

Monastic Scribe LVII: September 1, 2023

JUST LIKE JESUS

Do you ever pray using the Psalms? I am not sure how many Catholics do this as it goes along with really knowing the Bible, especially the Hebrew Scriptures. Praying the Psalms gets one into the mentality of the Bible just as knowing the Bible helps us to appreciate the Psalms.

Apart from the Mass many Catholics do not know the depth and treasury of the Catholic tradition. We have been raised in a prayer life based on devotions and individual intercessions. We have similarly been raised in the Baltimore Catechism which gave brief rational answers but not the rich understanding of the two thousand year Christian tradition.

Since Mass has been in English we have become accustomed to hearing a responsorial psalm at Mass and that has opened new avenues of prayer. We have also become familiar with such psalms as Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd...." at funerals and other occasions. But the Psalter is a school of prayer. It teaches us many ways to pray and broadens our approaches to God.

There are many forms of psalm prayers – praise, thanksgiving, wisdom, penitential, nature centered, historical, trust and confidence, and longing for God. One particular form of psalm prayer is unknown to many and that is the lament. In lament psalms we just pour forth our broken hearts without penance or blame. I shall never forget our pilgrim group praying Psalm 88 in Jerusalem. It has these verses, "Lord, I call for help by day; I cry at night before you... I have reached the end of my strength, like one alone among the dead, like those you remember no more, cut off from your hand." And the psalm ends with these sad words, "Friend and neighbor you have taken away; my one companion is darkness." We prayed that psalm in the dark, under belly of a church that supposedly sits on the dungeon where Jesus was held captive the night before he was crucified. I cannot pray that psalm now without thinking of Jesus about to die and, likewise, I pray in union with prisoners on death's row, soldiers on a battlefield, or those in many other places and times of impasse in life. Another psalm of lament is Psalm 22 which Jesus prayed on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Other lament psalms: 12, 35, 40, 60, 69). Don't we feel that way sometimes?

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Some verses of psalms become short prayers to be repeated during the day. One of my favorites is from Psalm 51 which was King David's prayer of penance after his sins of adultery and murder. I pray, "A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence nor deprive me of your holy spirit." I know, in my heart of hearts, that my heart is divided. It is not pure. Only God can make me whole. The psalm, as a whole, expresses penance, hope and God's mercy. (Other penitential psalms are 6, 32 38).

The psalter is not all doom and gloom. The book ends with three triumphant psalms – Cosmic Praise (148); Praise to the God of victories (149) and the slam-dunk Praise to the Lord (150) which ends in these words, "Sing praise with sound of trumpet, Sing praise with lyre and harp. Sing praise with timbrel and dance, Sing praise with strings and pipes. Sing praise with resounding cymbals, Sing praise with clashing of cymbals, Let everything that lives and that breathes give praise to the Lord. Alleluia!" (150). Yes, Alleluia! (Other praise psalms are 8, 100, 145).

It may take time and repetition to become accustomed to the psalms. They are poetry. As such they are best prayed out loud or even sung. They often express feelings that are not ours or even are foreign to us. But this reminds us to pray in the name of others – Africans, Ukrainians, Chinese, Latin Americans. The psalms call us to be one with the whole Christ in all His members. They stretch us to think and feel with others and not just ourselves.

In summary, this is why I recommend the psalms:

- 1.) They widen our understanding and practice of how to pray, embracing many types of feelings and approaches to God.
- 2.) They stimulate our imagination and help us get past the literalistic understanding of scripture and church, thus helping us also to better appreciate all the scriptures.
- 3) They help us to realize how one we are with all people, especially with those who suffer.
- 4.) They place us in the very mind of Christ who prayed the psalms, and likewise with Christians and Jews who have prayed these psalms for hundreds of years.

In the sixth century Saint Benedict advised us to pray Psalms 4, 91, and 134 every night at Compline. We continue this practice along with communities and individuals throughout the world.

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Are you still skeptical and intimidated? Here is a suggestion. Get a copy of “This Day,” a monthly prayer book (available, at our Bookstore and elsewhere). It has a very short morning and evening prayer for every day, including a psalm or part of a psalm. In addition, it has the readings from daily Mass which we can read and pray with Christians throughout the world.

Know that I include being one with all you readers as I pray the psalms each day. Let us pray for each other and for all those in need and those who celebrate something this day. I am your prayer friend at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.