

A Reflection on Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make his face to shine on us, that your way may be known upon earth, and your saving power among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. O let the nations rejoice and be glad, for you will judge the peoples righteously and govern the nations upon earth.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. Then shall the earth bring forth her increase, and God, our own God, will bless us. God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth shall fear him.

There is in London at the moment an exhibition of paintings by the great Spanish painter, Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664). He is well known for his paintings of religious subjects which have an unusual and enormously powerful sense of *spiritual intensity* to them; but also of *still life* paintings which are as elegant and delightful as any ever made. I have chosen three images here, which provide a kind of visual commentary on the Psalm which is given during our Liturgy this week, Psalm 67 – which speaks about the *blessing of God* upon us, a blessing which comes from God's *turning his gaze towards us* with love, and by *bringing forth the fruits of the earth* which are our delight and our sustenance. Put side by side, we can see that the spiritual intensity which makes the vision of God so precious and important to us, and the quiet delightfulness of the ordinary goods of the earth are both testimonies to the *same single thing*, which is *God's abiding love* for the whole of creation.



‘May God make his face shine upon us’, prays the Psalmist. In one of these paintings, Zurbarán shows the crucified Jesus looking down on a painter – see the palette in his hand with colours mixed ready to apply to a new canvas. This is often described as an image of St Luke, the first artist; but many people wonder whether this specific figure includes Zurbarán’s own *self-portrait*: this man’s features appear in a number of other paintings, and his realistic appearance reflects someone with all of the distinctive

quirks of a real individual, rather than a generic image of a 'saint'. Most striking of all is the *depth of engagement* between the two figures – the artist (who, in effect, stands in for you or me), and Jesus himself, looking back with a gaze of quiet goodwill – of what the Psalmist calls 'blessing'.



A second image shows this gaze upon us by God, this look of blessing, in a more oblique way. In the *Stations of the Cross* there is a moment when Veronica steps out of the crowd and wipes Jesus' face. In western art, this is reflected in a cloth onto which the face of Jesus has been transferred, often with all of the features showing very *clearly*. That helps us *interpret* the image, but it is totally unrealistic. Here, Zurbarán depicts something more like the discoloured and sweaty smudge which is more like the actual impression on the

cloth must have been like. So we have an image which is *completely realistic*, but which vividly describes God's continuing gaze upon us all, in and through the compassion of Jesus Christ in his Passion. It is a powerful spiritual idea – achieved not by clever symbolism, but by *absolute realism*.

It is this realism which makes the third image – of the fruits of the earth – so immensely powerful in itself. In the painting, they have an almost *sacramental* quality – reflecting the stillness and exquisiteness of the God who created them and who gives them to us in the first place. There is a kind of sacredness about the image, even though all it shows is the most ordinary and domestic thing possible, a few pieces of fruit on the table. Zurbarán anticipates that we shall have learnt from his more obviously religious paintings to regard *everything* with a kind of 'holy eye'. It is his way of showing that God does indeed continue to bless us, not least through the fruits of the earth (as the Psalmist affirms) – and that this ongoing blessing is part of the same thing as is depicted in the explicitly sacred images. May our own eyes learn to see exactly this: how God *hallows* us and the whole earth around us – until we learn to see God in and through all things, and always a source of *blessing*. Thanks be to God.

