

THE PSALMS¹

By GORDON MURSELL

I do not like the Psalms: they seem to me to be the classic examples of fool's comfort. Comforting people by telling them what they would like to believe when both parties know that it is not true is sometimes humane, and always to be let off with a light penance as between two frail mortals; but it should not be admitted to the canon.

SO WROTE GEORGE BERNARD SHAW to Dame Laurentia McLachlan O.S.B., Abbess of Stanbrook,² in characteristically trenchant style; and there will have been many, Jews and Christians alike, who have found themselves thinking the same. There are moments in the psalter when the assumption that things will turn out all right in the end is a shade too easy for comfort, and other moments when the psalmist's conviction of his or her own innocence seems too assured to carry conviction. Nor is Shaw's stricture the only one that could be levelled: there is a narrow tribalism that is often perceptible, and occasionally explicit—an adversarial quality that consorts uneasily with the eirenic tone of modern liturgical intercessions. And the theology of God is likely to be unacceptable to many today: the assumption that God wills all that happens in a direct and interventionist manner reflects the primitive cosmology of a distant age.

These difficulties are real, and will be considered more fully below; but they should not allow us simply to dismiss the psalter altogether in favour of more acceptable alternatives. For there are a number of arguments in favour of these 150 anonymous prayer-poems which are worth recalling. First, as poetry, the psalms almost invariably use images, not concepts, and with good reason. Images are accessible, inclusive, and open-ended: concepts are élitist and precise. Too much modern liturgy is irredeemably concept-based, with a consequent imaginative impoverishment. It is worth noting, for example, the rich diversity of images of God that are used: God is a large bird protecting its young (Psalms 36 and 91, among others); a loving craftsman who fashioned and shaped us (Psalm 119 verse 73); a mother at whose breast our souls can suckle (Psalm 131); a midwife (Psalms 22 verse 10 and 71 verse 6); and always a safe place, a rock of refuge and shelter.³ Most of the imagery used in the psalms is drawn

from secular, not narrowly religious, experience: the whole of life is the psalmists' agenda, and the collection thus forms a manual of lay spirituality which is worth stressing since for much of its history it has been used more in monastic communities than anywhere else.

Secondly, the psalms know no sharp distinction between the individual and the corporate: even the most intensely individual psalms have a formulaic character that allows their content to be universalized.⁴ These are 'open texts', capable of speaking on many levels; and, as with all good poetry, their very specificity allows them to address a vast diversity of contexts and people: *cor ad cor loquitur*.

Thirdly, the psalms are the prayer-book of Jews and Christians alike: to pray them at all is to engage in interfaith spirituality in a direct and imaginative way. Their essential Jewishness allows us a unique point of access to the spirituality of Jesus, whose own personal formation as a devout Jew must have been heavily indebted to them: the psalms of the Hallel (113–118, or 112–117 in the Greek numbering) will have been recited by Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper (cf Mt 26,30), and many lesser psalms (such as Psalm 3, or Psalm 35) as well as more famous ones can be prayed by Christians as acts of imaginative identification with the prayer of Christ to the Father.

Fourthly, the psalms are worth praying because, like Everest, they are there, and have for two thousand years nourished the spirituality of countless Jews and Christians alike. That might appear to be an unacceptably traditional argument; and it is true that each generation needs to pray as it can, not as it should. But that should not blind it to what is, simply, *given*; and the current preference for a personalized 'designer-spirituality' can cause us to forget that our spiritual growth depends on our finding ways of handling creatively those aspects of our lives over which we have no control. In this sense, praying with the psalms is similar to praying with our past: both are given, irreversibly there, like so much of what happens to us (particularly for those with little or no control over their lives). The spiritual question is: what do we do with what (for good or ill) is 'given' in our lives? How can we make something creative out of the hand that life has dealt us? The psalms contain many answers to these questions, ranging from acceptance to furious protest; but they never attempt to evade them.

Finally, the psalms seek to offer, not explanations, but meaning. Concepts explain: images, in art or poetry, offer meaning. Many aspects of human life, such as unmerited suffering, or the mystery of

love, are literally inexplicable; and a liturgy or pastoral theology designed to explain rather than offer meaning is hopelessly flawed. The gospels suggest that Jesus was often asked for explanations, but rarely gave any; instead he used stories, images, gestures, not to explain but to offer meaning. The psalms do the same: indeed they are at their worst when they try to provide explanations. But their capacity to sound the depths of human experience enables them to help us find meaning in those parts of our lives that explanations cannot reach.

There is space here only to explore a few of the rich resources which the psalms can contribute to contemporary spirituality; and it might be appropriate to begin with their approach to memory and story. For both individual and community, memory is constitutive of identity: we are what we remember. Without the capacity to remember the past, we are inevitably doomed either to repeat it or to be haunted by it. The rulers of Babylon knew this well, and must have done all they could to encourage the exiled Israelites to forget their past, as the practitioners of *apartheid* sought to do with the black majority of South Africans. But the memory of what God had done once rekindles the hope of what he may yet do again. It is this that lies behind the passionate intensity of Psalm 137, articulating the experience of the exiles: the word 'remember' recurs three times, and leads to a terrible conclusion:

O daughter of Babylon, you that lay waste:
happy shall he be who serves you as you have served us;
Happy shall he be who takes your little ones,
and dashes them against the stones.

Here, as so often in the psalter, it is crucial to remember that what we are reading is a *prayer*, not a summons to action: the exiles pour out before God their deepest feelings of anger and despair and, in so doing, we may believe that they were able to release them. 'To forgive and forget' is dangerous nonsense: the Christian must learn to forgive and remember. And remembering the past, unless done selectively (as with nostalgia), is likely to expose some raw and unhealed wounds in all of us, as it will have done for the first singers of Psalm 137. But that exposure is often the only way to healing; and by using the 'memory' psalms to align our own painful memories with those of the psalmist, we may experience for ourselves their therapeutic power.

Memory, however, is more than therapeutic: it can also be subversive. The great 'story psalms' (78, 105-107) appear on a

superficial reading to be simple retellings of the Exodus with minor variations. In fact they are vivid meditations on a theme of enormous significance: how a community's past can nourish its present. The theme is set out in the introduction to Psalm 78:

Give heed to my teaching, O my people:
incline your ears to the words of my mouth;
For I will open my mouth in a parable:
and expound the mysteries of former times.
What we have heard and known:
what our forefathers have told us,
we will not hide from their children
but declare to a generation yet to come: . . .
So that they might put their confidence in God:
and not forget his works but keep his commandments.

'And not forget . . .' Alas, subsequent generations of Israelites forgot all too easily. Psalm 106, the greatest of the 'story psalms', constantly underlines the disastrous amnesia of the psalmist's forebears:

Our fathers when they were in Egypt:
took no heed of your wonders;
They did not remember the multitude of your loving-kindnesses.

The Lord remembered, however, and delivered them at the Red Sea:

Then they believed his words:
and sang him songs of praise.
But in a little while they forgot what he had done:
and would wait for his counsel no more.

The pattern is repeated again and again. God delivers his people, and for a short time they are grateful. Then they forget again; and this failure to remember leads them to idolatry, nostalgia and even despair. But God did not forget:

He remembered his covenant with them:
and relented according to the abundance of his loving-kindness.

Psalm 106 is as timely and powerful as Kipling's 'Lest we forget': a sharp summons to remember the past rather than to repeat it. But it also reminds us that true remembering is neither the glorification of the past (as with nostalgia), nor the perpetuation of its tensions for

their own sake (as with resentment), but rather an uncensored representing of its truths in the interests of the present. This is subversive remembering, refusing to allow the easy or fashionable certainties of today unchallenged dominance, and allowing all present experience to collide with the sober lessons of the past. The eucharistic anamnesis is the essence of this Christian remembering: lifting the past into the present for the sake of the future, so that our stories are interwoven with the story of the Church and its risen Lord.⁵

For ancient Israel, however, it was not only the people who needed reminding: sometimes God did too. In the 89th Psalm the first section reads like a song of thanksgiving for the covenant God had made with Israel. But at verse 39 a terrible disjunction appears in the text, and the fierce irony of the first part becomes clear: God has forgotten his covenant, and rejected his people. 'Remember . . . remember . . . remember'—the word echoes through the final section; and the psalm as a whole gives voice to the experience of all who have known that disjunction between past blessing and present distress—Jews in Auschwitz, or Kurds in Iraq; the bereaved, or the homeless, or those whose lives seem to be disintegrating before their own eyes.

Psalm 89 leads naturally to the theme of lament or protest, which characterizes some of the greatest psalms in the collection. I have written at length elsewhere about these,⁶ and will not repeat what is said there. But it is worth making two points which, taken together, help to explain the greatness of these psalms. First, the psalms of protest are of exceptional psychological depth, and not only because their imagery unlocks some of the all-too-rarely articulated aspects of human experience. The clearest example of this is the movement, in almost all the greatest psalms of this kind, from a narrow individualism to a broader, corporate context. This is the movement of much therapy and spiritual growth: from a destructive isolationism to a discovery of meaning attained by placing your own experience within a wider context, within a clearer perception of reality. Psalm 102 begins in fearful isolation, reflected in its unique biblical superscription:

(A prayer of one afflicted, when faint and pleading before the Lord.)
 O Lord hear my prayer:
 and let my cry come before you.
 Do not hide your face from me in the day of my trouble.

The movement of the psalm is not coherent but fitful, reflecting the slow and erratic movement of any wounded person or community from despair towards hope: the opening prayer is followed by a graphic articulation, with vivid imagery, of the psalmist's situation:

My heart is scorched and withered like grass:
and I forget to eat my bread.
I am weary with the sound of my groaning:
my bones stick fast to my skin.
I have become like an owl in the wilderness:
like a screech-owl among the ruins . . .

These images are not simply picture language designed to make the experience more vivid: they serve at a deeper level to convey the meaning of the sickness for the sufferer's life. Some of the images have specific cultural connotations: the owl, for example, was an unclean bird (cf Lev 11, 17), and its use here clearly reflects this pervasive sense of being seen as an unclean person, isolated from the community. There follows a prayer of protest (v. 10)—for the psalmist it is, in some sense at least, God's fault that this is happening to him—and a melancholy self-reflection (v. 11). Then the psalmist begins to set his situation in a wider context (v. 12–22), looking both outwards and forwards, and identifying his predicament with that of his people (v. 17). It is worth noting here how the image of Jerusalem reduced to dust (in v. 14) picks up the image previously used to articulate the psalmist's situation ('I have eaten ashes for bread', v. 9): what is happening to the individual is a part of what is happening to the whole community. But this changed perspective is not yet secure: in verse 23 it collapses, and there follows an abrupt reversion to the psalmist's earlier isolation. The reversion, however, is temporary; and the sharp contrast, in the concluding verses, between the sense of individual transitoriness ('Do not take me away, O God, in the midst of my life . . . They shall perish, they shall all grow old like a garment') and the eternity of Yahweh ('you whose years extend through all generations') enables the psalmist finally to set his situation in the widest and most cosmic context: you remain even if I do not, and *because* you remain our children will be safe (v. 28).

The same movement can be clearly seen in Psalms 22, 77 and 69; and seen in this light, these psalms can serve as powerful metaphors for the journey of any individual or community towards healing and integration. It is crucial to stress that the 'praise' sections of these

psalms are not facile 'happy endings' but new and wider future-oriented perspectives that are achieved precisely through the honest articulation of despair, protest and anger: to praise without the protest is empty verbosity, which is why so many modern hymns fail ultimately to change the human condition because they make so little attempt first to address it. Nor are these conclusions 'fool's comfort', as George Bernard Shaw argued; for they relate to the future in precisely the same way as the 'story psalms' relate to the past: both past and future are put at the service of the present. To remember is to lift the past into the present: to praise is to lift the future into the present, and thus to make its eventual reality the more certain.

This leads us to the second important point about the psalms of protest. They are written from what appears to be a curiously paradoxical starting-point: on the one hand, God is responsible for all that happens; on the other, life is palpably and consistently unfair. The paradox, however, is crucial, and helps to answer the criticism of the psalmists' theology referred to earlier: it is *because* God is involved in all of life that we have a right to protest when things go wrong. Some Christians see God's involvement in human suffering as limited, and ignore him: others see that involvement as predestined, and thank him. The psalmist sees it as baffling, and screams at him. The psalms make sense only for those who share that starting-point; and for that reason they make better sense as a resource-book for survival, or a spirituality of resistance, than as vehicles for the personal spiritual growth of the leisured. In turn this brings us to the wider reason why prayer of this kind is desperately needed in contemporary Christianity. Writing about the psalms of lament or protest, Walter Brueggemann says:

A community of faith which negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne [of God], because the throne seems to be only a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne (which is a conclusion drawn through liturgic use), they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts. Justice questions disappear into civility and docility. The order of the day comes to seem absolute, beyond question, and we are left with only grim obedience and eventually despair. The point of access for serious change has been forfeited when the propriety of this speech form is denied.

We might conclude by reflecting briefly on two other themes that are explored in the psalter, and underline its relevance to contempor-

ary spirituality. The theme of journeying in the psalms has not always received adequate attention,⁸ which is the more surprising, since it has a special relevance for Christianity: one of the oldest descriptions of the Christian faith was simply 'The Way'; and journeying as a whole is a powerful metaphor for life, for it causes us to address such questions as 'where are you going?' or 'what do you seek?', and thus puts us more closely in touch with our deepest longings. The psalms reflect a society that was at once settled and nomadic, and whose more developed form was marked by a series of regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Pilgrimage has become popular again today, though modern methods of travel have robbed it of much of its original cost and power. But it is still possible to feel something of the intense love and longing all devout Jews felt for Jerusalem, the 'heavenly city', even though some may wish to use it as a metaphor for a different goal: the coming of the kingdom, the vision of God, the attainment of a just cause, or whatever we hold to be the ultimate goal of our lives. Psalm 48 encapsulates the goal of our journeying: Jerusalem is the city of God, at once this-worldly and transcendental—the ideal community offering joy for the whole earth (v. 2), protection (v. 3) and guidance (v. 13) for women and men alike (v. 11) through the indwelling presence of God. Psalms 84 and 42-3 reflect in different ways the painful longing of the exile difficult or no longer possible: the latter pair of psalms make excellent sense as the prayer of the priest in a time of stress. But most beautiful of all are the pilgrim psalms (120-34), suitable for use before, during or at the end of any journey, but equally suitable as metaphors of the interior journey: the 'enemies' in Psalm 120, as so often elsewhere in the psalter, can be those forces within ourselves that tempt us to duplicity (v. 2) or aggression (v. 6); and Psalm 129 can be seen as a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance from internal obsessions or the corrosive power of stress.⁹ If Psalms 121 and 131 are justly famous as expressing the quintessence of that mature childlike trust which is the single most important quality needed by the pilgrim, Psalm 127 catches best of all that elusive but crucial gift that Christians call grace:

It is in vain that you rise up early and go so late to rest,
eating the bread of toil:
for the Lord bestows honour, and on those whom he loves.

Finally, something needs to be said about the theme of contemplative prayer in the psalter. The Wisdom tradition of later Old

Testament piety is evident in many of the psalms, notably in the evocative imagery of Psalm 1, where the chaff vividly reflects the unreflective and fruitless activism of those whose journey is not directed by God, whilst the tree offers a wonderful image for those seeking wisdom: it is a safe place, a source of shelter, but only because it first knows how to receive fresh water (v. 3)—the tree is a metaphor for a life of contemplative presence, not relentless busyness; and its winter nakedness can allow the light to shine through it even more effectively than all its summer foliage. Any of the images in the psalms (but particularly those in the wisdom psalms) can be used in this reflective way: as we pray them we can allow our imagination to dwell on the images and be nourished by them, in precisely the way that the wise person in Psalm 1 ponders (literally 'murmurs from memory') the *torah* of the Lord day and night (v. 2), ruminating on the merciful will of God for him or herself with the careful meditative attention of the medieval monks engaged in their spiritual exercise.

No psalm more completely exemplifies the contemplative tradition of Judaism than the longest one of all, Psalm 119. It is an acrostic psalm, with each set of eight verses beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The method was doubtless designed to facilitate memorization, though it does not make for coherent thematic development. Yet that is precisely its genius. The 119th Psalm consists of 176 verses whose subject is exclusively the praying person's relationship with God. Everything extraneous is filtered out: every verse (apart from the first three and v. 115) is addressed directly to God. And their subject matter is the Law, the *torah*, for which a series of synonyms are used repeatedly, giving the whole psalm a hypnotic, mantra-like intensity. This is a psalm of totally awakened, focussed contemplation, demanding of those who pray it something of that alert attentiveness that Buddhists call 'mindfulness'. The word 'law' is a poor translation for *torah*: Martin Buber described it as 'Yahweh's merciful direction';¹⁰ and it is crucial to see that it is the free gift of God *for us*, a lifegiving source of personal (or communal) guidance and instruction for our own unique vocation. Understood in this way, this extraordinary psalm can come alive, and its passionate and affective language can help us to open our entire being to the costly but transforming power of God's call. Dietrich Bonhoeffer regarded the exploration of its secrets as 'the climax of his theological life',¹¹ and with good reason: this is spiritual direction of the purest and most searching kind, without guru or guidebook; and if we can use the repeated synonyms for the *torah* to

focus our attention on God's mysterious and providential (but always personal) will, there need be no limit to its transforming power.

How to pray them? There is space only for brief suggestions. The 'royal' psalms are a point of entry for reflection on our own unique call: the words of Yahweh in Psalm 2 are addressed to all of us, for we are all kings and queens and priests in the city of God, begotten and accepted through grace:

I will announce the Lord's decree, that which he has spoken:
You are my son—this day have I begotten you.

Many of the psalms of protest can be used as means of imaginative intercession for others: we live in a society suffering from 'compassion fatigue', and much corporate intercession suffers from a failure genuinely to empathize with those for whom it is offered. These psalms can help us to see life from their perspective: thus Psalm 7 could be the prayer of someone who stays to face the enemy and resists the temptation to flee; Psalm 39 is the prayer of someone afflicted by sudden and serious illness or disaster; Psalm 88 could be the prayer of someone suffering from AIDS; and the terrible Psalm 109 can be read as a psalm for the Nuremberg trials, or wherever those justly afflicted are overwhelmed by the need for retribution. We need not agree with all the sentiments expressed in order to identify ourselves with the experiences that gave rise to them, and to pray for those who live those experiences today.

Many psalms vividly evoke particular experiences or situations: Psalm 16 is the prayer of a priest, and Psalm 80 of a community facing decline; Psalm 57 evokes the experience of those in prison awaiting judgement, or of those held hostage, and Psalm 146 evokes either the actual or hoped-for experience of liberation. The apparent complacency of Psalms 26 and 101 is misleading: these prayers reflect a rigorous concern to root out interior deceitfulness and all that corrodes us from within. And the great psalms of penance, supremely Psalm 51, confront us with both the intense seriousness of sin and the God whose *rachamim*, or mercy (v. 1), evokes a mother's suffering love¹² for her children. And on those occasions, such as a monastic office or any public liturgy, when the psalms are chosen for us, it is possible to allow one's own immediate experience and concerns to collide with those of the psalmist, at once lifting us out of our self-preoccupation and at the same time allowing our own needs to trace in these ancient but timeless poems God's personal will for us. Such prayer will always be hard work; but perseverance may enable even

the least appealing verses of the psalter to allow us glimpses of annunciation. Beneath the austere formality of Psalm 119 is a love that can lift us to the stratosphere:

O let your loving mercy¹³ come to me that I may live:
for your *torah* is my delight.

NOTES

¹ The numbering of the Psalms continues to cause confusion, and it is much to be regretted that the main Christian denominations have not been able to agree on an 'industry standard'. The Greek Septuagint numbering, commonly used in Roman Catholic circles, is one behind the Hebrew numbering from Psalm 10 to Psalm 113, and from Psalm 117 to Psalm 147: thus the longest Psalm is numbered 119 in the Hebrew tradition and 118 in the Greek. The Greek Psalms 9 and 113 are respectively Psalms 9–10 and 114–115 in the Hebrew, while the Hebrew Psalm 116 is Psalms 114–115 in the Greek. In this article the Hebrew numbering is used throughout; and the translation used is that published by Collins and included in the Church of England's *Alternative Service Book 1980*.

² Letter of 23 December 1924; quoted in D. Felicitas Corrigan, *The nun, the infidel and the superman* (John Murray, 1985).

³ The theme of shelter recurs frequently in the Psalter, and is an important and neglected aspect of its spirituality: see, among many others, Pss 18, 27, 31, 57, 61, 63, 119, 143 and 144.

⁴ 'There is no "private piety" in the Psalter. The singers of the psalms of prayer and thanksgiving always arise from the worship of the congregation of Israel.' (Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: a commentary*, trans H. C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), p 77.

⁵ For further reading on this subject, see Mary Warnock, *Memory* (London: Faber, 1987, repr. 1989); and, on the significance of memory in the Old Testament, Walter Brueggemann, *The hopeful imagination: prophetic voices in exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

⁶ In *Out of the deep* (London: DLT, 1989), chap. 3.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, 'The costly loss of lament', in *Journal for the study of the Old Testament*, vol 36 (1986), p 64.

⁸ Though see the excellent little book by Mark S. Smith, *Psalms: the divine journey* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

⁹ Used in this way, many psalms can become precious resources as prayer in times of stress—e.g. Pss. 32, 35 (where the 'enemies' can stand for your own obsessions or besetting sins), 56, 118 etc.

¹⁰ Quoted in H.-J. Kraus, *op.cit.sup.*, p 117.

¹¹ See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Collins: Fountain, 1977), p 571.

¹² The Hebrew word *rachamim* derives from the Hebrew word *racham* (womb) and alludes to a mother's love for her child. It appears also in Pss 25,6, 69,16, 77,9, 79,8, 103,4, 119,77, 119,156 and 145,9.

¹³ *Rachamim*—see note 12 above.