

"IT IS DARK, LORD!"

I have been reading the prayers and poems of Michel Quiost, a French Catholic priest, for over forty years. In his book, Prayers, in a section called, "Stages of the Road," are several poems that finally made sense to me as I matured as a Christian. I began to understand the prayer, "It is Dark," only in the last ten years, when I passed through times of gloom and experienced a "dark night of the soul."

In his introduction to this poem he wrote: "It is only one totally blind who puts himself completely into the hands of God, to be led like a child. So...the Lord is obliged to plunge him into darkness. He then learns to rely on God only." Quiost added: "This is a painful time. The Christian mustn't try to escape it, but he does need to be reassured." Here is the prayer:

Lord, it is dark.
Lord, are you here in my darkness?
Your light has gone out, and so has its reflection on men and on all the things around me.
Everything seems grey and somber as when a fog blots out the sun and enshrouds the earth.
Everything is an effort, everything is difficult, and I am heavy-footed and slow.
Every morning I am overwhelmed by the thought of another day.
I long for the end, I yearn for the oblivion of death,
I should like to leave,
Run away,
Flee,
Anywhere, escape.
Escape what?
You, Lord, others, myself, I don't know,
But leave,
Flee.

I go haltingly, like a drunkard, from force of habit, unconsciously.
I go through the same motions each day, but I know that they are meaningless.
I walk, but I know that I am getting nowhere.
I speak, and my words seem dreadfully empty, for they can reach only human ears and not the living souls who are far above.
Ideas themselves escape me, I find it hard to think.
I stammer, confused, blushing.
And I feel ridiculous,
And abashed, for people will notice me.
Lord, am I losing my mind?
Or is all this what you want?

It wouldn't matter, except that I am alone.
I am alone.
You have taken me far, Lord; trusting, I followed you, and you walked at my side,
And now, in the middle of the desert, at night, suddenly you have disappeared.
I call, and you do not answer.
I search, and I do not find you.
I have left everything, and now I am left alone.
Your absence is my suffering.

Lord, it is dark.
Lord, are you here in my darkness?
Where are you, Lord?
Do you love me still?

Or have I wearied you?
Lord answer.
Answer!
It is dark!

Have you ever felt the way that Quiost described: a desire to escape, even in death; fear of insanity; questioning the wisdom or justice of God; feeling alone or abandoned; experiencing God's silence as acute suffering; or pleading with God: "Where are you, Lord? Do you love me still? Or have I wearied you?" I have.

The Psalms help us to pray during our times of spiritual darkness. One psalm in particular, 88, is the ideal palliative for the depressed and bewildered believer. It begins in verse one with a profession of faith, "O Lord, God of my salvation," but finishes with this lament: "You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness" (v. 18). The psalm describes many of the phenomena in Quiost's poem: fear of death, sense of God's culpability, depression, weakness, abandonment by others, little prospect of relief, and worst of all: divine silence and inaction. Almost as a foretaste of hell itself, the absence of God (seemingly even His repudiation) is the most painful of all the writer's afflictions: "O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?" (v. 14).

Sometimes, and quite paradoxically, God seems to plot the destruction of our faith in order to build it up.

In Mark's gospel the disciples experienced their own, if quite brief, "dark night of the soul" and sense of abandonment:

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side" ...And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:35-41)

This episode captures many of the elements featured in Quiost's poem and Psalm 88. There is the seemingly causal intention to "go across to the other side," when disaster strikes ("a great windstorm arose"). Jesus seemed oblivious to their danger and anxiety, for He was "in the stern, asleep on a cushion." In a moment of despair, doubt, and fear the disciples implied that He was malfeasant: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

During these episodes, when our faith and hope are stretched past their limits, it is essential to acknowledge the implicit accusation in our laments: "Do you not care?" When God is silent or inactive, we sometimes feel that He has neglected or repudiated us, just like our human relationships, when there is a lack of communication or concern. But, Jesus Christ is not simply another finite and flawed human being.

Could it be that, during our storms, those painful periods when God is enigmatic, silent or seemingly unconcerned, that we ought to look for divine intervention in our lives, like the disciples in the boat? Perhaps we ought to expect God to rebuke the howling "wind" and turbulent "sea" in our lives and declare for us: "Peace! Be still!" Perhaps, despite appearances to the contrary, we should hope for the "great calm" after the storm and recognize our lack of

faith. Perhaps thereafter, we would confess with the disciples: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Or, if the storm lingers, remember what James wrote about Job:

Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (5:11)

Or even still, if the storm never passes, perhaps we will profess with Job: "Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face" (13:15).