

Understanding the Mass: The Psalm

The life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus have given a profound meaning to the Psalms. Jesus grew up praying the psalms. In his book, “The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Order of the Mass,” Lawrence Johnson writes,

Continuing the practice of the Jewish Synagogue, Christians traditionally sang a psalm or biblical canticle after the first reading. At Rome a cantor or subdeacon approached the ambo. He stood on one of its lower steps (gradus) and began the chant which was eventually called the gradual. The psalm verses were sung by the soloist, and the people responded with a short refrain which was frequently taken from the psalm itself. Once florid melodies evolved, the psalm text was abbreviated, and the singing was done by trained singers. Today the responsorial psalm has been restored to a special place of importance. Normatively it is

sung, and the whole assembly frequently the psalm relationship to one of traditional to certain thanks to the Lord for forever) and 66 earth; sing of his glorious praise) for thematic or liturgical appears, the lectionary



assembly participates. Very has a textual or spiritual the readings. At times psalms seasons, e.g., Psalm 118 (Give he is good, his mercy endures (Shout joyfully to God, all the glorious name, and give him Easter are used. Where no special relationship to the scriptural text appoints certain other psalms so

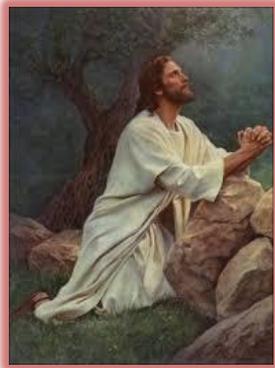
that the assembly may make contact with the psalter as a whole. To facilitate the singing of the psalms, the lectionary also appoints a number of common psalms and refrains which may be used through different liturgical seasons.¹

The responsorial psalm stands on its own and “helps the gathered assembly create an atmosphere of prayer, one in which we can recall what God has done and

¹ The Mystery of Faith, Johnson FDLC 2011, Pg. 34

continues to do.”² In his book, “What Happens at Mass,” Fr. Jeremy Driscoll O.S.B., takes the psalm to a more profound level. He writes,

*The antiphonal style [of the psalm] articulates in a lovely way the coordination of the voice of the Church with the voice of Christ. It is he who is speaking when the antiphon is sung the first time, and with him ‘opening our minds to the understanding of the scriptures’ (Luke 24:45) as he does so, we will hear the gathered in his voice. As the assembly repeats the same words, it is singing his to the Father. Then the assembly listens as he continues in the voice of the cantor with some of the verses. By listening, the assembly lets itself be led in its prayer, led by Christ himself. That is why someone different from the reader leads the psalm.*³



Hence, we make present Christ in the prayer of the psalm and the “event character” of the words in the psalm become present in the prayer uniting the gathered assembly with each other in Christ in prayer to the Father through the Holy Spirit. In the psalms themselves we often can hear Jesus praying to the Father and the Father speaking to Jesus. The psalms themselves encapsulate most every human emotion within them fully complementing the humanity of Jesus.

In his book, “Praying the Psalms in Christ,” Lawrence Kriegshauser, O.S.B., writes, “*In making the psalms his own Christ gave them their definitive meaning. They are the prayers of the man-God who is the Son of God. He became incarnate, so to speak, in them. For this reason a Christian understanding of the psalms cannot neglect any dimension of these prayers that contributed to their original meaning, since that is the meaning taken up into the prayer of Christ.*”⁴ Therefore, when praying the psalms or studying the psalms or scriptures as Jesus does, “*It is necessary to begin with the literal meaning of the passage in its historical context. For the Book of Psalms this includes an understanding of the genre or category of psalms, its internal structural and emotional tensions, imagery, rhythm, and poetic devices such as parallelism and*

² Ibid Pg. 36

³ What Happens at Mass, Driscoll Jeremy O.S.B., LTP 2011 Pg. 42

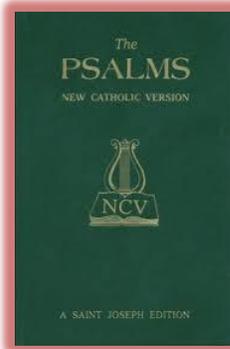
⁴ Praying the Psalms in Christ, Kriegshauser, Lawrence, UND Press, 2009, Pg. 5

*chiasmus,*⁵ *and asyndeton,*⁶ *and consonance,*⁷ *by which its meaning is enhanced or reinforced.”*⁸ For example, many psalms speak of the love that God has for his people. “*Thus when a psalm speaks of God’s love (hesed) for his people, the Christian means the love shown in his sending of his son to die for us.*” Again, “*When it speaks of God’s dwelling among his people in the temple, the Christian means the Body of Christ his Church.*”⁹

“The Book of Psalms represents a collection of 150 sacred hymns used for private devotion and public worship in the Temple liturgy.”¹⁰ In the preface of their book, “The Psalms: New Catholic Version: A Saint Joseph Edition,” Catholic Book Publishing under the Imprimatur of the Most Reverend Joseph A. Fiorenza, give an excellent snapshot to understanding the psalms, which is worth quoting at length.

They write,

In the life of Christians, there can never be too many translations of the Psalter. The Psalms are the prayer of God’s of the People of God. Psalter because of its of the chosen people’s adoption by the The Psalms may be Holy Spirit. Over the Spirit of God inspired the psalmists (typified by King David) to compose magnificent prayers and hymns for every religious desire and need, mood and feeling. Thus, the Psalms have great power to raise minds to God, to inspire devotion, to evoke gratitude in favorable times, and to bring consolation and strength in times of trial.



*assembly, the public prayer par excellence No prayer of Israel is comparable to the universal character. The idea of the unity prayer guided its elaboration as well as its Church.*¹¹

looked upon as the prayer- book of the long centuries of Israel’s existence, the

⁵ Inverted word order or phrase

⁶ Leaving out conjunctions

⁷ Agreement, or similarity of consonants

⁸ Praying the Psalms in Christ, Kriegshauser, Laurence, UND Press, 2009, Pg. 5

⁹ Ibid Pg. 7

¹⁰ A Biblical Walk Through The Mass: Understanding What We Say And Do In The Liturgy, Sri Edward Ascension 2010, Pg. 61

¹¹ The Psalms NCV Saint Joseph Edition Catholic Book N.J. 2001 PG 7

Furthermore, in giving us the Psalter, which sums up the major aspects of our relationship to our Creator and Redeemer, God puts into our mouths the words he wishes to hear, and indicates to us the dimensions of prayer:

*“The Psalms call to mind the truths revealed by God to the chosen people, which were at one time frightening and at another filled with wonderful tenderness; they keep repeating and fostering the hope of the promised Redeemer, which in ancient times was kept alive with song, either around the hearth or in the stately temple; they show forth in splendid light the prophesied glory of Jesus Christ: first, his supreme and eternal power, then his lowly coming to this earthly exile, his kingly dignity and priestly power, and finally his beneficent labors, and the shedding of his blood for our redemption.”*¹²

Jesus and the Psalms

Jesus often prayed the Psalms. At the age of twelve, as a pilgrim on the way to the temple in Jerusalem, he sang the Psalms meant for this journey: “I rejoiced when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD.’ And finally our feet are standing at your gates, O Jerusalem” (Ps 122:1f).

The Gospels tell us that Jesus frequented the synagogue of Nazareth on the Sabbath and that consequently he took part in the reading of the Scriptures and the recitation of the Psalms.

Again, Jesus took part in the singing of the great Alleluia Psalm with its refrain, “His love endures forever” (Ps 136).

If we read carefully the account of the Passion of Jesus, we glimpse citations from many Psalms; finally, his last words on the Cross were supplied by the Psalms: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1) and “Into your hands I commend my spirit” (Ps 31:6)

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the first Christian community made the Psalms its own, applying to the Lord and to itself what was said in the Psalms about the People of God, Jerusalem, the king, the temple, the promised land, the kingdom, and the Covenant.

¹² Ibid Pg. 7

Jewish prayers become the prayers of the Church; the dead and risen Lord is the new Passover; the Eucharist is the everlasting Covenant.

Thus, Christians who pray the Psalms should be aware of their total meaning, especially their Messianic meaning, which was the reason for the Church's introduction of the Psalter into her prayer. This Messianic meaning was fully revealed in the New Testament and indeed was publicly acknowledged by Christ the Lord when he said to his apostles:

"Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Lk 24:44). The best known example of this Messianic meaning is the dialogue in Matthew's Gospel on the Messiah as Son of David and David's Lord (22:44ff): there Psalm 110 is interpreted as Messianic.

Following this line of thought, the Fathers of the Church saw the whole Psalter as a prophecy of Christ and the Church and explained it in this sense; for the same reason the Psalms have been chosen for use in the sacred Liturgy. ¹³

Prayer Book of the Church

Some may wonder why the Church makes use of Psalms from ancient times in order to pray in our day. Isn't she capable of creating new prayers? In truth, the creativity of the Church is evidenced in many other ways. However, she knows that there is no need for new Psalms since these were the work of the Holy Spirit. They are inspired prayers, appropriate for all times.

The Church knows and teaches that there is only one economy of salvation and it includes both the Old and the New Covenant. The Psalter is the prayer book for this entire history—containing both thanksgiving for the wonders that God has already accomplished and expectation for the promises of the Kingdom.

Naturally, then, she invites us to pray the Psalms with understanding. This means reading all the historical or prophetic accounts to which they allude. Such a study certainly is in accord with the Biblical study of them made by Jesus with the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Lk 24:44-45).

¹³ Ibid Pg. 9

Perhaps no one used the Psalms in this sense more than St. Augustine. He pored over the Psalms till he practically knew them by heart. His all-around knowledge of them led him to use the Psalms as his own.

The opening words of his classic Confessions are woven out of the Psalms: "Great are you, O Lord, and worthy of praise; great is your power and incalculable is your wisdom." Cardinal Michael Pellegrino pointed out that these words are formed from a combination of four Psalms (47:1; 95:4; 144:5; 146:5).

This use of the Psalms shows that St. Augustine found in them the most fitting words to express his religious feeling at those moments when it was most intense. The Italian Scripture scholar Gianfranco Ravasi has noted that out of 60,000 Biblical quotations used by St. Augustine in his works 25,000 came from the Old Testament and of those 11,500 were from the Psalms.

We should follow the example of the Bishop of Hippo and be suffused with the Psalms so that the Bible becomes our history. We enter anew into the Biblical tradition to relive the experience of the Exodus, of the departure into Exile, and of the Return.

We rediscover in our own history the actualization of the history of God with human beings. God always says the same thing. It is up to us to discover this unique Word beneath the everyday events.

This is how our praying of the Psalms can become concrete and can lead us to a surer unraveling of the ways God acts in the world. ¹⁴

Praying with the Psalms in the Name of Christ

Christ made his own the prayer of the Psalms. He made his own the cries, the suffering, and the despair of the Psalms. He purified, transfigured, and fulfilled the cry of his people and the prayer of the poor.

The Word incarnate assumed the human condition of sinful human beings with its trials and infirmities (except sin). He experienced moments of exultation in the presence of God, human beings, and creation.

¹⁴ Ibid Pg. 10

At the same time, he also experienced the anguish brought on by the apparent absence or indifference of God and the wrath of enemies. He experienced physical trials (fatigue, suffering, and death) with the moral trials that accompany them.

He experienced all the feelings of those who prayed the Psalms and all the situations underlying their prayers. He had no need of inventing formulas to pray in these diverse situations, for the Holy Spirit had prepared for him human formulas patterned after his celestial chant. Jesus used the Psalms for his prayer from the first instant of his life until his death on the Cross. He had recourse to the Psalms for the liturgy of his supreme offering. And he used a verse from the Psalms as his last word: "Into your hands I commend my spirit" (Psalm 31:6; Luke 23:46).

Jesus placed himself on high, drawing all people with and after him. He became part of sacred history and made its prayer his own. He inhabited the Psalms.

Since he has effectively expressed his piety in the Psalms, Jesus invites us to see in them the faithful mirror of the sentiments and motions of his soul, the mirror that permits us to grasp his spiritual life. The Psalms enable us to complete and make precise the spiritual portrait that the Gospels give us of Christ.

Thus, the entire Psalter presents Christ to us— his voice, his history, from his birth to his Resurrection. All the Psalms refer to him. By praying them, we receive a kind of Fifth Gospel: the Gospel of the Holy Spirit.

As mentioned above, the Fathers of the Church believed that every Psalm speaks to us of Christ. On this point, too, we can call upon St. Augustine as their spokesperson:

"To announce Christ, the Scriptures make use of figures; this veil that hid the truths contained in the ancient books was to be removed when the Truth in person appeared on earth. Hence, when we read the Psalms, the Prophets, and the Law, written before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, our sole concern should be to discern Christ and to know Christ" (Commentary on Psalm 98).¹⁵

Praying with the Psalms in the Name of the Church

¹⁵ Ibid Pg. 12

The Church has made her own the prayer of the Psalms. She makes use of the Psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours and in the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. This is altogether appropriate since the Church is the Body of Christ.

As St. Augustine indicated, praying with the Psalms is a case of praying in two voices: that of Christ and that of the Church, the Head and the Body. “Sometimes, the Head alone speaks; at other times he speaks in the name of his Body, the Church, spread out through the whole earth” (Commentary on Psalm 37:6).

We should strive to pray with the Psalms in the name of the Church. If we do so, difficulties disappear when we notice in prayer that the feelings of our hearts are different from the emotions expressed in the Psalm—for example, when a Psalm of joy finds us sad and overcome with grief or a Psalm of sorrow finds us full of joy.

If we pray in this way, we can always find a reason for joy or sadness, for the saying of the Apostles applies in this case too: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). In this way, our human frailty, wounded by self-love, is healed in that degree of love in which our mind and voice are in harmony.

In the Psalms we recognize the voice of the Church, the Apostles and the Martyrs. The whole Church, throughout her history, presents herself before God like a single supplicant, immense and perpetual.

In the Church, Christ continues his Passion, just as he continues his prayer. There is the passion of the Martyrs, the passion of human distress, the passion of the poor, overwhelmed with the universal suffering that causes the Psalmist to cry out: “[They] . . . seek my life” (Psalm 63:10).¹⁶

Praying with the Psalms in Our Own Name

A third way of praying with the Psalms is in our own name. By bringing our own experience of life to the praying of the Psalms we make these ancient prayers our own. Because our life is constantly changing, we bring something fresh to the Psalms every time we pray them.

In praying the Psalms this way, we must realize that God not only speaks to us but also inspires our response. In the words of St. Augustine, “the Psalter is the voice of the Spirit of

¹⁶ Ibid Pg. 13

God—if he did not inspire these words in us, we would not say them. . . . In the final analysis, they are our words, for they express our wretchedness, and at the same time they are not since they are a gift of the Spirit” (Commentary on Psalm 26, 1).

Thus, praying with the Psalms also entails a listening. We pray them with wisdom, that is, we discern clearly in them what we must say or sing. If we do, we will pray them with understanding, and our words will be a true prayer.

We must approach the Psalms as being human words, the utterances of very incarnate human beings confronted with the risks of human life. Through them we rediscover our whole humanity with its struggles, rebellions, anguish, and even salvation and joy—life and death. We come to understand that everything is a way to God.

If we enter into the Psalter, it will become an opportunity to rediscover our own humanity: its anguish, its rebellion, its violence, and its reconciliation as well.

In the Psalms, people have a body: a mouth to cry out, a heart to love, arms to stretch out, and legs to dance. The Psalms allow us to use our bodies as expressions of ourselves: of our cry, our fear, our death, and doubtless our resurrection. They restore to us the primary instrument of prayer that God has given us. They teach us to pray with our bodies as well as with our words.

Thus, in the final analysis, we hope to draw from the Psalms spiritual food for faith, hope, and love. On this point, St. Augustine is once more on the mark:

“Every page of Scripture recommends to us faithful patience in present evils, firm hope in future goals, and ardent love for the One whom we do not see so that we may hold fast to him when we do see him” (Commentary on Psalm 91).¹⁷

A St. Joseph Edition

It is a well known fact that different translations of the Psalms (like different translations of any subject) bring different meanings for each one of us. The Bible and especially the Psalms are so full of meaning that we can rightly say no single edition will do them full justice.

Hence, it has become customary for Christians to make use of many translations of the sacred books in order to get to know the Bible and pray with its text.

¹⁷ Ibid Pg. 14

Therefore, we have thought it worthwhile to make available a Catholic Version of the Psalms in the renowned and exclusive format of our St. Joseph Editions of Bibles and Missals. The St. Joseph Edition is an editorial system developed over a span of fifty years. It consists in a series of features intended to ensure that a text (particularly a biblical or liturgical text) is user friendly, leading to greater readability and easier understanding. The textual features or format in the present case are a large readable typeface, additional headings or titles, and a full measure extension for long lines of poetry that clearly indicates when a line has a runover. It also includes a general introduction to the Psalter, Psalm introductions, copious cross-references, and pastoral notes. For greater clarity and convenience, the footnotes and cross-references are printed at the bottom of each page and cross-indexed in the text itself.

An asterisk () in the text indicates that there is a footnote to the text in question. Each footnote is in turn clearly marked with the number of the Psalm and the verse to which it pertains. Similarly, a superior letter (a) in the text indicates that there is a cross-reference to a particular verse. The reference itself is also clearly marked with the same letter. Hence, the reader is always aware of a helpful footnote or cross-reference, simply by reading the text.¹⁸*

Variations in Numbering

The Psalter contains 150 Psalms in the Hebrew and the Latin Vulgate. Their numbering, however, is slightly different since the Vulgate joins Pss 9 and 10 of the Hebrew into a single psalm, and again 114 and 115 of the Hebrew into a single psalm, while dividing 116 and 147 of the Hebrew into two psalms. The numbering is as follows:

Hebrew

1—8 =

9. 9 =

10. 10 =

11—113 =

114. 114 =

115. 115 =

¹⁸ Ibid Pg. 15

116:1-9 = 116:10-19 = 117—146 = 147:1-11 = 147:12-20 = 148—150 =

Vulgate

1—8 9:1-21 9:22-39 10—112 113:1-8 113:9-26 114

115 116—145 146

147 148—150

*Most Catholic translations after 1943 (in accord with the recommendation of Pope Pius XII in his ground-breaking encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* to translate from the original languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—instead of the Latin Vulgate) make use of the Hebrew numbering of the Psalms. Those completed before 1943 usually have the Vulgate numbering. This fact is important especially when Catholics desire to locate the Psalms used in the Liturgy.*

Liturgical English texts sometimes follow the Latin Vulgate since they are a translation from the Latin liturgical books. Hence, to find the text of the Responsorial Psalm for any Sunday Mass, one must be guided by the above chart to get the number correct.

However, there is also a second difference in numbering—the enumeration of the verses. All but 35 of the Psalms begin with “superscriptions” (sometimes called “titles”). These contain the name of the supposed author of the psalm, the circumstances of its composition, a note about its liturgical use, and obscure phrases about its melody or its musical accompaniment. Most Catholic Bibles have traditionally assigned a verse number to these superscriptions. In some, however, these superscriptions are not assigned a number.

This means that, in most cases, the numbers that give the references for psalm verses used in the Liturgy are at least one digit higher than the corresponding verses in versions that do not number the superscriptions. For the convenience of our readers, one part of the Appendix lists the correct verse numbers for the Responsorial Psalm for every Sunday celebration.

Another part of the Appendix lists the psalms in the four-week Psalter for Morning and Evening Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours.

We trust this new edition of the Psalms will lead many into a better understanding of the Psalms and a fuller knowledge of Jesus Christ the incarnate Word, of whom the Psalms so faithfully testify. ¹⁹

True Disciples of Jesus understand the value of mining the psalms daily for the pearls that can nourish the soul.

¹⁹ Ibid Pg. 17

Photo Sources

David Praying the Psalms Pg. 1

<http://biblescripture.net/Harp.jpeg>

Jesus Praying Pg. 2

https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/Believer%2527s%252520Corner/prayer-jesus.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/Believer's%2520Corner/prayer_made_simple.htm&h=600&w=443&tbnid=4jyprm4fld2xUM:&docid=UMNT6W1pZs0JjM&ei=OKqrVszVKtiiwO617KwDw&tbm=isch&client=safari&ved=0ahUKEwjM0f6wzs_KAhVY0WMKHbqrDPYQMwgvKBMwEw

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