

Pastoral Message, 1 January 2019

*You crown the year with your goodness,
and your paths overflow with plenty. (Psalm 65:12)*

My Dear Friends in Christ,

Some while ago, I spoke with a rabbi following an interfaith symposium at the cathedral in Baltimore. Much of the panel discussion had turned on the beliefs and practices held in common by persons of many faiths, but especially by those in the Abrahamic tradition.

Our own discussion afterwards turned on the psalms. I think she was a little surprised to learn of how often Episcopal Christians pray the psalms each week as part of our Sunday celebration but also during the week when we observe the Daily Office. We went on to share some of our favorite verses, both ones that comfort and inspire us and ones that challenge and admonish us (as well as some that scare us half to death!). For that moment, rejoicing with her in a common religious literature, I felt very close to the heritage out of which both of us had come.

Beginning later this month, and running through most of the season of Epiphany, I'd like to explore with you some of the contexts and meanings of this great literature in the light of that shared heritage. I'd like to look carefully at the Psalms their history, authorship, meanings, and their relevancy to our contemporary lives. In addition to reading (and, yes, absorbing!) all 150 psalms, I'd like us also to look at N.T. Wright's very fine study, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (\$9.85 from Amazon).

In his introduction, Bishop Wright boldly states his reasons for the Psalms importance by offering an overview of their unique emotional, psychological, and spiritual breadth:

The Psalms are among the oldest poems in the world, and they still rank with any poetry in any culture, ancient or modern, from anywhere in the world. They are full of power and passion, horrendous misery and unrestrained jubilation, tender sensitivity and powerful hope. Anyone at all whose heart is open to new dimensions of human experience, anyone who loves good writing, anyone who wants a window into the bright lights and dark corners of the human soul anyone open to the beautiful expression of a larger vision of reality should react to these poems like someone who hasn't had a good meal for a week or two. It's all here.

Interested?? Hungry?? If you are, join me at the Rectory on Wednesday afternoons (January 23 and 30; February 6 and 13) between 4 and 6pm. A light Tea with refreshments will accompany (fuel?) our discussions! (Although not convenient for some, I hope this earlier time will encourage others who prefer not being out later at night, especially in the winter.). Look for more information about the study in future Sunday bulletins and in emails. A sign-up sheet will be available for those interested in purchasing the books.

What has so often impressed me about the Psalms is the way they can encompass both desperation and trust over the space of the same poem. The song may begin in deep distress “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” but end by affirming witness to the God’s mercy and love “My soul shall live for him; / my descendants shall serve him; they shall be known as the Lord’s forever” (22:1, 29). Sometimes this transformation is accomplished in the same verse “Weeping may spend the night, / but joy comes in the morning” (30:6). And even when the poet or the nation might yearn to “see better times”, the singer already knows who it is, and who alone, that can reverse the course of human struggle “who can put gladness in my heart and make me dwell in safety” (4:6, 7, 8).

It is with this hope, and with these reassurances, that we can and should begin this New Year. What I glean spiritually from these great poems is the simple truth that whatever we do in God’s Name we do with God’s protection and blessing. For the Lord “will not abandon me to the grave, nor let his holy one see the Pit” (16:10). In all the challenges that lie ahead, with all the decisions that we will face, we are made stronger and braver in the knowledge of that love, with the long memory of that divine promise.

Many Blessings and Happy New Year!
Fr. Gordon +