



PSALMS OF ORIENTATION, DISORIENTATION AND NOW ORIENTATION

Recently I came across the following article on the Psalms by Fr. William Parker who has degrees in Biblical Studies. He writes:

We might say the psalms have great “staying power.” Still, they come from a time and culture quite different from our own. How are we to make sense of these prayers? Why do they echo, even now, some of our deepest yearnings and our strongest fears?

The Church has been fascinated with the psalms for centuries. At one time it was thought that King David wrote a great many of these prayers. Long after his death, Jews continued to identify themselves with this popular king, waiting in hope for a “new David,” who would restore their fortunes and their kingdom. Although there is a strong tradition that David or someone in his court may have composed some of these prayers, most biblical scholars today believe that the psalms were written by others who lived much later.

If David did not write the psalms, then who did? We will never know, I suspect. The most probable answer is that no one person wrote the psalms; rather, they developed out of the ongoing prayers of a faithful community. This concept is hard for us to understand today. We naturally think of a song or poem as expressing the ideas and feelings of an individual. But in ancient Israel a psalm grew out of years of experience of the community. Indeed, these prayers were ultimately written down by individuals, but they could not claim to be the authors.

The prayers we use at Mass today originated in a similar way. The opening prayer, for example, was written by someone, but that person drew on prayers that had been spoken over the centuries in various places and in a variety of forms. Indeed, the modern composers of our Mass prayers stood on the shoulders of a great many unknown people of faith, and so it would be impossible to attribute authorship to any one individual.

In the nineteenth century a German biblical scholar named Hermann Gunkel began to pay attention to the form of the psalms. His extraordinary efforts have affected their study ever since. He observed that the psalms could be categorized based on their particular

form. Most fell into one of three very different groups: *the psalms of lament*, which reflected an experience of sorrow or distress (for example, Psalms 3, 10, 22, 44); the *psalms of thanksgiving*, which breathed an enormous sigh of gratitude at being rescued from some danger (for example, Psalms 9, 18, 30, 32); and another smaller but important *group of hymns that simply praised God*, not just for what God has done, but for who God is (for example, Psalms 8, 100, 113, 150).

Understanding the different forms of the psalms is important. However, not everyone is familiar enough with Hebrew poetry to recognize the different forms, and biblical scholars since the time of Gunkel have identified many other forms within the Book of Psalms (*penitential psalms, wisdom, psalms, royal psalms*, and so forth). Still, it was Gunkel who recognized that the majority of psalms expressed great sorrow or great relief at the rescue from sorrow. Other biblical scholars have used that insight to look at the psalms in a new way.

Walter Brueggemann, Ph.D., for example, has developed a way to bring the psalms into our own personal lives. In his book entitled *Praying the Psalms* (Saint Mary’s Press) he suggests that the *psalms reflect two very basic movements in everyone’s life*. One is the move into the “pit”. It happens when our world collapses around us and we feel that there is no way out of the deep hole into which we have sunk. The *other move is out of the pit into a welcome place*. We suddenly understand what has happened and who has brought us up out of the pit.

Brueggemann further suggests that human beings regularly find themselves in *one of three places*: a place of *orientation*, in which everything makes sense in our lives; a place of *disorientation*, in which we feel we have sunk into the pit; and a place of *new orientation*, in which we realize that God has lifted us out of the pit and we are in a new place full of gratitude and awareness about our lives and our God. Using these three “places,” Brueggemann suggests that life has a rhythm as we move from one place to the next. He believes that that psalms match those places and the surprisingly painful and joyful moves we make. In short, there are psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. Recognizing that different psalms match these three places in our lives can help us

identify psalms that fit our personal lives. Let me explain.

Psalms of *orientation* reflect the ordinariness of life. Most of us spend a large part of our lives in this place. Things are settled and life makes sense for the most part. We have a sense of confidence in the regularity of life and God's creation. A number of psalms express this outlook, articulating a confidence that the world is orderly due to God's wisdom built into the world at the time of Creation. We find in these psalms a sense that good people prosper and the wicked are punished. They express the conviction that God is the one who guarantees life and protects it. Psalm 33 is typical of these psalms of orientation. It is a song about a world made secure by God's justice; everything about the world reveals God's faithfulness.

But life rarely stays so orderly and coherent; at times it can be brutal and irrational. We can watch our world collapse without warning, and we are pulled down into what seems a dark pit. In this pace of *disorientation* hangs a great sense of abandonment. The psalmist moans, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1). Our usual response to this rupture of our equilibrium is denial. We want to believe that things are really OK, but even if we know they are not, we certainly do not want anyone else to know. Our denial forces us to cover up. We put on a happy face, and our isolation grows more intense.

A number of psalms give voice to experiences of *abandonment* in this broken and terrifying place long before the time of Christ. These psalms of lament, which are the most numerous in the Book of Psalms, are audacious affirmations of faith. They bring this harsh brokenness to God, resisting the temptation to deny reality. Those who prayed these laments were confident that God would understand their negative language. When we are in a time of disorientation, praying these psalms challenges our desire to keep up a good front and helps us bring to speech those feelings we might otherwise keep hidden. In one typical lament the psalmist cries out four times, "How long?" and insists that God answer this prayer. (See Ps 13:1-3).

The *language of the lament psalms can seem scandalous*. How can faithful people speak to God that way? Often we want to make excuses for such outspokenness. We may even be uncomfortable with these prayers. Yet they are the collective prayers of a people in pain. They are not magical, however; praying these psalms will not make everything better. But unless they are spoken, we run the risk of trivializing our relationship with God. The language of the lament calls upon God by name and expects a

response. It takes a great faith to be so candid.

Every one of the lament psalms except Psalm 88 concludes with a prayer of thanksgiving. It would be simplistic to suppose that once the lament had been prayed the person's complaint was immediately answered and life was restored. We do not know how many weeks, months, or even years passed before the psalmist could utter those words of thanks signaling the end of the lament. But concluding with a prayer of thanksgiving reflects our faith that God will rescue us and bring us up from the depths.

God does hear our prayer, and when this happens, it is always a surprise: the surprise of grace. Then change in circumstances cannot be explained by logic or inevitability. It comes only from the goodness of God. The move to a new place in our lives, a "new orientation," as Dr. Brueggemann calls it, is accompanied by the language of joyful gratitude. We are fully conscious of this move as a gift. *The psalms of new orientation are filled with amazement, awe, and gratitude*. They narrate how God has rescued the individual in a decisive way. Psalm 30 is a good example. The psalmist tells the story of sinking into the pit (see vv. 8-10) and being raised out of it (see vv. 11-12).

This period of new orientation is not simply a return to normal where everything is coherent again. The rhythm of life expressed in the psalms is not circular. New orientation is another stage in our journey of faith. The experience of the pit has changed us, and the experience of God's grace has transformed our life. We cannot go back again. We now know something about life and God's way of fidelity that cannot permit a return to an earlier faith. The psalms are not only personal prayers; they are above all "pilgrimage" prayers. Life becomes coherent once again, and the pilgrimage goes on. But we must learn not to forget, which is why we need to pray the psalms daily.

The psalms are prayers of praise that were spoken by individuals and by groups. They were sung in formal worship centers, such as the Temple in Jerusalem, though far more often in the private sanctuary of individual hearts. The psalmist sings: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits" (Ps 103:2), then goes on to enumerate at least five of those benefits. Here we find a clue as to why the psalms remained the prayer of a faithful community. We sing praise in order to remember because we so easily and quickly forget. These prayers remind us what it means to praise God, that is, to not forget all God's benefits.

When we pray the psalms we find in them the

eloquence and honesty of a people who trusted that God was there in times of coherence, despair, and gracious gift. But we also bring to the psalms our own similar experiences. We might express them in different and imaginative ways, but these ancient prayers still mirror our life struggles, and the pilgrimage of faith goes on.

PSALM SUGGESTIONS

Psalms of Orientation

These psalms reflect a confident belief that the world is well ordered, reliable, and life-giving to the person of faith.

Psalm 1

Psalm 8
Psalm 14
Psalm 33
Psalm 37
Psalm 104

Psalm

112
119
131
133
145

Psalms of Disorientation

These psalms reflect the brokenness of life when it is no longer orderly but savage. Spoken out of the depths, they are still bold acts of faith.

Psalm 13
Psalm 22
Psalm 32
Psalm 35
Psalm 50
Psalm 51
Psalm 73
Psalm 74

Psalm 79
Psalm 81
Psalm 86
Psalm 88
Psalm 130
Psalm 137
Psalm 143

Psalms of New Orientation

The pit is not the end of life; There is more. New orientation Psalms reflect the surprise of New possibilities that are Experienced as pure gift from God. They are full of thanks. -William J. Parker, C.Ss.R,

Psalm 23
Psalm 27
Psalm 30
Psalm 34
Psalm 40
Psalm 65
Psalm 66
Psalm 91

Psalm 100
Psalm 103
Psalm 113
Psalm 117
Psalm 124
Psalm 135
Psalm 138
Psalm 150

Something to Reflect On

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are more blessed than the million who won't survive the week.

If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture or The pangs of starvation, you are ahead of 20 million people around the world.

If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish someplace, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy.

If your parents are still married and alive, you are very rare, especially in the United States.

If you hold up your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful, you are blessed because the majority can, but most do not.

If you can hold someone's hand, hug them or even touch them on the shoulder, you are blessed because you can offer God's healing touch.

If you can read this message, you are more blessed than over two billion people in the world, that cannot read anything at all.

If you attend a church meeting without fear of harassment, arrest, torture, or death,

you are more blessed than almost three billion people in the world.

If you have food in your refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of this world.

You are so blessed in ways you may never even know.

from Agnes Wachtel

Have a blessed week,

Le Paran