

## THE PSALMS AND EVERYDAY LIFE<sup>1</sup>

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**I**N spite of the title of this talk, I do not propose to say anything about everyday life. It is not merely that I can think of very little of value to say about it; above all I want to avoid absolutely the idea that we should adapt the psalms to our own lives. The psalms are not adaptable. They are a divinely inspired, divinely guaranteed expression of a whole range of religious sentiments which we must take as we find them, take as God left them, however crude or alien to our native ways of thought they may sometimes seem. Our thought in using the psalms for our devotions should be to take them simply as they are, and let them enrich and invigorate our everyday religion. We must try to adapt ourselves to the psalms, not the psalms to ourselves. So I shall confine myself to a few considerations about what the psalms are.

To begin with then, they are *songs*, they are meant to be sung. And they have all the variety of songs anywhere in the world. Some are sad songs, some cheerful, some plaintive, some robust. There are quiet songs among them and noisy songs, 'rock 'n' roll' songs, and also, I am afraid, boring songs. They are very human, and God is no more a respecter of artistic values than he is of persons. Furthermore, they are songs meant to be sung to an accompaniment. That is what the word 'psalm' means: from the Greek verb *psallo*, which means to strum or twang, and then to sing and twang, or hum and strum, at the same time. Some of the more rollicking psalms were sung to a very noisy accompaniment indeed; for example, Psalm 150, 'Praise the Lord among his saints, praise him on the blaring trumpet, praise him on the fiddle and guitar, praise him with drumming and dancing, praise him on wind and strings, praise him on echoing cymbals, praise him on merry-making cymbals'.

Forgive me for having used what you might feel are rather vulgar or irreverent epithets about the psalms, but I think that quotation will justify me. The Hebrew name for the psalms is 'Tehillim, 'Praises', and praising God to the Hebrew meant making

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a loud noise. The psalms are all religious songs, most of them liturgical songs to be used in formal worship, but there is nothing whatever about them of dim religious light or subdued ecclesiastical demeanour.

Their liturgical character is suggested—apart, of course, from the evidence of their own texts—by their traditional ascription to David. It has never been supposed, as far as I know, that David wrote all the psalms, though there is no very valid reason for doubting that he composed a few of them. But David was the patron saint, indeed the founder, of the Temple liturgy, and so all the psalms used in that liturgy, at whatever date during the many centuries of its development they were composed, and the other psalms that accrued to this liturgical compilation, were given what you could call a titular Davidic authorship by way of assuring them their place in the tradition of worship that David had founded.

To appreciate these sacred songs rightly, we must see them in their setting—or I should say their settings; because besides their immediate, or Old Testament setting, which is their plain literary context, they have, as inspired writing, a further theological context, which I will call their total or Christian setting.

First of all, then, some remarks about their Old Testament setting, and to begin with about their language. There will be not a few passages of the psalter which are completely unintelligible at the first reading, and some which remain unintelligible after never so many readings. Where the obscurity is due to corruptions of the text there is little we can do about it. But more often it is due to what strikes the European mind as incoherence of expression, to the want of any obvious sequence of thought, to the reduction of almost all conjunctions to a universal 'and', to uncouth Semitic metaphors and idioms. It will be a help here to use a modern edition which sets out the psalms in strophes, and provides some notes on the text—for example Fr Lattey's translation in the Westminster version, or for those who can read French the Jerusalem Bible. But such aids can be no substitute for the indispensable condition of understanding the psalms, and that is a pretty thorough familiarity with the Old Testament as a whole. The language of the psalter is the language of all the Hebrew Old Testament, and only constant familiarity with

biblical turns of phrase and tricks of expression will bring understanding of them.

There is an even more important reason why we cannot hope to understand the psalms if we do not know the rest of the Bible. The psalmists, like the other prophets and instruments of divine revelation, experienced God and expressed their experience in terms of Israel's history. Hence a fairly detailed knowledge of that history, from Genesis onwards, is a necessary condition of appreciating the psalms. There are a few psalms which are little more in fact than synopses of Israel's history, with its religious lessons brought out: Psalms 77, 104, 105. But there are many others which are full of historical allusions, and of names like Edom, Moab, Oreb and Zeb, and phrases like 'as in the provocation, according to the day of temptation in the desert, where your fathers tempted me', which are meaningless without reference to the people's history. A feel for the historical background is also desirable for a full appreciation of such magnificent war songs as Psalms 17 and 59. It is admittedly scarcely ever possible to give any particular psalm its own precise historical context or date; but a knowledge of the history will make possible certain illuminating guesses. Psalm 45 for example seems to fit the deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib, Psalm 117 the beginning of rebuilding the Temple under Zorobabel.

The psalmists also experienced God in nature (Psalm 103), and they seem to have felt a strong analogy between nature and the Law, and to have rejoiced in the harmony between these two works of the one Creator and Lawgiver, each reflecting his power and his wisdom; hence the juxtapositions which seem at first so inconsequential in Psalms 18, 134, 135, 146-7. But the most direct contact, so to say, which the psalmists had with the God of Israel was in the setting of the Holy City Jerusalem, where God dwelt on Mount Zion in the midst of his people. It was there that Israelites went up to meet God, to enter into his presence, to see his glory, to shelter beneath the shadow of his wings. And so some of the most lyrical psalms have Zion and Jerusalem for their theme: Psalms 83, 86, 121, 124. The Holy City is the object of such love and veneration that it is personified, as in Psalms 146-7, almost instinctively. The great feasts at Jerusalem, especially Tabernacles, which seems to have been pre-eminently the Temple feast (the Pasch was much more of a family celebration in ancient

Israel), were the occasion and theme of many psalms, especially those which proclaim the kingship of the Lord, e.g. Psalms 23, 92, 95, 96, 97. A theory which has had some vogue in recent times, and is very attractive, holds that these psalms were sung at an annual 'enthronement of Yahweh', when the ark of the covenant, over which God was considered to be enthroned on the Cherubim with the ark as his footstool, would have been carried in procession out of the Temple, through the city, and back again to the Holy of Holies.

The kingship of the Lord was closely associated with and represented by the throne of the kings of the house of David. The king in ancient Juda was a central liturgical as well as political figure, and the sacred monarchy is the theme and setting of a number of royal or messianic psalms: Psalms 2, 19, 20, 44, 71, 109. The hopes centred on the 'anointed of the Lord' (every king was a Messias, or anointed one), which these psalms express, were the seeds from which grew the transcendent messianic expectations, looking forward to a more than earthly, in all ways perfect, royal redeemer, that our Lord came in so unexpected a manner to fulfil.

Now for a few words about what I call, rather inadequately, the psychological setting of the psalms. Many, if not most, of them are highly personal in tone, and express in very forcible terms the individual psalmist's personal attitude to God, to himself, and to other people. It is in this respect, perhaps, that the psalms can be most disconcerting to the modern mind, repelling it by the very qualities which are also their most compelling attraction. There is nothing indifferent or neutral about the 'dramatis personae' of these personal psalms, or about the psalmists' attitude towards them. Everything is in black and white, everything, we feel, is stated in extremes; there is on the one hand God and those who love him, his servants, the just, the innocent, the upright, the poor and needy with the psalmist among them; and on the other side there are those who hate God, the wicked, the sinners, the deceitful, the proud and rich and oppressive. And the sublime vehemence with which the psalmist expresses the aspirations of the 'white' side towards God, their love, their longing, their hopes and fears, their faith and courage and their persistent prayer, would move us more unreservedly, we think, if only it were not counter-balanced by

the vehemence of his sentiments against the 'black', by the unabashed expressions of hatred, by the vindictive maledictions and the clamour for vengeance. What is a Christian to make, in all seriousness, of Psalm 108, which only concentrates in one psalm what is scattered through the rest of the psalter? 'May his sons be orphans and his wife a widow, may his children wander homeless and begging, may they be cast out of their devastated homes . . . , may no one show him mercy, may there be none to take pity on his orphaned children. . . .' It scarcely matches 'But I say unto you, love your enemies'. 'Blessed be the man who takes and dashes her little ones against the rock', 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

And yet without the savage virulence of the psalms the charity of the gospels makes no sense and has no value. If you want the one, you must have the other too. Loving your enemies is meaningless unless in some sense you also hate them, otherwise you are only practising Stoic indifference; our Lord's forgiveness of his murderers must be seen against the background of the curses, the woes, he had pronounced upon them, in the 23rd chapter of St Matthew. You can only forgive a debt to which you first lay claim.

Now the psalmists knew as well as we do that you cannot put people in neat categories of black and white, just and unjust, without qualification. They knew that the just, among whom they counted themselves, are also sinners, because they frequently confess their sins and pray for forgiveness. Psalm 31 is a complete statement of the doctrine of penance. David their patron had been guilty of rounding off his adultery with Bethsabee by the singularly base murder of her husband. They knew also that the wicked are open to conversion; Psalm 2, an uncompromisingly fierce psalm, ends with an exhortation to God's rivals 'to understand' and to the powerful 'to be instructed'. But they also knew, better perhaps than we do, that wickedness and goodness have no reality as mere ideas or abstractions—Hebrew is a language very poor in abstract nouns—but only as things, that is as deeds and as the doers of deeds. And their touchstone of right and wrong was not any moral philosophy and its abstract notions, but the supreme rock-like reality of the God of Israel. If our deeds and therefore our characters are now such a mixture of good and bad that we cannot justly put anyone into pure black or white

categories, the judgment of God is nonetheless unerringly discriminating, and one day his judgment *will* finally sort out the black from the white, and separate the sheep from the goats.

St Augustine says that we should read the maledictions of the psalms as expressions of prophetic knowledge rather than of vengeful desires. This may seem a very artificial solution to the difficulty. But there is something in it. Exaggeration, for which grammarians use the politer word hyperbole, was as characteristic of the Hebrews as understatement is of the English. The psalmists were so convinced of the ultimate black-and-whiteness of things, which is demanded by the absolute 'all-whiteness' of God, that they stated their actual situations in terms of it. And so on the one hand their own vehement wish to be numbered among the friends of God was expressed by the positive statement that they were, then and there, innocent and just and lovers of the Law and therefore already his perfect friends; and on the other their conviction that the wicked were his enemies found expression in the wish that they should be treated as such, then and there. It is not a point that I can develop now, but this exaggerated character of so much Old Testament language is of supreme importance as a means of forcing on the Hebrew mind an awareness of the next life, of the resurrection, of eternal rewards and punishments, and hence an ever more urgent expectation of a heavenly redeemer.

I have left myself very little time for considering the total or Christian setting of the psalms. But this note of exaggeration or hyperbole so characteristic of their language leads us straight into it. If you consider the psalms simply as Old Testament hymns, they must undoubtedly be regarded as expressions of a childhood religion compared with the adult worship of Christianity. Old Testament religion was not perfect, because it was not complete. But it is precisely the inspired 'big talk' of the psalms which makes it possible for the adult worshipper of the gospel to use them, and apply them to new perspectives which no exaggeration can do justice to. Meanwhile let us take another rule from St Augustine. All the psalms, he says, are uttered in the name of Christ, of the whole Christ, head and body. So sometimes it is Christ the head who speaks in the psalms, and sometimes it is the body of Christ. Thus all the 'dramatis personae' of the psalms acquire a new dimension. Sion and Jerusalem are the heavenly

city of the Apocalypse, they stand for the Church triumphant or militant as the case, or the taste, may be. The warlike king, the persecuted poor man, are Christ in his glory and his humiliation, and Christ in his members humbled to be exalted. The psalmist's enemies are Christ's enemies—and if we are fortunate enough to know nobody to whom we can apply Psalm 108, it is at least salutary to remind ourselves of the dreadful possibility of its being applied to us.

I would like to conclude by dwelling briefly on the fact that the psalms are inspired prayers. As St Paul says, we know not how to pray as we ought. We only pray well when the Holy Ghost prays in us 'with unspeakable groanings'. Well, he prayed pre-eminently in the psalmists. Theirs *was* a childhood religion, and it had the directness, the frankness, the immediacy of childhood. God was so much more real to them than he usually is to us. This is something which need not be, but often is lost to the grown-up Christian. God has given us in Christ a revelation which has the wide horizons of the adult world. But from the days when our religion—and our religion of course is identical with the psalmists'—from the days when our religion was in its infancy God has left us the psalms to be the Church's special prayer as well as the Temple's. In the psalms we can respond to the adult experience of the full revelation in Christ with the vital directness and innocence of childhood, and this is the most proper response for those who have been born again as the children of God.



## OUR LADY IN THE SCRIPTURES

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**T**HE present article continues the study begun in the May number of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* under the title of our Lady in Tradition. In that article there was occasion to remark on the benign and gratifying way in which the great organs of the secular press have reported the events connected with the centenary celebrations of the apparitions of