



THE PSALMS by Father Robbie Low

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tucked between the long lament and engagement with suffering that is the Book of Job and extraordinary and frequently indigestible compilation that is the Book of Proverbs, lies a treasure chest which funds and informs the very heart of Christian spirituality. The collection of some 150 prayer poems and meditations is the hymnbook of the Church and has been the core of Judeo-Christian prayer for the best part of three millennia.

The Psalms are the heartbeat of the praying church and form the backbone of her liturgy. It is no accident that the daily offices of the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican communions are comprised overwhelmingly by psalms and that the ancient intention of St. Benedict that the entire Psalter should be prayed weekly infuses the intention of the duties of priest and religious alike. (St. Benedict, incidentally, saw this as a concession to the weakness of that generation who could not emulate their religious predecessors by reciting the entire psalter daily.)

The import of the Psalter has been underlined in other traditions by the printing of New Testaments (detached from the whole corpus of the Canon of Old Testament) but always including a psalter. New Testament AND Psalms, they belong together.

We should not be entirely surprised by this insistence and emphasis. The early Church had no Scripture or hymns of her own but the Old Testament and the Psalms. Within the Old Testament the New Testament was hidden and within the New Testament the mystery of the Old Testament was revealed and found fulfilment. If the Word of God, which created all things and was incarnate in the God-Man, Jesus Christ, was exposed in the Old Testament, nowhere was that more so than in the Psalms.

The psalms offer a degree of intimacy between God and Man that is as unique as it is profound. The praying of the Psalms is an heart to heart encounter with the Living and Eternal One and the range of its experience encompasses the whole condition of Man. You would be hard put to find a human expression which is not somewhere articulated in this catholic and comprehensive collection. To borrow the old phrase from the lost and unlamented by-line of the News of the World, 'All human life is here'.

Open the book, pray the prayers and discover yourself therein and find yourself naked in the Presence, like a child speaking to a loving Father.

The Psalms, therefore, are both a measure of our humanity and the process of its daily lifting up to God. Herein we see the work of Christ and participate in it.

Nor was the use of psalms part of the development of Church liturgy. It was inherent from the very beginning. If we cast our minds back to the most detailed of the Resurrection appearances, the Emmaus Road encounter, the disciples recall Jesus explaining Himself from the Old Testament AND....on

His subsequent appearing at the gathering of all the disciples, Jesus explanation contains specific reference to Him in the Book of Psalms.

Furthermore the Psalms play an immediate part in the ordering and preparation of what is to be the Church. On the contentious matter of the replacement of Judas – the needful reconstitution of the Apostolic Twelve to represent the Twelve Tribes - the political and spiritual process is taken directly from the Psalms. (Acts 1 v 20).

And, in the wake of the outpouring of the Spirit at the Pentecost, the original Christian sermon makes extensive reference to the Psalms and the place of the Davidic line in the provenance of Jesus as the Christ. (Acts 2 v 25f).

The Psalms are, according to James (Ch. 5), the natural recourse of a merry heart, an exposition of rejoicing. Colossians (3 v 16) sees them, inter alia, as educative, conforming us to the person of Christ. And, in Ephesians (5 v 15 – 20), the psalms help us focus on God, be filled with the Spirit and speak to ourselves the Divine Wisdom. In short, the Psalms are both central to our prayer life and to our understanding of Christ as He, in the divinely inspired Word, speaks through us and, by the power of the Presencing Spirit, prays in us and moves us Godward.

There is, of course, much more that could be said but my aim here is simply to remind myself (and you) of the immensity of what we study and pray and the beautiful and extravagant condescension of God to enable us to enjoy this amazing intimacy.

It is necessary now to get on and there can be no better starting place for the appreciation of this privileged intimacy than the very brief Psalm 131 (Hebrew numbering) 130 (Greek/Septuagint/Vulgate).

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