

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

Pope Francis' Catechesis on Prayer, arranged for each liturgical week

Fourth Sunday of the Year – 28th January 2024

Our Sunday readings this week include a section of Psalm 94. (Psalms have two numbering systems this Psalm is 94 according to the Greek text of scripture and 95 according to the Hebrew). It is a central Psalm – the introduction to each day (the invitatory Psalm) for many priests, religious and lay people who pray the psalms in the Divine Office – The Liturgy of the Hours. Praising and honouring God is a central call in the life of the Christian. Reflecting on the Psalms in prayer is recommended to all. The teaching below was given by Pope Francis on Wednesday, 14 October 2020.

The prayer of the Psalms. 1

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning,

As we read the Bible, we continually come across prayers of various types. But we also find a book made up solely of prayers, a book that has become the native land, gymnasium and home of countless men and women of prayer. It is the *Book of Psalms*. There are 150 Psalms to pray.

The *Catechism* affirms that every Psalm “possesses such direct simplicity that it can be prayed in truth by men of all times and conditions” (ccc, 2588). As we read and reread the Psalms, we learn the language of prayer. God the Father, indeed, with his Spirit, inspired them in the heart of King David and others who prayed, in order to teach every man and woman how to praise him, how to thank him and supplicate him; how to invoke him in joy and in suffering, and how to recount the wonders of his works and of his Law. In short, the Psalms are the Word of God that we human beings use to speak with him.

In this book we do not encounter ethereal people, abstract people, those who confuse prayer with an aesthetic or alienating experience. The Psalms are not texts created on paper; they are invocations, often dramatic, that spring from lived existence. To pray them it is enough for us to be what we are. We must not forget that to pray well we must pray as we are, without embellishment. One must not embellish the soul to pray. “Lord, I am like this”, and go in front of the Lord as we are, with the good things and also with the bad things that no one knows about, but that we inwardly know. In the Psalms we hear the voices of men and women of prayer in flesh and blood, whose life, like that of us all, is fraught with problems, hardships and uncertainties. The Psalmist does not radically contest this suffering: he knows that it is part of living. In the Psalms, however, suffering is transformed into a *question*. From suffering to questioning.

And among the many questions, there is one that remains suspended, like an incessant cry that runs throughout the entire book from beginning to end. A question that we repeat many times: “*Until when, Lord? Until when?*” Every suffering calls for liberation, every tear calls for consolation, every wound awaits healing, every slander a sentence of absolution. “Until when, Lord, will I have to suffer this? Listen to me, Lord!” How many times we have prayed like this, with “Until when?”, enough now, Lord!

By constantly asking such questions, the Psalms teach us not to get used to pain, and remind us that life is not saved unless it is healed. The existence of each human being is but a breath, his or her story is fleeting, but the prayerful know that they are precious in the eyes of God, and so *it makes sense to cry out*. And this is important. When we pray, we do so because we know we are precious in God's eyes. It is the grace of the Holy Spirit that, from within, inspires in us this awareness: of being precious in the eyes of God. And this is why we are moved to pray.

The prayer of the Psalms is the testimony of this cry: a multiple cry, because in life suffering takes a thousand forms, and takes the name of sickness, hatred, war, persecution, distrust... Until the supreme "scandal", that of death. Death appears in the Psalter as man's most unreasonable enemy: what crime deserves such cruel punishment, which involves annihilation and the end? The prayer of the Psalms asks God to intervene where all human efforts are in vain. That is why prayer, in and of itself, is the way of salvation and the beginning of salvation.

Everyone suffers in this world: whether they believe in God or reject Him. But in the Psalter, pain becomes a *relationship*, rapport: a cry for help waiting to intercept a listening ear. It cannot remain meaningless, without purpose. Even the pains we suffer cannot be merely specific cases of a universal law: they are always "my" tears. Think about this: tears are not universal, they are "my" tears. Everyone has their own. "My" tears and "my" pain drive me to go ahead in prayer. They are "my" tears, that no one has ever shed before me. Yes, many have wept, many. But "my" tears are mine, "My" pain is my own, "my" suffering is my own.

Before entering the Hall, I met the parents of that priest of the diocese of Como who was killed: he was killed precisely in his service of helping. The tears of those parents are "their" own tears, and each of them knows how much he or she has suffered in seeing this son who gave his life in service to the poor. When we want to console somebody, we cannot find the words. Why? Because we cannot arrive at his or her pain, because "their" suffering is "their" own, his tears are his own. The same is true of us: the tears, "my" suffering is mine, the tears are "mine", the tears are mine, and with these tears, with this suffering I turn to the Lord.

All human suffering is sacred to God. So prays the prayer of Psalm 56: "Thou hast kept count of my tossings; put thou my tears in thy bottle! Are they not in thy book?" (v. 8). Before God we are not strangers, or numbers. We are faces and hearts, known one by one, by name.

In the Psalms, the believer finds an answer. He knows that even if all human doors were barred, God's door is open. Even if the whole world had issued a verdict of condemnation, there is salvation in God.

"The Lord listens": sometimes in prayer it is enough to know this. Problems are not always solved. Those who pray are not deluded: they know that many questions of life down here remain unresolved, with no way out; suffering will accompany us and, after one battle, others will await us. But if we are listened to, everything becomes more bearable.

I will tell you something: it is good for me, in difficult moments, to think of Jesus weeping; when He wept looking at Jerusalem, when He wept before Lazarus' tomb. God has wept for me, God weeps, He weeps over our suffering. Because God wanted to make Himself man - a spiritual writer used to say - in order to be able to weep. To think that Jesus weeps with me in suffering is a consolation: it helps us to keep going. If we maintain our relationship with Him, life does not spare us suffering, but it will open up to a great horizon of goodness and set out towards its fulfilment. Take courage, persevere in prayer. Jesus is always by our side.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on prayer, we now turn to the Book of Psalms, which can be considered a great treasury of prayers. The Psalms teach us to pray to God in words that he himself has given us. In them, we encounter the entire gamut of human emotions, from praise, petition and joyful thanksgiving to anguished supplication for deliverance from life's bitter disappointments and sorrows. The Psalms teach us that God is not deaf to our prayers, especially those that arise from a broken heart and a troubled spirit. The Psalmist's repeated cry, "How long, Lord?", is itself an acknowledgment that, amid our every trial and tribulation, God hears our voice and never abandons us. As a loving Father, he weeps for our sufferings in this world, yet in his wisdom he has a saving plan for each of us. The Psalms are thus a guide to growth in the practice of prayer. They open our hearts to ever deeper hope in God's providential care; they confirm our trust in his promises, and they inspire us to persevere on our life-long journey of faith in his word.