



Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time B September 23, 2018

◆ The Old Testament: Part Twelve Introduction to the Book of Psalms

◆ Inner cravings that can bring destruction to our lives

Introduction. To open the Book of the Psalms is to open the door into the worship world of Jewish believers since 1,000 B.C. and of Christian believers since the time of Christ. In the centuries before Christ, Jewish believers would sing the Psalms as they made their way to Jerusalem for their annual religious festivals. Jesus and some of his disciples sang some of the same hymns as they left the upper room after their last supper together. Early Christians sang “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph 5:19) in prison (Acts 16:25) and in other difficult times. Today in monasteries, convents and religious houses all over the world, monks, priests, religious sisters and brothers gather at certain times of the day and night to pray the Psalms. In some parishes, lay men and women gather before morning Mass to pray the Psalms, and individuals pray them in the quiet of their homes. “In turbulent times of history, when the foundations are shaking (Ps 11:3) and the world seems on the verge of chaos, many people testify that the Psalms enable them to speak to God “out of the depths” in company with the community of faith, visible and invisible, past and present, local and worldwide” (Bernhard Anderson). We can say the Psalms have great staying power.

The word Psalm. The Book of Psalms, also known as the Psalter, is a collection of one hundred and fifty prayers/poems composed by the Hebrew people over a period of about 600 years, from around 1,000 B.C. to 400 B.C. The title Psalm in Hebrew—“tehillim”—means “praises” and the English title comes from the Greek word “psalmos,” meaning a song accompanied by a stringed instrument. The word “praises” captures the context of the Psalter better than any other word. Even in the Psalms of sorrow and distress, a note of confidence and trust in God comes through.

The Psalms express every mood of the human heart. One of the reasons that people of all races and backgrounds are drawn to the Psalms is because they

express every mood in the human heart: joy, despair, discouragement, anger, disappointment, weariness, etc. In the Psalter, we can find a Psalm for every season and time. In his book *Out of the Depths*, Bernhard Anderson writes: “*The Psalms speak ‘for’ us by expressing the whole gamut of human responses to God’s reality in our midst and thereby teaching us how to pray with others in the various circumstances of our lives*” (p.1X).

Who wrote the Psalms? Traditionally, the Book of Psalms have been attributed to David because he is depicted in the books of Samuel as a musician (1Sam 16:16-23) who composes songs (2Sam 1:17, 2 Sam 22). Also, David’s name appears in the heading of 73 Psalms. Thirteen of the Psalms are associated with an event in David’s life. Today it is generally agreed that many of the Psalms attributed to David were written at a much later time. Some Psalms are attributed to others, such as Asaph and the sons of Korah. About fifty of the Psalms are anonymous.

Types of Psalms. There are three major groups of Psalms: Songs of Lament, Hymns of Praise, and Songs of Thanksgiving. Then there are several smaller groupings, such as the Royal Psalms and Wisdom Psalms.

Lament Psalms

The largest group of Psalms (almost one-third of the Psalter) is called Lament or Supplication Psalms. They could be an individual’s cry for help or a community’s plea for God’s intervention. In contrast to Psalms of Praise where the focus is God, Lament or Supplication Psalms express the personal needs of the psalmist or those of the nation. The reasons for the lament vary: sickness, sin, old age, unjust accusation or enemies. Most laments do a U-turn in midstream. The complaining changes to thanksgiving or an act of confidence in God. For example, after the psalmist in Psalm 54 tells God of his need, he says: “*Behold, God is my helper; I will praise your name, O Lord, because from all my distress you have rescued me.*”

Sometimes in Psalms of Lament, the psalmist would make an unabashed declaration of his own innocence and his enemy’s wickedness. Another psalmist would express intense hatred for his enemies and ask God to destroy

them. In Psalm 137, the psalmist, in exile in Babylon, says at the end of the Psalm:

“Fair Babylon, you destroyer, happy those who pay you back the evil you have done us. Happy those who seize your children and smash them against a rock.” (vv 8-9)

Oops! As you can see, there is no U-turn in this Psalm from complaint to thanksgiving. Commenting on this change about in the Lament Psalms, Peter Ellis writes: *In the final analysis, the apparent boasting and the apparent personal hatred of enemies spring from the psalmist’s concern for God’s honor. If God does not treat His friends well, His reputation for goodness, power, and fidelity will suffer in the eyes of men. If He does not punish His enemies, His reputation for impartial justice and implacable hatred for evil may be put in question. In either case, His honor is at stake in the eyes of the psalmist. It is the psalmist’s concern with God’s honor that the student should keep in mind when he reads what might otherwise be interpreted as complete ignorance or forgetfulness of the Old Testament commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself (Lev 19:18)”* (The Men and Message of the Old Testament, pp 240-241).

In her book *The Catholic Companion to the Psalms*, Sr. Mary Kathleen Glavich writes: *“Through the laments, we are able to work through feelings of rage and frustration. We can pray these pleading psalms whenever we’re trapped in a crisis or life has dealt us a blow. If our pain is excruciating, it helps to pray a lament boldly with a strong voice, even shouting. Like the Israelites, we should be confident that our good and loving God will hear our petition”* (pp 26-27).

When we read a Psalm in which the psalmist is praying for deliverance from persecution, we should reflect on how we ourselves are being persecuted. If we are not being persecuted, we should pray the Psalm on behalf of others who are. If we don’t do this, the Psalms may become senseless and empty.

Two types of Lament Psalms. Lament Psalms may be communal or individual. *Community Lament Psalms* consist of prayers in the name of the people asking God to protect them against the threat of war, famine, exile. *Individual Lament Psalms* are concerned with the plight of the individual seeking deliverance from sickness, death, senility, slander and enemies.

On our parish website, see Level 2 for the full version of this article. See Level 3 for a fuller commentary on the Book of Psalms.

Inner cravings that can bring destruction to our lives

Today, we listened to the fourth of five excerpts from St. James’ Epistle. A part of this fourth excerpt deals with “inner craving” that can get us in trouble and make life difficult for us. James says: *“Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice.”*

Jealousy. Jealousy is an insidious feeling or emotion that can wreak havoc on our relationships and steal our inner joy. Jealousy has destroyed many marriages and seriously hurt many more. I do not have a lot of wisdom to offer on this particular feeling. I have over the years read articles and books on most emotions: sadness, joy, fear/anxiety, shame, etc., but I don’t remember ever coming across a good article on jealousy. What causes it and what can help to free us of it? If you have read a good article on this topic, please share it. Two points:

- ◆ Feelings are neither right nor wrong. They just exist. It is never a sin to *feel* hate, jealousy, shame or envy, etc., Feelings only take on a moral dimension when they move us to engage in immoral behavior. It is therefore not wrong to *feel* jealous. But it is wrong if our feelings of jealousy lead us to engage in destructive behavior that damages another or harms relationships.
- ◆ It is generally accepted that the *root cause* of jealousy is *low self-esteem* and *insecurity*. It would seem that if we were truly in touch with our own goodness and giftedness, we would not need to be jealous of another or of his/her qualities. In fact, true self-esteem would allow us to *celebrate* and not be jealous of the successes of another.

Envy. Today’s readings warn us about the sin of envy. In the first reading, some people plot to destroy a person they are envious of. In the Gospel, the disciples are jockeying for the top spot in the new kingdom Jesus is creating. In the second reading, James names envy as one of the inner cravings that can lead to destruction in our lives. Reflecting on the destructive nature of envy, Jay Cormier tells the following story.

Once upon a time a CEO of a large and important corporation promoted two of his brightest young executives for rapid promotion because they were so creative and so intelligent and so hard working. Everyone knew, including the executives whom he had passed over, that one or the other of these men would be the next CEO. One was named president of the company and the other the Vice CEO. They had been close friends for twenty years and their combined talents and dedication had been responsible for the rapid growth of the firm. However, once it became clear to both of them that only one could

win the prize, they began to try to undercut one another. Their friendship ended. Their wives stopped speaking to one another (though they had been friends, too). The other executives enjoyed the rivalry and plotted how they could undercut both of them. Now the big problem was that the two stopped cooperating with one another and that cooperation had been the key to the firm's success. Sales fell off, a little bit and then a lot. Wall Street, as you can imagine, didn't like that at all. Two months before the CEO was to retire, the board of directors intervened and fired him. Then they brought in a new CEO from another company. Everyone said that if the two crown princes had only cooperated a little more, they both would have won. Two children, an analyst said, could have run that company, it was so successful. But these adults couldn't. (Used with permission from Jay Cormier, Copyright 2010 by connections/Media Works. All rights reserved.)

True & false ambition. In the second reading, James also names false ambition as a destructive inner craving. In the Gospel, we have a concrete example of false ambition. Reflecting on the issue of true and false ambition, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

There's nothing wrong with being ambitious. Indeed, it is good to be ambitious, to have goals, to want to be good at what one does and to succeed in it. But ambition can get out of hand. It can cause us to forget everything else in the pursuit of success in business or in a career.

Hence, we must be careful what we are sacrificing in the pursuit of our goals. We may be sacrificing family life, justice, kindness, even life itself. Drive and ambition can cause one to treat others in a cruel or unjust way. What good will it do us if we gain the whole world but lose ourselves?

In the Gospel we see the apostles fighting over who would be first in Jesus' kingdom. The scene is not an edifying one. That they are driven by selfishness and false ambition shows how little they had learned from Jesus. It shows how poor was their understanding of his mission. Jesus called them together and gave them a lecture on the meaning of true greatness.

Jesus did not abolish ambition. Rather, he redefined it. For the ambition to rule others, he substitutes the ambition to serve others. For the ambition to have others do things for us, he substituted the ambition to do things for others. So, it is not ambition itself that is being condemned, but false ambition.

False ambition is very damaging to the unity of the community. It springs from jealousy and selfishness. And

it can result in all kinds of ugly behavior. So much of the violence and evil in our society results from greed and selfishness. Self-interest creates conflict and often results in painful divisions.

There is a good form of ambition which Christians should not shy away from. Jesus did not tell the apostles that they should not seek greatness in his kingdom. He just showed them where true greatness was to be found. It is not to be found in being the masters of others, but rather in being the servants of others, especially the weaker members of the community.

It's easier to serve the great, because we feel honoured through our association with them, and there is a better chance of rewards. But the real test is serving the least, from whom we cannot expect any rewards. Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes one such child, welcomes me." Welcome' means loving service. And 'child' stands for the weakest members of the community, who are the mostneedy. Service rendered to the least is best of all. We hear the same words in the last judgment scene, "As long as you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me."

Jesus set the example himself. Though he had authority from God, he never used that authority to dominate others. Instead, he used it to serve others. And that service was directed towards the poor, the sick, the maimed, the outcast ...

The really great people, those who are fondly remembered, are not those who sought to further themselves in their own interests, but rather those who devoted themselves to furthering the interests of the community.

Service implies that you're not there for yourself. You are there for others. In order to serve, one has to be very self-effacing. A servant has to get used to being taken for granted.

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I am glad to say that here at Ascension, we have *many humble servants* of the Lord. Week after week, they go about their service not seeking attention. They are simply glad to have the *opportunity* to serve God and to be of help to others.

Have a blessed week,

