport in it'.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps modern man needs to learn the art of looking, to rid himself of his distorting carapace so that he can see again. This will call for a purification of the heart: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see . . .'.<sup>8</sup> Holidays can serve this purpose; to lessen and subdue our selfishness so that we can gaze once more without preconceptions; to move away from the profit motive to selfless admiration. Contemplation is disinterested and for that reason it does a man good and heals him.

The author of Wisdom introduces us to the *second stage* when he criticizes the Greeks for being unable to soar up to the creator and for making gods out of his creatures:

If through delight in the beauty of these things they assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if they were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is he who formed them. For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their creator.<sup>9</sup>

It is necessary to go beyond mere amazement at creation and mere pleasure in it. The clear eye of the child must gain in maturity and perception; this will mean that it will see *more*, not that it will see *something else*. The child can say, 'Play, dolphin'; the grown-up child speaks of 'the dolphin (or Leviathan) which thou didst form to sport in the sea'. 'The sun when it appears spreading heat', say the astonished eyes of the child. 'What a marvellous work of the Lord', add the penetrating eyes of the adult.<sup>10</sup> 'The stars adorn the beauty of the heavens', says the infant's thunderstruck gaze; and the enlightened man goes on: 'At the command of the Holy One they stand as ordered, they never relax in their watches'.<sup>11</sup> The

<sup>6</sup> Ps 8, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ps 104, 25-26.

<sup>8</sup> Mt 5, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Wis 13, 3-5.

<sup>10</sup> Sir 43, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Sir 43, 9-10.

contemplative who looks up towards the Creator receives a new light on himself, which gives him a better appreciation of his puny stature before God and so helps him to solve his own riddles.

When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers,  
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;  
what is man that thou art mindful of him,  
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?<sup>12</sup>

Once educated by a profound contemplation of nature, man learns to look at what had previously seemed prosaic and humdrum with the fresh eyes of a poet.

Man brings forth food from the earth,  
and wine to gladden the heart,  
oil to make his face shine  
and bread to strengthen his heart . . .  
When the sun rises the wild beasts get them away  
and lie down in their dens;  
man goes forth unto his work  
and to his labour until the evening.<sup>13</sup>

When it comes to the *third stage*, some people need do no more than go into the country, enter a wood, settle down on a mountain or face the sea, for these are privileged moments. Other people, however, can be helped by a book, and the Old Testament offers splendid texts which we can take up and read wherever we are. Alternatively we can create poems of our own. Reading these texts is already praying, learning to contemplate. When we read inspired texts we go to school with the Holy Spirit, who hovered over the face of the waters at the dawn of creation.

Thou didst set the earth on its foundation,  
so that it could never be shaken.  
Thou didst cover it with the deep as with a garment;  
the waters stood above the mountains.  
At thy rebuke they fled;  
at the sound of thy thunder they took to flight.  
The mountains rose, the valleys sank down  
to the place which thou didst appoint for them.<sup>14</sup>

It is instructive to compare prayers from the bible with others which have been composed for prayer at home. Modern prayers

<sup>12</sup> Ps 8, 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Ps 104, 14-15; 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> Ps 104, 5-8.

may deserve our respect on account of the sanctity of their authors or the devotion with which so many christians have prayed them.

O Lord, I tell you that you are holy, that you are very sweet, that you are the king of all hearts, delight of souls, giver of all that is good, our sole hope. In you there are four ecstasies of love towards us: creation, redemption, sanctification, glorification. O Heart filled with ineffable tenderness towards poor miserable wretches!

Many of us would be glad to have a tenth of the holiness of the author of these lines. Nevertheless, I do not think any will be offended by my preference for prayers from the bible. Another example is to be found in a missal for the faithful published in 1956, which contains a series of devotional prayers stretching over two hundred pages. There we can seek in vain for creation's praise of God, although the author finds room for novenas, septenaries, triduums and devotions to St Ignatius, St Francis Xavier and St Aloysius Gonzaga. There is nothing wrong with all these prayers, but if we were to use this book alone we should certainly have no feeling for God's creation. Whereas the man who faithfully uses the psalms as his prayer-book will be open to the contemplation of nature.

And it is not only the psalms that teach us so much, for we could quote magnificent passages from Ben Sirach, Job, Proverbs and many of the Prophets. Here is Ben Sirach:

Look upon the rainbow and him who made it,  
exceedingly beautiful in its brightness.  
It encircles the heavens with its glorious arc;  
the hands of the most High have stretched it out . . .  
He scatters the snow like birds flying down,  
and its descent is like locusts alighting.  
The eye marvels at the beauty of its whiteness,  
and the heart is in ecstasy at its falling.<sup>15</sup>

### *Liturgy*

We are so used to going into churches for our liturgical celebrations that it is difficult for us to think of the contemplation of creation as a liturgical act. At best we listen to a few verses of a psalm by way of a response between readings, without really understanding what it is saying or where it is pointing. To say and mean the words of a

---

<sup>15</sup> Sir 43, 11-12; 17-18.

psalm in the course of a liturgy in church I need to have absorbed its attitude towards nature. If I do not really believe that 'the heavens proclaim the glory of God and the firmament proclaims the work of his hands', then I cannot truly say 'heavens, bless the Lord'. Psalm 148 consists entirely of putting this cosmic liturgy into words. The psalm is made up of ten invitations to seven heavenly beings and twenty-one terrestrial creatures to join in a liturgy of praise. We find the same pattern imitated in the book of Daniel.<sup>17</sup> Simply by being called, creation is obedient and fulfils its destiny. When woven into song and speech, creation reaches its true significance as praise of God. In the psalm, creation is ordered concentrically around man and forms a ritual ascent towards God. The song gives tongue to the new cosmic order and creates a worshipping community in place of so many isolated individuals. Rejoicing is now in its proper framework, with every creature in its rightful position and God at the summit of all creation.

When Teilhard de Chardin was unable to say Mass, he composed his *Mass of the Universe*. If we understand liturgy in its full sense of service, then the contemplation of which we are speaking can be called a liturgy. Surely this would be true of the morning prayer of a few early risers when they see the sun coming up behind a mountain. We can test this by reciting antiphonally:

Awake O harp and lyre  
I will awake the dawn . . .  
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;  
Let thy glory be over all the earth.<sup>18</sup>

When a man beholds the sunrise in that daily miracle which city life hides from us, the soul soars up to God, who rises like the sun and reveals himself in the light. And the christian soul rises up to contemplate the solar ascension of Christ in glory, illuminating the world with his new life. It is an impressive public act of prayer to God.

The book of Wisdom describes Aaron's priestly vestment for the act of the Atonement like this: 'In his long robe was contained the whole world'.<sup>19</sup> The high priest symbolically presented the whole of creation as a mediator before God. This is the function of the poetic

<sup>17</sup> Dan 3, 52-90.

<sup>18</sup> Ps 108, 2. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Wis 18, 24.

word in the psalms we have quoted. Now we do not need a high priest to perform his representative part.

Praise him you highest heavens  
and you waters above the heavens!  
Praise him sun and moon,  
Praise him all you shining stars,  
Praise the Lord from the earth,  
you sea-monsters and all the deeps,  
Mountains and all the hills,  
Fruit trees and all the cedars.<sup>20</sup>

It will be said that in order to sing these contemplative stanzas man needs to be in the right frame of mind; his soul must be at peace; this kind of prayer is impossible amidst life's irritations and preoccupations and the debilitating routine of our daily work. That is just when we need contemplative prayer to cure our distress and restore our tranquillity.

In the Old Testament, Job is the model of suffering. He suffers from sores on his body, from the cutting remarks of his supposed friends, from the terrible riddle of an uncomprehending and pitiless God. Job demands a hearing from God, and in the end God comes down to meet him. And what does God do? He takes Job by the hand and talks to him about the world, the wonderful land which is man's kingdom. Driven on by God's questions, Job is forced to describe the extent of his domain, and discovers there with a startled sense of surprise his own ignorance and weakness.

Who shut in the sea with doors,  
when it burst forth from the womb;  
when I made the clouds its garment  
and thick darkness its swaddling band,  
and prescribed bounds for it,  
and set bars and doors,  
and said, 'thus far shall you come and no further  
and here shall your proud waves be stayed'?<sup>21</sup>

Job's question remains unanswered, because God is teaching him to see himself in his proper context. He is made to watch the march-past of the free and untamed members of the animal kingdom.

<sup>20</sup> Ps 148.

<sup>21</sup> Job 38, 8-11.

The wings of the ostrich wave proudly,  
 as though it had the pinions and plumage of a stork . . .  
 when she rouses herself to flee  
 she laughs at the horse and the rider.<sup>22</sup>  
 Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up  
 and makes his nest on high?  
 On the rock he dwells and makes his home  
 in the fastness of the rocky crag.  
 Thence he spies out his prey,  
 his eyes behold it far off.<sup>23</sup>

Probably the best pieces of descriptive writing in the bible are to be found in the book of Job. The lesson for us is that some of modern man's psychological ailments could be alleviated or cured by the contemplation of nature. When man is in his true place between the universe and God, he regains his dignity and integrity. 'Thou dost crown him with glory and honour. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands'. Contemplation is a way of finding and securing man's true place – 'when I contemplate the heavens, the work of thy fingers'. Then contemplation naturally flows into a hymn of praise. 'How majestic is thy name in all the earth'.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Christian tradition*

At times when men were not so close or responsive to nature, the great mystics were outstanding in possessing contemplative gifts. Francis of Assisi composed his hymn to creatures. St John of the Cross far outshone many talented poets of his era:

My love's the mountain range,  
 The valleys each with solitary grove,  
 The islands far and strange,  
 The streams with sounds that change,  
 The whistling of the lovesick winds that rove.<sup>25</sup>

Our own literary tradition – all of it and not merely the strictly religious writers – gives us a number of examples. Unamuno's *Journeys and Vistas* are a perfect model of the first stage of contemplation and do not need a forced interpretation to lead us into the second:

And up there, in the solitude of the summit, among the tall hard rocks

<sup>22</sup> Job 39, 13, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Job 39, 27–28.

<sup>24</sup> Ps 8.

<sup>25</sup> St John of the Cross: *Poems* (trans Roy Campbell, London, 1960), p 34: 'Songs between the soul and the bridegroom'.

there is a divine silence, a silence that recreates . . . and the silence marries with the majesty of the mountain, a bare mountain, a raising up of the bare womb of the earth; stripped of its greenery, which leaves off at the foot of the mountain as one leaves off a garment, to rise towards the bare sun . . . And the bare and silent sun kisses the bare and silent rock with its rays. There, alone with the mountain, my spirit turned its gaze from the mountain's peaks to the peaks of my soul, and from the plains that lie at the mountain's foot to my spiritual plains. It was an enforced examination of conscience.

We could quote many spanish poets such as Antonio Machado, Gerardo Diego, Panero and others. Here we have to content ourselves with just one who sums up the contemplative attitude: José María Valverde in his *Poet's Prayer*:

You do not give us the world for us to enjoy it;  
 you hand it over to us that we may make it speak.  
 And when we have given voice to the earth,  
 it is not ours; we have only its mighty soul . . .  
 Now you see that through us life is voiced,  
 just as the stones in the clear water make the stream sing.  
 You have not given us your creation to drown in silence,  
 in the fleeting silence of anxious people;  
 to live in it alone without pausing to look at it . . .  
 In us man's haste takes its rest.  
 For if we did not exist,  
 the unprofitable beauty of God's creation would have no point:  
 so many vermilion sunsets and so many trees that bear no fruit and  
 so much blossom and so many wandering birds.  
 Only we feel your gift  
 and we thank you for it with our ecstatic cries.  
 You smile upon us, Lord, repaid,  
 because we are overcome by astonishment and wonder.

We do not have to be afraid of running out of matter for contemplation in the course of a single week-end, a few holidays or even a life-time. We might be afraid of exhausting our capacity for wonder. But the great secret is that the more this capacity is exercised the more it grows and the more satisfaction it brings. When we contemplate and sing the wonders of creation, God makes us a gift of his joy, the joy of the seventh day when he contemplated creation and took his rest. There is no danger of running out of creatures to contemplate; long before that we shall have run out of time.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Sir 43, 27-32.