

Praying the Psalms

The psalms have been the foundation of so much prayer in the Christian Church over many centuries. The earliest monks would go into their cells in the desert armed only with a psalter. In the 8th century Ireland, before a man could be ordained, he had to learn the whole psalter (at least, that was the rule, if not the reality). Benedict spends chapters of his short Rule setting out what psalms to use when. This tradition is familiar to us in Mattins and Choral Evensong, where the chanting of the psalms quite specifically became a thing for all the people to do, and not the clergy or choir alone.

It is this habit – that all Christians can benefit from being familiar with the psalms – that I want to encourage. Yes, the Book of Psalms may not cover every human situation – but being familiar with the psalms prepares us well for novel occasions. Perhaps it is because we may be unsure of how to use the psalms that keeps us back from reading them. I find most of the psalms are a manageable length; it's much easier to say to myself "I'll sit and read one psalm thorough slowly twice and then stop", rather than deciding on what particular passage to read from the Gospels, say.

But what do we do with the psalm as we read it? Here are some suggestions:

- 1 A psalm can speak to you. Read Psalm 46 which begins in such a comforting way: "God is our refuge and strength". We need not fear though the earth is shaken. Moreover, there is a river of flowing water provided by God for us – that image stirs memories of plenty, beauty, contentment. And then 46.10 – "Be still and know that I am God". Of course, you might hear that as an encouragement to settle, to stop being anxious just for 5 minutes. If so, do it – now! Perhaps you should just stop now – don't even read on to the next verse until you have been still for 5 minutes. Or, you could hear that as a kindly divine reprimand; the translation could be 'Shut up, sit down, stop talking – I'm in charge'. Either way, you can read a psalm in the hope that it will speak to you.
- 2 A psalm can speak for you. Sometimes when I am faced with a ghastly pastoral situation I find myself wanting to quote a psalm. This is NOT to tell someone in trouble how they should live their life; NOR is it to tell them off. But there are times when I simply run out of words, I don't know what to say. Not only can a psalm give me words when I find myself stumbling, but also it comes with an authority greater than my experience. Look up Psalm 139, especially verses 11 and 12. For me to tell someone in the pit of despair that things will get better may be crass and inappropriate. To recall that, for God, darkness and light are alike is true, whatever we may be feeling.
- 3 I can only let the psalms speak for me if I know some of them. So this third approach to the psalms is based on recognising that there is immense and old wisdom here, ready to guide our living and instructive about our inner lives. It is worth simply knowing, say, 10 verses from different psalms. Learn them as, maybe, you once learnt some poetry. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" – how often that comes back to me when I need it. This learning can take years; there is no need to rush it. But if you read a psalm each day, eventually you will be carrying within some jewels of divine wisdom.

- 4 When I recite a psalm each day in Morning Prayer, I am more frequently lead into thinking about others, applying the words to them, rather than finding the words appropriate to myself. This attitude is worthwhile: as I begin a psalm, I ask God to show me who it is for. Psalm 22 is familiar to all of us, beginning with the great cry of dereliction: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ There may be some days this fits your experience; there will always be others for whom Psalm 22.1 is right. As you read the psalm, if you are led to thinking about someone else (or a nation, or even an area of the world) then that is your prayer. For me, this does not have to be someone specific: as I read Psalm 130 ‘Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord’, I can simply pray “You, God, know who is feeling this: be with them”.
- 5 Be ready to be challenged. Much of what I have said so far is about the psalms matching our experience, or the current situation of people we know. But it is worth being alert to those moments when we hear a new word of warning, or even when we disagree with what is being said by the psalmists. I was reading Psalm 86 the other day and was caught out by 86.14: ‘the arrogant are attacking me’. Having just come from a difficult meeting I was ready to apply this to myself – except it suddenly came abundantly clear that those I thought were “attacking me” were not arrogant, but good, honest people. The book of psalms rather frequently splits people into light/darkness, good/evil, godly/sinners. Reading this verse 86.14 prompted the recognition that good people can disagree – and so I disagree with the psalm!
- 6 You don’t have to decide in advance which of these methods to use (or indeed, any other way). Part of reading the psalms should involve concentrating on the text and seeing what will happen. By regularly and carefully reading a psalm each day we can become people who are better at attending to God and to others. We will be people of stillness; we will be better listeners; we will see more of God’s creation. From a book I read recently, this quotation seems very appropriate: “attention is rewarded with reality”.

Psalm 95.7 (one of Benedict’s favourites): ‘O that today you would listen to his voice’.