

Mass Parts 14/52: ***Psalms***



In the middle of the Old Testament, we have a collection of 150 songs, the Psalms. As songs, they are meant to be sung, not just recited. These were originally separate liturgical and private prayer songs of the Jewish people. As they began to collect their writings, these particular songs were seen as vital to their prayer lives and as revealed by God. Every possible emotion is expressed within the Psalms: crying out to God, complaints, contrition, adoration, thanksgiving, supplication. We can feel the pain of betrayal as expressed in Psalm 55:13-14: “For it is not an enemy that reviled me—that I could bear—not a foe who viewed me with contempt, from that I could hide. But it was you, my other self, my comrade and friend”; or the loneliness of Psalm 88:19: “my only friend is darkness.” The early Church, as it broke off from Judaism, carried with it the synagogue service of psalms and preaching. Psalms were reread with a Christian perspective: Think of Psalm 22, which begins with the words of Christ on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (22:2).

The early Christian hermits, continuing their Jewish roots, began to pray the entire collection of 150 psalms every day. St. Benedict, the father of moderate Western monasticism, spread the psalms out by theme into a one week cycle of prayers. Today, the Breviary, or Liturgy of the Hours, divides the psalms into a 4 week cycle. All clergy and religious vow to pray the Liturgy of the Hours every day, at certain times, on behalf of the People of God. So my personal prayer life is immersed in the tenors of the Psalms. The times, or “hours,” are established by Scripture as well. Psalm 119 tells how “at midnight I rise to praise you” (62); as well as how “seven times a day I praise you” (164). Every few hours, we are meant to stop and take time to praise God. We may complain and find it impossible, but Islam, including all believers, not just clergy, stops five times every day for prayer times.

There are certain psalms or individual verses of psalms that are not included in the Breviary. These are the “cursing” psalms. The revision of the Breviary in the 1960s found these too jarring for the everyday prayer life. They are quite intense, but show the emotion, and point of view of the song writers in the midst of oppression.

“O God, smash the teeth in their mouths” (58:7)

“May his children be fatherless, his wife a widow. May his children wander and beg.” (109:9-10)

“Blessed the one who seizes your children and smashes them against the rock.” (137:9)

More positively, there are also repeating refrains and key words in the Psalms. One key word, not found very frequently in the rest of Scripture is “*Hesed*.” This can mean: mercy, love, or faithfulness. This refrain is repeated in each of the 26 verses of Psalm 136: “His love endures forever.”

Don’t just zone out during the Psalm. Listen to the verses and sing along with the refrain. Become one in the point of view of the writer. One Sunday, these may be the perfect words to express what you are feeling.

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: Gospel