

Sunday, February 10, 2019 – The Psalms

I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.
This morning I am going to speak to you about the Psalms.

How many of you have ever been given money or a gift certificate? Did you use it? What did you do with it? Probably you bought things that you wanted. How many of you have every received a gift certificate which you didn't use? How did you feel when you think about that gift you never used? I have done that and have felt kind of mad at myself for not using it...it would have helped me get something I wanted. I once read that there are a very large percentage of gift certificates not used...so it's lucrative for the merchants who sell them since so many are never redeemed. Gifts given but never used.

Or...how many of you have every bought a book, really excited to read it and then never got around to reading it?

Well today I suggest to you that the Psalms in the Bible are like a gift, a gift which can help us to pray. They are a gift, but a gift not always used. In the Psalms we have inherited a treasure, a wonderful storehouse of writings which are over 1000 years old...over 1000 years old. Isn't that in itself marvelous?

The psalms are prayer book, hymn book and instruction book all rolled into one. It is believed they were used in worship in the Jerusalem temple, sometimes sung. Later the Psalms were probably used in the synagogues and perhaps even used in homes.

King Saul when he could not sleep, would call for young David to play his lyre and sing Psalms to soothe him. Today, these very same psalms can still soothe our souls and bring on sleep.

Jesus himself knew the psalms by heart and prayed them. Imagine! We today can pray the same words that Jesus did. Isn't that startling...that we can pray the same words that Jesus did. Here is a link, a strong link with our past. That sort of continuity is rare in today's mobile society where technology is changing each moment.

Many of us don't realize what a treasure we have in the Psalms.
Let's look at today's Psalm, Psalm 91. This is a psalm whose basic message is to trust God and to rely on God for refuge and protection.

*You who live in the shelter of the most High,
Who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
Will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;
My God, in whom I trust.*

This psalm is really poetry. God's protection is compared to that of a fortress whose shadow we are in.

It goes on:

*He will cover you with his pinions,
And under his wings you will find refuge;*

Here God is compared to a bird whose feathers will cover us and under whose wings we will find refuge.

God's faithfulness is like a shield.

God's angels guard us in all our ways. We will be borne up on the hands of angels so we will not dash our feet against a stone. Isn't that a comfort; to know we are guarded in all our ways by angels and borne up on the hands of these angels?

In addition, this psalm gives us simple words of reassurance. Those who love God will be delivered. Those who know his name will be protected. God will answer those who call him. God will be with those who are in trouble. He will rescue and honour them. These words are an antidote to our inner and outer turmoil and anxiety which we experience in daily life.

So, we have this gift, the Psalms. How do we use them? How can God speak to us through the Psalms? Well... Sister Constance Joanna has a technique she uses with people on retreat. Sister Constance Joanna is an Anglican sister or nun, and a member of the order of St. John the Divine whose convent is in Toronto.

Sister Constance is a jolly person. She has a pleasant and down-to-earth nature which inspires trust. Even Bishops go to her for spiritual direction. Sister Constance Joanna asks you to select a Psalm from among several she has given. Today's Psalm, Psalm 91 is one of them.

Each person then finds a quiet spot. Some went outside and sat on a park bench. Here is what she suggests one does. After sitting quietly for a few minutes, you read the Psalm through once, then again a second time. You thank God for

directing you to this Psalm and you ask God to help you notice what he wants you to notice. You take note of any words that jump out at you or any words or phrases which you react against. Then you read through the Psalm again, a 3rd time. After you have sat quietly, then you pray to God, using the words that stood out from the Psalm.

If this sounds too hard, then another way is simply to read the Psalm as a prayer a couple of times.

Eugene Peterson, a Canadian theologian, in his book “**Under the Unpredictable Plant**” talks of prayer being the central activity of humans. We **want** to pray and we receive many requests *to* pray, but we lack the language beyond our own personal concerns.

The Book of Romans reassures us that even though
“we do not know how to pray as we ought, ...the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

In other words, the Spirit within us prays for us in a deep way which is beyond words. Can we take comfort from this scripture which assures us that despite not knowing how to pray, the Spirit within us understands our desire and takes over?

The psalms can help us pray. A psalm can be used as the bucket, the container which reaches deep into the well of God’s presence. The Psalm is a container for our prayers, as we join ourselves to it. That is why the daily office in our prayer book takes us through the Psalms daily in sequence through the month. It is an ancient practice, tried and true, which can still help us pray today, as it helped so many before us throughout the ages, including Jesus himself.

So, if you want to pray, and you feel a desire to try this, just try it today or this week. Pick a Psalm. Maybe you will choose today’s Psalm. If you take your bulletin home, you’ll remember which one it is. Or maybe you want to look in the front of your prayer book, whichever prayer book you have, and find what the appointed Psalm is for each day, morning and evening. In whichever way you want...choose a Psalm...read it, sit with it, savour its beauty, its images and let words or phrases jump out at you. Then thank God and ask God to help you notice what it is you need to be aware of. God can do amazing things in us...we only need to get used to being attentive...to noticing things in the psalm and things that come to our minds. This is allowing God’s activity to come to our attention. Isn’t it both challenging yet exciting! May God bless us all...as we read the psalms and allow their ancient wisdom, their joy and their sorrow to dip us deep into God’s presence.

