

"O Lord, you search me and you know me"

Looking at the origin of the Psalms, their purpose, and their various styles could be a fairly academic exercise. It is only when we approach the psalms as a **gift** to our prayer lives that they can begin to enrich our spirit, our soul-searching and discernment, and then point us towards deeper commitment to the Lord of the Word, and to more authentic worship in the community of his Church. As well as praying the psalms as an assembly, it is very fruitful to make them your own in private prayer. How to do that? Here's a way:

To pray and really meditate on a psalm is to "get inside the skin" of the person/people who said/wrote/chanted those words and to share in all that was going on inside them. In particular, it is to share their feelings, their memories and their hopes, their attitudes to God and people.

A possible framework for this is to:

1. Choose a Psalm from the Psalter.
2. Read the Psalm through completely, silently, at a pace where each word, or phrase has a chance to rest in your mind.
3. Pray the psalm slowly now, again silently. Note any initial observations that come to your mind.
4. Chart the Psalm's meaning for yourself now: Are there distinct sections in it? Are there distinct voices? Who is speaking? What kind of situation is it? What feelings are being expressed? What kind of language does it employ? What does this Psalm say about God? What does it say about humanity? Is there a flow to the psalm - e.g., from pain to despair, to searching, to confidence. Is there one overall message?
5. Explore your own life in the light of this inspired Word of God. Has there been a situation (or is there at present) in your own life, family, or church to which this Psalm has something to say?
6. Finally in your own way, give the Psalm back to the Lord in praise, trusting that he will crown its graces for you....you might want to finish with the *Glory be to the Father*

The Liturgy of the Hours

The purpose of the Liturgy of the Hours is "to sanctify the day and all human activity" (intro para.10). **Time** and **activity** are sanctified when we are consciously aware of the saving presence of Christ in us. In his book, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church*, Paul Bradshaw notes:

"There are good grounds for concluding that the primary purpose of the observance of fixed times for daily prayer in the early Christian Community was none other than the liturgical expression of the constant readiness for, and expectation of, the parousia [return of the Lord Jesus].....and the realisation that the new age was already begun was embodied in **thanks and praise** for what God has done: constant readiness for the Kingdom of God was embodied in regular **petition** for its final consummation, and participation in the apostolic mission of the world was embodied in **intercession** for the salvation of all mankind."

The Psalms are the largest element in the Liturgy of the Hours!

The daily cycle of the Liturgy of the Hours is:

Office of Readings: Psalm of Praise, Hymn, 3 psalms, 2 readings.

Morning & Evening Prayer: Invitation to pray/opening verse; a Hymn

The Psalmody

The psalms of **Morning Prayer** always feature – a morning psalm; an Old Testament canticle; a psalm of praise. The psalms of **Evening Prayer** feature two psalms followed by a New Testament canticle. These are selected to suit the evening mood and the response of a disciple looking back over the day, especially with the themes of thanksgiving and trust in God. **These psalms are hinged by antiphons.**

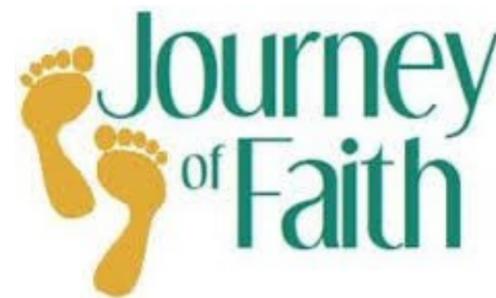
A Scripture Reading and response - A Gospel Canticle—Benedictus or Magnificat

The Lord's Prayer - Intercessions - Conclusion

In short, Morning Prayer is full of hope for the blessings and the good in the day to come. Evening Prayer is full of thanks for the good we were able to do through God's faithfulness to his promise.

Midday Prayer: Invitation to pray/opening verse; a Hymn; Psalms—one or two, depending on length, a short scripture reading and response of prayer; conclusion.

Night Prayer: or Compline—we shall pray it in order to see its structure!



Session V - 2016-2017

***"Praying the Psalms,
and finding the God who is revealed
in the Book of Psalms".***



Connecting to the previous session:

The last session made us aware of the **teaching documents** given by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council as well as the vision of the Church which that Council espoused.

One of the important teaching documents is called "**On divine revelation**" in Latin, *Dei Verbum*) and these quotes from it help us set the scene for this session:

14. In planning and preparing the salvation of the whole human race God..... chose for Himself a people to whom He would entrust His promises. First He entered into a covenant with Abraham and, through Moses, with the people of Israel. To this people He so manifested Himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know **by**

experience the ways of God with men. Then too, when God Himself spoke to them through the mouth of the prophets, Israel daily gained a deeper and clearer understanding of His ways and made them more widely known among the nations. The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain **permanently valuable**.

15. The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the Redeemer of all and of the messianic kingdom, to announce this coming by prophecy and to indicate its meaning through various types. The books of the Old Testament, in accordance with the state of mankind before the time of salvation established by Christ, reveal to all men the knowledge of God and of man and the ways in which God, just and merciful, deals with men. These books, though they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary, nevertheless show us true divine pedagogy. These same books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a **wonderful treasury of prayers**, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence.

16. God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New.

What might this session achieve?

My hope for this session is that God will say something to us about prayer, about **his revealed truth** as the basis of authentic prayer, how his consistent word through the Jewish and Christian traditions continues to call us to *fervent and passionate* prayer..... and that we will catch something of the power of the realities contained in the book we call the Psalter or the Psalms.

Catholics pray the psalms more than they know they do! There is at least one at every Mass - called *responsorial* - not because it has a response, but because **by its nature** a psalm is a response to the Word of God. Every psalm is "responsorial". **The psalms don't dictate Israel's history for the first time.** They are the both the response of people to what has happened in their history, and they are God's inspired presence placed in the hearts and on the lips of the people - as Saint Paul would later reflect -*when you don't know how to pray, the spirit himself plants words in you.*

Where does the Book of Psalms fit in to the Biblical narrative?

Israel understood her history as a **partnership with God in a historical drama**. In the time of the exodus, God created this people out of nothing and entered into a covenant relationship with them. **Living by faith** was a **response** to God's being with them and going with them through the wilderness and on toward the Promised Land. In the course of time the drama developed; and where the ideas and songs that we find in the book of Psalms begin to be developed is **during the time of the united monarchy** - the time of David and Solomon. The last era of the Judges left Israel in a vacuum as was like a ship without a rudder. The book of Judges says - *in those days, there was no king in Israel* - this is the world of twelve/eleven centuries before Christ. The story of David is told romantically in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

Saul was the first king to lead Israel, having been anointed with oil by Samuel; but we know what power can do (!) and Saul began to follow his own mind, and grew insensitive to the spirit of Yahweh— 1 Samuel:15 records the Lord's saying he *regrets having made Saul king*. Eventually David succeeds Saul and is anointed at Hebron. [Listen to the first reading next Sunday, *Solemnity of Christ the King*, for more!] **And David is a success story:** he accomplishes the task of uniting the land - the north and the south, Israel and Judah, he makes them one; and Solomon his son inherited that empire. Israelites would look back to the days of David as a *golden age*, and would dream of a future golden age, when a new David would come, - that period would be provide many symbols of inspiration for the messianic longing in the post exile time which many of the psalms reflect.

Psalm 89 sings of what it is to be **chosen:** 21-38
"I have found David my servant and with my holy oil anointed him... He shall say of me, "You are my father....." And I will make him my first born, highest of the kingdom of the earth. His posterity shall last forever, and his throne shall be like the sun before me."

Although he has largely been credited with writing the book of Psalms, David is more probably responsible for a handful of them, while **inspiring** many more. Started in David's time, the book of Psalms is not completed until around 400 BC - so we are talking 600 years before all 150 Psalms are collected as we have them now. What they celebrate is the activity of God, in the light of God raising up David to be king, and by opening up to Israel wider horizons than the people had ever seen. The Psalms and the Prophetic interpreters declared in songs and poetry and writings that God was active in the secular sphere of politics as well as in the temple, punctuating Israel's life-history with historical events which showed God's active presence.

The finest example of Israel conversations with God are found in the book of Psalms, the Psalter. If you look at any hymnbook in our churches you see texts and music from many different generations, from the psalms themselves to items written very recently; the book of Psalms itself is like this: **it unites the voices of many generations**, and its like a condensed account of the whole of the drama of the history of Israel with God from the time of David down to the last period of the Old Testament.

A hundred and fifty songs make up the Psalter - often called the *hymnal of the second temple*, because most of the psalms were created as a liturgical work, in the post exilic period for the Temple worship: even though some psalms pre-date the exile it seems that they are not written down in a collection until after the exile. The world view of the psalms is one which seeks to experience the divine presence in worship, in temple, sacrifice, and in deep interior conversion: **that's why they speak to our own Christian liturgy so poignantly;**

The actual title "**The Book of Psalms**" comes from the New Testament - in Luke 20: 42, and in Acts 1: 20. The early Christian community read the scriptures of Israel, and songs sung to stringed instruments were titled there "psalmoi", praise songs of adoration and thanksgiving, and of confession and petition, which formed Israel's response to God's active presence in their history: so whether the mood was joyful elation, or sorrow, confidence or fear, these songs were intended as anthems to God's glory: they bring you into the sanctuary into the realm of the holy.

When the exiles returned from Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem their first thought was to rebuild their temple, because the fundamental reality of Israel, through all the social changes and all the aspects of history was that they were to be a worshipping community; and the book of psalms lies at the very heart of the old testament. The faith expressed there is a communal faith; the faith of a people at worship, especially, at the many temple festivals. While lots of the psalms are composed by individuals who spoke to God out of their own life situation, even so, they are not just private meditation; **they have been adopted by the worshipping community for use especially in connection with liturgical acts**, sacrifices, processions, pilgrimages: when the words "I" and "my" are used for example in the well known 23rd Psalm *The Lord is my Shepherd*, we can think of the whole community joining to express its faith.

So much for all that history! what about now? How do the Psalms find their way into our tradition, and how is it that they colour and influence our whole liturgical experience so deeply? I think because they are a double edged sword - they express both sides of the **conversation of faith** - God's and ours - they bring the human condition honestly and without compromise, into God's presence, - from praise, to doubt, to despair, to anger, to grief, to hope; and yet they are also the voice of God, a Gospel voice cutting through the veneer of life in which we might think God to be absent, seeking to seduce and transform us by the greatness of God. The Psalms draw our entire life under the rule of God, so that in turn we can submit everything to God.

Understanding the sentiments behind the historical perspective

The scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann's work on the Psalms is helpful. In his studies he sees **three** particular categories of Psalms which he names "orientation", "disorientation" and "new orientation".

Psalms of orientation express confidence; and expressed confidence breeds deeper confidence; and they express serenity. In them, God is known to be **reliable and trustworthy**. These psalms praise God and thank him. But they also build community; they place those who sing them within a framework in which they can live out the life of faith they are singing of, and knowing they can do so makes them sing out in gratitude.

Psalm 8 declares - **How great is your name** and how mortal is man, yet you've made him little less than a god - the whole situation of God and man is placed there - that's the framework - once you know the framework, the parameters, you can get on with living.

Psalm 33 speaks of *Yahweh as Saviour* - you must praise him on the lyre and harp - Why? Because he is Creator "*he spoke and it happened*" and he moulds every heart, and he is our only hope. So, praise him.

Other orientation psalms go further and speak of creation being not only good, but containing in it the very structure, the dynamic of the will of God.

The long Psalm 119 speaks of God's law, God's word bringing true happiness and fulfilment, like creation itself articulating who God is and his intention for his people.

Psalms 131 and 133 speak of the joy of knowing all this - I have no lofty ambitions - enough for me to be childlike in your arms; how good it is to live to together in unity.

Psalms of disorientation provide another reflection on life that humans know from their own experience as well - that often in life there is incoherence, chaos, numbness, denial. These psalms speak honestly - they bring the whole gamut of human experience before God - so boldly they announce the plight of the human situation and the need for God's

transformation in it. They often begin with the situation of the person who is petitioning God in suffering, the need is expressed probably with tears and emotion.

Psalm 102 begins with the complaint of a sick man, in distress and pain:

"For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. My heart is smitten like grass, and withered; I forgot to eat my bread, Because of my loud groaning, my bones cleave to my flesh.

Another lament is Psalm 88 - here's a person who feels he has been separated from God's influence, a spiritual sickness.

For my soul, it is full of troubles, And my life draws nearer to Sheol. (Sheol = the pit, the grave, the place of utter inactivity.)

I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit.

I am a man, who has no strength, Like one forsaken among the dead, Like the slain that lie in the grave,

Like those you remember no more, cut off as they are from your hand.

The move of the lament/disorientation towards new orientation comes with the psalmist remembering God in his past mercies and focussing on them. [Recall that to remember is more than to recall, it is to experience the reality again].

In Psalm 7, having asked for refuge from the ones he calls "*my pursuers, from all who hound me, lest they tear me like a lion, psalm continues: God is the shield that protects me, He preserves upright hearts. God the righteous judge is slow to show his anger.*"

The famous **Psalm 30** which begins *Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord.....* progresses to - *but with you is found forgiveness, for this we revere you.* This remembering, is a like a **bridge** from despair to confidence, confidence that God will hear, and grant the prayer. Later in that psalm, towards its climax we sing - *and he will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.*

The person who prays **Psalm 7** about God the righteous judge, ends up with:

"I will give to the Lord the thanks due to his name, for his righteousness, and I will sing praise to the name of the Lord the most high".

From disorientation, from "the pit", "from the depths", God can bring the one who sings to him, to new orientation.

The psalms as we have them regularly give witness to the move from emptiness, despair, nothingness to newness, a new beginning, a fresh opportunity. The psalms of new orientation celebrate the wonderful power of God and his goodness to bring new life, to make grace emerge.

So the Psalms express the life of faith: in them you can rejoice, lament, give thanks, weep, express anger, or just praise God in general. Some are songs of pilgrimage, some of longing, some of weariness. The *halel* psalms of the Passover look back and praise God for what he has done; Psalm 121 (122) which we often sing is the "pilgrimage Psalm" sung by the pilgrims arriving at the gates of Jerusalem in obedience to the command of the Lord to gather in worship three times a year. The singer can scarcely contain his joy as he waits to join the procession in to the court: *we shall go up with joy the house of our God.* The splendour of the city is not just its great building. Jerusalem is the place of encounter. Here the people praise the Lord, and hear Gods; authoritative word to the; the very building speak of the presence of Yahweh.



Jerusalem
Stand Upon
The Heights