

Praying the Psalms

By [Lawrence S. Cunningham](#)

"In a doxological fashion, the psalms testify to the primordial truth of the entire biblical tradition. Negatively put, we are not condemned to complete autonomy. Positively put, we come out from God; we are sustained by God; and our proper destiny is to be with God."

That the complete psalter has been the prayerbook of synagogue and church is a commonplace. Cycles of psalms mark the liturgical life of both traditions. In the monastic tradition of Christendom, the 150 psalms (151 in the Eastern Orthodox churches) are gone through at a rate which historically varies from once a day to once a week. The language of the psalms has so shaped the very language and ethos of church life that it is difficult at times to recall the source of that influence.

Besides the public life of prayer, there is a long tradition of praying with the language of the psalms as part of private or domestic devotion. The character of psalmic language invites both public participation and private utterance. Psalm 24 with its strophic acclamation of "Lift up your head, O gates!" and the rhetorical question "Who is the King of Glory?" demands, as it were, choral expression, while the following psalm contracts to the personal pronoun and the private cry: "To thee, O Lord, I lift up my soul! O my God in thee I trust" (Ps. 25:1-2a). While most commentators on the psalter underscore its public and liturgical character, there is also agreement that some of the psalms have an individual character which points, however imperfectly this is understood, to a strand of private piety in ancient Israel. The reconstruction of that private piety is problematical, but can be assumed.

I assumed the above as a given when, this past year, I devoted time each day working through the psalter (I'm on my third go-round) with pen in hand in an exercise which falls somewhere between serious study and simple rumination. My method, if it can be called a method at all, was simply to read slowly and, on the first round, to jot at the head of the page, the various titles used for God. Round two focussed on what I will describe below as examples of "expansion and contraction." In this third round, I have dipped into commentaries a bit, but what follows is mostly my own reflections on what I have found and what has puzzled me. The impulse behind this exercise was no more dramatic than a desire to do somewhat systematically what I have been doing by bits and snatches over the years.

I

Exuberance. Even in the quiet of one's study, it is difficult to escape the clangor and energy of some of the psalms. At the very least, one feels compelled to drum one's fingers as we are invited to "Praise him with sounding cymbals/Praise him with loud clashing cymbals ..." (Ps. 150:5), just as Cecil B. DeMille visions invade our minds as "He sent out his arrows and scattered them/He flashed forth lightning and routed them./Then the channels of the sea were seen/and the foundations of the world were laid bare... ." (Ps. 18:14-15a). It is difficult, surely, to be at rest when the energy of the psalm demands movement and action as many of the ascent psalms surely do: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving/and his courts with praise/Give thanks to him, bless his name!" (Ps. 100:4).

But lines that trigger visual or auditory reactions do not exhaust the energy of the psalms. At times, it is the pure intensity of the language, especially the language of excoriation and rebuke, that astounds us. The psalmist is an accomplished hater who can ask God for a wish-list of ills to befall his enemies. Psalm 109 begs that an enemy's children be turned into orphans; that aliens will plunder his fields; that creditors will be merciless to him; that his name will be wiped out of the memory of posterity; that he end up a widower since, in a fine summary of the matter: "He loved to curse/let curses come upon him ..." (vv. 8-17). The Catholic liturgical tradition has paid a backhand tribute to the vehemence of Psalm 109 by excluding it from those used in the Divine Office, a small example of a canon within a canon.

The following psalm widens the scope of woes by expanding from a personal enemy to those who oppress from on high: "He will shatter kings on the day of his wrath/He will execute judgment among the nations/filling them with corpses./He will shatter chiefs [or: heads] over the wide earth ..." (Ps. 110:5a-6). I am not sure if it was verses like these that Cromwell's Roundheads sang as they marched off to do battle for a Holy Commonwealth, but such sentiments seem tailor-made for such an enterprise. One also wonders whether, following the sanction of Psalm 52, we are permitted to laugh at the fall of the evil person or whether such scorn is open to us only if we are sure of our own righteousness (vv. 6-7).

The energies of the psalmist can turn from a consideration of the enemy or the powers of the world to heat up the personal condition of the poet. The wished-for divine wrath against enemies can quickly turn on the writer, for "thy arrows have sunk into me and thy hand has come down on me" rendering one like a "deaf man" and a "dumb man" who is "ready to fall" with a pain that is "ever with me" (Ps. 38:2 *et passim*). That psalm, of course, must be read in conjunction with the "christological" Psalm 22 and its familiar catalogue of images: one who is a worm and not human; despised by all people; poured out like water; tongue cleaving to the jaw; prostrate in the dust of death. These psalms, unlike the ones cited above, move from the language of rebuke to the plane of self-lacerating lament. At times, this language takes on an edge of something very close to self-pity when, for example, the psalmist protests his fidelity to the covenant despite the fact that, in a striking image, God has seen fit to "have broken us in the place of jackals..." (Ps. 44:19a).

II

Tranquillity. However noisy the language of the psalms, there is always an oasis ahead in which panoramas are constricted to the profoundly personal. When one is nearly sated with opaque images of fortresses, rock, pinnacles, and high places, the psalmist provides us with evanescent moments of intimacy and tenderness. Mystics have gone to those verses almost connaturally, because they speak both of the yearning of the human for proximity to God ("As a hart longs for flowing streams/so longs my soul for thee, O God," Ps. 42: 1) or, equally frequently, the turning of God to the desires of the pray-er. The one who waits patiently on God finds that God "inclined to me and heard my prayer" (Ps. 40:1a). It is that verb "incline" that strikes just the right note with its image of God turning (*converting*) to the patience of faith. That patient sense of "incline" is all the more striking when we remember that in other places the writer can be exuberantly demanding: "Rouse Thyself! Why sleepest thou, Lord? Awake! Do not cast us off forever!" (Ps. 44:23).

The tranquillity of the psalms reveals itself most clearly in the rapid moves the poet makes from expansion to contraction. There is something almost cinematic about the way the psalmist shifts from panorama to intimacy. This shift takes various forms. In Psalm 33, to cite one example, the writer "sees" first from the perspective of God who "looks down from heaven" sitting "enthroned" on high (vv. 13-14). This is a God who earlier (vv. 6-7) called the world into being with a word and, in a lovely phrase, "gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle." The psalm ends, not with the expected praise of this creator, but with a quiet statement of fact about the believer who "waits," who is glad, and who hopes in God (vv. 20-22). To read Psalm 33 is to travel, within a finite space, from the otherness of the celestial to the intimacy of the personal with the poles of God and believer defining the boundaries of the cosmos.

Psalm 36, by contrast, begins with the egocentricity of the sinner whose transgressions are deep in his heart and who looks in on himself with a spirit of self-satisfaction and self-flattery. From the suffocations of the self in the first four verses, the psalmist moves to the contrasting "steadfast love" of God which "extends to the heavens" with a faithfulness that goes up to the clouds and a righteousness that is compared, in verse six, to a mountain peak. From there, the psalmist contracts to a consideration of God's children who live in the shadow of God's wings while, in the final verse, the image of the evildoer is returned to as he is seen "prostrate/thrust down/unable to rise" (v. 12). In this psalm, the dynamic consists in the contraction of ego/self and the expansion of God's love for those who are not so bound by self; the polarities are, as it were, cosmic: the sin-filled self and God.

This sense of expansion and contraction may also be seen by juxtaposing whole psalms. Psalm 67 with its exquisite opening blessing ("May God be gracious to us and bless us/And make his face to shine upon us") turns quickly to exhort the nations, peoples, and, finally, the earth to recognize the blessings of God. To contrast that perspective with Psalm 51 and its penitent "I" is a dramatic-almost cosmic-shift in emphasis. In that psalm, it is the penitent who waits for the action of God to blot out sin; to fill with joy; to create a clean heart; to open our lips since, as the penultimate doublet says, "a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou will not despise."

III

Location. By "location" I do not mean the original setting of the individual psalms (this has been a major preoccupation of scholars since the pioneering studies of Gunkel and Mowinckel), nor their place in the received psalter. I mean *our* location *vis 'a vis* the psalms encountered as a whole. To be sure, we stand in relationship to them as members of a believing community who have inherited them as the prayerbook of the church. They are part of our lives because they were the prayers with which Jesus was familiar. They are part of our worship because they form an essential part of the church's fabric of prayer. As pilgrims on the way, we have no problem with entering into the spirit of the "ascent" psalms (120ff.) because their affirmation of hope, praise, and even their laments are no different from the needs of the most contemporary person. Cannot all believers locate themselves within the framework of Psalm 130 and its cry from the depths; its confession of sinfulness; its insistent note-strangely contemporary in its sentiments-that we must "wait for the Lord" and hope "in his word," since with the Lord there is "steadfast love" and "plenteous redemption?"

We can also "locate" ourselves in the psalter because, as we read, there is a constant bumping up against familiar tag lines that we have sung or heard not as part of the psalter but in the general act of worship. We remember Psalm 110 because Jesus cites it polemically in the New Testament ("The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool"), just as we recognize a line from Psalm 118 because it is a popular vernacular hymn: "This is the day the Lord has made/Let us rejoice and be glad in it." There are even lines that have never made sense to me but which have an unforgettable poetic power. Why, for instance, is the unity of brethren "like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the collar" (Ps. 133)? I do not know, but I do know that few lines are more beautiful than that praise of fraternal community.

The problem of location only comes to full force when we recognize that we live in dissonance with a vocabulary that is not ours or with sentiments that we do not wish to acknowledge as our sentiments. This dissonance can be as simple as the awareness that the pastoral imagery (of shepherds, for example) is not our imagery. At that level, we either evade or romanticize or "retranslate" by some spiritual synapse that allows us to feel the full weight of the words by some alchemical process that is not always conscious. We cannot "locate" the term *shepherd* in our vocabulary except through the images that sacred art has given us, but most of us, I think, have transformed that noun, hallowed in the psalms and identified with Jesus in the New Testament, into something with which we can relate: A God/Jesus who shelters, watches, and cares. The shepherd becomes, albeit at an inarticulate level, something other than a shepherd.

What happens in such instances is that we do not simply subvert the more obvious meaning of the text. Rather, we come to it with a whole tradition behind us, a tradition that has seen those words not in their original setting but as words which have a trans-cultural and transhistorical significance to them. From the perspective of the historical critic, we do a certain violence to the words because we assign those words meanings which are not "in the text." From another perspective, however, we honor the texts by saying that their time-bound condition is overcome by the readiness of the reader/prayer to invest the words with a significance well beyond the obvious. Is that, in some manner, what we mean when we say that these texts are inspired? Is that not also what we mean when we say, as it is said of the classic, that the psalms have a "surplus of meaning?"

My suspicion is that those who pray the psalms make those kinds of transpositions all the time. We engage the psalms because they are the prayers which Jesus used (and, remembering that, we can pray them "Jewishly" because that is the way he prayed them) as forms of praise. We pray them also because, in solidarity with Jesus, we pray them as members of that believing community which calls upon him. We pray the psalms because this long tradition allows us to repeat those words, as it were, with a view toward what is at the edge of the words, what is behind them, and what promises they hold. We transpose the descriptions of distance and closeness (the image of God as a fortress or rock, the image of God as shepherd and hope) into models of who we are, what we want to be, and what we do not want to be.

IV

There is a wonderful line from the *Celestial Hierarchy* of the Pseudo-Dionysius to the effect that the psalms sum up in praise everything that the sacred Scriptures contain. Denys most likely had in mind the typological interpretation of the psalms as pointing to Christ in every line. It is that kind of approach to the psalms which has both informed much of their use in the liturgy and is a commonplace in the ancient commentary tradition of the church fathers and mothers. It is an approach that we cannot escape even though we may want to read the psalms as texts and not as revelation.

Yet, there is another way to understand the Dionysian claim, and it is this: the psalms are replete with the presence of God who not only sustains the world but interacts with it at every level of existence from the cosmic to the historical and the personal. In a doxological fashion, the psalms testify to the primordial truth of the entire biblical tradition. Negatively put, we are not condemned to complete autonomy. Positively put, we come out from God; we are sustained by God; and our proper destiny is to be with God. The psalms, in short, are an ancient poetry but the poetry is God-drenched with a God who is still affirmed and witnessed to in the community of belief. That is why there is a profound truth in Saint Augustine's conviction that the optimum approach to the Scriptures is in the context of praise.

Once we have understood that basic psalmic thread of the presence of the divine, other "problems" begin to take on a manageable form. Yes, there is violence in the psalms, but beneath the violence, there is order and purpose. Yes, the psalms are patriarchal and monarchical, yet they are only inadequate pointers to a deeper reality that has to do with guidance, care, and protection. Even the language which puzzles or, worse, repels, can be used to arrest us into silence or puzzlement or, in the best tradition of the Bible (Job), argument and counter-strategy.

One basic counter-strategy is to turn the language of the psalms against itself. If the images, the sentiments, the fierce imprecations, and the visions come "howling like dogs/prowling about the city" (Ps. 59:6), it is time to retreat "in the shadow of thy wings ... till the storms of destruction pass by" (Ps. 57: 1b). Another way of saying it is that if the language begins to drive us from praise and supplication so that we wish, not for God to speak, but for silence, we realize that the psalmist gives us warrant for that also. Indeed, he tells us that it is precisely that wish for silence that is the deepest prayer of all, since "for God alone my soul waits in silence" (Ps. 62:1) and in that hope-filled waiting "I have calmed and quieted my soul/like a child at its mother's breast/like a child that is quieted is my soul" (Ps. 131:2). In that silence-the silence of faith-not even the clamor of the psalmist can touch us, since "even before a word is on my tongue/lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether" (Ps. 139:4).

That is a paradox worth thinking about as we wrestle with the psalms. The experience of them in prayer, as vivid and energetic as they may be, leads us inevitably to that silence before God which the mystical tradition assures us is the simple prayer of adoration. At that level, language becomes what language should always become in prayer, the prelude to that Presence which "has been our dwelling place in all generations" (Ps. 90:1).

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