

## Ways of Reciting the Psalm

### Psalm Tone

The preferred method of reciting the psalms is using a psalm tone. This allows the liturgical text to be used and the simplicity of the tone allows the text to speak.

- When introducing a psalm tone to an assembly it is often best to sing it to the text of the 'Glory be...' which is familiar to people.

### Performance

- The whole psalm can be sung by everyone throughout.
- It can be sung antiphonally either between cantor and everyone or the assembly divided into two groups.
- A response might be sung at each end of the psalm .
- Or the response might be sung by the congregation between the verses which are sung by a cantor or proclaimed by a reader.

### Reading the Psalm

- Although Communities are encouraged to sing the psalms, some psalms may be better said. (GILH 279)
- As with singing there is a variety of ways of reciting the psalms:
  - there can be a musical background to the reading or the response can be sung (not said) between verses.
  - psalms are best read by individual voices reflecting the structure where appropriate.
  - the psalms are first of all poetry and should be read as such.

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## Praying the Psalms

The psalms are the kernel of the Prayer of the Church linking us with the Hebrew tradition of daily worship. They are the staple part of the Liturgy of the Hours, and they feature in the Mass, not only as the responsorial psalm in the Liturgy of the Word, but also in the antiphons of the Mass and the processional songs sung during the ministering of Holy Communion.

From the Gospels we learn that the psalms were constantly on the lips of Christ, in prayer and in teaching.

In praying the psalms today, we pray with and through him, we make his prayer our own. The psalms express the range of human emotions: praise, thanksgiving, sorrow, supplication, hope and despair, shared by all at different times.

LET  
MY  
PRAYER  
ARISE  
BEFORE  
YOU LIKE  
INCENSE

It is worth remembering that the Prayer of the Church is universal. It is the prayer of the Body of Christ as the local community and as the whole Church: *'If one part of the Body suffers, all suffer; if one part rejoices, all rejoice.'* (1 Cor 12:26). Through the psalms, and through the whole of Evening Prayer, we pray, not just for ourselves and our individual needs but for, and with, the whole Church.

The repetition of the psalms enables us to take to heart the words, so that their language becomes part of our language of prayer. This repetition also emphasises our continuing call to conversion as we listen to the voice of God in the psalms.

## How do we pray these texts?

1. Very often the words of a psalm will help us pray easily and fervently. They offer us **words that help us express** thanksgiving or joyfully bless God, or they present us with a prayer from the depths of sorrow. On the other hand, sometimes the psalms seem less suited for prayer. Is it prayer when the psalmist often speaks directly to the people, recalling, for example, the history of Israel? How can it be our prayer when sometimes the psalmist speaks as if he were God himself, or even, as sometimes, speaks in the voice of the enemies of God. The psalms are often quite different things to what we commonly think of as 'prayers,' prayers such as the liturgical collects composed by the Church.
2. In praying a psalm (as indeed when praying much of the rest of Scripture) we are invited to **open our hearts** to the emotions which inspired it, respecting its particular form, for example whether it is a psalm of lament, confidence, thanksgiving or any other form designated by scripture scholars.
3. Each psalm was composed in particular circumstances, often suggested by the titles which head the psalms in the Hebrew Psalter. But whatever may be said of its historical origin, each psalm has a basic human meaning which we should not neglect. Even though these songs originated many centuries ago in a culture very different to ours, they express the pain and hope, misery and confidence, and especially sing of faith in God, his revelation and his redemption. These are **universal human experiences** that we can quite easily recognise and bring to prayer.
4. Those who pray the psalms do not say them in their own name so much as **in the name of the whole Body of Christ**. In fact in praying them, we pray in the person of Christ himself. Keeping this in mind overcomes many difficulties, even if while saying the psalms our own present and particular feelings differ from those expressed by the psalmist: for example, if we find ourselves saying a psalm of jubilation, while we are worried or sad, or saying a psalm of lament, when in fact we feel in good spirits.
5. In private prayer we can simply choose a psalm to suit our mood, but in the liturgy often this is not possible. Yet whoever says the psalms in the name of the Church can always find **a reason for joy or sorrow**. And when we do

so we make our own the words of the apostle: *'Rejoice with those who rejoice and be sad with those in sorrow'* (Rom 12:15). St. Benedict observed that in this way human weakness and selfishness are healed by charity enabling the mind and heart to harmonize with the voice.

6. There is a further level of meaning in the psalms which is precious to the Church – and that is their **messianic meaning**. This meaning is explored frequently in the New Testament; indeed by Jesus himself when he says to the apostles: *'Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the prophets and in the psalms, has to be fulfilled'* (Luke 24 :44). One classic example of this appears in the Gospel of Matthew when the reference in Psalm 109 (110) to David's Son and Lord is understood as speaking of the Messiah, of Jesus himself.
7. Building on this way of interpretation, the Fathers of the Church read the whole of the psalter as **prophecy about Christ and his Church**. Sometimes such interpretations can seem to us a little strained, but generally the Fathers were right in hearing in the psalms the voice of Christ calling out to his Father, of the Father speaking to the Son, and even the voice of the Church, of the apostles and the martyrs. This method of interpretation also flourished in the Middle Ages. Falling out of fashion at the beginning of the Modern Age the value and truth of such interpretation is now once more being widely recognised, and only with the clearly 'messianic' psalms. This form of spiritual interpretation has received constant approval in the tradition of the Church.

## Psalm Prayers

Psalm Prayers are often used at Morning and Evening Prayer. They are collects, prayed aloud, after a time for silent prayer after the conclusion of each psalm and its Doxology ('Glory be...')

*"Psalm prayers help those reciting the psalms to interpret them in a Christian way... when the psalm is completed and a short silence is observed, the psalm prayer sums up the aspirations and emotions of those saying them."*