

VESPERS: THE PRAYER OF SUNSET

When I was a young boy – during the War years – we faithfully observed a little ritual in our home, not from a sense of piety, but to aid the war effort. We would not put on the lights until five o'clock, “when it got dark”. In my child's mind this quickly became associated with the end of the day and the change of pace it brought. It became the signal for my mother to begin preparing supper, and it meant my father would soon be home from work.

Long before electricity, the lighting of the household lamps heralded the evening. In the Book of Exodus, chapter thirty, it is reported that God commanded Moses to see to it that seven lamps were lit in the Tabernacle between sunset and nightfall:

“...Aaron must burn fragrant incense each morning when he trims the lamps and between sunset and nightfall when he puts them back...”

“You are to make these offerings of incense before the Lord without fail from one generation to the next.”

Early Christians, continuing a practice already long established among the pagans, would bless the evening light with a short prayer of praise. Soon they began to augment this very simple rite with a hymn and other prayers. But even when a regular routine of prayer was organized in the church building, the blessing of the evening light remained the

pivot on which all the other ceremonial gestures revolved.

These early Christians made Psalm 140 their evening prayer, because of the phrase “*Let the lifting of my hands be like an evening sacrifice.*” Even to this day, the recitation of Psalm 140 is an integral part of vespers, the evening service of prayer. The other phrase of the opening verses, “*Let my prayer rise like incense before You...*”, probably urged them to restore the lapsed rite of burning fragrant spices. The first gentile Christians had disdained the use of incense because it was so intimately connected with pagan rituals, but as the acute danger of idolatry began to subside, the study of Scripture moved them to restore the use of incense as an act of worship, since it is written in Exodus that this oblation is a “perpetual ordinance”.

VESPERS TODAY

Today the Horologion, the book of official daily prayers for use in Church, preserves these elements. In the course of time, other elements were added, notably a portion of Scripture, especially on those days when one would expect the whole body of the faithful to assemble, such as the greater feasts or special fast days. Other psalms were also added, some read quietly for the congregation to reflect upon and others chanted by the cantor with the people singing a refrain (prokimenon). To prepare everyone for the service, an introductory psalm was added at the very beginning. Today that is Psalm 103, which speaks of the rhythm

of the day: man going out to work in the morning and returning in the evening. And to express the intercessions of the entire community, a set of petitions was added at the end, in which the deacon led the people in prayer for their various needs. Originally there was only one such litany and it was found toward the end of the service. Today this set of petitions has been divided up and there are now at least three litanies in vespers.

Yet more important than the structure or the historical evolution of the service is the spiritual message it conveys. The coming of physical darkness reminds us that the influence of darkness is ever ready to engulf us, and only the light that is Christ can reveal its tricks and expose its frauds. Christ is – and must always be – the light in our lives.

The Scripture itself teaches us the meaning of the incense. It reports in the sixteenth chapter of the Book of Numbers that a plague broke out among the Jews when they grumbled against the Lord. Aaron, the high priest, took a censer and “*performed the rite of atonement over them and the plague was checked.*” The incense also reminds us of the pillar of fire, seen as a column of cloud by day, which was the mysterious vehicle of God's presence while the Israelites were wandering in the desert. It is also said that the incense represents the Holy Spirit who, as the Book of Genesis relates, was hovering over the void at the beginning of creation, ready to bring forth life.

IN THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

Perhaps we cannot always attend these evening prayers in church, but there is no reason why we cannot observe our ancient traditions at home. Before the holy icons we ought to have an oil lamp or a candle burning. Each evening this lamp could be lit with the whole family present, perhaps before or after dinner. The family could recite the first verses of Psalm 140, perhaps sing the evening hymn, *O Joyful Light*, or use some other suitable prayers. A grain or two of incense might be offered. Small burners and proper size charcoals for this purpose are usually available in shops that serve the religious or domestic needs of our people. The sweet fragrance in the air might serve to remind the whole family of the presence of God, and to promote peace and tranquility in the household.

PRAYERS FROM VESPERS

At nightfall, dawn and noon we sing to You, we bless you, we give thanks to You and we beseech You, O Master of all and Lover of mankind, guide our prayers aright as an offering of incense before You. Let not our hearts be led to words or thoughts of wickedness, but save us from all those who pursue our souls. For all glory, honor and worship are Your due – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – now and always and forever and ever. Amen.

O Joyful Light of the holy glory of the Father immortal: heavenly, holy, blessed Lord Jesus Christ! Since we have come to the setting of the sun and have seen the evening light, we praise God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is proper for You to be praised at all times by fitting melodies, O Son of God, giver of life. Therefore all the world glorifies You!

Deign, O Lord, to keep us this evening without sin. Blessed are You, O Lord, God of our fathers – praised and glorified is Your name forever. Amen. O Lord, let Your mercy rest upon us for we have placed our trust in You. Blessed are You, O Lord, teach me Your statutes. Blessed are You, O Master, grant that I may understand Your statutes. Blessed are You, O Holy One, enlighten me with Your statutes. Everlasting is Your love, O Lord, turn not away from the work of Your hands. Indeed, praise, adoration and glory are Your due – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – now and always and forever and ever. Amen.

Now You shall dismiss Your servant, O Lord, according to Your word in peace; because my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared before the face of all peoples: a light to the revelation of the Gentiles and the glory of Your people Israel.

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