

PSALMS – Our Songs of the Heart

Dear Friends,

Tonight I'd like to say a few words about the Jewish sung prayers that are familiar to us. We call them psalms. Then we'll consider the relevance of prayers in our own time, our own culture, and finally I'd like to offer suggestions you might find helpful to create your own psalms. You may even want to start a journal of prayer or a journal of reflection – whatever you want to call it.

You may find this talk a little simplistic. But faith is simple. I'm aware that if we seek growth for the mind, we add things. If we seek growth for the spirit, we subtract things.

Let's begin with Scripture. When we read the traditional psalms we need to do so in the cultural context of a little band of people who struggled to exist. The harsh elements of the Jewish Bible reflect the harshness of a nation's existence. Time and time again, the Israelites were threatened with extinction and because they believed that all misfortune was punishment for sin, an overwhelming theme in the psalms was the need to appease God's anger. If we sit down and read the book of Psalms, 150 songs, we are left with an image of a people both faith-filled and fear-filled, who want God to see them as virtuous so God will cut down their enemies. It's survival stuff. And yet, here and there in the book of Psalms, there is transcendence, words that rise above the struggle – like fireworks in an explosion of light. Some of that light finds its home in us. Psalm 23 The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. Psalm 139 Oh Lord, you have searched me, and you know me. Psalm 51, Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. We all have our favourites. What we see in the book of Psalms, is the total human condition, strength and weakness, courage and despair, shouts of praise, cries for help. And if we read these writings with the eyes of the heart, God will speak to us through them. That's why we call Scripture 'The Word of God.' Not because we believe God dictated it, but because God will speak to us through it.

I have a fondness for the Bible. I've grown up with it. As a child I had a particular love for the grandeur of the St John Gospel. I didn't understand much of it, but the language would fill me up with a feeling I could not describe. "The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh of whither it goeth. So it is for everyone that is born of the Spirit." I am still greatly moved by the John gospel although now I read it differently: As Fr Timothy Radcliff said, "It is full of conversations." Yes, it is. And the most interesting thing about the conversations between Jesus and others, is that Jesus always talked the language of the heart – metaphor, parables, spiritual language – while the other side answered with the language of the head, facts, numbers, rules and religious laws. Often people didn't understand what Jesus was talking about.

For a moment, let's consider those definitions - the language of the head and the language of the heart. How are they connected? They nourish each other. We know that all of Church teaching is head language designed to lead us to the heart. But the heart has no actual language. We can only describe heart knowledge with metaphor and poem, song and parable. So in this year of Faith we remind ourselves that the

head nurtures the heart, and the heart reshapes head thinking. The path from the head to the heart is called devotion. In other words, the key to unwrapping heart knowledge, is love. It is all about love.

At some stage on the beautiful faith journey, I felt a need to translate heart knowledge into the kind of metaphor and parable that reflected our environment here in Aotearoa. This land is full of the Sacred. The Holy Spirit combs the grass on a windy day. Snow on the Southern Alps celebrates Spiritual Light. Living water is abundant, as are green pastures. In the early 1980s, as a new Catholic, I had come home to who I was, and everything seemed sacred. Because I was a writer, one of the first things I was asked to do, was to write some short reflections for the Marist Messenger. The same request came from Zealandia. Now, writing personal reflection for public consumption was very different from writing it for myself. I have to admit, I went into a state of cringe. These writings were poured into me. I couldn't claim to own them. At the same time, they were so intimate, that I felt I was being asked to get undressed in public. I was certain that people would think me unbalanced, or at least, would laugh

My self-conscious ignorance didn't last for long. Quickly I learned the truth of the saying: "Every soul is God's favourite." People responded to the reflections, cutting them out, putting them on the fridge, and Peter and Barbara Hoskins of Catholic Supplies, asked if they could publish them in a book. What I had believed to be intensely personal experience, was, in fact, intensely personal for everyone. I had made the error of imagining it was exclusive.

Terry and I were not together at this stage. He was a friend with a camera, who offered to photograph images for the reflections which I called Psalms because they were songs of the heart. There were times when I went with Terry, and often, we saw a situation that was material for a reflection. I suppose it was this sameness of vision that was the beginning of our relationship.

I'd like to say a little more about the language of the head and the language of the heart. Most of us recognize that we are prisoners to an adequate but limited sensate system. We know what we experience through taste, smell, touch, hearing, sight. In Judaism, it is said that we live in only 10% of reality and the other 90% is the spiritual realm which is all around us, but is beyond our five senses. I don't think that Catholics would have any argument with that. But – and this is a big but – there is this other way of knowing, what we call the knowing of the heart. Heart knowledge is very close to that 90% per cent, the spiritual realm. The more we are aware of heart knowledge, the greater the influence of the spiritual realm on our lives. However, because heart knowledge is beyond actual language, the head struggles to find words to describe it. I'll give you a simple exercise. Can anyone here give an accurate definition of the word "love"? We all know what it is. Love is the fuel of the church and right now the fuel tanks seem full. But what rational description of love is possible? I remember a definition in a book written by a psychologist. "Love is a feeling for something or someone outside of oneself under the condition of retaining one's own separateness and integrity." Is that love? Of course it isn't. But when our hearts melt in the love of God, and that feeling is so powerful we need to do something with it, we have the urge to write about it – and we can do that only the way Jesus did it, through story, parable, metaphor, allegory.

Psalms come out of prayer and prayer comes out of listening to the heart space – in other words, meditation. We all know that. But for many of us who have read about meditation, it seems to demand special circumstances and a lot of time. That's fine for the people who can manage it. Most of us can't. If you can set aside six minutes a day, that will do it – 5 minutes in the morning and 1 minute of gratitude before you go to sleep. This is sufficient to get us into the habit of seeing the world through the eyes of the heart. And when we can do this, we realize that everything that happens to us, is a teacher from God.

For those who want to write their own psalms – or prayer poems -

1. Forget all that you have ever learned about poetry from others. Trust the voice of your inner guide.
2. Spend some quiet time, aware of the stillness deep inside you. Feel relaxed and yet alert. Ask Jesus to give you what you need.
3. Find a starting point in something that deeply moves you. This can be a line of scripture or poetry, a song, a memory, or something that is affecting your life at present. It is important that you experience emotion or feeling in your response to the words you use. This means that the words are connected to you and have meaning for you. It doesn't matter if the words are from what you would call a secular source. Your prayer will make them sacred.
4. Recite the words over and over, slowly, allowing them to fill you like a mantra. Possible examples could be: Before I formed you in your mother's womb, I knew you. / Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. / The main thing in life is not to be afraid to be human. / Darkness always serves the light. / I will come again and take you to myself. / Those who live in love live in God and God lives in them. / His giving is gentle as silence. / The truth will set you free.
5. Allow a prayer to form around your words. Let the words of the prayer fall into place without thinking too much about them. Prayer is an organic response. It will grow naturally from the heart without intellectual control. If, for example, you are sitting with the first example from the beginning of Jeremiah, your "feeling" prayer may grow something like this: "Yes, You knew me before I was born and I knew You, and I have always carried that knowing in me. It's as though I am joined to You by a shining thread. One day you will draw me back. In the meantime that connection is most bright when I am in darkness." Or, if you have a response to Pablo Casal's statement: The main thing in life is not to be afraid to be human, your reflection might go this way: I have doubts about myself, doubts born of fear. Show me the battlegrounds where I struggle self against self. Let me see the cause of these conflicts. Could my fear come from my inability to love myself as You love me? Help me to see myself with the eyes of love.
6. Jot down the words as they come to you. Don't try to arrange them as either poetry or prose. At this stage they are fragments of feeling, questions, bits of rejoicing, emotion finding shape in phrases. This is you in dialogue with the Ineffable, the Unnameable that you call God.
7. Read what you have written and let it come naturally to a wholeness. Rewrite it but still keep it heart-centred. Don't try to make it rhyme. That will turn it into an intellectual exercise and it will lose some of its power. Simply follow

the prayer movement – what you felt initially, how that developed, what questions or concerns it raised for you, and what deep responses there were to those questions and concerns.

8. The deep voice of guidance within you will unwrap your reflections as a wisdom poem that will continue to speak to you.

If you wish to keep a journal of prayer poems, I suggest you do so. It is a great spiritual tool. Don't borrow church language. Use your own words, conversational language. After all, this is your dialogue with the One who knows you better than you know yourself.

Joy Cowley