

### **The Psalms III. Sentiments of Praise**

Sentiments of wonder and delight readily lead to outbursts of praise, as do prayers of pleading which are answered by God. One such prayer is found in Psalm 22, the opening words of which, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ are quoted by Matthew and Mark as they contemplate Jesus on the cross. In the second part of the psalm the psalmist invites us to praise God for hearing his cry:

‘You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;  
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!  
For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.  
From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.  
The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord.  
May your hearts live forever!’(Psalm 22:24-26).

Psalm 47 summons the community to sing praise to God. The Greek for ‘sing praise’ is the verb *psallein*, from which our word psalm derives:

‘Sing praises to God, sing praises;  
sing praises to our King, sing praises.  
For God is the king of all the earth;  
sing praises with a psalm’(Psalm 47:6-7).

Many psalms carry a similar invitation:

‘O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us joyfully acclaim the rock of our salvation!  
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us joyfully acclaim him with songs of praise!  
For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods’(Psalm 95:1-3).  
‘Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!  
I will praise the Lord as long as I live;  
I will sing praises to my God all my life long’(Psalm 146:1-2).

In Psalm 100 God is praised for what he has done for Israel, his chosen people:

‘Acclaim the Lord with joy, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.  
Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.  
Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.  
Give thanks to him, bless his name.  
For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations’(Psalm 100).

The traditional Christian practice of praying the Divine Office at seven different hours during the day (Matins [Office of Readings], Lauds [Morning Prayer], Terce<sup>1</sup> [9:00am], Sext<sup>2</sup> [Midday], None<sup>3</sup> [3:00pm], Vespers [Evening Prayer], Compline [Night Prayer]), derives from the following cry: ‘Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances’(Psalm 119:164).

A number of psalms (Psalm 106,111,112,113,117,135,146,147,148,149,150) begin with a call to ‘Praise the Lord’(Hebrew: *Halêlûyâh* - from the verb *hll*, the sound of which echoes the sound of shouting with joy). Others (Psalm 103,104,134,144) summon the people to ‘Bless the Lord’(Hebrew: *bârki Yhwh* - from the verb *brk*: to express solemn words of appreciation, praise, respect, gratitude).

Psalm 67 invites the whole world to praise God for his blessings. Psalm 96 is a hymn of praise of God whose reign is universal, serene and secure. Psalm 98 is a hymn of praise of God for the restoration of Judah after the exile in Babylon. God is returning to Jerusalem to inaugurate a universal kingdom. Psalm 145 is an acrostic (alphabetical) psalm, praising God for his comprehensive blessings.

<sup>1</sup>Acts 2:15; <sup>2</sup>Acts 10:9; <sup>3</sup>Acts 3:1

Again and again in Psalm 71 the psalmist bursts into a song of praise:

‘My praise is continually of you ... My mouth is filled with your praise’(Psalm 71:6,8).

‘I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord God,

I will praise your righteousness, yours alone.

O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me,

until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come.

Your power and your righteousness, O God, reach the high heavens.

You who have done great things, O God, who is like you?’(Psalm 71:16-19).

‘I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God;

I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel.

My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you;

my soul also, which you have rescued.

All day long my tongue will talk of your righteous help,

for those who tried to do me harm have been put to shame, and disgraced’(Psalm 71:22-24).

The psalmist is continually praising God for God’s steadfast love.

‘Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright.

Praise the Lord with the lyre;<sup>1</sup> make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.<sup>2</sup>

Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.

He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.’

(Psalm 33:1-5)

‘I will sing and make melody.

Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.

I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;

I will sing praises to you among the nations.

For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds.

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth.’

(Psalm 57:7-11 = Psalm 108:1-5)

The psalmist praises God for the power which God reveals:

‘Be exalted, O Lord, in your strength! We will sing and praise your power’(Psalm 21:13).

‘I will sing of your might; I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning.

For you have been a fortress for me and a refuge in the day of my distress.

O my strength, I will sing praises to you, for you, O God, are my fortress,

the God who shows me steadfast love’(Psalm 59:16-17).

God is especially praised for his care for the poor:

‘Let the righteous be joyful; let them exult before God; let them be jubilant with joy.

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<sup>1</sup>Greek: *kithara*, played with a plectrum.

<sup>2</sup>Greek: *psalterion*, plucked with the fingers.

Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds – his name is the Lord – be exultant before him.

Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.

God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land' (Psalm 68:3-6).

'The Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds.

Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them.'

(Psalm 69:33-34)

'Let this be recorded for a generation to come, that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord:

that he looked down from his holy height, from heaven the Lord looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die.'

(Psalm 102:18-20)

## **The Psalms IV. Sentiments of Thanksgiving**

When we praise God we are opening our hearts to the Transcendent God, allowing the wonder of God and therefore the goodness of all creation to lift us to God in joy. We are acknowledging that God whom we are praising always acts with love. This acknowledgment draws us into gratitude. Psalm 118 is a thanksgiving liturgy, beginning and concluding with the refrain: 'O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!' With the priests and people assembled, the king is thanking God for victory. In Christian prayer it has been used to thank God for the victory of Jesus over death and the wonder of his resurrection:

'The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.  
This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes'(Psalm 118:22-23).<sup>3</sup>

In Psalm 136 we find wave after wave of exultant thanksgiving offered to God for God's action in creation and in history. It too opens with the refrain: 'O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!' We can sing this hymn thinking also of the Passover effected by Jesus, and the many wonderful ways in which God has proved victorious in the obstacles that have faced us on our journey to the fullness of communion with God.

Other psalms give expression to the thanksgiving that wells up in the course of prayer:

'I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.  
I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High'(Psalm 9:1-2).

'I will thank you forever, because of what you have done.  
In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim your name, for it is good'(Psalm 52:9).

'It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High;  
to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night,  
to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre.  
For you O Lord have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.  
How great are your works, O Lord! Your thoughts are very deep!'(Psalm 92:1-5).

God's answering of prayer is a frequent reason given for giving thanks

'Blessed be the Lord, for he has heard the sound of my pleadings.  
The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts;  
so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him'(Psalm 28:6-7).

'O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me ...  
You have turned my mourning into dancing;  
you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,  
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.  
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever'(Psalm 30:2,11-12).

'My vows to you I must perform, O God; I will render thank offerings to you.  
For you have delivered my soul from death, and my feet from falling,  
so that I may walk before God in the light of life'(Psalm 56:12-13).

'I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord.  
I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people,  
in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem.  
Praise the Lord!'(Psalm 116:17-19).

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<sup>3</sup> See Mark 12:10 = Matthew 2:42 = Luke 20:17; also Acts 4:11-12; 1Peter 2:6-7; Ephesians 2:19-22.

'I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;  
I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name  
for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;  
for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.  
On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul'(Psalm 138:1-3).