

## **The Christian Debt to the Jewish Tradition of Praying the Psalms –**

### **Some Historical and Contemporary Texts**

*Presentation by Monsignor Kevin Long*

*to the Annual General Meeting of the Council of Christians and Jews, Western Australia Inc.*

*Sunday 24 February 2019*

The Hebrew Bible, with its Psalms and Canticles and Prophecies, provided the raw material for the Christian Liturgy of the Hours.

**St. Benedict b. 480, *Rule for Monks.***

#### ***Chapter 16: The Celebration of the Divine Office During the Day***

**The Prophet says: *Seven times a day have I praised you* (Ps 118 (119):164). We shall fulfil this sacred number of seven if we satisfy our obligations of service at**

**Lauds (Morning), Prime (Late Morning), Terce 9.00am, Sext 12noon, None 3.00pm, Vespers (Evening), Compline (Bed time),**

**For it was of these hours during the day that he said: *Seven times a day have I praised you* (ibid).**

**Concerning Vigils, the same Prophet says: *At midnight I arose to give you praise* (Ps 118 (119):62). Therefore, we shall praise our Creator for his just judgments at these times: Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline; and *let us arise at night to give him praise* (Ps 118 (119):164, 62).**

#### **Chapter 18 The Order of Psalmody**

St. Benedict's insistence that the Psalms form the basic substance of the monastic hours of prayer.

**....the full complement of one hundred and fifty psalms is by all means to be carefully maintained every week, ....for monks who in the span of a week say less than the full psalter with the customary canticles betray extreme indolence and lack of devotion in their service. We read, after all, that our holy Fathers, energetic as they were, did all this in a single day. Let us hope that we, lukewarm as we are, can achieve it in a whole week.**

**The Situation Today – From the General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours (GILH), Rome, 1974**

***The psalms are distributed over a four-week cycle in such a way that very few psalms are omitted, while some, traditionally more important, occur more frequently than others; morning prayer and evening prayer as well as night prayer have been assigned psalms appropriate to these hours. GILH 126***

***Three psalms (58, 83, and 109) have been omitted from the psalter cycle because of their curses; in the same way, some verses have been omitted from certain psalms, as noted at the head of each. The reason for the omission is a certain psychological difficulty. GILH 131***

*Thus Ps 119 is divided in keeping with its own internal structure and is spread over twenty-two days during daytime prayer, because tradition has assigned it to the day hours. GILH 132*

It has been the constant tradition of the Church – Eastern and Western - to use psalmody in liturgical worship. Definitive evidence of psalmody as a formal part of the liturgy can be found as early as the second century.

**Saint Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria d. 373**

Singing the psalms was viewed as an *antidote* to heretical doctrine and as spiritually transformative ... *the reader takes all its words upon his lips as though they were his own and each one sings the psalms as though they had been written for his special benefit, and takes them and recites them, not as though someone else were speaking or another person's feelings being described, but as himself speaking of himself, offering the words to God as his own heart's utterance, just as though he himself had made them up... everyone is bound to find his very self in them and each reads in them descriptions of himself.*

**Saint Basil of Caesarea d. 379** describes the Holy Spirit making the *medicine* of scripture palatable in the *honey* sweetness of the psalms. The Holy Spirit *mixed sweetness of melody with doctrine so that inadvertently we would absorb the benefit of the words through gentleness and ease of hearing, just as clever physicians frequently smear the cup with honey when giving the fastidious some rather bitter medicine. Thus he contrived for us these harmonious psalm tunes, so that those who are children in actual age, as well as those who are young in behavior, while appearing only to sing would in reality be training their souls.*

**Saint Ambrose of Milan d. 397** speaks of the unity brought forth when praying the psalms: *A psalm joins those with differences, unites those at odds and reconciles those who have been offended, for who will not concede to him with whom one sings to God in one voice? It is after all a great bond of unity for the full number of people to join in one chorus.*

The Protestant and Anglican Reformers kept the tradition of the Psalms in its vernacular worship. There was a renewed appreciation for the liturgical possibilities of the Psalter.

**Martin Luther d. 1546** said of the psalms: *No book of moral tales and no legends of the saints which have been written, or ever will be written, are to my mind as noble as the Book of Psalms.*

**John Calvin d. 1564** taught that when singing the Psalms *we are certain that God has put the words in our mouths as if they themselves sang in us to exalt his glory.*

*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, from the Second Vatican Council called *for active participation of the people by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes.*

**Pope Benedict XVI** reminds that in the Psalms:

*God gives us words to speak to him, to place our lives before him, and thus to make life itself a path to God.*

The value of praying the Psalms

*In the liturgy of the hours the Church in large measure prays through the magnificent songs that the Old Testament authors composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The origin of these verses gives them great power to raise the mind to God, to inspire devotion, to evoke gratitude in times of favour, and to bring consolation and courage in times of trial. GILH 100*

*..... when a person feels sad and the psalm is one of joy or when a person feels happy and the psalm is one of mourning, such a problem is readily solved in private prayer, which allows for the choice of a psalm suited to personal feelings.*

*The divine office, however, is not private; the cycle of psalms is public, in the name of the Church, even for those who may be reciting an hour alone. Those who pray the psalms in the name of the Church nevertheless can always find a reason for joy or sadness, for the saying of the Apostle applies in this case also: "Rejoice with the joyful and weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15). In this way human frailty, wounded by self-love, is healed in proportion to the love that makes the heart match the voice that prays the psalms. GIRB 101*

It beggars belief how Christians could pray these precious Jewish prayers and yet demonstrate Anti-Semitism in all its destructive forms.

As recently as 16<sup>th</sup> January this year Pope Francis spoke about his Jewish Catholic friendship

Pope Francis reminded Catholics that they must continue to ask forgiveness and forge new bonds of respect and friendship with the Jewish community. A few decades of respectful Catholic-Jewish dialogue pale in comparison to *Nineteen centuries of Christian anti-Judaism. We must work with greater intensity to ask pardon and repair the damage.*

*It is of vital importance for Christians to discover and foster knowledge of the Jewish tradition in order to understand themselves more authentically.*

Reading the Hebrew Scriptures together, Francis said helps people discover the richness of the word of God.

*The common objective will be to witness together to the love of the Father throughout the world. The values, traditions and great ideas that characterize Judaism and Christianity must be placed at the service of humanity without ever forgetting the sacredness and authenticity of friendship.*

*For Jews as for Christians there is no doubt that love of God and love for one's neighbour summarize all the commandments. Therefore, Jews and Christians must feel like brothers and sisters, united by the same God and by a rich, common spiritual patrimony on which to base and continue to build the future*