The Ecstasy of Praise; The Depth of Lament

BY MICHAEL GUINAN

Because of their regular use in the liturgy, the psalms are perhaps the most familiar part of the Old Testament. This does not, however, imply that they are always that well understood. In what follows, I would like to discuss briefly one very basic aspect of the psalms: they take our lives, in all their dimensions, very seriously. This appears above all in the way the psalms gravitate around the two poles of praise and lament.

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Psalms and Praise

"It is not the dead who praise the Lord, nor those who go down into silence" (Ps 115:17; cf. also 6:5, 30:9, 88:10-11 etc.). Death is characterized by lack of praise; on the other hand, life manifests itself in praise. There cannot be true life without praise of God. The Hebrew hallel means "to praise" (as in hallelu-Yah, "praise Yahweh"), and the name of the book of psalms in Hebrew is tehillim, praises.

But what exactly do the Scriptures mean by "praise"? This is not as obvious as might first appear. All too often we equate praise with thanksgiving, with saying,
We are taught to say “thank you,” but we don’t have to be taught to praise.

open it, his eyes lit up, he tore off the rest of the wrapping and ran back and forth between his parents saying, “Mama, papa, Uncle Mike gave me a purple teddy bear!” Only later, with parental direction, did he come over and “thank” me. Children have to be taught to say “thank you”; they do not have to be taught to praise. “Mama, papa, Uncle Mike gave me a purple teddy bear” is praise. It calls to others and focuses on the giver and the gift. Thanks comes only later. Praise is the spontaneous response to giftedness in life and the giftedness of life. This is what we find in the psalms of praise.

Praise the Lord, all you nations; glorify him, all you peoples.
For steadfast is his kindness to us, and the fidelity of the Lord endures forever (117).

The psalmist calls to others, and then a reason is given: for, because. Sometimes, as here, the reason is a more general description of God; at other times, more concrete acts of deliverance are remembered (e.g., 34:5, “I sought the Lord and he answered me . . . when the afflicted cried out, the Lord heard.”). The entire Psalter ends on a mighty crescendo of praise—Pss 144-150, in which the entire chorus (148) and the entire orchestra (150) come into play.

Praise, then, is response to the giftedness of life, a response that focuses on the giver and the gift and shares this with others. It is prayed out of joy, of strength, of happiness, and of blessedness. It is a corrective to pride, arrogance, and the abuse of power because, in praise, we recognize our dependence and our creaturehood. The words of Abraham Heschel are apt here, “prayer is our humble answer for the inconceivable surprise of living.”

Psalms and Lament

It does not take much imagination to realize that our lives are not all joy, happiness and strength. At times we experience just the opposite. We know brokenness and pain, alienation and confusion, doubt and the absence of God. At these times we lament: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (22:2).

Just as praise is not the same as thanksgiving, so lament is not the same as petition. If praise is the spontaneous response to the blessedness of life, lament is a spontaneous response to pain. It is a loud, religious “Ouch!” When we stub our toe, we cry out in pain; when we experience the presence of death, with all its brokenness, in our lives, we also cry out, and that is lament.

Laments of one kind or another are the single largest group of psalms; over one-third of the Psalter is lamen-
Outside of the Psalter, the book of Job and Lamentations are also good examples. The psalmists pray “out of the depths” (130), “how long, O Lord?” (6:4). They pray because of sickness (e.g., 6:2, 13:3, 22:14-15), because of loneliness and alienation (e.g., 31:11, 38:11), because of danger and mistreatment by others (6:8, 7:1-4, etc.), because of shame and humiliation (e.g., 4:2, 22:6-7). Finally, they pray because of death (e.g., 28:1, 88). We find something similar in the New Testament. People who are afflicted cry out to Jesus (e.g., Mk 1:40-42, 7:25-30, 10:46-52). Jesus also laments to the Father in the garden (Mt 26:38-39, Mk 14:34-36; Lk 22:41-44), and, in the death throes on the cross (Mt 27:46, Mk 15:34), he makes his own the words of Psalm 22 cited above.

I think it is fairly safe to say that as Christians we are not all that comfortable with speaking our pains and our doubts and our anger before God. We have lost touch with this dimension of prayer. There would seem to be two main reasons for this: (1) we think that lamenting is against faith, or (2) we think that it is against charity.

(1) We feel, “My God, why have you forsaken me,” and we think, “I should not feel this way; I’m losing my faith.” Lament corrects a false, naive, and overly rationalistic view of faith. In the Scriptures, faith is not simply an intellectual assent to some statement about God. It is trusting our whole selves in our whole lives to God. At times we experience God’s absence; we feel alone and confused and we doubt. Doubt is not opposed to faith; despair is. “I believe, help my unbelief” (Mk 9:24), and Paul tells us he was “full of doubts but never despaired” (2 Cor 4:8). Doubt is a sign that our faith is alive and kicking. It is part of the rhythm of faith itself.

Lament, then, is not a failure of faith but an act of faith. We lament before the Lord because deep down our pain is of concern to God. Even if we do not experience the closeness, we believe that God does care and does hear. God does not say, “Do not fear. I will take away all the pain and struggle.” Rather, we hear, “Do not fear, for I am with you” (e.g., to Jacob, Gen 26:24; to the anxious Moses, Ex 3:11-12; to the Disciples, Mt 28:20), and together we will survive, yes, even death itself. Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof knew how to lament. There is something here we need to relearn. Perhaps it is not lamenting but the failure to lament that expresses a lack of faith.

(2) We feel, against people who hurt us, “Happy the man who shall seize and smash your little ones against the rock” (137:9), and we think “I should not feel this way; it is against charity!” Lament corrects a false, naive, and overly romantic view of charity. Charity does not mean that everything is lovely, that we never get upset, that we sit around holding hands saying how wonderful everything is. This is unreal. Negativity, injustice, brokenness are part of our lives. Charity does not deny this; it says, “What next?” I do feel hurt, pain, anger, but this does not give me carte blanche to go out and dump my negativity wherever and on whomever I want. Lament suggests that we dump it on God.

In this light, we can approach the so-called “cursing psalms” (e.g., 109, 137). These have often been a particular stumbling block. First of all, they are clearly spoken out of great pain and distress. This is real; we must recognize it. These feelings are really in us and they are really in the psalms. But then the psalmist does not say— and this is important— “I am going to go out and smash his little ones against the rock.” We do not take things, as it were, into our own hands. We pray, rather, “God, this is the way I feel. You take care of it.”

And God has never been conspicuous for rushing out to do everything we say when we are upset. We let God deal with it and in the process we get it out of us. Again, the feelings are real; they are there and will not go away. If we do not recognize them and deal with them constructively, they will be heard, but destructively.

It has often been noted that almost all of the lament psalms (88 is an exception) end on a sudden turn of praise (e.g., 22:23-32, 28:6-9). Scholars have offered various explanations for this, but from a viewpoint of prayer, I think the meaning is clear: it is only after we lament, after we face and speak in some way the negativity, that healing can begin. The power and blessing of life is experienced anew. Some years back, after the changes in the funeral liturgy, a family I know lost a child in a boating accident. A lot of pressure was put on them to “celebrate the Mass of the resurrection,” to rejoice in his birth to new life. About a year later, their suppressed grief almost tore them apart. It would not be denied and had to be dealt with. Some charismatic prayer which praises the Lord for everything can also err in this regard. The psalms of lament teach us that it is possible to praise too soon. Perhaps it is not lamenting, but the failure to lament that expresses a lack of charity.

We noted at the beginning that our familiarity with the psalms derives mainly from their use in the liturgy. They appear there largely as responses, either to the readings or to the liturgical action. As our brief discussion has shown, this is appropriate, because the psalms are above all response, response to the God who creates, blesses, gifts us with life; they are cries to the God who alone saves and delivers from the power and realm of death. While we certainly do not live all of our lives at the intensity and pitch represented by the two poles of praise and lament, whatever our experiences may be, they move in one direction or the other and come to voice in our prayer.

As represented in the psalms, biblical prayer takes our human life, in all its dimensions, very seriously. Nothing in our human experience is foreign to our prayer. It is there, in the everyday interactions of our lives, in our deeply felt blessings and joys and the deeply suffered pains and hurts, that we respond to our God, the source and root of life. We can do nothing more. We should do nothing less.