

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Adult Education

The Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible

In our first class we discussed the place of the Psalms in Scripture, and details regarding the forms of psalms as prayers of lament, thanksgiving, praise, etc. The scheme we are employing comes from Bl. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *The Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*. Bonhoeffer, by way of introduction, first states that "we can learn true prayer only from Jesus Christ," and goes on to state about the psalms that "we must not ask first what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ". Last week we followed this approach in looking at Psalm 22.

This week our approach is more thematic, but it is still based on the insight that the psalms must always be participated in and offered as prayer. When we pray the psalms with Jesus Christ, we participate in the oneness of the Church militant and the Church triumphant, the communion of the saints. Our hearts are opened and our affections enlarged. Our thoughts are drawn heavenward with our words.

The Psalms is the only book of the Bible that is composed primarily of discourse directed to God. In the prophets we find God speaking to us. In Proverbs and other Wisdom literature we encounter meditations on life and truth, on God's will. We also find histories and the giving of the Law. In the New Testament we encounter the life and teaching of Jesus, and life of the early Church, the teaching of the apostles, and a vision of the consummation of all history. But in the Psalms *we* talk to God directly! God has given us prayers by which we may express ourselves to Him, by and through the mediation of His Son, Jesus. It is through Jesus that our prayers become God's word.

Praying with Jesus must be an integral part of the Christian life:

It is the incarnate Son of God, who has borne every human weakness in his own flesh, who here pours out the heart of all humanity before God and who stands in our place and prays for us. He has known torment and pain, guilt and death more deeply than we. Therefore it is the prayer of the human nature assumed by him which comes here before God. It is really our prayer, but since he knows us better than we know ourselves and since he himself was true man for our sakes, it is also really his prayer, and it can become our prayer only because it was his prayer.¹

Praying the psalms is something that we can do on our own in the Daily Office, but this is an offering best made in community, in the Daily Office and at Holy Eucharist. Even when we are alone, however, we do not pray alone. As the evening hymn *The day thou gavest* (no. 24) phrases this reality in v. 3, "As o'er each continent and island the dawn leads on another day, the voice of prayer is never silent, nor dies the strain of praise away." This voice of prayer is offered by us, and it is offered with Jesus Christ. So, let's look at what we are giving voice to.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), 21.

The Psalms teach us how to pray:

The psalms are a school of prayer. We are taught three distinct things about our relationship with God, and how we are to approach Him in prayer.

1. *What does prayer mean?* Prayer is a manifestation of our reliance on the word of God. By praying using the Psalter we express our reliance that God has given to us the words with which we may speak to Him; the means to approach Him in prayer. God is the God of promises, and when we pray with Jesus we express confidence in these promises.
2. *We are taught what to pray.* The full range of human experience is present in the Psalms. The community finds voice to articulate the breadth of human emotions—from gratitude and joy to suffering, pain, and deepest passion—within the context of faith. Even the imprecatory psalms, with their vows of vengeance and bloodshed, find harmonic overtones in the Church's life when engaged from the point of view of Jesus Christ.
3. *We are taught to pray as a fellowship.* As phrased by Bonhoeffer:

[Through the Psalms] the body of Christ is praying, and as an individual one acknowledges that his prayer is only a minute fragment of the whole prayer of the Church. He learns to pray the prayer of the Body of Christ. And that lifts him above his personal concerns and allows him to pray selflessly.²

In the psalms we never pray alone. We join the collective Body in offering our voice to the Father.

Perhaps it was Bonhoeffer's exposure to Anglican tradition in the Daily Office that allowed him to develop his insights into the Psalms. The Anglican approach of the use of the Psalter in collective prayer served as a useful corrective to his own experience of an emphasis on individual piety. Our engagement of the heart of God is one made together. He writes:

In the commandments, in acts of worship and prayers, the heart seeks after the One who has given them all. So it is not inactive and does not rest content, but continuously seeks God and his revelation--the Word in the words, the Gospel in the law. Blessed is the person who keeps the testimonies of God in this way, who seeks God from her whole heart.³

We are not the best judges of what we need to pray for:

God tells us what we need and tells us how to begin to align our prayers with what God wants us to need. In the Psalter we learn the language of prayer. There is a discipline to the practice of prayer. It does not come easily. Why should we expect learning to talk to God is going to be easy to learn? "The child learns to speak because the parent speaks to the child. The

² Bonhoeffer, *The Psalms, etc.*, 49.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditation on the Word* (Lanham, MD: Cowley, 1986), 113.

child learns the language of the parent. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken and speaks to us.”⁴

1. We learn to speak by repeating God’s words to us and for us. The Psalms are God’s gracious gift to us of words with which we can submit our self-centeredness to God and allow Him to shape our desires. All that God has spoken is through the Word. Thus these Psalms are given to us by God through his Word.
2. When we pray in this language of God we are praying with Jesus Christ. When we pray the Psalms, Christ joins us in our prayers.
3. *What about the imprecatory psalms?* A psalm that we cannot utter as a prayer, that makes us falter and horrifies us, is a hint to us that here someone else is praying, not we; that the One who is here protesting His innocence, who is invoking God’s judgment, who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ prays the Psalter through his congregation.

Bonhoeffer understood the difficulties of forgiving those who hate us, and understood that in the imprecatory psalms the enemies referred to are the enemies of God. The imprecatory psalms lead to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God which forgives enemies. I cannot forgive the enemies of God out of my own resources. Only the crucified Christ can do that, and I through him.

4. Now that Jesus is with the Father, the new humanity of Christ, the Body of Christ on earth, continues to pray His prayer to the end of time. This prayer belongs, not to the individual member, but to the whole Body of Christ. Only in the whole Christ does the whole Psalter become a reality, a whole which the individual can never fully comprehend and call his own.
5. Even if a verse or a psalm is not one's own prayer, it is nevertheless the prayer of another member of the fellowship. Offering up petitions of sad lament, praises of glad adoration, pleas for justice can have this sort of transforming effect as we put ourselves in others’ shoes. And when the Psalms are joyful and I am not, I can thank God for blessings He is shedding that day on others whom He loves.

Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis on 9 April 1945, as the prison in which he was held came within the range of the Royal Army. He was executed on the personal order of Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer of the Gestapo and SS. The Nazis, servants of all that embodies lies, understood that a servant of truth was a threat to them.

Addendum on the forms of psalms:

Finding a theological theme in the Psalter is a matter of debate. It is better to identify a number of themes, and then to also identify types of psalms as they embody these themes.

Themes include:

1. God is the God of covenant. He enters into a relationship with His people in which they are bound to Him, but also in which He is bound to them. Cf. Gen. 15, in which it is *God* who passes through the covenant ceremony.
2. God’s people are people of the covenant.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, *The Psalms, etc.*, 44.

3. The covenant between God and His people is effected through the instruments of place, sacramental offering, and prayer.

Types of psalms include:

1. *Enthronement psalms*: The rule of the LORD is celebrated. See Pss. 106, 135, 136. God can be trusted by His people in all circumstances.
2. *Royal psalms*: God's rule is administered by His human steward (the king). The royal psalms also have an eschatological (end times) meaning. They are not direct prophecy (with the exception of Ps. 110?) but typological.⁵ The royal psalms are the most frequently encountered form in the Psalter.
3. *Thanksgiving psalms*: Praises attest to God's sovereign rule. See, e.g., Pss. 65, 67, 68 and 118. Pss. 40.4, 41.11-14, 92.16 provide examples of the extension of God's rule.
4. *Hymns*: All psalms are hymns, but some focus on being descriptive; they describe who God is and what He does. Examples include Pss. 29, 33, 100.1-5, 111.2-11, 113, 114.1-8, 149.7-9, 150.1-6. God sustains His people: 33.1-5, 103.20-22, 117, 146.3-10, 147.1-20.
5. *Wisdom psalms and Torah psalms*: The faithful are exhorted to live under God's commandments. Pss. 1 and 119 are primary examples.
6. *Laments*: While God's people await vindication they must suffer evil in every form. They lament this reality, and the conditions of sin, sickness, famine, malicious enemies, war. In the laments the reasoning is that if God is truly sovereign His faithful followers should not have to deal with these problems, so they pray that they may be heard and delivered. If evil has resulted from the psalmist's sin, then confession is first in order (see, e.g., Pss. 6 and 32). If suffering is undeserved, the appeal is that God recognize the injustice (Pss. 22 and 44).

⁵ The term "type" (from the Greek *typoi*, "examples" or "figures") refers to a foreshadowing of the Christian dispensation in the persons and events of the Old Testament. Just as Jesus Himself could refer to Jonah as the symbol of His resurrection (Mt. 12.39-40; 16.4; Lk. 11.32), so St. Paul found in the Israelites crossing the Red Sea the "type" of baptism (1 Cor. 10.1-6), and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews found a type of Christ in Melchizedek (Heb. 7). However, a type is not allegory, for the historical significance of the person or event is not lost sight of.