

The Psalms in Christian Devotion

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Psalm 89:5-15 Psalm 2 Psalms Christian Devotion Ser.doc
Sermon by Julian Templeton preached at United Evening Worship

This evening I will explore why Psalms occupy a central position in Christian worship and devotion. Have you noticed that publishers continue to publish the New Testament and Psalms in one volume? We are not offered the NT with Deuteronomy or the NT with 1 Chronicles. Why? One reason may be because the Book of Psalms is the most often-quoted OT book by New Testament writers.

For example, in the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem the crowds cry out,

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” a quotation from Psalm 118:26, and this same quotation often features in Christian worship as part of the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*.

In the Gospels according to Matthew and Mark, the last words Jesus says before dying on the cross are a quotation in Aramaic from Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”. This same Psalm is central to the Church's worship for Good Friday.

On Ash Wednesday (in this coming week), many Christians will hear or sing or recite Psalm 51, a classic statement of repentance,

“God, be gracious to me in your faithful, love;
in the fullness of your mercy blot out my misdeeds.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.” (51:1-2)

Another quotation from that same Psalm begins the Anglican Book of Common Prayer services of Morning and Evening Prayer

“O Lord, open thou our lips
and our mouth shall shew forth thy praise.” (51:15).

And central to Anglican Morning Prayer is the recitation or singing of the *Venite*, Psalm 95,

“O come, let us sing unto the Lord

Let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.”

Probably the most well known and loved of all the Psalms is the 23rd, which many know in the metrical version sung to the tune ‘Crimond’:

“The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want:
he makes me down to lie
in pastures green; he leadeth me
the quiet waters by.”

After the 23rd, the next most popular metrical version is probably Psalm 100 set to the Genevan tune ‘Old Hundredth’: “All people that on earth do dwell”. Then there are the paraphrases of the Psalms that have enduring appeal:

“O worship the King” a paraphrase of Psalm 104 by Robert Grant;
“Immortal, invisible, God only wise” inspired by verses from Psalm 36 by Walter Chalmers Smith;
and “O God, our help in ages past” based on Psalm 90 by Isaac Watts.

These psalm-inspired hymns have been hugely influential in the development of hymnody. Hymnody, in the history of the Reformed Churches, was a later development. Most of the Reformed Churches, including the Church of England, for the first 250 years of their existence would sing or chant only the Psalms. And it is this period from which West Gallery Choirs draw their main repertoire. The one exception to this was Tate and Brady's paraphrase of the nativity story, ‘While shepherds watched their flocks by night’ of which there is reputed to be over 100 different musical settings. The Congregational Minister, Isaac Watts, was a pivotal figure in the enlargement of the English-speaking churches' sung repertoire to include non-psalm based hymns. Yet Watts' own journey to hymnody was via his publishing of a revised version of the Psalms, stating that his grand design was “to teach my author to speak like a Christian.” Some have since quibbled with his ‘Christianising’ of the Psalms, yet Christological interpretations of the Psalms have been engaged in from the very beginning of Christianity, notably in the New Testament itself.

What is it, then, about the Psalms that accounts for their enduring appeal for Christian devotion?

I think the root of their appeal lies in two factors:

1. Their poetry
2. Their emotional honesty and range

1. The psalms are Hebrew poetry

As poetry, they make use of metaphor, simile and analogy. In poetry the poet often comes at her or his subject from an oblique angle, requiring from the reader an imaginative leap and effort to understand what is being communicated. In prose something may be stated plainly; but in poetry something is stated and then qualified and contrasted. One of the most common poetic devices engaged in by the psalmists is *Parallelism*. This is where one short statement is balanced in some way by another short statement.

The second statement can reinforce the first by way of reiteration in slightly different words, for example:

“I shall bless the Lord at all times;
his praise will be ever on my lips” (34:1)

The second statement can act as a contrast to the first, for example:

“The Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked is doomed.” (1:6)

Or the second statement can develop, or enlarge on, the meaning of the first, for example:

“Why do the nations conspire
and the people’s plot *in vain*?” (2:1)

The psalmists’ use of analogy is often illuminating, for example, where can one find a more concise but effective expression human longing for God than the beginning of Psalm 42?

As the deer longs for running streams,
so I long for you, my God.
I thirst for God, for the living God. (42:1-2a)

This analogy drawn from the observation of the natural world expresses wonderfully the human longing for God’s presence.

The imagery in Psalm 23, already mentioned, works on a similar principle.

2. The Psalms have an intense emotional honesty and range

Saint Athanasius, Fourth Century Bishop of Alexandria said that the Psalms are like a mirror. He claimed that within the Psalms:

“...are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul.” In the Psalms “...you learn about yourself. You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, ups and downs, its failures and recoveries.” (p. 103, *Letter to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms*)

Athanasius, exiled from Alexandria five times due to violent opposition against him, knew better than most the ups and downs and the failures and recoveries of life.

We can sometimes give the impression in the Church that the prayers we pray and the hymns we sing to God must be restrained and polite. The Psalms serve as a challenge to this view since many of them express grief quite openly:

“I am wearied with my moaning;
all night long my pillow is wet with tears,
I drench my bed with weeping.” (6:6)

Other psalms are very honest in their expression of a sense of abandonment by God:

“Why stand far off, Lord?
Why hide away in times of trouble?” (10:1)

“I shall say to God, my Rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me?’
Why must I go like a mourner
because my foes oppress me?” (42:9)

Others express their anger:

“Rouse your, Lord; why do you sleep?
Awake! Do not reject us for ever. (44:23)

Yet the psychological stages that the psalmists go through are often instructive. There are many psalms of lament or complaint, but in almost all cases they move from lament to praise:

“My enemies taunt me the whole day long;
made with rage, they conspire against me.
I have eaten ashes for bread
and mingled tears with my drink.
In furious anger you have taken me up only fling me aside.
My days decline like shadows lengthening;
I wither away like grass.
But you, Lord are enthroned for ever;
your fame will endure to all generations.
You will arise and have mercy on Zion.” (102:8-13)

We hear in this psalm a searing honesty and reality about how the writer feels about his or her situation. Here is no ‘power of positive thinking’ that flies in the face of reality. However, the writer does not wallow in self-pity but directs his situation to God, affirming God’s sovereign rule over all, and expressing hope in God’s power to help. The Psalms, therefore, can enlarge our emotional range in prayer and praise. Not only this, but the psalms can also enlarge our vision of what constitutes the purview or jurisdiction of God. It has become a truism that faith is a *private* matter, and that religion and politics should not mix, and by and large this perception seems to suit both Christians and their political leaders. However, the writer of Psalm 2 does not recognise such a separation but dares to consider political life theologically:

“Why are the nations in turmoil?
Why do the peoples hatch their futile plots?
King of the earth stand ready,
and princes conspire together against the Lord
...He who sits enthroned in the heaven laughs,
the Lord derides them.’ (2:1-2, 4)

While this assessment has, so far, been a positive one about the value of the psalms in our devotion, we should also acknowledge that in the psalms, as with other parts of Scripture, there are expressions with which we may strongly disagree or even find abhorrent. For many

Christians, the sections of the psalms where the psalmist expresses a fierce desire for vengeance causes the greatest difficulty. Psalm 139 is the most exquisite and majestic psalm expressing the complete and intimate knowledge and care that God has for us; yet, abruptly, the psalmist in verse 19 writes:

“If only, God, you would slay the wicked.
...How I hate those that hate you, Lord,
I loathe those who defy you;
I hate them with an undying hatred” (139:19, 21-22)

Such vehement hatred probably strikes the average churchgoer as unchristian and most definitely as not nice! Indeed the *Revised Common Lectionary* that many of our churches follow Sunday by Sunday often excludes these difficult sections. Yet it was in reading CS Lewis’s (*Reflections on the Psalms*) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s (*Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*) writing on the Psalms that caused me to reappraise the value of these expressions of vengeance. They advise that we should still pray these passages, if only as an act of solidarity with those who feel very much aggrieved and vengeful and hateful and angry—not as an approval of their attitude—but as an occasion of empathy. The psalms of vengeance give us the opportunity, imaginatively and empathetically, to enter into the experience of those denied justice, treated shamefully, oppressed or incensed—sometimes this could be you and me—and having done this we are in a better position to intercede for them and help them. Bonhoeffer goes further and says that these vengeful sections serve as a reminder of our Christian belief that Christ has, in his life, and supremely on the Cross, taken upon himself our grief, vengeance, hate and anger in order to transform it.

Because the Psalms are so deeply embedded in our Christian worship, because of the Psalms’ poetry and emotional honesty and range, they will and they should occupy a central place in Christian devotion, since they help us in our Christian duty: to give glory and thanks and praise to God.

Amen