

Wednesday of the 1st Week of Lent

Rediscovering the Psalms

Homily of Bishop Barres

St. Agnes Cathedral

February 24, 2021

This Lenten Season 2021 is a good time to rediscover the psalms of the Old Testament and to pray them with all our hearts, minds and souls in union with Jesus who prayed the psalms himself.

In rediscovering the power of the psalms in this Lenten Season of 2021, maybe it would be helpful to experience them in another way.

Most of the time we read and pray the psalms silently. But sometimes it may help to read and pray the psalms out loud as we do in communal Liturgy of the Hours prayer experiences.

Reading the psalms out loud can amplify their resonance in our souls and deepen our focus, concentration and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit working through the inspired text of the psalm.

Recently, I discovered that the English actor David Suche (many of you know him from his role as Inspector Clouseau in the Agatha Christie PBS series) has beautifully recorded the Bible.

In recent months, I have repeatedly listened to Suche's trained actor's voice proclaim the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is incredibly enriching and moving and another way to be inspired by the inspired texts.

Most recently, I have been listening to Suche proclaim the psalms and he captures with rich and trained resonance so many of the varied emotional and prayerful nuances of the psalms. This is just one example of how a different way of experiencing the psalms can open new horizons and even help us to participate at Mass with a renewed and enriched concentration during the Liturgy of the Word and throughout the Mass.

We heard this morning one of the great penitential psalms, Psalm 51 that we pray in the Liturgy of the Hours appropriately on Fridays.

Psalm 51 reads: “Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me...A heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn...A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me.”

Psalm 51 expresses our sorrow for sin and our desire for true repentance. It expresses our desire for God to give us humble, contrite and pure hearts. Psalm 51, when prayed deeply and with concentration, opens our hearts and souls to conversion and to a new experience of God’s mercy.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasizes that the psalms are “the masterwork of the prayer in the Old Testament” (2585) and that they are “inseparably personal and communal.” (2586)

The Psalms express every emotional and spiritual chord in the human heart. In *The School of Prayer*, Pope Benedict XVI states that “the whole complexity of human life is distilled in the complexity of the different literary forms of the various psalms: hymns, laments, individual entreaties and collective supplications, hymns of thanksgiving, penitential psalms, wisdom psalms and the other genres that are to be found in these poetic compositions.”¹

St Ambrose writes: “All who read the Book of Psalms with eyes to see can discover in it a complete gymnasium for the soul, a stadium for all the virtues, equipped for every kind of exercise; it is for each to choose the kind he judges best to help him gain the prize...In the psalms, then, not only is Jesus born for us, he also undergoes his saving passion in his body, he lies in death, he rises again, he ascends into heaven, he sits at the right hand of the Father. What no man would have dared to say was foretold by the psalmist alone, and afterward proclaimed by the Lord himself in the Gospel.”

Praying the psalms takes us to St. Ambrose’s mystical gymnasium of the soul. We open ourselves to the power of the psalms and allow the Holy Spirit to play chords of blessing, praise, thanksgiving and repentance in our hearts.

I conclude with this beautiful tribute to the power of the psalms by St. Ambrose: “A psalm is a blessing on the lips of the people, a hymn in praise of God, the assembly’s

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *A School of Prayer: The Saints Show Us How to Pray*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016), 48.

homage, a general acclamation, a word that speaks for all, the voice of the Church, a confession of faith in song. It is the voice of complete assent, the joy of freedom, a cry of happiness, the echo of gladness. It soothes the temper, distracts from care, lightens the burden of sorrow. It is a source of security at night, a lesson in wisdom by day. It is a shield when we are afraid, a celebration of holiness, a vision of serenity, a promise of peace and harmony. It is like a lyre, evoking harmony from a blend of notes. Day begins to the music of a psalm. Day closes to the echo of a psalm...What is a psalm but a musical instrument to give expression to all the virtues? The psalmist of old used it, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, to make earth reecho the music of heaven. He used the dead gut of strings to create harmony from a variety of notes, in order to send up to heaven the song of God's praise. In doing so he taught us that we must first die to sin, and then create in our lives on earth a harmony through virtuous deeds."

May our lives in this Lenten Season 2021 be in harmony with the spiritual chords and accents of the psalms and may the Holy Spirit's plans for our conversion, our holiness and our missionary spirit be done, be fulfilled and be accomplished.