

## The Psalms I. Sentiments of wonder and awe

Having examined some key aspects of prayer and some ways which might help us as we begin our commitment to making space in our day to enter into conscious communion with God, we will pause to reflect on the psalms and on some of the sentiments to which the inspired author gives expression in his prayer. We might find our own hearts echoing to his words.

In his major theological work, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (vol vi, page 205), Hans Urs von Balthasar refers to the psalms in speaking of our prayer:

‘We ‘raise up our soul’ (Psalm 25:1; 86:4; 143:8) by yearning for God (Psalm 119:20), thirsting for him (Psalm 63:1; 143:6), losing the ground under our feet as we hang on his words (Psalm 119), pressing our soul against God (Psalm 63:8; 119:31), leaning against God’s breast silently, weaned in the spirit of childhood (Psalm 131), looking fixedly at God as a servant looks to the hand of his lord (Psalm 123:2), constantly admitting our need of grace (Psalm 51:7; 130:2; 143:1), being satisfied with the imperishability of God’s love (Psalm 103:17), instead of stopping short at the realisation of our own perishability (Psalm 37:2; 39; 90:5-6), and being ready to interpret the puzzling process whereby creatures come into being and pass away as the breathing in and out of the breath of God (Psalm 104:29-30)’

Most of the one hundred and fifty songs contained in the Book of Psalms are prayers addressed to God which found their way into the liturgical prayer of the community. Their continued use in the Christian community encourages us to draw on them as models for the many ways in which we, too, are drawn to respond in prayer to God. In his Apostolic Constitution on the Book of Psalms (*Divino Afflatu*, 1911), Pope Pius X quotes from Saint Athanasius (*Letter to Marcellus* n.2 and 12) and Saint Augustine (*Confessions* 9.4):

‘Saint Athanasius writes: “The Book of the Psalms is like a garden which contains the fruits of all the other books, grows a crop of song and so adds its own special fruit to the rest ... It seems to me that for the person who recites them the psalms are like a mirror in which we may see ourselves and the movements of your heart and mind and then give voice to them.” In his *Confessions* Saint Augustine says: “I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles, and was powerfully moved at the sweet sound of your Church’s singing. These sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart: so that my feeling of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them.” ... Who is not fired with love by the faithful portrait of Christ the Redeemer whose voice Saint Augustine heard in all the psalms, singing, sorrowing, rejoicing in hope, sighing in distress?’

Earlier we noted how the psalms give expression to our profound longing for God. Here we focus on the expressions of wonder and awe at God’s presence and action in creation and in the history of Israel. As we do so, let us reflect on our own experience of these sentiments in the prayer with which God graces us.

Psalms 8 is particularly beautiful. The psalmist is gazing at the night sky and, overwhelmed by its beauty and intricacy, he is moved to praise the Creator. He is amazed that, while little children are open to the wonder of what God is doing, there are those who rebel against God. They try to devastate the earth and would want to rise above the firmament and challenge God. The psalmist longs for the wonder, simplicity and innocence of a child so that he might give expression to his overwhelming desire to praise God for the intricacy and delicate beauty of what he calls ‘the work of God’s fingers’. However, he is troubled and asks himself: Who am I? What does it mean to be a human being? He does not attempt to answer this fundamental question by looking at human beings and what we do. Rather he looks at what God has done and is doing for us. We are all too aware of what we do and fail to do. The only way to find out who we really are is to look

at our relationships, and primarily at our relationship with God. How God treats us will give us the clue as to who we are. The psalmist is amazed at the way God keeps us in mind and cares for us.

‘O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.  
Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.  
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?  
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,  
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.  
O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!’

Similar sentiments can be found in other psalms:

‘I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well’(Psalm 139:14).

‘The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind.  
From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth –  
he who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds’(Psalm 33:13-15).

In Psalm 19, the psalmist contemplates the day sky and ponders the silent revelation of God that is passed on from one day to the next across the night. The sun is likened to a bridegroom joyfully running its course through the sky after a night of love. However, we so often fail to hear this silent message, and so God has given us the Law so that we will know how to run our course, like the sun, with joy and love. Verses seven to ten speak of the Psalmist’s profound love for the Law.

‘The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.  
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,  
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,  
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.  
Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them;  
and nothing is hid from its heat.  
The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.  
But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.  
Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me.  
Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.  
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.'

Psalm 103 has been called the 'Te Deum' of the Old Testament. The author is overwhelmed at the wonder of God's mercy. He begins in a personal way, and then invites all of Israel (103:10), all humankind (103:14), and finally the whole of creation (103:20-22) to join in praising this wonderful God who is so rich in forgiveness. The mood of the psalm is established in its opening verses:

'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits –  
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
who satisfies you with good as long as you live'(Psalm 103:1-4).

Besides these three complete psalms, sentiments of awe and wonder are expressed in parts of many psalms. Psalm 106 surveys the history of sin among the people of Israel. The psalmist expresses his wonder at the constancy of God's merciful forgiveness. We can think of the way in which, in spite of our sin, God has shown himself faithful to us. As Paul says: 'We might be faithless, but he is faithful; he cannot deny himself'(2Timothy 2:13).

'Many times he delivered them,  
but they were rebellious in their purposes, and were brought low through their iniquity.  
Nevertheless he regarded their distress when he heard their cry.  
For their sake he remembered his covenant,  
and showed compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love.  
He caused them to be pitied by all who held them captive'(Psalm 106:43-46).

In Psalm 29, the psalmist, with intense power and considerable poetic beauty, celebrates the wonder of God's power revealed in a storm. In Psalm 65, he celebrates the wonder of God's action in creation. The psalm concludes with one of the finest examples of Hebrew poetry.

'You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water;  
you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.  
You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.  
You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.  
The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,  
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
they shout and sing together for joy'(Psalm 65:9-13).

The wonder of God revealed in creation is a recurring theme in the psalms (see, for example, Psalm 104:24). We find the same sense of wonder in psalm 74, expressed in more mythical language (Psalm 74:12-17).

Psalm 99 celebrates the holiness of God (see verses five and nine). His awesome majesty is revealed in creation, and also in the way in which he hears our cry and has mercy upon us.

Psalm 147 invites us to sing and to employ musical instruments in giving praise to God. The psalmist looks with awe at the way in which 'the Lord heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds'(147:3). 'He lifts up the downtrodden'(147:6). The Psalmist marvels at God's action in

creation, and especially in the history of his chosen people: ‘The Lord takes pleasure in those who hope in his steadfast love’(Psalm 147:11).

The steadfast love of the Lord is also celebrated in Psalm 107 which is a reflection on the human condition and the many difficult situations which call out for God’s love. This love is demonstrated, above all, in God’s commitment to justice:

‘I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor.  
Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall live in your presence.’

(Psalm 140:12-13)

Numerous psalms celebrate the wonder of God’s action in the history of Israel. As we pray them, we think of what God has done in Jesus and in the history of the Church as well as in our own personal lives. Psalm 105 celebrates the wonder of God’s presence to the Patriarchs and Moses. Psalm 114 celebrates the wonder of God’s action in the Exodus, as does Psalm 66:

‘Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.  
He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot.  
There we rejoiced in him’(Psalm 66:5-6).

The same psalm goes on to celebrate the fidelity of God’s love to the people and to the psalmist:

‘We went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.’  
(Psalm 66:12)

‘Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer  
or removed his steadfast love from me’(Psalm 66:20).

When the psalmist is tempted to lose hope, he recalls in Psalm 77:11-20 the wonderful way in which God acted in the escape of the Hebrews from Egypt.

Psalm 119 expresses awe at the way God has shown his love in the Law:

‘The earth, O Lord, is full of your steadfast love; teach me your statutes’(Psalm 119:64).

Psalm 44 expresses wonder at God’s gift of the Promised Land:

‘Not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory;  
it was your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance,  
for you delighted in them’(Psalm 44:3).

Psalm 46 celebrates God’s continued protection of his people:

“‘Be still, and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.’  
The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge’(Psalm 46:10-11).

Psalm 40 celebrates God’s wonderful deeds:

‘You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;  
none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them,  
they would be more than can be counted’(Psalm 40:5).

Psalm 50 sings of Jerusalem, the city from which God reigns:

‘Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth’(Psalm 50:2).

Psalm 68 sings of the beauty of the temple:

‘Awesome is God in his sanctuary, the God of Israel;  
he gives power and strength to his people. Blessed be God!’(Psalm 68:35).

The inspired words of the Psalmist, especially when sung to the accompaniment of stringed music, can evoke similar sentiments in us, for science continues to open up for us the wonder of the created universe and God is as wonderful in his dealings with us as he was with the people of ancient Israel.

## The Psalms II. Sentiments of delight

Besides a sense of wonder and awe, we find expressions of delight in God and in what God means to the psalmist. In Psalm 16 we have a lyrical expression of an intense religious experience, and a declaration of exclusive loyalty to the Lord.

‘Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.  
I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.”  
As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight ...  
The Lord is my chosen portion ...  
I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.  
I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.  
Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure ...  
You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy;  
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.’

We find expressions of delight because prayer has been answered:

‘Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.  
This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble ...  
‘O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.’

(Psalm 34:5-6,8)

‘I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications.  
Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.  
The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;  
I suffered distress and anguish.  
Then I called on the name of the Lord: “O Lord, I pray, save my life!”  
Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful.  
The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me.  
Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.  
For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.  
I walk before the Lord in the land of the living’ (Psalm 116:1-9).

The Psalmist is delighted at the care which God shows on behalf of the oppressed:

‘The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.  
Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all.  
He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken :  
The Lord redeems the life of his servants;  
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned’ (Psalm 34:18-20,22).

‘My soul shall rejoice in the Lord, exulting in his deliverance.  
All my bones shall say, “O Lord, who is like you?  
You deliver the weak from those too strong for them,  
the weak and needy from those who despoil them”’ (Psalm 35:9-10).

We are invited to delight in the fact that God has shown us how to live so as to be in communion with God. Obedience is meant to be a joy.

‘I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart’ (Psalm 40:8).

The Psalmist is delighted at God’s presence, in the Jerusalem temple

‘O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides.’

(Psalm 26:8)

‘How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!

My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.  
Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.  
Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise' (Psalm 84:1-4).

Throughout the psalms we find many expressions of love and joy:

‘You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound’(Psalm 4:7).

‘I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me’(Psalm 13:6).

‘I love you, O Lord, my strength.

The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God,

my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.’

(Psalm 18:1-2)

‘It is you who light my lamp; the Lord, my God, lights up my darkness’(Psalm 18:28).

‘Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.’

(Psalm 32:11)

‘How precious is your steadfast love, O God!

All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

They feast on the abundance of your house,

and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light’(Psalm 36:7-9).

‘I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.

You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Those who are far from you will perish; you put an end to those who are false to you.

But for me it is good to be near God;

I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works’(Psalm 73:23-28).

‘O Lord God of hosts, who is as mighty as you, O Lord? Your faithfulness surrounds you.’

(Psalm 89:8)

‘When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul’(Psalm 94:19).

‘Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;

then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.”’

(Psalm 126:2)