

THE PSALMS—MIRRORS OF THE SOUL

We are now in the church season of Lent and Lent is a season of reflection. How then do the Psalms serve to aid us in such reflection? What happens to us when we take up and read the Psalter? I believe that the fourth century Church Father Athanasius was right when he is said to have claimed that the Psalms are the mirrors of the soul.

Certainly, poetic expression has been used throughout history by many diverse cultures and religions to heighten human spiritual awareness on its journey towards God. Such examples include the Nordic, Icelandic and Celtic mythologies and of course the great Hindu classic the Bhagavad-gita. How then are we to approach the compilation of ancient poetic writings that constitute the Psalms? How are we to carve a pathway through their beauty and meaning for us today when they can be obscured by the language and culture of their own times? Certainly, such a pathway should involve a listening heart because we are told by the author of Psalm 95, 'O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts'. True prayer involves listening in that it is a correspondence between the depth of the heart and the heights of heaven, understood not only in the physical sense but also in the transcendental sense of a 'beyond' or of the 'other' in relation to the divine centre. But what is it exactly that leads us to prayer? Surely, it should include that which increases the depth of our existence and which gives us a perception of mystery in the presence of love or of beauty or of death. The Psalms are a gateway to this mystery. Indeed, the powerful words and pictorial phrases of the psalmists have been recognised throughout the generations as a means of directing our souls through prayer towards the living God. This is because the Psalms are marked by a spiritual intensity that springs out of the psalmist's own inner experience in the worship of God. The whole range of human experience is contained in their poetry from the starry heights to the depth of despair. Their appeal to us today is to that animating and vital spirit within us that is credited with the faculties of thought, action and emotion in relation to God that should be regarded as our immortal souls. There can be no better example of a human being who had an innate longing and thirst for God than the fourth century Church Father Augustine of Hippo. He demonstrated this in his exegesis of Psalm 42 where he equated the hart that pants for the water brooks with his own soul. Indeed, Augustine taught that we should run as fast as the deer towards the inward sweetness of God pouring into our souls from above.

The Psalms give rhythm to the prayer life when they are said or sung in private or in church. Indeed, their words have become very much part of the tradition of the church as exemplified in the liturgy, hymns and anthems. The question is how to find Christ in the Psalms as we journey through Lent. Certainly, the central truths of the Christian tradition such as the Incarnation, the Passion, the Resurrection, the Ascension and redemption are contained within them. When it is recognised that the suffering psalmist is the suffering nation Israel then Christ is revealed as the new Israel and the conquering and liberating royal successor of David.

Furthermore, we know that as a Rabbi, the historical Jesus would have been steeped in the poetic tradition of his country and indeed, we are told in the Gospels that he often drew on their words to inform his own teaching. For example, in Matthew he teaches on being non-judgemental to one's enemies when he asks, 'Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not see the log in your own eye?' (7:2). This is clearly an interpretation of the danger of judging others and the subsequent search for redemption in Psalm 7. So then, the Psalms would have been a source of common language between Jesus and his enemies. In

total isolation on the cross, we are told by the authors of Mark and Matthew that Jesus cried out in the words of Psalm 22, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’ Further on in the psalm we can discern a graphical representation of the suffering that he endured for us. Yet again the author of Luke assures us that Christ appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem after his resurrection and told them that all things that were written in the Psalms concerning him must be fulfilled.

So then, to enter into the experience of the psalmists is nothing short of asking God for the precious gift of Himself. On our own spiritual journeys there are inevitably dark nights that



are not merely the loss of contact with the visible and intelligible but also trials of despair. It is then that we should fall, not into nothingness, but at the feet of Christ crucified. It is incumbent upon us to identify with Christ in his agony on the cross in the words of Psalm 22 where he cries out, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’ but also when he went on to say, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit’. Indeed, trials such as these are the crucible of our humanity because they form part of the journey into the desert that is faith alone. The God of the Psalms thus calls the soul from despair and reveals to us a more lively feeling of Christ that in turn leads us to a place of safety. It is a question of the light that is revealed in the Psalms penetrating and protecting our very souls. On the other hand, the Psalms also appeal to our feelings of thanksgiving and our praise of God. For example, Psalm 24 reads, ‘Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in’. The splendid entry referred to by the psalmist here is most likely to the solemn entry of the arc

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of the covenant into the tent pitched by King David or the temple of King Solomon. However, are there not strong echoes here of Christ’s ascension into heaven and the welcome that he received there? Again, Christ’s entrance here mirrors his entry into our souls as we deliver our souls back to him, their rightful owner. In the words of Psalm 139, ‘For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb... Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed’.

This is something of the awesome experience that can happen to us when we pick up and read the Psalter during Lent.

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