

## **Prayers of the Psalmists**

### **Fr Allen Shin**

The psalms are the most cited portion of the Old Testament in the NT. Of the 150 psalms, 129 are cited either by direct quotes or by allusions. Most of them appear only in brief glimpses. But, some have a special prominence, the best-known perhaps being the quote from Psalm 22 in the Passion narrative where Jesus in Matthew cries to the Father, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

To put it simply, the Book of Psalms is a collection of prayers in the Old Testament. This begs some questions – what is prayer, and what makes the Psalms prayers, and who are the Psalmists?

Prayer is literally an entreaty. It is our way of entreating God to fulfil our desired goals or wants. But, God is not a Ginny in the bottle. God as the creator has his own will and design over our life, and we are created with free will of our own to respond to God’s will or not. So, prayer must be a dialogical activity. It is a conversation in which we not only talk to God, but also must listen to God.

In prayer we try to discern God’s presence in our life and God’s will for us. Prayer can direct our hearts toward God and lead our souls to be in union with God. In that sense, prayer is a sacramental act through which we enter into God’s salvation and receive God’s self-revelation. Pure prayer is communion with God.

Prayer, then, is a spiritual journey toward communion with God. There is no other prayer than the Psalms which evoke such a deep searching desire for union with God. This journey has a particular pattern which Walter Brueggemann, a prolific Old Testament scholar, describes as the sequence of orientation-disorientation-reorientation.

When we pray we often begin by entreating for our needs and desires. But soon prayer takes us through a terrain of disorientation where we must let go of our selfish entreaties, that is to say, we must now hand them over to God. We must let go of our control and begin to accept God’s control over our entreaties and our life. So, finally, in prayer we learn to reorient ourselves to God; we recommit ourselves to faith and hope in God’s love and mercy. In prayer the spirit moves from self-orientation through disorientation (the desert experience) and to God-orientation.

This pattern of orientation-disorientation-reorientation is a helpful way to understand the use and function of the Psalms. And the function of the psalms is nothing short of being concerned with salvation. It is certainly salvation that the Psalmist seeks: time and again the psalmist pleads to God to deliver him from the enemy, from the snares of the evil doers, etc. On the surface, a prayer may have nothing more to do than with food to eat, water to drink, clothes to wear or a simple statement of “I love you God.” But, on a deeper spiritual level, even the simplest childish prayer is concerned with salvation.

This sequence of self-orientation through disorientation to God-orientation is also the biblical paradigm of salvation. In the Old Testament, Yahweh’s salvation of Israel is worked out precisely in this sequence over and over again. In the NT this pattern is fulfilled once and for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the Christian sacramental paradigm of life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a slim book called, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, in which he describes the psalms as “the prayers God gives us to pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who has brought every human sorrow and joy, every frustration and aspiration, before God. If we prayed out of the poverty of our hearts we might pray for only what we want to pray for; but God wants our prayers to be much fuller, encompassing not only our own needs but the life of the whole community of God’s people.”

We cannot offer to God something which we’ve created out of nothing on our own. We always offer back to God of what God has already given us. That’s what a sacramental offering is. Bread and wine, our souls and bodies, and prayers are no different, especially the prayers of the Psalmists. We offer back to God the very words inspired and given by God so that we can commune with God in praying those very words back to God, and that our restless spirit may find rest in God.

A deeply personal communion with God encompasses the life of the whole community of God’s people. What is deeply personal is also universal, Henri Nouwen said. In the psalms where the psalmist prays in the first person I, there is a sense that it is not just about the individual person. But, the ‘I’ in the psalms encompasses the entire community of the Israelites. The deep sorrow and anguish experienced by the psalmist is a universal experience echoed in others in the community and also by others through out all times. When the sorrow is too much and the grief too deep for words, the Psalms lend the very words needed to pray even if they express the emotions of anger and bitterness at times. The prayers of the Psalms transcend both time and space.

This leads to the question, Who are the Psalmists. Like much of the Bible, it’s difficult to pin point an individual author or select authors of the Psalms, even though many of the psalms are attributed to David. Some scholars came up with the device to categorize the Psalms according to their inherent situations and forms. So, there are royal praise psalms, liturgical psalms, individual lament psalms, national hymns, etc. So, the original Psalmists might have been the priests or the musicians in the royal court or in the temple, and some individual laments might have been written by the prophets suffering in exile.

Even though a psalm might have had an individual author, the Psalms as a book were the work of many in a community over a long period of time and perhaps not even compiled by just one or a few persons. In this sense the Psalmists are not just those who prayed the psalms in the ancient times, but the myriads and myriads of believers who prayed them over and over again for a good part of three millennia of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The praying community uses and reuses over and over again these same words of prayer because the words are known to be adequate, time tested so to speak, and because we have no better words to utter. We all belong to the community of the Psalmists.

Psalms in Hebrew is *tehillim* which means ‘praises.’ Walter Brueggemann writes that praise is speech that is endlessly surprised about who God is and endlessly grateful and joyful about God’s gift of life in the world. But, the praises in the psalms do not silence or censor the emotional and spiritual need to complain, lament, accuse, and petition. The prayers of the Psalmists constantly move between these two dialectical points, praise and lament.

There are also unanswered prayers and unresolved situations in the Psalms. But the silence of God does not stop the Psalmists from praying; it drives the psalmists to more intense and passionate prayers. At the heart of many Psalms is the incongruity between the way of the world and the way of God – the injustice of the world and the righteousness of God, the bigotry of the world and the love of God, the violence of the world and the peace of God, the hatred of the world and the forgiveness of God. In spite of this incongruity or rather because of it, the Psalmists pray even more fervently and passionately, because what is at stake is nothing short of salvation of the world.

Bernhard Anderson, a famous Old Testament scholar who recently passed away, in his later study on the Psalms tells story of Natan Sharansky. Some of you may remember Natan Sharansky, the famous Soviet Jewish dissident, who was imprisoned in the Gulag for many years. When he was about to be imprisoned, his wife gave him a book of the Psalms. He was not particularly a religious man, but he began reading them and memorizing them over the nine years of his imprisonment. On the day of his release he was taken to the airport to be flown to Israel. He found that his Psalm book was missing from his belonging and refused to leave until it was returned to him. When nothing happened, he started shouting, “Give me back my Psalm book!” Finally his Psalm book was returned to him. On the plane ride to freedom, Sharansky opened the book and began reading Psalm 30 which was what he vowed he would do upon his freedom.

I exalt you, O Lord,  
for you have lifted me up  
and have not let my enemies rejoice over me.  
O Lord, my God, I cried out to you  
And you healed me.  
O Lord, you brought me up from Sheol,  
You preserved me from going down into the pit.

If the prayers of the Psalter can inspire such hope and courage in one who is not so religious, imagine what more these prayers can do for those who believe!