

Reflections on the Psalms for the Bible Journal by Brian Roberts

John Calvin said that the Psalms are an ‘anatomy of the soul’. He found the whole faith of the whole person articulated in these poems. They have been treasured by Jews and Christians over the centuries. The Psalter in the translation made by Myles Coverdale in the sixteenth century, and incorporated in the Book of Common Prayer, has entered the DNA of the English speaking Christian world. The recent translations into English, as in *Common Worship* and modern translations of the Bible, make the Psalms accessible to all of us.

Generation after generation, faithful women and men have turned to the Psalms in a conversation with God about things that matter most. What is it that we find most valuable in the Psalms? In them we find the entire gamut of our speech to God, from profound praise to the utterance of unspeakable anger and doubt. And then, the Psalms are not only addressed *to* God. They are a voice *of* the gospel, God’s good word addressed to God’s faithful people. In the Psalms God meets the community of the faithful in our depth of need and in our height of celebration. The Psalms draw our entire life with all its troubles into God’s presence.

Each part of the Bible makes its own distinctive contribution to the enrichment of the spirit. The Psalms are words from worship, and mostly words of worship. Their extraordinary importance is that for thousands of years they have been able to lead people into the heart of religion, the actual practice of communion with God. Even in those times we call *the dark night of the soul* the Psalms enable us to speak and to listen, to be at home with God.

I have deliberately said *we* and *us* because sometimes the Psalms are the voice of the individual, sometimes the voice of a whole people. When we read Psalm 137 ‘By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,’ we drink in the grief and anger of a defeated people in exile, and their desire for revenge, a universal cry heard from people like us over all time, including our present day. And when we read Psalm 88 we hear the cry of a believer whose life has gone awry, who desperately seeks contact with God, but who is unable to evoke a response from God.

‘O Lord, God of my salvation,
when at night, I cry out in your presence,
let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of troubles;’

This is indeed the ‘dark night of the soul’, when we are troubled and fear we must stay in the darkness of abandonment, utterly alone. At the end the psalmist is shunned and in darkness. The last word in Psalm 88 *is* darkness. The last theological word here *is* darkness. Nothing works. Nothing is changed. Nothing is resolved. All things deny life, and worst of all is the shunning, and the blame is fixed on God.

What is a Psalm like this doing in the Bible? Well, perhaps because life can be like that, and these poems intend to speak of all of life, not just the good parts. Here faith faces life as it sometimes is. But the psalmist has not given up on God. She or he is still addressing God. We have to deal with God in his silence as much as when he answers. This Psalm works against every theology of glory, against every theology that imagines that things can be resolved, that there are always answers, and that we go from strength to strength. Above all, Psalm 88 shows us what the cross is about: faithfulness in scenes of complete abandonment.

Now when the gospel writers were striving to express the experience of the living Christ they drew upon the psalms extensively, most famously Psalm 22 with its opening cry of dereliction ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ repeated by Christ on the cross. But unlike Psalm 88, Psalm 22 does not in the end leave us with a sense of abandonment. The Psalm falls into two parts. A lament from verse 1 to 21, and then praise from verse 22 to 31. In the lament there is the royal figure, God’s chosen one, the Messiah. Like the Man of Sorrows in Isaiah 53, the Messiah of Psalm 22 is deprived for a while of his outward glory, and he suffers. The Psalm expresses terrible suffering which has its sharpest point in the sense of being forsaken by the God who made promises and declared special love, and was trusted. God seems so far away, far from the agony, far from the cry for help. No answer is heard from him. Yet all that is expressed as prayer. In the very last word of the lament section there enters a tone of hope, ‘From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.’

The second scene of Psalm 22 is full of praise. The Lord has kept faith. He has answered the prayer of the sufferer. He did not hide his face.

For the evangelists of the New Testament, Psalm 22 appears to prophesy the way taken by Jesus, especially the mockery of the suffering Messiah, the Son and King. Christians have felt that the psalmist was led to the mystery of ultimate sorrow and salvation which corresponds with Christ’s passion and resurrection. Through the words of this great Psalm, we as worshippers may voice the tragedy of forsakenness and death, and see the light beyond.

That light is fully revealed in a Christian reading of the greatest of the messianic Psalms, Psalm 23 ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.’ Perhaps the most loved by Christians of all the Psalms, but first let’s try to understand it when first composed.

Through the images of the good shepherd and bountiful host the psalmist testifies to the Lord as his King. The shepherd was a much used image for the duties of kingship in the ancient near East and in Israel, symbolised in sceptre, ‘rod’, and crook. Psalm 23 is probably the song of King David. As the representative of his people, and as sharing the royal task with God, David dwells on the thought of his relation to God as his supreme sovereign and shepherd. To him David owes his anointing and the covenant of protection against foes (v.5); and to God he returns to dwell on the sacred hill of Zion in Jerusalem.

The form of Psalm 23 is unique in consisting only of testimony and trust – testimony about the Lord, and trusting words to him. There is no prayer, no lament, no general praise. We have here an intimate reflection on the grace of the heavenly king to his chosen one. David ponders the restoration of his soul, the protection from death, the gifts of abundant and unending life, the meal in God’s presence.

All this has great meaning for us as well, but for us as Christians something even deeper is being expressed. The tender and faithful relationship of God with his Messiah becomes a fountain of grace and blessing for all. Psalm 23 evokes the passion and the new life of Jesus, and the gifts of the Lord’s table. We as pilgrims on the way come to know Christ through the true wonders of the pastures of young growth, the still waters, the grace of communion, the angels of love, the comforter in the valley of the shadow of death, and the great homecoming. I have drunk into my soul the Twenty Third Psalm as a song of God’s sustaining love for us in Christ; perhaps you have as well. *Brian*