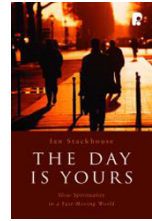


Praying the Psalms



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*Blessed is the man
Who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
or stand in the way of sinners,
or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And on his law he meditates day and night.* [1]

Having considered the rhythm of a day, it occurs to me that something needs to be said at this point – by way of an excursus – about the Psalms and their place in a rhythm of prayer. This book is peppered with psalms because for me the Psalms form the basis of my daily prayer, and have done so for many years: ‘Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice,’ says the Psalmist. [2] And for me, as for many others, this crying out in distress has more often than not been through the primal language of the Psalms themselves. We have other ways of praying, of course: the Lord’s prayer, praying in tongues, silent prayer, centring prayer, the Jesus prayer, Ignatian prayer. All of these are important and necessary. [3] I have written elsewhere about the importance of recovering the Lord’s prayer for Christian discipleship. But when it comes to daily prayer, the book of Psalms is invariably where a day begins for me, in the classical Benedictine five psalms as day, making a hundred and fifty psalms a month cycle. [4]

The monthly journey through the Psalms is an interesting one. Having prayed them for nearly ten years now there is definitely more of an order to them than first meets the eye. It is not a systematic theology; that much is clear. But neither are the Psalms completely random in their arrangement. Certain themes cluster in particular places; certain words recur again and again. The journey from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150 is *the* original odyssey: from the safety of a world where the righteous flourish and the wicked perish, [5] to a world where the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, [6] and all the way through to a world where, whatever our experience of life, however unjust life has been, all ends in praise. [7] To pray the Psalms over a month is to embrace the whole gamut of human experience. As Calvin put it in a preface to his commentary: the Psalms are ‘an anatomy of all parts of the soul’. [8]

Learning the Grammar of Faith

Coming from a tradition where extempore prayer was the norm, praying the Psalms in a daily cycle of five psalms a day was strange at first. It didn’t seem like prayer. In fact, in the early days of trying to pray the Psalms I would read a psalm out loud (a practice which I would encourage, incidentally), and then, since prayer and psalmody were, at that time, two quite different things in my mind, I would pray about something else other than the psalm. Having persisted off and on for ten years, however, and having eventually realised that simply muttering the words is actually a legitimate way of praying, the practice of praying the psalm is now part of my body clock, as they say – part of the bio-rhythm of my day. Waking up to whatever five psalms are before me is like waking up to greet old friends. I have been here before. I have heard these words already. Their familiarity is a comfort to my soul, and a relief from having to find the right words.

Not that prayer should never be extempore. Crying out from the heart is the very essence of prayer. In fact one of the spin-offs of praying the Psalms is that at any point the one praying can wander off with a word, or a sentence, and never actually finish the psalm. But always the psalm is there to tutor us in what to say, and how to say it. As Peterson says, with reference to the Psalms: 'Liturgy defends us against the commonest diseases of prayer: the tyranny of our emotions, the isolationism of our pride.' I would add to that: liturgy delivers us from the burden of intimacy which is so much a part of my tradition. Though I am all for intimacy, to set out to be intimate in prayer is like the way we set out to have a great worship experience. It ruins it. Intimacy happens best when we give ourselves unselfconsciously to the steps by which it may happen or it may not. As Peterson continues: 'Liturgy pulls us out of the tiresome business of looking after ourselves and into the exhilarating enterprise of seeing and participating in what God is doing.' [9]

We might balk at his approach. Surely prayer is about what I am feeling. True. But many times we don't know what we feel and we don't know what to pray. We need words, even as other times we need to pray with groans that words cannot express (I am one of those who think that when Paul talks about praying 'with groans that words cannot express' he is referring to the gift of tongues). And what the Psalms provide us with are words to answer God with. That we don't identify with the particular mood of the psalm for that day, as is often the case, is not a problem according to this tradition of praying. Prayer is not in the first instance about my feelings anyway. I may identify with it, I may not. It doesn't matter. The point of liturgy, as Heschel reportedly said to his congregation on one occasion, was not to express what they felt; rather it was to learn what the liturgy expressed.

In a strange and paradoxical way, this liturgical rhythm of prayer, far from suppressing the emotions, in fact liberates them. As Kathleen Norris remarks, following her year-long exposure to the Psalms in a Benedictine monastery: 'To your surprise you find that the Psalms do not deny your feelings, but allow you to reflect on them, right in front of God and everyone.' [10] The reason for this is simple. As the British Benedictine Sebastian Moore reminds us, 'God behaves in the Psalms in ways that he is not allowed to behave in systematic theology.' [11] Our emotions are allowed to run wild. For those of us reared in the language of sentimental niceness on the one hand, and theological correctness on the other, the Psalms tutor us in a language that is far more daring. Without betraying the core of Israel's faith, the Psalms say it straight. They say our anger, just as they say our thanks. They say our sin, just as they say our wonder. They say our doubts, just as they say our faith. What the Psalms provide us with is a way to be human even as they provide a way to be holy. The one implies the other.

It is no surprise to me, therefore, that people instinctively turn to the Psalms when they are suffering. How many times have I been aware as a pastor of how critical the Psalms have become for someone going through treatment for a cancer, another facing a bereavement, another off work with stress, still another waiting for an unfaithful spouse to return? Each one of them testifies to the relevance of these ancient words; for what the Psalms do is transfer us from the flatness, dishonesty and inadequacy of so much of our modern speech and into the ancient and extreme world of praise and lament, with all the ambiguity that living at the extreme implies.

For instance, sometimes the depression never lifts, as in Psalm 88. Elsewhere, especially towards the end of the psalter, it seems as if the praise is overdone. For someone going through hard times, those Hallelujah Psalms sound like the shrill voice of a TV evangelist. But always the Psalms insist on raw words and images – nothing trite. Through the Psalms our laments are dragged from despair into hope; likewise, they usher us into our praises by declaring our grief. They provide us with a grammar of faith and a way of living one day at a time. For a generation that is desperate for roots, praying the Psalms puts one in touch with the deep bedrock of the earth. It centres our prayers in the answers of the people of God.

When in 1978 Anatoly Sharansky was convicted on charges of treason and spying for the United States, ending up in a Siberian labour camp for nine years after sixteen months of incarceration, it is significant that he pleaded with the authorities not to strip him of his book of Psalms. [12] In truth, he was in the process of rediscovering his Jewish roots, hence the Psalms. But that is the point isn't it? Praying the Psalms puts us in the company of the ancient people of God, the Ancient of Days himself, who at his most critical hour gushed forth the words of a Psalm. It was in his blood. 'My God my God why have you forsaken me' was not Jesus proof-texting from the cross, but the heartfelt cry of a man steeped in the Psalms. [13] In fact, every time I get to that Psalm, on the fifth day of the month, I pause. It is like a station of the cross. To know that we are praying the same words of Jesus from the cross is to anchor our ordinary lives at the centre of all things: in the love of God.

All the Psalms, Christological or otherwise, have this same effect. Before the world gets its teeth into us, the Psalms do their own work of slowing us down, getting us to see 'heaven in ordinarie'. [14] Instead of bringing God into our world, the Psalms invite us into their world: a world of salvation, grace, trust, thanksgiving, lament, and praise. As Sharansky himself said to his friend Mendelevich during a snatch of a conversation in the prison: 'I have a Passover Haggadah. I'm reading it. It helps me to learn the language. I already know the Psalms that are found there. It strengthens my soul because I learn from the faith and heroism of King David. What a wonderful man. And he is held in this stinking prison!' [15]

When I pray the Psalms the whole company of saints is there with me: those who have gone before and those who are going now. Furthermore, even if I don't feel what the Psalmist is going through, you can bet that someone else in the community of faith is. Even if I wake up joyful, for a change, and can't hack why the Psalmist is so downcast – 'why are so you downcast, I my soul?' [16] – the simple act of praying the Psalm reminds me that I am part of a community in which at any one time there are people grieving even as I am rejoicing. Conversely, while I am grieving, there are others who are rejoicing. Praying the Psalms tutors us in this community awareness.

Sometimes when I am praying a psalm a face will appear; someone for whom this Psalm describes actual experience. Other times the words of the Psalm sound for all the world like the latest news bulletin from Kosovo, or the Congo, and so, in a strange way, the ancient liturgy helps me to be more up-to-date than I would otherwise be. Precisely because the world hasn't changed much, and human experience is awful a lot of the time, praying the Psalms, far from representing a retreat into private interiority, is an advance onto the concourse of life.

Bedside Prayers

It has been a common practice over the years to attach the book of Psalms to a pocket version of the New Testament. I guess the idea is that the Psalms are so universally popular and so commonly prayed that they are an essential companion to the gospel story. I have one of these versions myself and take it with me on most of my hospital visits. And there are no prizes for guessing which of the Psalms are most often read at the bedside. After years of doing this I can testify first-hand to the power of these ancient words. Reading Psalm 139 at the graveside of a person who died by suicide convinced me long ago that what the church needs in its public ministry, not to mention its public worship, is the gravitas of these ancient prayers: prayers where the words are weighty enough to hold us, cavernous enough for us to hide in.

In that sense they need no explanation. As C.S. Lewis noted in his *Reflections on the Psalms*: 'no historical readjustment is required. We are in the world we know.' [17] They simply need to be heard. 'Sing to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs,' says the apostle Paul, [18] precisely because this is what the Psalms were meant for. They both

tutor and guide us. Sung in the morning they set my bearings for the day to come; sung in the midst of a busy day, they slow us down, sung in the evening they the whole of the day into the light of God's presence.

Again, this is not the only way to pray. There are times when I haven't prayed the Psalms at all. But always the Psalms are there. Once prayed, the Psalms become part of our muttering life. We carry them round with us, in the pockets of our unconscious. So even when my mind has gone, and even when I cannot even remember my name, at the very deepest place of my identity the Psalms keep me rooted: in God, in place and in people.

In the film *The Elephant Man*, [19] set in the late nineteenth century, and cleverly filmed in black and white for effect, we see this power of psalmody to do this protective work wonderfully illustrated in the person of John Merrick, a circus freak taken into medical care by Treves, a doctor played by Anthony Hopkins. Though his colleagues are sceptical, Treves is convinced that the monstrous figure before him is indeed a human being, though goodness knows what trauma he has been through. He never says a word. He just stares blankly into space, thus confirming to all who examine him he is nothing more than an imbecile. If only Treves can get him to speak. Then, just as he is about to give up and consign his philanthropic project to the dust-heap, the Elephant Man speaks. What he utters in that first sentence explains why he has survived all those years. In the most polite English accent, and quoting from the King James, of course, he calls forth from deep within him the word that has kept him:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. [20]

Notes

- [1] Psalm 1.
- [2] Psalm 55:17.
- [3] See R. Foster, *Prayer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992).
- [4] For a good introduction to Benedictine spirituality see E. de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St Benedict* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1999).
- [5] Psalm 1.
- [6] Psalm 73.
- [7] Psalm 150. For an introduction and way into praying the Psalms see E.H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), and W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984). With typical originality and audacity Brueggemann classifies the Psalms along the lines of Psalms of Orientation, Psalms of Disorientation, Psalms of Reorientation. The Psalms account for both the wintry and the sunny seasons of our life.
- [8] J. Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 1, xxxvii.
- [9] E.H. Peterson, *Answering God*, 91.
- [10] Norris, *The Cloister Walk*, 92.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 91.
- [12] M. Gilbert, *Sharansky: Hero of our Time* (London: Penguin, 1987), 348-351.
- [13] Psalm 22:1.
- [14] Herbert, 'Prayer' (I), *Selected Poems*, 15.
- [15] Gilbert, *Sharansky*, 333.
- [16] Psalm 42:5.
- [17] Quoted in *The Psalms with commentary by Kathleen Norris* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), ix.
- [18] Colossians 3:16.
- [19] *The Elephant Man*, produced by Jonathan Sanger, directed by David Lynch, Warner Brothers, 1980.

[20] Psalm 23.

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