

HANDOUT FOR OCTOBER 1

Praying the Psalms in the Voice of Christ

Week One

An Introduction to the Psalms

Preliminary Remarks

- The Book of Psalms is one of three parts of Israel's Scriptures, the other two being the Law and the Prophets. The Hebrew title of this book is the Book of Praises.
- The Psalter consists of 150 psalms divided into five books in imitation of the Torah/Pentateuch. Each section ends with a prayer of praise.
- The books are divided as follows: 3-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150.
- Psalms 1-2 form an introduction to the Psalter.
- Jewish and Christian tradition attributes the psalms to King David; but the psalms were written over several centuries by many people.
- The psalms are poetic songs written for a variety of occasions, especially for worship in the temple. While many have to do with the king and the city of Jerusalem, others are meant for individuals suffering from sickness or persecution.
- When praying the psalms, it is important to pay attention to their use of imagery. For example, when speaking of God, the psalms refer to God's face, God's ears, God's wings. God is like an eagle; God is my rock, my refuge, my strength, my shield.
- The psalms make use of repetition and parallelism: one verse often repeats what the previous verse says in a different way.
- There are different kinds of psalms
 - hymns of praise (8, 33, 66, 100, 104, 150)
 - individual laments (3, 7, 17, 22, 31, 51, 54, 55, 69, 88, 130)
 - communal laments (44, 74, 77, 79, 80)
 - thanksgiving songs (30, 57, 92, 116, 138)
 - psalms of confidence (4, 16, 23, 62, 91)
 - royal psalms (2, 19, 20, 72, 89, 110, 132)
 - songs of Zion/Jerusalem and enthronement psalms (29, 46, 47, 93, 95-99)
 - historical psalms (78, 105-107, 135, 136)
 - wisdom psalms (19, 25, 34-37, 49, 111, 112, 119)
- The psalms are often a mixture of these categories; for example, laments and complaints also include expressions of praise and thanksgiving.

The Importance of Psalms 1 & 2

- Psalms 1 & 2 serve as an introduction to the Psalter, announcing the two great themes that guide our reading and praying of the psalms: obedience to God's Law and submission to God's rule.
- Psalm 1 instructs us to ponder the law of the Lord day and night so that we will thrive.
- Psalm 2 teaches us that God rules and has established his anointed one, the Christ, as his king to rule over the peoples according to the law God has revealed.

- These two themes instruct God’s people to pattern their lives on God’s law and to submit themselves to God’s rule over history and creation.

The Use of the Psalm in the New Testament and the Church’s Liturgy

- The New Testament makes extensive use of the psalms because it reads them as *prophecies* of Christ’s Passion (Psalm 22, 31, 69) and resurrection (Psalms 2, 16, 110, 118).
- The church makes extensive use of the Psalms at Mass and in the Liturgy of the Hours, which consists of:
 - Office of Readings
 - Morning Prayer
 - Daytime Prayer
 - Evening Prayer
 - Night Prayer
- In the Liturgy of the Hours, all the psalms are recited over a four-week cycle.

Reading and Praying the Psalms Today

- Christians have prayed the psalms for centuries because they are a treasury of prayer for every occasion: sorrow and joy, victory and defeat, life and death, good and evil.
- The psalms are a divine school of prayer because they are God’s words given to us to teach us how to pray. By praying the psalms regularly, we learn how to pray as God’s wants us to pray.
- It can be challenging to pray the psalms because they were composed centuries ago, and some of their language can be off-putting.
- To pray the psalms as Christians, we need to pray them with Christ, who is the head of the body of the church.
- In the light of the Paschal Mystery, the psalms are about Christ.
- In the psalms we can hear:
 - the voice of Christ
 - prayers to Christ
 - prayers about Christ.
 - prayers about the body of Christ, the church
 - the voice of Christ’s body, the church.

The Psalms used in the Liturgy of the Hours for Night Prayer

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| • Sunday | Psalm 91 | Resting in the shelter of God’s wings |
| • Monday | Psalm 86 | Complete trust in the Lord |
| • Tuesday | Psalm 143 | Need for God’s mercy and furtiveness |
| • Wednesday | 31:1-6 & 130 | Commending ourselves to the Lord |
| • Thursday | Psalm 16 | Total trust in the Lord |
| • Friday | Psalm 88 | Lord, help me! |
| • Saturday | Psalm 4 and 134 | Raising our hands in prayer to God |