

Psalms and Liturgical Life, Psalms and Life

BY MARY REABURN NDS

The psalms were a very important element of Jesus' prayer life because they were foundational for the prayer and liturgy of his people, the Jewish people. The Evangelists quoted them often in writing the gospels. Paul also cites them in his Letters. There are 150 of them in the Book of Psalms. Thus they are both part of the Scriptures we inherited from Judaism and now an important part of our Christian Bible.

There are several different types of psalms: hymns, thanksgiving psalms, laments, wisdom psalms and Torah psalms. These different types, or genres, give expression to different experiences and emotions in the life of the community and its members. Many psalms are prayers, addressed to God with joy, thanks, pain, abandonment, hope and complaint.

Amongst the laments there are seven Penitential Psalms: 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129 and 142 (6, 32, 51, 102, 129, 143) and several cursing or imprecatory psalms, these psalms contain curses or prayers for the punishment of the psalmist's enemies: 7, 34, 54, 57, 58, 68, 78, 108, 136, and 138 (7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137, 139).

There are psalms which speak directly to God about God's lack of response to the troubles surrounding the people. These can be a little shocking for Christians, but upon reflection we can discover that they are an expression of a deep and honest relationship with God. Thus the laments, which at first may not appeal, are also an important means of deepening our relationship with God. In them we can tell God how

we really feel and then in truth and humility await God's response.

The hymns and thanksgiving psalms are a means of praising and thanking God for the goodness in life and to 'sing a new song'. These can give expression to our own praise and at times they serve as a reminder of just how many good things there are in our life. Always we can pray these psalms with others, both near and far.

You may be feeling very happy and then in liturgy you are presented with a lament concerned with enemies. This can be a reminder that many in our world are experiencing oppression, slavery or manipulation imposed on them by 'enemies'. Pray with and for them. In this way the psalms take us beyond ourselves even as they take us deep within the self.

You will notice in what I have listed above that often the numbers differ by one. This is because of a slightly different division within some psalms in the Hebrew and Greek. Catholics traditionally follow the Greek numbering found in the Latin Vulgate.

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Yet these ancient prayers and meditations are not always well known. Most Catholics first encounter the psalms as the Responsorial Psalm in the Liturgy of the Word within the Sunday Eucharist. The other important place of the psalms is in the Liturgy of the Hours. They have been part of our liturgical life from the time of Jesus and it is important to know that they can also enhance our private prayer life, as does all good liturgy.

It is as the Responsorial Psalm that many of us pray psalms on a regular basis. Its place in the midst of the readings, in the Liturgy of the Word, is very important. You are probably aware that on Sundays the First Reading and the Gospel are thematically related; the Second Reading provides an opportunity to reflect on the Letters, especially the Pauline Letters, in an ongoing way. The psalm is chosen in relation to the First Reading and the Gospel. Often it deepens and always it enhances these readings. When it is sung it is more likely to stay with us even when we leave the church, reminding us of the word of God and allowing it to continue to nourish us as we are sent out to live God's word. It is preferable for the whole congregation to sing at least the refrain; a cantor may sing the verses or a Reader proclaim them.

A less well-known liturgy is the Liturgy of the Hours or the Prayer of the Church. 'This is not exclusive possession of clergy or monks; it belongs to the whole Church' (*General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours* §270). This liturgy is desirous of providing a form of prayer which intersperses the day: morning, daytime, evening, night and readings. Many people find morning and evening prayer suits their rhythm of life. These prayers have some introductory segment and then three psalms, a reading, intercessions and prayer. One of the psalms is usually called a Canticle, which means, in this context, that it is a psalm which is from another book of the Bible; for example, the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) or the Canticle of the three young men

from the book of Daniel (Dan 3:52-90). In earlier times morning and evening prayer were said in the church by some members of the community who could gather together. Others said it in solidarity with the community but could not be physically present. Always this prayer is communal, even if said alone. It includes the whole Church and world in its intention and in its intercessory prayers. Since Vatican II there has been a reclaiming of this prayer by many people. I invite you to begin by praying morning and evening prayer yourself. Ideally it is prayed with others and in time you may invite others to pray it in the church or in your home, or even in the park. The rhythm of prayer gives shape to the day and more importantly gives glory to God and nourishment to us.

We rightly regard the psalms as prayer and at the same time they are also God's word, spoken to us in the Scripture. This has many implications, one of which is to remind us of the place of silence in the Liturgy of the Hours. There are many words in the prayer of the Church and we need to take time for some gentle silence whilst praying them. The moments of silence allow our hearts and minds to absorb what we are saying and for these words and images to settle into our being. Silence allows God's word to speak to our lives, and to nourish us. In any conversation it is not wise for one party to monopolise the whole conversation, for then it is neither dialogue nor prayer. When we pray the psalms as part of the liturgy we can be united with Jesus in his prayer and we are united with the whole Church in its prayer for itself and for the world. This is important for our community of faith. Prayer is communion with God, conversation, listening and speaking, pondering and allowing God to mold us as servants. The psalms offer us words when we cannot pray and nourishment when we are lost. They are both our words to God and God's word to us.

St Athanasius said a psalm 'is a mirror in which you contemplate

yourself and movements of your soul'. This beautiful insight encourages us to pray the psalms and to allow them to teach us about ourselves and to give expression to our deepest feelings, concerns and desires. Praying the psalms in the Liturgy of the Word and in the Prayer of the Church may be a little difficult in the beginning, but I promise you it will become a love affair that lasts your whole life long. ☩

HELPFUL WEBSITES

- **United States Catholic Bishops' Conference:**
<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgy-of-the-hours/>
- **Archdiocese of Brisbane, LabOra:**
<http://liturgybrisbane.net.au/labora/>
- **The Bible Project:**
<https://thebibleproject.com/resources> (scroll down to the psalms)

FURTHER READING

- Atherton, R. *Praying the prayer of the Church*. UK: Redemptorist Publications, 1998.
- Brown, WP. *Psalms*. IBT, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010.
- Brueggemann, W. *The message of the psalms*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984.
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- Magonet, J. *A Rabbi reads the psalms*. London: SCM, 1994.
- Merton, T. *Bread in the wilderness*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1953.
- Nowell, I. *Pleading, cursing, praising: conversing with God through the psalms*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013.
- Zenger, E. *A God of vengeance? Understanding the psalms of wrath*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

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SEE OVERLEAF FOR SOME SUGGESTED REFLECTIONS USING THE PSALMS

SUGGESTED REFLECTION

Read Psalm 64/65, which is the Responsorial Psalm for the 15th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A). Which verse speaks to you? Why?

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PSALM 64:/65

(R.) The seed that falls on good ground will yield a fruitful harvest.

1. You care for the earth, give it water,
you fill it with riches.
Your river in heaven brims over
to provide its grain. (R.)
2. And thus you provide for the earth;
you drench its furrows,
you level it, soften it with showers,
you bless its growth. (R.)
3. You crown the year with your goodness.
Abundance flows in your steps,
in the pastures of the wilderness it flows. (R.)
4. The hills are girded with joy,
the meadows covered with flocks,
the valleys are decked with wheat.
They shout for joy, yes, they sing. (R.)

SUGGESTED REFLECTION

Psalm 8 praises God and recalls how wonderful we are as humans. Do you accept that you are crowned with glory and honour? Why? Why not?

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PSALM 8

²O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
⁷all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

SUGGESTED REFLECTION

Psalm 104 is a longer psalm recalling each act of God in creation. How does this psalm speak to today's world where the environment is threatened in many places?

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PSALM 104

¹Bless the Lord, O my soul.
O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
⁴you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.

⁵You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.

⁶You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.

⁷At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

⁸They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.

