

USING THE PSALMS

A number of years ago I was asked to take part in a series of talks about 'spirituality' that was taking place in a church near Birmingham. I say talks but in fact the idea was that the vicar would interview me about my own experience of prayer and then invite questions from the congregation. This didn't seem to require any preparation on my part so I rather breezily agreed, but as the time got closer I began to feel increasingly anxious about what I had committed myself to. In fact, I can't remember anything of what the vicar asked let alone what I answered, but I do remember that the first question from the congregation was 'what would I advise someone to do who wanted to stir up their own spiritual life?'. I was able to say, that that was a very easy question to answer. All they needed to do was to get a friendly vicar to invite them to answer questions about their own spiritual life in front of a large congregation, and in the weeks leading up to this event they would be astonished by the galvanising effect it would have. Now I think they thought I was joking so I went on to explain that what I meant to say was that the best way to stir up your prayer life was to get involved in some kind of Christian service. But in fact I hadn't really been joking at all. That had been exactly my experience. So when Andrew asked me to take part in this series of sermons I think he was a little surprised at how quickly I agreed. It wasn't that I thought that the discipline and profundity of my own spirituality was such that the rest of you would be bound to benefit from hearing about it, it was I'm afraid rather the opposite: that I knew from experience that given the shallowness and indiscipline of my spiritual life it would be a great help to be put on the spot.

So did it work? Well up to a point it did. Over the last month or so I decided to read the daily morning and evening Psalms, set out in the Prayer Book, which I don't do as a regular thing, but which as those who use this patten know has the great advantage of taking you away from your own favourite texts and plunging you without any reference to your own state of mind into that impassioned dialogue with God that you find in the Psalms. The idea of reading the Psalms in a daily pattern has of course always been a part of monastic life and the Daily Office and even within the Book of Psalms itself you can see evidence of a kind of pattern of use, so that the psalm we sang this morning, for instance, Psalm 126, is one of a group of 15 psalms with the title "A Song of Ascents" that were probably connected with the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But whether or not we use any pattern in reading them, the gift of the Psalms is to allow us to hear, almost to overhear, that kind of dialogue with God

which is what I understand "spirituality" to mean and which is a central part of the fabric of Christian life.

It is also part of the fabric of this building, and I am often struck that while the great crusted arches over my head, which mark the place where the altar used to stand before the later chancel was added, speak of the majesty and glory of God, the little carving of a bird on it's nest cut into the pillar just next to me, refers to the lines in Psalm 84 which tells us that "even the sparrow has found a house and the swallow a nest for herself, a home near your altar where she may lay her young". Here was the altar: there was the nest. It is an affirmation that however shallow and inadequate our own life of prayer might seem in the face of the endless suffering of the world and the infinite majesty of the universe, it has a meaning, a place near God's altar.

This kind of prayer, which we overhear in the Psalms, is more nakedly personal than anything we put in our own hymnbooks and for that reason often quite uncomfortable reading. Many of the Psalms are full of pain both physical and psychological. Psalm 139 asserts that God knows all our thoughts "there is not a word in my tongue but you know it altogether", and the psalmists make no attempt to hide from God their sense of outrage and frustration at God's failure to put the world to rights. This frustration is frequently expressed in demands that God should smite the wicked and destroy the evildoers. These ferocious demands for justice on behalf of the poor and the oppressed are cries that need to be listened to however hard they are to read. All the same if this was the dominant theme of the Psalms we would not find in them the spiritual nourishment that we do. And of course it is not the dominant theme.

What we call the Book of Psalms, calls itself the Book of Praises, and praise is the central theme of the whole collection. "In the prison of his days / teach the free man how to praise". What the poet W.H. Auden wrote about another poet W. B. Yeats, is what the poets of the Psalms actually deliver. They give us a vocabulary of gratitude, a whole language for giving thanks that is not just a reflection of moments of exaltation but the expression of a whole way of life. So that often Psalms that begin in desperation and pain with a chorus of complaint, suddenly move into hallelujahs. Sometimes though it is the other way round and the psalm we sang this morning is an example of that. Psalm 126 begins with the most delirious expression of joy in the whole Psalter. "When the Lord turned the captivity of Zion we were like dreamers. Then our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy." There is some uncertainty about whether there is a direct reference to being set free from captivity in the first line of the Psalm, but whether or not it refers to it there, it seems most likely that what this Psalm is

recalling is the extraordinary moment when the Jewish population returned to their homeland after a generation spent in exile in Babylon: "Then it was said among the nations 'the Lord has done great things for them': the Lord has done great things for us and we are rejoicing". Great moments like the release of Nelson Mandela which was being remembered the other week, often create the feeling in us that now everything is going to be different. But though things do change what follows the great moment is usually more complex and difficult. That was certainly the case for the Jews who returned from exile, so that it's not perhaps surprising that having remembered the great moment of joy the Psalmist begins to pray that God will once again transform what still feels like a kind of captivity in the same way that sudden streams of water transform the Negev desert. Yet the Psalm ends not with a prayer but with an image in which all this experience is fused together in a profound affirmation. A slightly more literal translation that the one we sang might go:

*Those that sow in tears
Harvest in shouts of joy
He that goes out and goes out
And weeps
Carrying a handful of seed
Shall return and return
With shouts of joy
Carrying his sheaves.*

The emphatic repetition *haloch yelech* (haloch yelech) goes out goes out is important because it makes clear that what is being talked about here is not going out to work in a bad mood, but something much more desperate and difficult. If it is right to think of the opening verses as referring to the return from exile, then these verses are talking about the deportation to Babylon. And to get an idea of what that meant we need to think not only what it would be like to be deported from your own homeland, but what it would be like to be cut off from everything that gave meaning to life and had shaped your own identity. We need to imagine what it would be like if this building were bulldozed, if we were no longer able to read our Bibles or take communion. When the population of Judah was deported to Babylon they left behind everything that shaped their religious practice. All they could take with them was what was inside them. 'A handful of seed'. That relationship, that dialogue with God, which is at the heart of the Psalms. But that was enough.

A little while back you may remember David mentioned in a sermon the diaries which a Jewish student called ETTY HILLESUM wrote during the Nazi occupation of Holland. As David told us she had lived a troubled, chaotic life, until through the influence of her therapist with whom she was involved in a complex relationship, she began first to pray and then to read the Gospel of St. John, and found that her life was transformed by this and that she was no longer able to hate.

I hadn't heard of ETTY HILLESUM before but as I have been reading about her, I've been constantly struck by the parallels to the experience of the Psalms. In 1943 while in a transit camp awaiting deportation she writes "My whole life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with you O God. One great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the Camp, my feet planted on your earth my eyes raised toward your heaven, tears sometimes run down my face of deep emotion and gratitude".

She often in fact talks about reading the Psalms "taking one phrase and planting it in the depths of the heart where it's meaning can grow". And describes how here priorities each day were reading the Psalms, listening to other people and finding some inner solitude. It's important though to note that second priority "listening to other people". When the Psalmist talks about carrying a handful of seed he isn't talking about something that we clutch to ourselves. The image is rather of distributing it, throwing it out. Literally it means "a trail of seed". People who met ETTY HILLESUM in the camp described her "radiance" her "warmth", how she would visit every sick person asking "can I do anything for you?".

When she was finally deported to Auschwitz, as David told us, she threw out a card from the cattle truck which was picked up by farmers. In it she describes opening the Bible at random and finding "The Lord is my high tower", one of the central images in the Psalms, and she says "we left the Camp singing".

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Of course that last claim was entirely a statement of faith. It couldn't be proved, and yet for the Psalmist it was based on solid experience. The Israelites had gone into exile with nothing except the remembered Songs of Zion which they could hardly bring themselves to sing. But they had come back with an extraordinary religious literature that has enriched the whole world. Etty Hillesum said that her deepest desire was "to bear witness that God lived even in these times", and though it has taken many years for her writing to become known, that has happened.

The sparrow's nest that we build near God's altar, the handful of seed that is our relationship with God, often I think seems to us a very frail thing. But the promise that the Psalm makes to us, the promise that the Easter story confirms, is that as we use it, as we live it, it will bear fruit, both in this world and beyond it.