Triduum Psalms: Cries of Tragedy and Triumph

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The psalms of the Paschal Triduum engage the praying community with their annual invitation to participate in the continuing embrace of the mystery of God's love. These psalms give voice to the assembly as it wends its way through the ritual remembrance of Jesus' saving death and resurrection. During these three days, the sacred memories are brought to the fore of the community's collective and personal consciousness to speak the story of salvation, once again Jesus' impact on the human experience, past, present, and future, is acknowledged and celebrated. For the moment, our consideration will focus on Psalms 31, 116, and 118, chosen respectively as the responsorial psalms for Good Friday and Holy Thursday, and as the responsorial psalm/gospel acclamation for the Easter Vigil.

In the twenty-five hundred years or so since Psalm 31 was first prayed, many whose names are woven into the history of the church have chosen their last words from among its memorable verses. Francis Xavier is said to have uttered verse one as his final statement. Polycarp of Smyrna and Bernard of Clairvaux, along with Jerome of Prague, Henry V of England, and the reformers Luther, Knox, Hus, and Melanchthon, breathed their last with the same words that the author of Luke's gospel attributed to the dying Jesus: "Into your hands I commend my spirit" (v. 5).

In his sacrificial surrender on the cross, however, Jesus directed his prayer in a more personal way than the divine titles used by the psalmist, addressing God as Abba or Father (see Luke 23:46). All the

Good Friday

Psalms 31:2. 6. 12-13. 15-16. 17. 25
The verses selected for the responsorial psalm on this day appear in bold type.

Father, I put my life in your hands.

I
In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.
In your justice rescue me, incline your ear to me, make haste to deliver me!
Be my rock of refuge, a stronghold to give me safety.
You are my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake you will lead and guide me.
You will free me from the snare they set for me, for you are my refuge.
Into your hands I commend my spirit; you will redeem me, O Lord, O faithful God.
You hate those who worship vain idols, but my trust is in the Lord.
I will rejoice and be glad of your kindness, when you have seen my affliction and watched over me in my distress.
Not shutting me up in the grip of the enemy but enabling me to move about at large.

III
How great is the goodness, O Lord, which you have in store from those who fear you.
And which, toward those who take refuge in you, you show in the sight of men.
You hide them in the shelter of your presence from the plotstings of men;
You screen them within your abode from the strife of tongues.
Blessed be the Lord whose wondrous kindness he has shown me in a fortified city.
Once I said in my anguish, "I am cut off from your sight";
Yet you heard the sound of my pleading when I cried out to you.
Love the Lord, all you his faithful ones!
The Lord keeps those who are constant, but more than requites those who are proudly.
Take courage and be stouthearted, all you who hope in the Lord.

In your hands is my destiny; rescue me from the clutches of my enemies and my persecutors.
Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your kindness.
O Lord, let me not be put to shame, for I call upon you;
let the wicked be put to shame; let them be reduced to silence in the nether world.
Let dullness strike their lying lips that speak insolence against the just in pride and scorn.
words and works of Jesus' life were lived in the conviction that he was the loved child of a loving Parent-God. Jesus' prayer, in life and in death, reflected the depth of that shared love.

By praying Psalm 31, even in his dying moments, the Jesus of Luke leads believers into a new realm of faith by helping them to move beyond a formal, staid expression of adoration, petition, penitence, and thanksgiving into a realm of relatedness. And it is from within that secure bond of relatedness to God and from a deepened awareness of being loved with an eternal constancy that all the other postures and attitudes of prayer flow simply and naturally.

Like Jesus, the composer of Psalm 31 had reason to lament the downward spiral of sickness, rejection, stress, and distress which had become the pattern of the psalmist's daily life. Evidently, this dreadful situation had been playing out over an extended time (v. 11), until the psalm poet felt "like the unremembered dead" and as ruined and useless as "a dish that is broken" (v. 13).

Nevertheless, even under the burden of such misery, the author of Psalm 31 was obviously in touch with the word of God and sought solace in it. While some scholars have criticized this post-Exilic psalmist as lacking creativity, because his prayer resembles a tapestry of passages from several other psalms as well as texts from Jeremiah, Carroll Stuhlmuehler suggests a different evaluation. Rather than charging the composer with a lack of originality, Stuhlmuehler proposes that we recognize the author as a mystic, contemplating and absorbing the word of God, allowing the words to be a carrier of an otherwise inexpressible human experience. By praying these words in the midst of his own tragic situation, the psalmist teaches all who have reason to lament that the inspired passages of Scripture can reach out over the centuries and leap from the page with new meaning capable of giving fresh insight, comfort, and assurance to contemporary believers.

As in most psalms of lament, the tone of tragedy in Psalm 31 suddenly yields to a celebration of praise and thanksgiving (see vv. 14-15). First to point out the lament's abrupt change of mood, Hermann Gunkel attributed this striking shift to the authenticity of the psalmist's faith. So certain was the poet's trust in God, his rock, fortress, and refuge (Ps 31:4-5), that he could express a sure anticipation of relief and respond to that hope with thankful praise.

However, as Bernhard Anderson has explained, it seems more likely that the transition from sorrow to joy was occasioned by something that occurred within the liturgical setting where the psalm was sung. At a certain point in the service, a cultic priest or prophet may have delivered an "oracle of salvation" as an assurance of God's grace and favor (see Ps 12:8; 35:3; 60:8-10; 91:14-16).

Even as a parent soothes the pain and hushes the crying of a troubled child, so the oracle may have whispered gently, "Hush! It's okay! I'm here! Nothing can harm you." With that assurance, the psalmist gains a balanced perspective; what appears to be tragedy can safely be put to rest in God's hands (vv. 5, 15), and the future can be approached with hope (v. 20).

Because, as John Ker once said, "This psalm sparkles all through with lamps which have lighted the steps of men in dark places," it remains an apt prayer for Good Friday. Jesus, in his dying and rising, has become the living oracle of salvation who annually whispers to his struggling disciples, "Hush, It's okay! I'm here! Nothing can harm you."

When the first generation of Christians tried to find some sense in the ignominy of Jesus' execution on the cross as a common criminal, they looked to their sacred writings for guidance and light. But while the Deuteronomist had decreed that "God's curse rests on him who hangs on a tree" (Deut 21:22), other texts from Deutero-Isaiah and several of the psalms offered a different, more encouraging perspective.

As the early communities of believers perused the words of the prophets and prayed their psalms, they began to understand Jesus' death not as a curse but as something "precious in the eyes of the Lord" (Ps 116:15). In reflective prayer, they became aware of the truth that Jesus' dying and rising was not a political accident but an integral aspect of God's saving plan for all peoples.

This awareness enabled the early Christians to sing the psalms with new insight, appreciating, as they sang, the sensus plenior or fuller sense of meaning that only the divinely inspired and living word possesses. Always unfolding, always new and enlightening, always sur-

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**Holy Thursday**

Psalm 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18

Response (based on 1 Corinthians 10:16):

Our blessing cup is a communion with the blood of Christ.

How shall I make a return of the Lord for all the good he has done for me?

The cup of salvation I will take up, and I will call upon the name of the Lord.

Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones.

I am your servant, the son of your handmaid; you have loosed my bonds.

To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the Lord.

My vows to the Lord I will pay in the presence of all his people.

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prizing or even shocking, the living word of God remains a treasure trove which continues to nourish the faithful.

One such treasure is Psalm 116, a thanksgiving song composed to accompany a ritual action in the Temple. Regarded as a post-exilic psalm because of its several Aramaisms (vv. 7, 12), Psalm 116 was written by someone who looked back on his life and retrospectively compared his suffering to a grave illness (vv. 3, 8); to being unjustly accused (v. 11); and to being shackled and sentenced to death (vv. 3, 16). Surely, the years of exile in Babylon were fraught with such experiences but it would seem that these powerful metaphors could serve as apt descriptions of any serious plight.

Having experienced deliverance at God’s hand, the psalmist was moved to ask, “How shall I make a return to the Lord?” (v. 12). As Carroll Stuhlmuebler noted, since “we do not pay for God’s mercy” the ritual action of pouring out the cup of salvation (v. 13) as testimony would be a sufficient “return.”

They became aware of the truth that Jesus’ dying and rising was not a political accident but an integral aspect of God’s saving plan.

When the early Christians turned to this psalm to probe more deeply the meaning of Jesus’ saving death, they understood the cup of salvation in terms of Jesus’ allotted portion of life, willingly and lovingly poured out in sacrifice for the salvation of sinners. But our ancestors in the faith were also aware that the cup of salvation referred to the Israelite communion sacrifice in which the cup shared among friends in the presence of God strengthened and secured their relationship (Ps 23:5). At his last supper with his disciples, Jesus took that very cup and identified it as his own blood which would soon be poured out for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:27-28). At each eucharistic gathering, we who are blessed to share in Jesus’ saving cup are bound more closely in communion with him and with one another.

Another of the psalms pressed into service by the early church is Psalm 118; the last of the Egyptian Hallel songs (Ps 113-118), this psalm, along with Psalm 116, would have been sung after their last supper together by Jesus and the disciples as they made their way to the cemetery garden on the Mount of Olives. Because its complex structure resembles an ensemble liturgy, scholars suggest that Psalm 118 was also sung by pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for the Feast of Sukkoth or Tabernacles. Their gratitude is palpable and the reason for their joy is clearly stated from the outset.

God is good; God’s sheesh, i.e., God’s steadfast love, endures forever (vv. 1-2).

Said to have been a favorite psalm of Martin Luther, Psalm 118 was described by him as “the psalm that I loved . . . for it has often served me well and has helped me out of grave troubles, when neither emperors, kings, wise men, clever men, nor saints could have helped me.” Doubtless, the fact that Jesus probably prayed this psalm on the night before he died gives added poignancy to its verses. The greater part of Psalm 118 (vv. 5–21) is comprised of a celebration of thanksgiving which was originally sung either by the king, as representative of the people, or as an alternating chorus by various groups within the congregation.

Verse 22, with its reference to the rejected stone, was probably borrowed from a popular proverb. In its original context, the stone may have been a metaphor for the psalmist (or king), once rejected but restored through God’s assistance. Later, when the psalm was democratized, the stone came to represent the nation of Israel, spurned by the movers and shakers of the secular empires as being least among the nations, yet firmly established by divine choice in the economy of salvation.

Mark was the first Christian author to associate the rejected stone with the death of Jesus (Mark 12:10–12). Matthew (21:42) and Luke (20:17) adapted Mark’s metaphor and used Psalm 118:22 to describe the rejection of Jesus by some of his own people as compared to the acceptance accorded him among the gentiles. Subsequent Christian authors (Acts 4:11, Ephesians 2:20, 1 Peter 2:4, 7) regarded the stone as a type or prefiguration of Jesus, cast aside by sinful humankind (death on a cross) but established forever (resurrection) by God as the cornerstone of the new and cosmic people of God.

Support for the symbolic importance of the cornerstone comes from understanding its function in ancient architecture. The stone identified as the cornerstone in Roman architecture was not a stone at the base of a building but the keystone or capstone at the center of a curved Roman arch. The top or final stone to be laid, the cornerstone maintained the structure; if it were removed, the building toppled, but with it in place, the edifice remained solid and secure. So it is with the church: Through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, we are firmly founded. “By the Lord has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes!”

Notes
6. Ps 2, 16, 22, 31, 45, 69, 72, 89, 110, 115, 118.
9. Quoted in Gerhard Kittel, Die Psalmen.