The Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states that those who participate in the Divine Office “should take steps to improve their understanding of the liturgy and of the Bible, especially of the psalms” (no. 90), and forty years later Cardinal Francis Arinze, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, noted that “the psalms, in particular, are an indispensable source of liturgical language, signs, and prayers” (Arinze, 343). Psalms are clearly important for contemporary prayer, both liturgical and private. And yet the obstacles toward a full appreciation of their richness are many, though the efforts needed for a proper understanding of them are deeply rewarding.

To begin with, we must be aware of the history and culture in which they were formed. Although attributed to David, the psalms were written by many different authors and represent the liturgical life of ancient Israel for almost one thousand years. Psalms 29 and 81 still reflect the influence of ancient Canaanite worship. Psalm 23 may well have been written by David, though others, like Psalm 137, clearly refer to a much later period, that of the exile in Babylon, 587–538 B.C.E. Many of the psalms bear inscriptions of authorship by Asaph or the sons of Korah. The Psalter is actually a compilation of five previous books or collections of psalms.

Individual psalms are difficult to date because references to public historical events are infrequent and often allusive. Specific events did inspire the composition of the psalms, but they have ordinarily been generalized for recitation by others. Scholars try to place them at least before or after the Exile. Gerald Wilson’s influential 1985 study of the Psalter concluded that most of the psalms in the first three books (Psalms 1–89) were written before the Exile, and most of the remaining psalms in books four and five (Psalms 90–150) after the Exile.

**Literary Forms**

A fruitful way to study the psalms has been by grouping them into types or genres, with special attention to their structure. Many of the psalms are *hymns of praise* that follow a general pattern. They ordinarily begin with an invitation to praise the Lord, often in the plural, sometimes with mention of musical instruments or of the Temple. The Hebrew word *Hallelujah* is actually a sentence: *Hallelu- (“praise ye”) yah (“the Lord”). Reasons for praise are then listed,
ranging from qualities of God to divine activity of creation or of salvation. Hymns usually conclude with a final expression of praise. A good example is Psalm 117: A call to praise God is extended to all the nations, because of the Lord’s qualities of kindness and fidelity.

Another basic type of psalm is the lament. This form consists of five separate units that are, however, usually repeated in the same psalm. First is the invocation, a cry to God, such as, “My God, my God!” Then follows the lament or short description of the psalmist’s difficult situation, perhaps a serious illness or menacing enemy. The third part is central, namely the petition (in the imperative): “Come to my assistance, hasten to help me!” Next is usually some form of motivation, reasons why God should help, for example, the psalmist’s innocence or God’s merciful forgiveness. Psalms of lament conclude with an expression of trust. This last element has also become a whole psalm.

Most of the psalms used in the liturgy consist of these two basic forms. Detailed awareness of the hymn and lament genre will assist greatly in understanding them. Other psalm types are classified more by content than by form. Thus royal or messianic psalms portray the just rule of a future “anointed” king; historical psalms focus on God’s guidance of ancient Israel into the Promised Land; liturgical psalms rehearse celebrations in the Temple; while wisdom psalms proclaim blessed “those who follow the way of the Lord” and offer instruction and incentive to fidelity.

Difficulties

Individual psalms, as poetic compositions, were written as a unity and are to be appreciated as such. Yet at Mass that is rarely possible, for the responsorial psalm is usually limited to a selection of verses. Of the 126 psalms listed in the Lectionary’s “Index of Responsorial Psalms,” only 14 appear in their entirety: Psalms 1, 2, 23, 87, 117, 121–124, 126, 128, 130, 131, and 150. Clipped from the other responsorial psalms are historical details from Israel’s past such as the mention of Sirion and Kadesh in Psalm 29, Edom and Moab in Psalm 108, Sihon and Og in Psalm 135. Deletions often include other specific details, rendering the psalms more abstract. By limiting the responsorial psalms mostly to a selection of verses, their structure is often destroyed and the beauty of the poetry dimmed.

In the Liturgy of the Hours, most psalms do appear in their entirety. And yet significant deletions of verses also occur, especially of those considered violent, such as Psalm 5:11 (“Punish them, O God; let them fall by their own devices”), 21:9-13 (“Destroy their fruit from the earth and their posterity from among men”), or 143:12 (“And in your kindness destroy my enemies”). The omission of these verses may well weaken the urgency of the psalm as a whole.

Approaches

As prayer written more than two thousand years ago, the psalms portray the worldview of their time and use metaphors with images drawn from their culture. We read of God depicted as riding on the wings of the wind, sitting enthroned over the flood, saving from the arrows that fly by day and the pestilence that prowls at night. An introduction to the Old Testament is the best preparation for understanding the milieu in which the psalms were composed.

While acknowledging the cultural distance of the psalms’ origins, we can still find in them profound truths about ourselves and of our relationship with God. Whatever the image, God’s might and providential care for us in all the various circumstances of our lives stand at the center of the Bible and of the psalms. Psalm 27’s declaration, “The Lord is my light and my salvation” (v. 1) still resounds today.
Calls for the violent destruction of enemies are now removed from the liturgical texts of the psalms, but their original function should be properly understood. They were penned in an age when Israel saw its enemies as God’s enemies and felt every right to ask God to punish them. Such prayer also expresses a deep sense of fear, of vulnerability. It is addressed to God, not to the soldiers of Israel. It is a wish, an appeal, and whatever unholy sentiments it may be thought to contain, it is an honest, open conversation with God, who is acknowledged as the just and all-powerful Lord of the world. At bottom, it is a prayer for justice, that those who do evil be punished. The Israelites hoped that such punishment would take place in this life. We may be willing to wait for the eschaton, the final judgment, when all wrongs will be righted and tragic suffering come to an end. When we encounter such calls for violence in our prayer texts as they appear in the Bible, we can appreciate the terror of those who wrote them and beg the Lord for a termination of all injustice and violence in our world. We can also spiritualize them and use the vocabulary symbolically for the destruction of the evils that seem to come from the forces of hell and damnation. At the very least, they bear witness to our weakness and need for God’s help.

The attempt to discover the literary genre of the psalms is most helpful. Remote preparation for this task may involve consulting a commentary on the psalms, such as the one by Richard J. Clifford, S.J., or Konrad Schaefer, O.S.B., among others. These works refer, of course, to the psalms as a whole as they appear in the Bible. Comparison of the psalm in the liturgical text and its rendition in the Bible is useful, with attention to the footnotes and marginal references to other passages.

The psalms are considered the prayer of the church. As we pray in the liturgy, in community, we can easily turn to the Lord in the name of all our brothers and sisters throughout the world. Their concerns, their crises, their catastrophes become ours, and if the words of a psalm scarcely apply to our current situation, they may well portray the plight of many others. Again and again we are asked in the Bible to pray for one another (Matt 5:44; 2 Thess 1:11; Jas 5:16). We pray, therefore, not only for ourselves and our loved ones, but for the world community, prayers of thanksgiving and praise, petitions and laments, expressions of sorrow and repentance.

St. Paul urges us to sing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (Col 3:16) with gratitude to God in our hearts, and indeed, to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). The psalms can greatly enrich our vocabulary of prayer. We pray in faith, assured that our prayer will be heard.

References


