

REFLECTION

Watches in the Night

by Guillermo de Carndonagh

One of the signs of the onset of male decrepitude is the tendency to awaken during the night. Whether it is the mundane call of nature or the just things that go bump in the night each nights rest is segmented. At first there is a tendency to get anxious or even angry at this interruption of long established patterns but with time and heeding the advice of the ancients these periods of wakefulness can become times of grace.

The ancient world divided the night into three watches or periods with the watch starting at midnight being given special significance as a time of prayer. In the second chapter of Lamentations which in Hebrew is an acrostic liturgical poem we read: "2:18 [Sade] Cry aloud to the Lord! O wall of daughter of Zion! Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night! Give yourself no rest your eyes no respite! 2:19 [Qoph] Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children who faint for hunger at the head of every street." A similar idea is expressed in Psalm 119 [118] which is also an acrostic poem: "(Psa 119:145-149 [Qoph]) With my whole heart I cry; answer me, O LORD! I will keep thy statutes. I cry to thee; save me, that I may observe thy testimonies. I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in thy words. My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may meditate upon thy promise. Hear my voice in thy steadfast love; O LORD, in thy justice preserve my life." The watches of the night are seen as a time to pour out your heart to the Lord, to bring your grief and cares before him and to offer him worship.

Our early Christian predecessors were a robust lot and continued this tradition. We read in the Apostolic Tradition: Text from Hippolytus, Apostolic Traditions c. 32 19-27 "About midnight, get out of your bed and wash and pray, Wash with clean water. If you have a wife, pray the psalms, alternating versus with her. If you have a wife but she is not yet a believer, go apart by yourself and pray alone, then come back to your place with her.....It is very important that we pray at least once each hour; for the ancients have handed this practice down to us and taught us this is how we are to keep watch....." While in our times awakening your wife to pray the psalms with you in the middle of the night might accelerate you advancing decrepitude; this quote does show that it is very much in the Christian tradition to pray during the watches of the night.

My own approach is to offer thanks and to pray for people whose concerns I know using ejaculations or just expressing them plainly to God, relaxing and drifting again into sleep as I pray. Trying like David to praise the Lord and meditate on him in the watches of the night. Psalm 63 [62] vs 5-6 "My soul is feasted as with marrow and fat, and my mouth praises thee with joyful lips, when I think of thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the watches of the night;"

All scripture quotes from the RSV , numbers in brackets are from LXX, Hebrew letter names refer to acrostic letter of item.