

2nd Sunday of Advent (A)

8th December 2019

‘Scripture II: Psalms’

Is 11: a shoot springs from the stock of Jesse flourish ... Ps 71: in His days justice shall flourish ...
Rom 15: *the examples ... of how people who did not give up were helped by God*
Mt 3: 1–12: *in due course John the Baptist appeared ...*

Of the Scripture passages that we are presented with, day by day, week by week, perhaps it is the psalm that is the most overlooked, the most neglected. Yet the psalms form the backbone of the Christian liturgy. We sing or recite them at Mass daily, and at all the offices of the Liturgy of the Hours: Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Night Prayer etc. In monasteries, the monks recite all 150 psalms within a 2-week period, and even in the slightly reduced form that priests have in the breviary, we’d cover the whole 150 in 4 wks or less. So, they’re being used continuously, these hymns of Israel, in Christian as well as in Jewish worship.

Our Blessed Lord would have known and recited these psalms Himself — He knew them just as we know them, and would have sung them within Jewish synagogue prayers on the Sabbath, in the home too, and more splendidly within the Temple, or on pilgrimage to the Temple especially as they made the ascent from the Jordan

Valley up towards Jerusalem, Mt Zion, and the Temple precincts. These hymns would have been precious to His sacred heart, for they express the faith and desires of the people for their loving God. No wonder, then, that they were important to the Son of God in His earthly life — and therefore they are important to us.

Written over a long period, perhaps starting with the musically gifted King David in c. 1000BC, the psalms also cover a wide range of emotions, moods, and prayers. There are psalms of joy, of sorrow, of praise, of penitence, of recounting the scared history, of hope; in anger and distress, in fear, in bereavement. Just as any hymn book, the Book of Psalms covers all the spectrum of human experience and expresses it in verses that can be sung. What the Psalms have meant to the Jews for 3000yrs, and to Christians for 2000yrs, can be summed up in the words of St Paul to us this morning: *“Everything that was written long ago in the Scriptures was meant to teach us something about hope from the examples Scripture gives of how people who did not give up were helped by God.”* Singing the praise of

God, from whatever angle of human emotion, in whatever experience of human life, shows that God is truly the God of all things, and that He alone can help us and save us. Scripture is always a Word of Hope!

In Advent, as we pray with longing for the coming of the Christ child again at Christmas, the psalms help us to acknowledge the majesty of the Messiah who comes. Many of the psalms are linked to the monarchy, to the sense that God provided for His people a leader on earth — especially in King David, highpoint of monarchy — linked to His sacred Temple rites, ... but therefore the psalms also point forward to the everlasting King, the Messiah, the ‘Son of David,’ who will rule definitively and for ever. Today’s psalm, then, (Ps 71) presents to us a prayer of recognition that the King that God provides will judge wisely, provide charitably for the poor and the weak, will rule in God’s name with justice, and that His reign will extend not just to Israel (“every tribe”) but to “all nations.” So, in many senses this psalm, like many others, is a hymn of praise that is actually about Christ. We were saying last week, weren’t

we, that the way to read the OT is to see it as preparing for, and made sense of, by the NT? That’s true also of the psalms: they praise God in their own day, but also praise the salvation still to come in Christ. So, the King for whom we give thanks in the psalms is not just one or other of the kings of Israel’s history — some were good and holy, some were rotten and corrupt — but is more specifically the *king of kings*, the incorrupt, the eternal, the Messiah.

As we say the psalms as Christians, we apply these praises to Christ ... *In His days, justice shall flourish and peace till the moon fails ... May His name be blessed for ever, and endure like the sun. Every tribe shall be blessed in Him, all nations bless His name.* The book of psalms is a treasure-chest of prayers that God has inspired His people to write. Let’s *not* ignore, or pass over without contemplation, these ancient and beautiful hymns: let’s savour the words, let’s utter them tenderly, for these same words graced the lips of Jesus Himself as He lived this earthly life with us, and uttered with us the praise of the Father that He knows is the essence of living a life at peace.