

WHAT HAVE THE PSALMS DONE FOR US?

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What on earth are we to do with the 58th Psalm? This question may not have occurred to you before, and even if it had it would be unlikely to compare in urgency with, say, getting the children to school or coping with stress at work. In any case, it's quite likely that this particular psalm is not well known to you. In the Book of Common Prayer it is included in the psalms for the 11th morning, and so will rarely be sung by choirs. It never appears in the Roman Catholic Divine Office or the Church of England's Common Worship lectionary, so will hardly ever be prayed by clergy or others who use these; and in several standard prayer or office books (such as the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, the 1980 Alternative Service Book, or the Franciscan 2010 Daily Office SSF) it is the only psalm to have little square brackets around the whole of it – a kind of spiritual health warning.

A brief perusal of the psalm may explain its lack of use in worship. The sentiments are ferocious, the imagery violent; and one verse is particularly shocking:

The righteous will be glad when they see
God's vengeance;
they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.
(Common Worship Psalter)

Yet to omit this psalm, or others like it, from private and public prayer is far more spiritually damaging than to include it. Read the psalm again, and then consider: what experience might have given rise to it? The likeliest answer (we shall never know for certain) is some terrible form of abuse – physical, sexual or emotional, or all three. And that abuse has damaged the victim or victims – as it might have damaged me or you. They are angry, even bitter, longing for justice. But notice something vital: the victims are not themselves taking, or seeking to take, revenge. In the verse quoted above, they look forward to *God* doing that. Instead, they

take the full horror of what has happened to them, including the effect it has had on them, *and turn it into prayer*. They would love to see God destroying their abusers, and vindicating them. But, in the final analysis, they are leaving that to God.

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This is the way the psalms work. They take the full gamut of human and creaturely experience, from extreme abuse to the deepest joy, and articulate it all in a living relationship with God. The psalms weren't written by pre-Christian savages, but by the people of ancient Israel, who believed that God had made a covenant of love with them – a covenant which made them feel safe in bringing all of their lives, from their most intimate hopes to their bitterest questions, and sharing it with God. Children who believe their parents love them unconditionally react in the same way: they feel safe in sharing everything, including their fears and anger and questions. If they don't feel safe in doing this, it's because they aren't sure of their parents' love – in which case they will only share what they think their parents want to hear. So with us: to pray only in the language of collects or formal intercessions is to keep God at a distance from what really goes on in our lives. When we do that, the God we are worshipping may come across as detached, uninvolved, even boring. The language of too many official prayers is unlikely to convince any outsider that this God, or this God's followers, are at all concerned with what happens in the real world. The language of the psalms makes this God credible, and this God's followers credible too.

This is not just a matter of content, but of process. Look at most of the psalms, including the 58th, and you will see how prayer (talking to God) and testimony, or theology (talking about God) are seamlessly interwoven. The psalmist simply takes for granted the fact that God is intimately present in every aspect of life, and so feels free both to talk to God, listen to God (sometimes even to quote what he or she imagines God saying), and talk to others about God. Furthermore, the psalmist has no difficulty in holding together the private with the public, the individual with the corporate. The exquisitely beautiful 131st Psalm consists of just four verses: the first three are a deeply

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personal and intimate prayer, probably of a young mother, rooted in a profound yet childlike experience of trust (‘I have quieted and stilled my soul, like a weaned child on its mother’s breast’). The last verse (‘O Israel, trust in the Lord ...’) is not prayer, but evangelism; not private, but public; not experience, but aspiration: as if to say, if I can trust this God in the very depths of my being – and I believe I can – then, O fellow-travellers, so can you. The psalms enthrone *this* God as king, and thus implicitly subvert all who abuse power, thereby betraying the trust of those they lead: ‘put not your trust in princes, nor in any human power’ (Psalm 146.2). To pray them is to challenge all tempted to put themselves in God’s place, from school bullies to corrupt politicians, from perpetrators of abuse to greedy financiers.

How should we use them? Earlier generations would have learned some or all of them by heart, and thereby had them close at hand for use whenever and wherever they were needed. Medieval Christians developed a fourfold method of praying with them, which we can still use, either individually or (better still) in a group. After reading a psalm, ask yourself, first: what experience might have given rise to this? Secondly, what does it mean to pray this psalm ‘in Christ’, as a Christian? Are there particular people, within the universal Body of Christ (or outside it) who might be going through the kind of experience this psalm evokes, and for whom, in Christ, we could pray it now?

Thirdly, what is this psalm saying to me now? Is there some particular action it is inviting me to take? Finally, what kind of future does this psalm dream of? As I pray it, what does God most want me to hope for, and to give thanks for in anticipation?

A final point needs making. The psalms are above all the prayers of the whole people of God, not just of individuals. As such they were intended to be sung, even though the original settings have long been lost. They are suffused with references to music and song: the last of them (Psalm 150) suggests the existence and use of a veritable orchestra. From the simplest chant to the grandest of accompaniments, music gives wing to the psalms’ passionate, heartfelt prayer. The psalms themselves turn the word of God into music: ‘your statutes have been like songs to me, in the house of my pilgrimage’ (Psalm 119.54). And, commenting on a text from Psalm 33, St Augustine wrote: ‘Sing to him in jubilation. This is what acceptable singing to God means: to sing jubilantly. But what is that? It is to grasp the fact that what is sung in the heart cannot be articulated in words. Think of people who sing at harvest time, or in the vineyard, or at any work that goes with a swing. They begin by carolling their joy in words, but after a while they seem to be so full of gladness that they find words no longer adequate to express it ...’ What the psalms have done for us is to show us how to bring the whole created order, in all its beauty and sorrow, into our worship. When we sing them, we make all the world’s cries, of joy and suffering, our own.

NUMBERING THE PSALMS

There are two systems of psalm numbering, the Hebrew (or Masoretic) and the Greek (or Septuagint or Vulgate). The differences result from different ways of dividing some of the psalms, for example whether psalm 9 is a single psalm, or divided into two (numbered 9 and 10). CMQ follows the Hebrew numbering which is the one most commonly found, and used by Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists and Baptists and also most recent Roman Catholic translations of the Bible; official Catholic liturgical texts and Orthodox usage however follow the Greek numbering.

Hebrew	Greek
1–8	1–8
9–10	9
11–113	10–112
114–115	113
116	114–115
117–146	116–145
147	146–147
148–150	148–150