

THE POWER OF WORDS

*—some reflections on
the personal use of the Psalms.*

by Muriel Poulter

It is hard to overestimate the power of words, their power to reach the emotions and to lead us beyond emotion to those deeper places "where words come from". The Bible is full of potent words, rich nuggets to reward those who will seek. In his book *Grace Abounding* John Bunyan says: "I have sometimes seen more in a line of the Bible than I could well tell how to stand under." In the cooler language of the twentieth century, Pierre Lacout, in *God is Silence* writes: "There are passages in which the Spirit is waiting for us". The Book of Psalms is a rich mine of such passages, passages which can make the divine presence more real for us and lead us into worship and deep prayer; passages which, lived with and interiorised, can undergird our lives, making us stronger to serve and able to stand more firmly in times of stress and trouble.

The analogy of a mine is a fair one to use when thinking of the Psalms. Even the most zealous of us are selective in their reading of the Bible; and there are places in that ancient anthology of religious songs which are obscure, and others which remind us uncomfortably that the writers knew only in part

the love of God and what that asks of man, and that they had not had opportunity to learn from that fullness of revelation which came through Jesus Christ. But it is a foolish reader who cannot quietly pass over things that are either obscure or unacceptable and concentrate on those that are clear and of positive value.

Perhaps what strikes one most powerfully when reading the Psalms is how totally, and contagiously, they are permeated with a sense of the reality of the living God. He is the God whose glory is declared by the heavens and suffuses the natural world, the God who brought Israel out of Egypt and who is only too eager that those who worship him should know the blessing brought by obedience to his will and by a knowledge of his continual sustaining presence. In this overall context, the most dominant note is that of praise and thanksgiving. In our troubled times it is easy to forget how important these are in the life of the spirit. It is not, of course, that the mysterious invisible reality that we sense at the heart of things and encounter in our inner depths *needs* to be praised and thanked. It is rather that to praise and

give thanks is good for us who would worship him,
as the Psalmists knew:

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to thy name, O Most High;
to declare thy steadfast love in the morning
and thy faithfulness by night. (92 v12)

Such an attitude can lift us away from pre-
occupation with ourselves and with anxieties
personal and political, and lift us up, as it were, into
the divine harmony which is the source of healing
for individuals and societies. Perhaps my own
favourite lines of praise are the well known verses
with which Psalm 103 opens:

Bless the LORD, O my soul;
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!

Bless the LORD, O my soul
and forget not all his benefits.

Spoken aloud at the beginning of our “quiet time”,
these words can be more potent in their invitation to
us to make God the focus of our lives and to count
our blessings. They make a splendid way into other
forms of prayer.

Some readers may feel with me that, however much righteousness can be seen as an essential condition of social well being, when it comes to the individual the Psalms are often unrealistic in the promises of protection and prosperity they make to the righteous believer. The Christian cannot forget that Jesus was crucified and that his disciples were promised persecution. Let those who feel thus turn to Psalm 73. Here a righteous man, sorely afflicted, confesses how embittered he had become at the smug, arrogant prosperity of wicked men, and how he had come near to denying the faith of his forefathers. But out of this travail of soul comes what is to me one of the most moving confessions of faith in the Bible:

... I am continually with thee;
thou dost hold my right hand.

.....

Whom have I in heaven but thee?
And there is nothing upon earth
that I desire besides thee.
My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion for ever.

A moment of vision has shown the Psalmist that fellowship with God is the one thing that matters.

As I suggested in the opening paragraph, ready-made words can be a source of strength. If our hearts and minds are open, they can take us beyond what we can normally express for ourselves and be a creative, formative influence in our relationship with the Being who is the ground of all being. A way of using the Book of Psalms is to make from it our own personal anthology of lines and verses that we would wish to commit to memory and make part of the storehouse we can draw upon at different times and in different circumstances. Here are a few examples from my own anthology. For the beginning of the day there are the splendid words from Ps. 118:

This is the day which the Lord has made,
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

For the end of the day we can use words from Ps. 4:

In peace I will both lie down and sleep
—or words of trust associated with the crucifixion:
Into thy hand I commend my spirit. (31 v5)

Various lines can help us to quieten our minds and centre down to silent worship;

In thy presence is fulness of joy. (16 v11)

Be still before the LORD

and wait patiently for him. (37 v7)

Be still and know that I am God (41 v10)

There are words we can use when things are going badly or when we feel that something has gone wrong inwardly:

My soul cleaves to the dust;

revive me according to thy word! (119 v25)

Create in me a clean heart O God

and put a new and right spirit

within me. (51 v10)

Finally, a brief line expressing the psalmist's joy in the LORD;

I love thee, O God my strength. (18 v1)

Does this article appear to be over concerned with the personal aspects of religion? Let us remember that the effectiveness of our witness and our service depends upon our quality as persons, and ultimately upon our relationship with the living source of love and power. □

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