

THE PSALMS

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INTRODUCTION

The psalms have persisted throughout the centuries to be a major source of individual and communal prayer. When faith becomes alive in a Christian, it does not take very long for a searching of words and images to take place that focus, clarify and mediate the awakened faith. Note the comments of two divergent commentators of the psalms, a theologian and a poet:

Robert Bellarmine:

The excellence of the psalms stems from their themes, their form and their style. They constitute a compendium of the entire OT. All that Moses recounted in his time or taught in the Law, all that the other prophets have left in their prophecies and exhortations, David has brought forth in but a few words. And not in an ordinary style, but rather in poetry of immense variety, filled with sublime images, presented with such intensity that they lead their readers to love and to praise their God. I do not believe that one can sing anything more delicate or more powerful for the human soul.

Alphonse de Lamartine:

The divine poet has often touched the core of my being and ravished my thoughts. The psalms are the Queen of all lyrics. Never has the fibre of human beings resounded with cords so intimate, so penetrating or so serious; never have the thoughts of a poet been addressed so eloquently or cried out more poignantly. Never has the soul of another been laid out before people and before God in expressions so tender, so compassionate and so agonizing. All the inner movements of the human heart, even the most secret, have found their voice and their notes on the lips and the harp of this poet. Try to read Horace or Pindar after having read a psalm. I for one cannot.

It is not difficult to appreciate Bellarmine's generous presentation of the psalms. There is no significant feature of Israel's faith that has not made its way into the prayerful expressions of the community. To call it a theological compendium of the entire Hebrew Scriptures is not an exaggeration.

The psalms provide such words and images, verified through the centuries, that at once are a home for expressing our longings, our thirst and our relationship to God and at the same time they are a challenge to go beyond whatever we have experienced in faith and indeed a call to authenticity in living out our faith in life with our hearts and our minds.

In terms of our own praying the psalms today, I would want to locate three moments or ways in which the psalms call us to prayer:

- a) The psalms express through words, images and repetitions what we experience and long for. In this mode we feel at home with the psalms. The psalms provide a foyer for the thoughts of our mind and for the feelings within our heart. Whether they be feelings of praise and thanksgiving, or feelings of pain and suffering with a quest for understanding and solution. The human features described and expressed in the psalms make us feel at home in their images and utterances.
- b) The psalms also call us to authenticity by calling us to live and to pray what we already have become familiar with and know what we should do, what we desire to hold, what we desire to be like, what we desire to say and what we desire to hear.

In these modes we are still within the realm of the familiar. The psalms express what we feel and think; they intensify in our own imagination the images that express our thoughts and call us to authenticity.

– c) But there is much in the psalms that remains foreign to us. There may be experiences presented outside of the horizon of our own personal or communal experience. This is obviously the case where a young person encounters in the psalms the lived experiences of adults. There are elements and images expressed in these prayers that perhaps we would even want to disregard. There might be attitudes and positions presented as being untenable in certain situations that we would not hold as being true or consistent with the teaching of Christ. Obvious issues that come to mind are curses, violence, patriarchy, gender disparity. This foreign quality in a religious text that makes a claim on our personal commitment needs to be encountered and resolved. This is a challenge not particular to the psalms, but to all religious literature. Even this foreign aspect of the psalms has its place in prayer in that it challenges us to go beyond what we have experienced, to seek new answers, new horizons or in the least, to clarify our newly forged position regarding held values. The psalms challenge us to come to terms with the elements that seem foreign to us and that we would like to delimit or even extricate.

All in all, it is healthy to let the psalms touch us in all three ways. We do not approach the psalms merely to find ratification of our own positions which in fact could be narrow and restrictive, even self-serving. We let the psalms speak their new word to us. We let them call us to live the life we have decided to live, to cherish the values we have come to hold, to strengthen the attitudes we desire to foster. Finally we do need rest in our journey, rest that lets us savour and deepen the reality that we are presently living. On the one hand, at times we may find ourselves in a state of turbulence and homelessness. The language of the psalms may provide images and a dynamic of prayer that perhaps may not resolve our homelessness, but more importantly may provide a rootedness that enables us to forge a new world from within disorientation. On the other hand, we may find ourselves in a general state of tranquility and habitation. Here too the psalms may provide language that enables us to focus the fruits of habitation and success

One concrete and practical result of not being open to psalms that present attitudes and ideas that are less familiar to us is the choice of a limited number of psalms. We all have no doubt our favourite psalms that we repeatedly turn to. These psalms have inspired and continue to inspire us. But openness to God calls us to be on the look-out for further and newer revelation in our living situation. With regards to the psalms and to all of scripture in general, it is a sign of maturity to be open to the entire word of God. How often have we caught ourselves and others perhaps proving our positions with proof texts from scripture? I suggest that in the course of our reading and studying the psalms that we be open to the entire psalter in its many forms. This way we will find not only a home and a call to authenticity in the psalms, but also we may have the chance to discover a new word of God directed to us.

In studying the psalms then it is important, and it should be obvious, never to lose sight of the fact that psalms are prayers, individual prayers, communal prayers, prayers of lament, prayers of praise, prayers describing creation, prayers declaring God's greatness, prayers asking for God's justice and mercy. However we study the psalms, the end result, it is hoped will be an appreciation of the psalms as prayers, as a dialogue between ourselves and our creator, at times in the depth of our heart, at times in the collectivity, at times during moments of crisis, and at times of peace and strength.

There are two goals that I would like to highlight at the outset of this course. The first is to be familiar with the various methods of exegesis on the psalms so as to be able to make a fair judgement on commentaries that you will be reading. Each method has its strength and weakness, its horizon and limitations. To know at the outset the method of a particular exegete will aid tremendously in the future for assessing the viability of different sources for your own study. The second is for you to develop an approach to reading, studying and praying an individual psalm. This goal simply takes a step further the implication of the first goal. It implies the development of your own particular method and approach to studying a particular psalm either for homiletic purposes or other forms of study and presentations.