Praying the Psalms: A Christian Approach

By Lucien Deiss, C.S.S.P.

The Book of Psalms is, in many respects, a summary of the entire Bible. Psalms drawn from this book, along with other biblical canticles and song fragments, make up an essential part of Christian liturgy: They provide the texts for the responsorial psalm, part of the proclamation of the word of God during any liturgy of the word, and they form the heart and nucleus of the liturgy of the hours which is, or which should be, as Vatican II affirms, "the source of devotion and nourishment also for personal prayer."1

The way Christians pray the psalms is, therefore, of vital importance both in the renewal of the liturgy and in living the Christian life. In truth, learning how to pray the psalms in a Christian context is part of an even larger question: "How do we read and pray the Bible in a Christian way?"

These questions, some might say problems, of praying and living are relevant today when people are asking why we do not write new psalms, new creations that are expressive of our condition. Why do we continue to pray these old psalms, some of which are crumbling under the weight of age, that seem to express only the concerns of another day and another age? Did not Israel in the past compose these songs in the language of the people to address their pressing concerns? Would we not be continuing this tradition, rather than abandoning it, if we too wrote and created and prayed new psalms?

To the question of writing and praying new creations, I can only say that we have today, even as Israel had in the past, the obligation of creating each day new psalms, new prayers, new words, and new songs. We have the true obligation to celebrate each day the eternal newness of God's love, even as Psalm 98 proclaims: "Sing to the Lord a new song!"2

But we also have the obligation of praying the psalms of Israel as the deepest expression of the yearnings of the chosen people of God. When we pray these psalms in the words the Holy Spirit gave to God's people, in the light of the Christian revelation, we are sure to encounter the presence of Jesus Christ. But when we pray our newly written prayers in the language of today, a language which swiftly changes, do we have the same security?

In the psalms we feel the security of the word of God, a sense of the presence of the Holy One. Against this security, our own creations seem frail. To pray with the words of the psalms surpasses prayer using the words of our own creations, even as heaven surpasses earth, as Christ surpasses the human, as the Holy Spirit surpasses our own spirit.

To be sure, all true prayer is heard, even when no words are used, but to understand why I assert the value of the psalms of Israel for giving us the words of prayer and shaping the very way we pray, allow me to examine them under these aspects: as prayers of humanity; as prayers of a people of blissful hope; as prayers inspired by the Holy Spirit; and, lastly, as prayers used by Jesus Christ in his own prayer.

The Psalms Are Prayers of Humanity

In a fundamental aspect, the psalms are songs of the human situation. The conditions which bring forth the psalmist's song or prayer are not fictional story lines. They are expressive of a condition truly experienced by human beings. When we read Psalm 88:2-3—"Save me, Lord my God!/ By day, by night. I cry out./ Let my prayer reach you;/ turn, listen to me!"—we hear the prayer of someone, long ago, who called God all the day long and who went to bed oppressed by grief and sadness to lay wakeful through the long right.

And, again, when we pray in the words of a psalmist (Ps. 31:5b-6a, 15-17)—

You are my shelter;
I put myself in your hands ...
I trust in you, Lord.
I say, "You are my God,
my life is in your hands."
... Look on me with love,
save your servant—

the words are the words of someone long ago (who had no thought that Christ on his cross would echo these same words), someone who commended the preserv-
tion of a life into the hands of the Lord.

Not all situations described in the psalms, of course, are those of sorrow. In Psalm 150:3-4 we read— "Praise! Praise God with trumpet blasts, with lute and harp. Praise! Praise God with timbrel and dance, with strings and pipe." This psalm equally has its place because of the human need to dance for the Lord to the sound of harp, lute, and timbrel.

Throughout the psalms, we cannot escape the sense that psalmic prayer and the human condition are deeply intertwined. Thus it is that in Psalm 56:8, the psalmist describes God as "storing up" tears in a leather bottle (the equivalent of a modern flask). The psalmist's intent is to stress that God is aware of and collects the sorrows of humanity as well as their shouts of joy. Both find their way to the very heart of God who will succor us in our need and share in our joy.

All ages and conditions of humanity are mirrored in the psalms. There are prayers of thanksgiving for the beauty of young men and women: "God, you shape our sons, like tall, sturdy plants; you sculpt our daughters, like pillars for a palace" (Ps. 144:12). There are also prayers for help amid the infirmities of age. An especially poignant example of the latter is the heartfelt yet confident prayer of the aged man (Psalm 71:9, 18, 22) who beseeches God in these words:

Now I am old, my strength fails, do not toss me aside . . .
Do not leave me, Lord, now that I am old . . .
I will thank you, Lord, for your true friendship and play the lyre and harp for you, the Holy One of Israel. 3

The language of Psalm 71 is mirrored in the humble prayer composed by King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38: 11-12, 20) after he had recovered from a sickness that brought him close to death:

I said, I shall not see the Lord in the land of the living . . .
My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent:
like a weaver I have rolled up my life;
he cuts me off from the loom . . .
The Lord will save me, and we will sing to stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the Lord. 4

The voices of individuals at prayer are not the only ones heard in the Bible's canticles and psalms, however. Consider the prayer of Tobit and Sarah on their wedding.
night (Tobit 8:5-9) and the prayer for a couple that they will live to see their grandchildren in a peaceful land (Ps. 128:3, 6): "Your beloved, a fruitful vine in the warmth of your home . . . May you see your children's children, and on Israel, peace!"

Mirror of the human condition, the psalms also mirror the changing face of the rest of the created world. Oceans and rivers, mountains and valleys, springtime and autumn, sunshine and rain, day and night, wild goats and wild asses, lions and cattle, storks who nest in the tallest trees—all find their place in the Psalter. Special attention is given to the young ravens, about which it is said (Ps. 147:9) that God answers their cry: "The Lord feeds the cattle and young ravens when they call." The ravens of this psalm, who mirror the providence of the heavenly Father, may have been the ones Jesus had in mind when he told his followers: "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them" (Luke 12:24).

In these few examples we see the manifold diversity of psalmic prayer as it speaks the language of creation, the language of human distress and of human joy, the language that shaped the prayer of the one who called himself the "Son of Man."

Because the human truth of the psalms is the bedrock of their meaning and their source for prayer, I invite us particularly as Christians to embrace the full range of human gestures that make up the prayer expressed in the psalms. In other words, if we affirm, "We sing to you, O Lord," then we should really be singing. Let us abandon our inconsistencies. If we accept the invitation to "lift up your hands in the holy place and bless the Lord" (Ps. 134:2), then let us truly lift our hands. As we hear the call to "come, bow down and worship, kneel to the Lord our maker" (Ps. 95:6), let us not remain glued to our seats, but kneel! Let us cease acclamating that we ought to "praise God with timbrel and dance," if we are not going to dance, if we are going to stand as stiff as frozen chickens! At least, let us provide an opportunity for the people who do want to praise the Lord with dance to use this expression of prayer in their worship and praise.

In this invitation to respect the human truth of the psalms, of course, I am not suggesting that everybody should always do everything and affirm everything that we find in the psalms. We should reject what is inappropriate to our modern understanding of liturgy, but at the same time we should be fully aware that the psalms are the most alive prayers in our liturgy and that the assemblies of our beloved Catholic Church should be alive, lively, and life giving.

The Psalms Are Prayers of a People of Blissful Hope

The psalms reflect the human condition, but they become prayer only when we read them as Scripture and use them in the context of a community of faith, in our case, in the assembled church. God speaks to us, but he speaks to us in the midst of a community that believes in salvation. We answer God, but we form our answer in the midst of this same community.

To put it another way: The horizontal dimension of the psalms, which we have just examined, must be completed by a vertical dimension, the rising of prayer to heaven. We may go even further and assert that the vertical rise to heaven is possible only if it is based on the solid ground of the horizontal dimension, and both are embraced in the mystery that we call "church." The people of God, the faithful, need to be in communion with their brothers and sisters if they are to pray in truth: "Our Father who art in heaven." Likewise, the faithful also need to be united with their brothers and sisters in prayer, if they are truly to pray the psalms, for they are the prayers of all the people who are journeying toward God.

The greatest attention should be given to the fact that psalmic prayer is rooted in the history of Israel. We speak of the Psalter as one book, but it is in fact a collection of 150 prayers and songs whose composition spans a millennium. One of the oldest psalms (Psalm 68) dates to the 12th century B.C.E. "The Lord rises up, and his enemies scatter." Some psalms, including some of the wisdom psalms, may have been composed as recently as a century before the time of Christ.

It would be a good thing for Christians to become familiar with the literary categories of the psalms so that we could distinguish a royal psalm from an enthronement psalm, and a hymn from a wisdom psalm. It helps, when we pray, to know that the particular psalm which we are praying for, instance, a psalm of pilgrimage, or may be one of the psalms that our Lord sang as he went up to Jerusalem, and that we today sing and pray with him a text that he sang two thousand years ago. And it also helps to know that another psalm belongs to the collection of texts called the "Great Hallel" and it may have been sung by the Lord at the end of the Passover meal before the crucifixion. Thus when we sing that psalm we are uniting our prayer with his.

The literary types of psalms help our understanding, but we must always bear in mind that, whatever its literary category, when we pray a particular psalm we pray and sing a prayer text that belongs to a people of blissful hope, borrowed from the prayer of Israel and voiced by us in the name of the people of God that is the church of Jesus Christ.

Thus we cannot say, when we read or sing that "night after night I lie exhausted, hollow-eyed with grief, my pillow soaked with tears" (Ps. 6:7-8) that these words do not concern us, for we have never experienced the depth
of sorrow portrayed. Let us be grateful that we have not experienced it, but this sorrow does concern us because we are commanded to bear the burdens of our brothers and sisters who do weep night after night. And these words are of concern to us because of Jesus Christ who wept during that night in Gethsemani.

Psalms prayer, molded by history, has internalized all the greatness and holiness of that history, and it has also internalized the hesitations and gropings (and failures) of a people in their journey toward God. Thus it is no surprise to find in the psalms atrocious clamorings for revenge couched in the language of supplication: “O God, break their teeth; rip out the young lions’ fangs” (Ps. 58:7). Nor should we be surprised to find the mournful lamentation of Psalm 137—“By the rivers of Babylon/ we sat weeping, remembering Zion”—followed by the terrifying cry for vengeance:

Doomed Babylon, be cursed!
Good for those who deal evil for evil!
Good for those who destroy you,
who smash your children at the walls.

And we find this prayer in Psalm 139:22: “I hate them with a deadly hate; these enemies of mine.”

Such texts highlight a real difficulty which must be confronted, a difficulty which has sometimes turned the faithful away from psalmic prayer. The Hebrew Scriptures present a religion which is incarnated in time, a time which runs unknown years from “the generation of Abraham” to the time of Jesus of Nazareth. There is necessarily an evolution in what is revealed. Thus we find in this picture elements which will be entirely integrated in the Gospel, for example, the law of love expressed in the Shema Israel: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). This law is the heart of the revelation toward which the Hebrew people journeyed; it is at the heart of the Christian Scriptures as well.

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respect the literal sense of these prayers. They are requests for a bloody revenge which Christian prayer cannot accept. Still we can understand them in a positive way: The request for revenge was indeed an affirming of God's justice. Rather than seek the vengeance themselves, the people turned over their right to seek revenge to God: "Lord, never forget the crime." But we know that God is so just that he will crush the sins of evildoers but not the sinners themselves.

The Psalms Are Prayers of the Holy Spirit

Not only must we insist on the psalms for their human value and their insertion as prayer into the life of a people of blissful hope, but we must add, indeed insist, that these human prayers gathered by tradition as the word of God must also be considered as prayers inspired by the Holy Spirit.

This aspect of these texts upsets everything we've said so far. Now we look at these texts, which we've thought of to this point as emerging from and expressing human needs, emotions, and events, as texts that take their origin from and find their base, in a certain sense, in God. In this aspect we see the Holy Spirit seizing these prayers and transforming them over time for our benefit.

Allow me an illustrative example. Thirty-three centuries ago, some thirteen centuries before the birth of Jesus the Christ, there reigned in Egypt a Pharaoh named Akhenaten (which means, roughly, "Loved by Aton"—the name for the sun's disk, venerated as a god in distinction to other aspects of the sun—Ra—that were also worshiped in Egypt). This young prince, who ascended the throne at the age of thirteen, is remembered today for his mysticism and for his attempt to break the exploitive hold of the Theban priestly cult of Amon (another name for the sun) by instituting a new cult, grounded in the belief that there is only one god, the Aton, who is a god of love and truth. The young Pharaoh's "Hymn to the Sun," inscribed throughout Akh-en-aton, the city which he founded and named for the one god, Aton, burns with love:

You are in my heart, and nobody knows You
But your son Akh-en-aton.
In your designs, You have given him wisdom,
And by your power all beings, your creatures,
Are in your hands.
You are the time of existence;
It is also by You that all beauty is gazed at with wonder.
And all that is on earth, you have caused them to rise
for your child, the King living in truth.

With great tenderness does this young Egyptian king...
sing the universal presence of his beloved God! Through Aton "the flowers open up, for they drink their fill of the warmth before his face" Through Aton "the little birds fly with joy from their nests. It is him which their innocent clapping of wings strives to worship." Indeed all the beauty and holiness of creation reflects this one God, Aton.

Was Akh-en-aton ever aware of the revelation to Israel of the only God, YHWH, who is truth and love? Did Akh-en-aton's song arise from a knowledge of the Hebrew conception of the One who is holy? It may be possible. The sojourn of Israel in Egypt began around 1800 B.C.E. and ended around 1250. Beginning in 1378 B.C.E., this extraordinary pharaoh reigned for some sixteen years. Was he aware of the songs of the Children of Israel who had so long lived in Egyptian bondage? We cannot say.

What we can say is that the Holy Spirit did not consider Akh-en-aton's prayer as unworthy of being the source for the inspired prayer that we find in Psalm 104: "I will bless you, Lord my God! You fill the world with awe. You dress yourself in light, in rich, majestic light." Thus it is that when I pray this psalm in the liturgy or in personal prayer, I am praying and using a prayer which is more than three millennia old.

As a member of the Christian community, I use this psalm (verse 30) on Pentecost: "Breathe into them, they rise; the face of the earth comes alive!" And I use it (vv. 13-15) when I sing this communion antiphon on the Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time:

You nourish the earth
with what you create.
You make grass grow for cattle,
make plants grow for people,
food to eat from the earth
and wine to warm the heart,
oil to glister on faces
and bread for bodily strength.

And I use it for personal prayer, as when I quote verses 27-28 before starting meals: "All look to you for food/when they hunger; you provide it and they feed./You open your hand; they feast . . ."

When I use all of the above in my prayer, I am borrowing a prayer composed by Pharaoh Akh-en-aton according to the Egyptian tradition, taken up by the Holy Spirit and adapted as a prayer to the one God revealed to Israel, after undergoing a purification according to the exigencies of God's holiness, to become inspired prayer. Thus we are beneficiaries of the extraordinary grace which is in fact at the heart of the incarnation. It is the assumption by the Spirit of God of all that is beautiful, dignified, fully human, in order to change and transfigure it into a divine prayer.

Paul tells us bluntly (Romans 8:26-27) that we do not know how to pray as we should, that we cannot pray as we should. But the Spirit, who is in us, prays with us and in our stead, with the words that we cannot express. Most fittingly, the Spirit who knows the Father prays for us.

The Spirit not only inspires us to pray, but gives us the very words which must be said in order to reach the heart of God.

The Psalms Are Prayers Used by Jesus

The incarnation of Christ intervenes, finally, to transform the various perspectives on psalmic prayer which we have considered thus far. These human compositions, inspired as prayer by the Holy Spirit, have been taken up as the prayer of Jesus the Christ and must now be understood as a divine prayer. They have acquired the boundless dignity of the Son's praise for the Father in the Spirit.

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Jesus of Nazareth, indeed, prayed the psalms. As a pious member of the chosen people of God, he joined in communal prayer in the synagogue and, occasionally, in the Temple and in personal daily prayer, using texts drawn from the Book of Psalms. Most likely he sang the "songs of ascent" (Psalms 120-134) when he made the pilgrimage from Galilee up to Jerusalem. In the merry hubbub of the pilgrims and in the growing excitement of the faithful as they reached Jerusalem and by stages as they arrived at the Temple, he probably joined in singing: "With joy I heard them say, 'Let us go to the Lord's house!'" (Ps 122). And, if they were part of the Seder ritual at the time, then our Lord sang the psalms of the Hallel (Psalms 113-118) at the end of the Passover supper. (Matthew and Mark recount that he sang "the hymn" at the end of the meal; this may well have been all or part of this great act of praise: "Give thanks, the Lord is good,/God's love is for ever!" [Ps. 118:1].)

The early church (Hebrews 10:5-7) quoted Psalm 40:7-9 as the prayer of Jesus' fidelity to the Father's will from the day of his incarnation:

When Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me . . . Then I said: 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)."

And it is from the psalms that Christ draws his prayer of agony when he cries out on the cross: "God, my God,/why have you abandoned me . . .?" (Ps. 22:2; see Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Everything Christ does bears a divine value. His prayer as well as his other deeds bear the infinite value of the praise of the Son for the Father. Christ's prayer is thus a magnificent transformation of the meager prayer of the
Finding the Face of Christ

Vatican II made a recommendation to priests "and all others who take part in the divine office"—a recommendation that may be considered as valid for all the faithful—to improve their understanding of the liturgy and of the Bible, especially the psalms. In the account of the last appearance of the risen Lord to his disciples (Luke 24:44-45), Jesus speaks of what was written of him in the psalms. The writers of the Christian Scriptures found many psalm texts that would help to illuminate the meaning of Jesus’ life and ministry (nearly 30% of all the Hebrew Bible texts quoted in the New Testament come from the Book of Psalms). St. Thomas Aquinas thought of the psalms as another Gospel. I ask of us that we learn to pray the psalms, that we teach the psalms to the children in our care, and that we pray that the Holy Spirit help us discover, in each psalm, the face of Jesus Christ.

Notes


2. English translations of the psalm texts in this article are taken from International Commission on English in the Liturgy, The Psalter (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994).

3. Psalm 71 belongs to the so-called "Psalter of Jeremiah," so this may be a prayer of Jeremiah himself in his later years.

4. Apart from the psalms, the English translations of all biblical quotations in this article are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

5. The terms B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era) are often used in scholarly publications to replace the terms B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini).

6. The identification of literary types was, in large part, the work of scholars like Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel.

7. There is currently a debate going on in the churches about whether or not to retain such elements as prayers of vengeance or references to ancient practices in the church’s prayer and proclamation. For instance, the French version of the liturgy of the hours retains as prayer such texts as Psalm 15:2—"Then sacrifice will please you, young bulls upon your altar." The U.S. version of the hours dropped the bulls; Americans seem to have a certain common sense in this regard.

8. Akh-en-at-on is also remembered as the husband of "The Beautiful Woman" (Neferet), whose beauty her husband acclaimed: "Face of brightness, mistress of joy, woman of grace, great in love" (quoted in C. Aldred, Athenaton, le Pharaon mystique, p. 13).

9. Other psalm texts placed on Jesus’ lips by the evangelists include Psalm 69:22 (see John 19:28) and Psalm 31:6 (see Luke 23:46).

10. CSL/DOL #83.

11. CSL/DOL #90.

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