

July 31, 2022

Fr. John's Homily for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

THE PSALMS Prosper the Work of our Hands.

I would like to do things a little bit different today. Instead of reflecting on the big readings from the Old and the New Testament, I thought I would say a few words about the lowly Responsorial Psalm. It's here at every Mass, recited at the weekday Masses but sung by our cantors and choirs at our weekend liturgies. And you participate by singing the response. But it is only rarely that a priest preaches on the Psalm. These special prayers are also known as psalmody, or a collection of them called the Psalter, and they are a big part of the official daily prayer of the Universal Church. This is the Liturgy of the Hours that I frequently refer to which is 'required praying' for the ordained.

But it has also become a part of many of your lives as well. Some of you follow along with the Office of Readings, morning, daytime, evening and night prayer by using various apps that have come up lately on the Internet. But also through printed publications like Magnificat magazine.

Now personally, I have always struggled with the Liturgy of the Hours. To my mind, the Church couldn't have made it more complicated. There are a lot of ribbons in the books and we have to page back-and-forth on the major feast days. This can be confusing and frustrating and so and so those apps have been a life-saver for me. And probably a lot of other priests, as well.

And the most recent helper - I'll call it a worship aid - is something called a podcast. It is called Pray Station Portable where a guy named Jeff, sitting at his desk, somewhere out in cyberspace, prays the Psalms for us. It is very helpful, but also kind of comical because you can hear dogs barking in the background, sirens out on the streets and airplanes flying overhead. But he does all the page turning for us, his listeners. It gets me through the Psalms in a timely fashion and helps me to not daydream. As much.

Now as is often the case, the history of the Psalms is messy. Complicated, and convoluted. The 150 Psalms have been associated with King David, and even Solomon, his son, but scholars have determined that it really is a large body of literature, composed by many different authors, over many hundreds of years. They were meant to be sung, by choirs or or cantors, in the synagogues, or even in their homes. In which case they would have to be memorized. If you want to learn more about the history of these prayers, just go to Google or YouTube and you can learn everything you ever wanted to know about them.

But I am content to simply say to you that the Psalms are really very important. They are declared by the Church, by virtue of being in the Bible, as the Living Word of God. So, occasionally, you might find yourself opening your Bible to the Psalms, randomly putting your finger down on the page, and finding exactly what you needed to see. Because, like everything else in scripture, the Psalms were composed by the Holy Spirit and presented to us through various writers. And, as with the rest of the Bible, they are meant to encourage us, inspire us, correct us, admonish us, to prepare us and to move us to action.

They are prayers for the Everyman, that we can recite to help get us through the difficult days of our lives. For those of you who have the parish app, you might recall that I tried to send you a daily Psalm passage during the heart of Covid crisis to help you get through that difficult time.

I often found clear connections between what was being said in the Psalm and what was happening in the world at a particular moment. I hope you found them helpful.

There are many words and phrases that came from the Psalms that have become kind of household terms, and we're quite familiar with them. They even have special titles. Some examples:

How about Psalm 23. Many people, upon even hearing that number, say, Ah yes, "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he refreshes my soul."

Psalm 51 is called *The Miserere* (have mercy, on me, O God). We priests frequently give this one as a penance to those who come for confession. It is believed to be the words of King David, written by him after his big sin, his affair with Bathsheba. His song becomes an act of contrition. #51 has also been made into famous pieces of music sung by multi-voice choirs. We have an example of this on our website. Go to the Media section and scroll down to 'Sacred Music' and you will find it. It's absolutely glorious.

I was in the choir at St. Thomas in Ann Arbor when I got my call to the priesthood and left for the seminary. My fellow choir members gave me a book called "The Abbey Psalter" and it contains the 150 Psalms printed with beautiful calligraphy. I keep it in the confessional, opened to Psalm 51.

Perhaps the most famous line from the Psalms comes from one of the early ones. #22. It is presumed that this, too, was also authored by David in one of his lowest moments. He cried out from the very depths of his soul when he felt abandoned by God. He said, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus quoted that Psalm from the cross at his lowest moment, calling out from the very depths of his soul, feeling alone, lost, and abandoned. Even by His Father. It has been said that Jesus suffered in every part of His being. Certainly physically, but also mentally, emotionally and spiritually. So to feel abandoned by His Father would certainly be the epitome of His suffering. Kind of hard to imagine.

I chose to pursue this line of thought today because today's Psalm is one that I prayed at one point in my life whenever I was struggling to make a go of it, both spiritually and physically. There was good advice to be found here. The words spoke to me in such a way that I felt I could have written them myself. "Teach us to number our days aright, that we might gain wisdom of heart. Return, oh Lord. How long? Have pity on your servants. Fill us with your kindness."

The Psalm is written in the plural but I appropriated the words for myself. And I am sure I must have underlined or highlighted that last verse: "Prosper the work of our hands". It was repeated, spoken twice by the author. So it probably represented the most basic prayer that Everyman could pray. When we hear the word prosperity, we usually think in great and glorious terms, of becoming super wealthy. Or successful. Doing well in business. Making a killing in the stock market. Winning the lottery. But most people are concerned with simply surviving from day to day. Having enough money to support themselves and their family. They would be happy with just a little prosperity. They want to succeed. And I am sure that for most of us here, there were

times, are times, and will yet be times in your lives when you are not sure when or where the next paycheck will come from.

Well, you know that there are other ways of thinking about prosperity. It doesn't have to be financial. There are other places that we would like to be successful. As for myself, when I left my worldly profession behind and began to follow a call to the priesthood, my impressions of prosperity necessarily changed. I would still want to be prosperous, but as a priest. Which is another way of saying that I wanted to be fruitful. Any priest would want to be able to make a difference in somebody's life and so when we say prosper the work of our hands, we would like to think that God has blessed our hands in a way so as to be an extension of his hands. I extend my hands over the gifts of bread and wine and they are changed. That's prosperity. For me, and for you.

And there will be an opportunity on Tuesday for the "laying on of hands" as part of a sacrament: the anointing of the sick. This is our First Tuesday Healing Mass. Father Georges visiting from Africa, will again officiate at the healing service. It seems that God has indeed prospered his hands. He has a gift of healing.

I would encourage you to check out the Psalms if you haven't done so already. One of those apps, or the Magnificat. I think they will come in real handy for the days ahead. Again, they are the Word of God and are meant to be 'a light for our path' as we continue our pilgrimage, through this present darkness.

And so, to close, I will share with you a very short verse from Ps 30: Sing Psalms to the Lord, you who love him, give thanks to his holy name. Amen.

~Fr. John