

ECHOES OF GOD: JOURNEYING WITH THE WORD OF GOD



Selma Civil Rights March, 1965.

Week Five: The Psalms

The people sing of their experiences on their journey of faith and gather some of the songs in the Book of the Psalms. This becomes a miniature Bible including all the major themes of God's revelation and the memory of the best and worst of their responses. There are many more songs in the Scriptures than the Book of Psalms, but these 150 have sustained the people of God on their pilgrimage and provoked them to conversion when they have settled for less than the living God.

Long before the Psalms were written down, they were learnt by heart. They encapsulate the divine offer of liberation and reflect the people's free human response. Many Psalms were sung on the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem where the people renewed their sense of God's call to them and re-dedicated themselves to be *Is-ra-el* "the people of the God". From the earliest Christian communities the Psalms were central to the Church's understanding of Jesus, its worship and its self-understanding.

Main text: Psalm 51 - Sin, repentance and the divine mercy.

Echoed in story form in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11-32.

- ³ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your merciful love;
according to your great compassion,
blot out my transgressions.
- ⁴ Wash me completely from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
- ⁵ My transgressions, truly I know them;
my sin is always before me.
- ⁶ Against you, you alone, have I sinned;
what is evil in your sight I have done.
So you are just in your sentence,
without reproach in your judgment.
- ⁷ O see, in guilt I was born,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- ⁸ Yes, you delight in sincerity of heart;
in secret you teach me wisdom.

⁹ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be pure;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
¹⁰ Let me hear rejoicing and gladness,
that the bones you have crushed may exult.
¹¹ Turn away your face from my sins,
and blot out all my guilt.
¹² Create a pure heart for me, O God;
renew a steadfast spirit within me.
¹³ Do not cast me away from your presence;
take not your holy spirit from me.
¹⁴ Restore in me the joy of your salvation;
sustain in me a willing spirit.
¹⁵ I will teach transgressors your ways,
that sinners may return to you.
¹⁶ Rescue me from bloodshed, O God,
God of my salvation,
and then my tongue shall ring out your justice.
¹⁷ O Lord, open my lips
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
¹⁸ For in sacrifice you take no delight;
burnt offering from me would not please you.
¹⁹ My sacrifice to God, a broken spirit:
a broken and humbled heart,
O God, you will not spurn.
²⁰ In your good pleasure, show favor to Sion;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
²¹ Then you will delight in right sacrifice,
burnt offerings wholly consumed.
Then you will be offered young bulls on your altar.

(Revised New Jerusalem Bible)

The modern Christian martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called the Psalms the "*Prayer book of the Bible*". Luther used to call the 150 Psalms the "*Little Bible*". He said "*In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible... so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book,*" (Luther's *Preface to the Psalter*).

In the Psalms the people of Israel, touched by the awesome sense of the freedom of *Yahweh* "*the God*" and of how they are caught up into that creative freedom, turn this into song. Prophetic imagination always needs song, poetry and art to find appropriate expression. So we have the liberated and liberating *Song of the Sea* in Exodus 15:1-18 and the *Song of Miriam* in Exodus 15:21. They both focus on the freedom of God to act, and the people's freedom derived from God's own freedom. Again, and again, they use the name of that free God "*Yahweh*", "*I am who I am, who I will be, where I will be*". Again, and again, in the Psalms they play with it, savour its strangeness, and tease out its meaning and implications as they journey in faith. They coin a new word "*Halleluiah*" – "*praise to Yahweh*" which we still use at every Eucharist. Today, the Church is still praising and still working out the mystery of God's creative freedom in which we are all invited to share.

In praise and, above all in the Psalms, the people of Israel, name the name that redefines their social reality, and that celebrates an unforeseen turn in their history. Earlier they had celebrated in dance, free bodies no longer under the control of Pharaoh. Miriam picks up a tambourine and the young women follow her in ecstatic dance celebrating the freedom the free God has created for them.

It is in song and dance that they find the means to express the shift to a new unimagined reality. The language of praise is always dangerous. It breaks out of tight control. It's the language that makes possible compassion and justice, transforming fear into energy. From the time of Jesus, when not many people could read, believers learnt the Psalms and found their lives and their experience lit up by the divine Spirit who spoke to them there.

We see this in the experience of the Gospel songs among the black American slaves, reminding them of the God-given freedom, of which their Masters tried to deprive them. Their theology, underpinned by the Psalms and Biblical canticles, was rich and deep and provoked their own Spirituals...

*“There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded who-ole
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul,
Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain
And then the Holy Spirit revives my soul aga-ain.
There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded who-ole
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”*

They, like the generations of Jewish and Christian believers before them, found in the Psalms of lament echoes that affirmed their own experience and gave it worth and dignity. The Psalms of praise enabled them and us to recognise the given-ness of Creation and to respond in adoration and praise of the Creator. Then there are Psalms of thanksgiving for deliverance in crisis of both individuals and communities. There are royal Psalms that celebrate God's blessing of the people through David their king - thus the recognition that God can be encountered in the hard world of politics and economics. There are Psalms of wisdom that explore how to live at one with God, with others, and with the wider Creation.

There are Psalms that are clearly sung in procession, those remembering the journey of the Exodus, and the establishing of the Temple in Jerusalem, which gave the people their identity of Is-ra-el, the people of the free God *Yahweh*. A God who chooses to commit to this disastrously erratic folk – a God of faithful-loving-kindness. What Paul in the New Testament will call “grace”. We echo this idea at the beginning of every Eucharist when we call on God's mercy. We know it is promised because of the clear teaching of Jesus' parables. And of his reconciling and re-commissioning of Peter and the other disciples, by the lake of Galilee, after they had deserted him at his death.

In speaking to the people of Israel, the Psalms still speak to the Church. They speak to every person who truly faces their own experience of life and ponders it in depth. The free God of Israel who took on our everyday reality still accompanies us in the Spirit. This Spirit, at the heart of our communities and dwelling in our own hearts, becomes ever more real to us as we enter into the depths of these prayer songs. Our music and singing enable us to receive the word that God would still speak to each of us, and which he continues to speak into our communities.

On our own, our private prayers can be self-indulgent, focused on our needs and interests. Liturgical prayer opens us to a wider horizon, to the reality and disturbing presence of God. The God who is both beyond us and revealed to us in Jesus, and present in the life-giving Spirit endowed community.

When we sing a Psalm, the aim is to help us to become one in the worship of a people on a journey. To lead us into the inexhaustible mystery of God. The Psalms minister to us in all times and seasons. They serve to challenge and enable us to find the touch of our God in real human experience, high and low, good and bad. They provide us with the words to express our faith and commitment. They nourish and strengthen us and raise our hearts and minds in prayer.

If we come honestly from our own experience of life, then we can be open to the range of experiences found in the Psalms from those who went before us. And then, God's free Spirit that inspired the original singers will speak to us anew through their words.

Reflection

Take any sentence in Psalm 51 above that speaks to you and stay with it.

Is it a comfort, a challenge or a judgement?

Then like the Psalm writer, speak in your own words to the God of mercy and ask to be led ever deeper into the freed, forgiven, and forgiving life being offered to you.

The more realistic you can make this, in terms of your own experience and feelings, the more you give God's Spirit the chance to work creatively on your mind and heart.



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