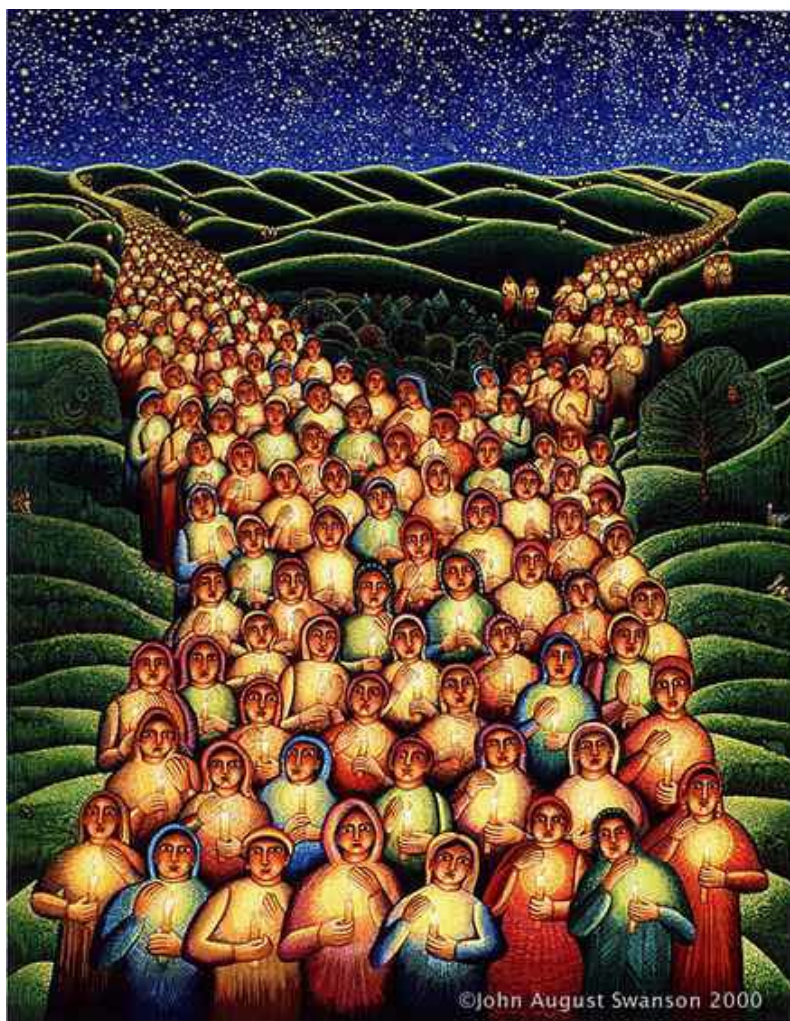


Two Short Essays on the Psalms

A Psalm of Lamentation: Psalm 14
A Hymn: Psalm 103



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Psalm 14

- 1 The fool has said in his heart,
“There is no God.”
Their deeds are corrupt, depraved;
no one does any good.
- 2 From heaven the LORD looks down
on the human race,
to see if any are wise,
if any seek God.
- 3 All have gone astray,
depraved, every one;
there is no one who does any good;
no, not even one.
- 4 Do none of the evildoers understand?
They eat up my people as if eating bread;
they never call out to the LORD.
- 5 There they shall tremble with fear,
for God is with the generation of the just.
- 6 You may mock the plans of one that is poor,
but his refuge is the LORD.
- 7 O that Israel’s salvation might come from Sion.
When the LORD delivers his people from bondage,
then Jacob will be glad and Israel rejoice.

Revised Grail Version

From the Psalms of Lament: Psalm 14

Short, unadorned and apparently simple, Psalm 14 is classed as one of the Psalms of Lament. Yet it has something rather enigmatic about it and doesn’t quite fit with the other psalms of the category. For one thing, it lacks the three-part structure that they have and, for another, it has something of the character of the wisdom psalms. Nor can it be classed, like the others, as either the lament of a single person or one intended to speak for the community. In spite of these differences, it does have an authentic quality of lament; we see this quality, above all, in the author’s revulsion in the face of evil, his profoundly troubled response to wickedness, as well as in his ardent faith in God’s ultimate deliverance.

Perhaps precisely because of its sparse and unadorned style, lacking the vivid and captivating imagery of many other psalms, it does witness in a concentrated and sharply delineated way to a quality and a way of living faith which is relevant to us today. For one of the things that has always struck me in the psalms as in the prophets, and it is illustrated very clearly in this psalm, is a moral passion able to survive in the midst of contradiction. That, it seems to me, reflects something at the very heart of Hebrew religious experience.

The psalmist laments an attitude that has become, in the world he knows, the rule rather than the

exception: namely, a practical atheism, the attitude of the “fool” (*nabal*), or (as we might say today) the “realist”, who cares little for the ultimacy of moral values and has no sense of God as acting in the world.

With penetrating insight the psalmist is aware of how vastly ramified and profoundly corrupting is the influence of such a stance upon society; people infected by it are not trustworthy, the strong oppress the weak and the poor, and apparently they think nothing of it. To the common-sense mind the psalmist’s affirmations may seem too sweeping, yet we can find much the same in Jeremiah or in Jesus.

The psalmist is consumed, furthermore, by a fierce indignation, fueled no doubt by his anguished and humanly impotent awareness of the apparent triumph of might over right and the seeming inadequacy of the forces of good.

Rather than despair, however, he believes (against all the evidence, one is tempted to say) that the just God will truly be a refuge for the oppressed and the down-trodden, for “the company of the just” (v.5), who cry out to him. God will indeed, but in God’s own good time, redress the wrongs they suffer. Far from being an opiate, his experience of God seems to have given free play to his moral passion and lent penetration to his vision.

The psalm concludes with an expression of ardent hope for Israel’s deliverance and for the restoration of God’s people. Here we meet a faith able to live in the tension between its conviction that God does indeed “look down from heaven upon the human race” (v.2) and its anguished perplexity before God’s apparent inaction.

This tension between acute and suffering moral sensitivity and white-hot indignation, on the one hand, and trusting, unbreakable faith in the face of the apparent impotence of goodness and the ostensible absence of God, on the other, constitutes for me part of the greatness of the Psalms. It is, I think, one of the secrets of the profound fascination they have for us and of their perennial relevance.

The psalms of lament especially encourage us to bring our faith unflinchingly into dialogue with the whole of our experience, especially with all that it has of pain and of our profound puzzlement when faced with the unspeakable horrors of life.

It is a commonplace to observe how easily the laudable effort expended in our time to create a spirit of tolerance appropriate to a pluralistic society can degenerate into mere relativism and moral indifference. Our blunted moral awareness needs the witness, such as we find it in this short psalm, of passionate moral commitment and of the ability to feel horrified revulsion and a mobilizing indignation at the violence, lies, and injustice which disfigure our world as it did his.

We are not, perhaps, too accustomed to live our faith with such vigorous realism, nor does our liturgy deal very adequately with the terrible contradictions and the awful darkness of our world. Psalm 14 offers us a stimulus and a model.

Psalm 103

- 1 Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all within me, his holy name.
- 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and never forget all his benefits.
- 3 It is the LORD who forgives all your sins,
who heals every one of your ills,
- 4 who redeems your life from the grave,
who crowns you with mercy and compassion,
- 5 who fills your life with good things,
renewing your youth like an eagle's.
- 6 The LORD does just deeds,
gives full justice to all who are oppressed.
- 7 He made known his ways to Moses,
and his deeds to the children of Israel.
- 8 The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger and rich in mercy.
- 9 He will not always find fault;
nor persist in his anger forever.
- 10 He does not treat us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our faults.
- 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so strong his mercy for those who fear him.
- 12 As far as the east is from the west,
so far from us does he remove our transgressions.
- 13 As a father has compassion on his children,
the LORD's compassion is on those who fear him.
- 14 For he knows of what we are made;
he remembers that we are dust.
- 15 Man, his days are like grass;
he flowers like the flower of the field.
- 16 The wind blows, and it is no more,
and its place never sees it again.
- 17 But the mercy of the LORD is everlasting
upon those who hold him in fear,
- 18 upon children's children his justice,
for those who keep his covenant,
and remember to fulfill his commands.
- 19 The LORD has fixed his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom is ruling over all.
- 20 Bless the LORD, all you his angels,
mighty in power, fulfilling his word,
who heed the voice of his word.
- 21 Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his servants, who do his will.
- 22 Bless the LORD, all his works,
in every place where he rules.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Revised Grail Version

From the Hymns: Psalm 103

Psalm 103 is a precious text both for me personally and for my ministry, above all for the way it can teach us how to mould prayer in a biblical way. For if prayer is a universal phenomenon, it is shaped both by the experience of human need and the sense of the divine that has emerged in a particular culture; biblical prayer is unique in the way it reflects the biblical revelation of God's Name and God's 'ways' and models an appropriate human response.

This psalm is a hymn of praise of God arising out of a profoundly personal experience of God's mercy, forgiveness and compassion. For most of us, praise and thanksgiving do not have the prominence in our prayer that they clearly do in psalms such as this one. Such a psalm, therefore, gives us a measure of the distance our prayer has yet to travel in order to become truly biblical, not of course just in terms of the forms or formulas we use so much as of training of the heart.

The psalmist begins not by praising God directly but by addressing his own self. He invites the self to praise the Lord. We are at once plunged into the mystery of human self-presence. Personal identity, moreover, is inseparable from memory, through which the mediated awareness in the now of consciousness is contextualized and a sense of self made possible.

Because we not only remember but also tend to forget, the kind and quality of our mindfulness shapes us as the particular person each of us is becoming. So the psalmist admonishes self not to forget the good that the Lord has accomplished in his life, above all God's forgiveness and the 'saving' and enrichment of his life.

Such remembering is constitutive of the faith-personality; it establishes the horizon in which faith is lived and roots ever more deeply in the core of the personality the primal awareness of God's loving and saving presence against the flux of shifting circumstance and the mutability of human will and feeling. In bold images (evoking the distance between heaven and earth, east and west) the poet situates himself in time, celebrating the definitive nature of God's forgiveness and thus assigning to wrath and punishment the character of episodes within the enduring and overarching span of God's 'goodness'.

The author anchors his own experience in that which is foundational in the life of his tradition and his people, namely God's self-revelation to Moses (especially as recounted in Ex.33-34), specifically the revelation of the Name (YHWH) and of God's covenant character of love and fidelity.

At the heart of the poem is a powerfully felt awareness of the contrast between God, source of life, and human being, for whom life is a gift received but not possessed, and in consequence one that is constantly threatened.

The psalm is remarkable too for the way it echoes the Hebrew awareness of the unity of life, in which moral weakness, radical physical vulnerability and the essential transience of mortal being form a seamless garment, a profoundly interconnected whole. Although the core experience of the poem appears to be a grasp of God's loving understanding and forgiveness, it is almost impossible to separate this from the sense of salvation from physical threat, healing from illness and the gift of long life.

The poet skilfully draws us into his own experience of contingency by a wonderful use of metaphors no less powerful for being traditional. Humankind is but dust, a transient bloom soon dried up by the sirocco and borne away by the wind. This heightened sense of human fragility and radical transience becomes the counterpart of a sense of God as superabundant source of life and as stable power; yet as the One in whom the qualities of mercy, kindness, and compassionate understanding authorize the person willing to keep God's covenant to have trusting confidence.

Indeed God's qualities of kindness and compassion are seen as a 'crown' placed upon the human head; what an evocation of graced dignity!

Realistically aware of our radical and manifold contingency, the psalmist reaches towards absolute centeredness through faith in the trustworthiness of the God who gives life, who has revealed God's own self to Moses.

The very movement of the psalm has much to teach people of our day inasmuch as the psalmist is training his heart to dwell in remembrance and so become free to dilate in praise and gratitude. As his gaze sweeps beyond his own anxieties, littleness and concerns so too does his voice call upon all beings in heaven on earth to join him in a prayer of praise.