

“Prayer for all Time”

Each week we say or sing a psalm in our worship. If you come to Compline we also say psalms then. If you ever had one of those tiny Gideon Bibles you will remember that it contained the New Testament in its entirety along with Proverbs and Psalms. It was as though the Gideons were telling us that all that is necessary for salvation are the books about Jesus, the aphorisms of proverbs, and the psalter.

The psalter has been called the prayer book of Jesus. Luther called it the hymn book of the Bible. Either way the psalms are a crucial part of the Bible. Medieval monks read psalms at each of the six daily worship services. Thus they would say all 150 psalms every week. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer when he composed the Book of Common Prayer reduced the daily worship services to two--morning and evening prayer. Psalms were read at each service and the lectionary was designed for us to say all the psalms over six weeks—a bit less intense.

The focus on the psalms may feel a bit odd until we begin to examine them carefully. The prayers or hymns that are the psalms convey a wide range of human experience and emotion. They explore through prayers our relationship with God. Traditionally the entire book is attributed to King David. While he is believed to have written some of the psalms, many included some of the ones that have his name on them were actually written by others. There were most certainly hundreds and maybe thousands of psalms, but the 150 in our Bible and Book of Common Prayer are the ones that stuck. That is, they are the ones that seem to have spoken to people most deeply and consistently.

The psalms have been classified by scholars into five different categories. Most broadly the categories are thanksgiving, praise, lament (personal and corporate), wisdom, and royal. These categories are so clear that with a little practice most anyone could identify a psalm type without too much trouble. Some scholars have subdivided the psalms into more categories, but these five are the major types.

Psalm 30 is considered a thanksgiving psalm. A thanksgiving psalm is one that gives thanks to God for God's favor, help in times of trouble, salvation from enemies, and so forth. These can be either personal or communal types of thanksgiving. Looking at this one would anyone hazard a guess as to whether it is personal or communal? It is a personal thanksgiving. Tradition says that it was composed by David for the dedication of his home.

What is so wonderful about this psalm is the range of emotion and experiences the psalmist expresses even as he gives thanks to God. He extols God for how God has restored him to health and lifted him out of despair. Even as he seemed to be headed toward death God brought him back.

While his own thanksgiving is important he also commands all those within hearing to also give thanks to God. He points out that God does not hold grudges but God does keep favor for a lifetime. Even the psalmist's weeping is temporary as joy comes in the morning.

The psalmist then tells us that at one time he felt utterly secure and safe. He felt as strong as a mountain. But God hid his face from him and he was lost in fear. At that moment he cried out and God listened to his plea.

Then comes what I think is the most wonderful line.

12 You have turned my laments [wailing] into dancing; *
you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy.

13 Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing; *
O LORD my God, I will give you thanks for ever.

There is a full range of religious experience expressed by the psalmist. That range is not limited to him. These are emotions that I feel and I expect others feel also. That is the elation of coming to know God. There is the wonderful feeling of being firmly in God's hands. The power of the experience is so great that I want to tell everyone. I want everyone to experience what I have and to shout in thanksgiving as well.

But even after that experience there are also times when I feel very far from God. We know that Mother Teresa whom so many admired for her devotion to God and to the poor felt isolated from God for decades, and still she worshipped God and kept up the ministry to the poor.

This is not like puppy love; this loving God. It is full bore soul filling and soul shattering. It can lead to great joy and times also of isolation and fear. What is so important is what the psalmist tells us at the end.

“You have turned my laments into dancing;
you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy.”

I did not do it. My possessions did not do it. My political party or country club did not do these things. Those are all trappings. It is God and God's deep unfailing and abiding love that transformed the psalmist and transforms you and me.

Read the psalms and you will find food for you soul. Read them daily like the monks. Join in the prayers that span 3,000 years or more. These are prayers that have been said by millions upon millions of people in many languages. They have been chanted and sung. They have been mumbled as we prayed with beads, or at bedsides in hospitals. They have comforted and encouraged people across time and they will continue to do so as long as there are people of faith. And it is a club that does not cost a dime to join. All you need is to love God, desire to be in communion with God, love all of God's people.

“You have turned my laments into dancing;
you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy.”

Thanks be to God.