

## First Sunday in Lent, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2019

“He will overshadow thee with his shoulders: and under his wings thou shalt trust. His truth shall compass thee with a shield” (Ps 90:4-5a). These words from Psalm 90 appear not just once, or even twice, but thrice, three times: in that rather long Tract before the Gospel, containing virtually the whole of Psalm 90; and then standing on its own, as it were, in both the Offertory antiphon and the Communion antiphon. Perhaps the Mass is therefore trying to tell us something? – Pay heed today to these words, and maybe also throughout the rest of Lent!

Why these words in particular from Psalm 90, used in virtually its entirety in the chant of the Tract? But first of all: Why Psalm 90? Yes, the devil quotes part of it in today’s Gospel of the Temptations: “it is written: That he hath given his angels charge over thee, and in their hands shall they bear thee up, lest perhaps thou dash thy foot against a stone” (Mt 4:6). The devil does so in such a way so as to get Christ to test the Lord God rather than to trust him. The whole of the Psalm, however, is about trusting in God, right from the very start: “He that dwelleth in the aid of the most High (*Qui habitat in adjutorio Altissimi*), shall abide under the protection of the God of heaven (*in protectione Dei caeli commorabitur*)” (v. 1).

All monks, and indeed all priests, are very familiar with the Psalms; reciting them in the daily Divine Office. Psalm 90 is especially familiar; given that it is traditionally recited every night of the week at Compline. What better prayer could there possibly be before retiring for the night than to wish to “abide under the protection” of Almighty God? Immediately after the section quoted thrice in today’s Mass, the Psalm in fact goes on to reassure us: “thou shalt not be afraid of the terror of the night” (v. 5b). And it is not only at night that we need protecting; for the Psalm then lists: “Of the arrow that flieth in the day, of the business that walketh about in the dark: of invasion, or of the noonday devil” (v. 6) – day, night, even right in the middle of the day, the devil seems to stalk.

If the devil is only interested in tempting and testing us; we ourselves should not be afraid of him but, just like Jesus during those forty days in the desert, simply trust in the loving protection of God. May these forty days of Lent be likewise for all of us a time of trust in, rather than of despair of, God’s merciful love. How does that part of the Psalm chanted in the Tract, and then in the Offertory and Communion, put it again? – “He will overshadow thee with his shoulders (*Scapulis suis obumbrabit tibi*): and under his wings thou shalt trust (*et sub pennis ejus sperabis*). His truth shall compass thee with a shield (*scuto circumdabit te veritas ejus*)” (v. 4-5a).

Within the Jerusalem Temple, the pinnacle of which the devil took Christ up to tempt him to cast himself down, there had been the Ark of the Covenant behind the veil separating the holy place from the Holy of Holies. Just before Christ’s coming, the Roman general Pompey laid siege to the city and, entering the Temple, peered into the very Holy of Holies, astonished to find nothing more than a dark empty space. What happened to the Ark is of course something of a mystery. Although it would be very interesting to discuss that, what I want to point out here, however,

are certain aspects of the Ark's construction. The Ark of the Covenant was basically a golden box, containing the two stone tablets of the Law and a few other bits and pieces associated with the Exodus, above which were the cherubim, also of gold, spreading their wings over the 'mercy seat', where it was believed God especially dwelt.



So why (if you have started asking) are we talking about the Ark? What has that got to do with Lent?! Well, there was the rather extraordinary claim during the Middle Ages that the Ark of the Covenant was kept inside the high altar of this Sunday's station church in Rome, St John Lateran. No, that is not quite the reason why, but rather the more plausible theory that when Psalm 90 says that "under his wings thou shalt trust" (v. 4), the Psalmist probably had in mind the image of the cherubic "wings" spread over the place where God had his 'seat' in the Holy of Holies. And it is indeed an image: God does not literally have "wings", though it is certainly a powerful image, and one which Christ will later use in reference to himself: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, [...] how often would I have gathered together thy children, as the hen doth gather her chickens under her wings, and thou wouldest not?" (Mt 23:37).

Yes, there is a somewhat large discrepancy between the "wings" of a cherub and those of a "hen", but they nevertheless are still "wings" under which protection is found: "under his wings thou shalt trust" (Ps 90:4); "as the hen doth gather her chickens under her wings" (Mt 23:37). Is God trying to tell us something? – Trust me rather than test me.