

1 Peter 1:17-23

Psalm 116

Luke 24:13-35

The Eucharistic Psalmist

[Over the next few weeks I'm planning to preach from the set psalm for the day. There are a few reasons for this. One is that I'm now into my seventh full cycle of the lectionary, which makes most of the other texts rather "old-hat", at least for the preacher and probably for the congregation. Another is that, in those seven cycles, I've rarely preached on the set psalm; and another is a remark by Howard Wallace in his book on the psalms, that we cannot expect the heart of the psalms to become our own heart if we do not preach on them. While we hear a psalm each week – beautifully sung – I'm not sure that this is enough for us to be affected by these hymns and prayers. Perhaps a little more preaching here would help.]

I want this morning to draw a link between today's psalm and our weekly gathering to break bread and bless a cup. The ground for this link is nothing more than a fortuitous phrase in the psalm and so the link is, in a sense, little more than sleight of hand! I think, however, that the effect is such that we might do well to allow ourselves to be tricked here, in order that we might come to see the psalms in a new, richer light, and the Eucharist also.

To read, to sing, to *pray* the Psalms is to be invited into a new experience...of *ourselves*. The Psalms are the prayers of people not very much unlike us.

Some of the language of the Psalms we happily embrace; other expressions leave us feeling decidedly uncomfortable. For this reason we are rather inclined to pick and choose between them. Yet the Psalms of the Bible present to us something of a *whole*. This being the case, we ought to wonder how can we be confident that we are right to reject the harshest of the language of the psalms and yet embrace the more comfortable bits. Few of us are comfortable with a blessing on those who take our enemies' babies and bash their heads against a rock; some of you perhaps don't even know that that thought is expressed in one of the Psalms (Psalm 137). We hear that particular Psalm often enough, but the nasty bit is edited out by the lectionary that it might fall more softly on our sensitive ears. Perhaps – *perhaps* – we might dare to pray with the psalmist, *My God, why have you abandoned me?* (Psalm 22) But even this seems rather an impious accusation against God, perhaps especially on when it is heard on Jesus' own lips.

On the other hand, we are less likely to be upset by the psalmist who suffers quietly or simply confesses sin, or who praises God with joy.

It is not hard for us to pick and choose between the Psalms in this way but here we are not simply being lopsided. We are presuming that, on the one hand, we *are* as contrite or thankful as the psalmist at the positive end of the spectrum but *are not*, on the other hand, in fact as deep in the pit as the psalmist is when he (she?) gets angry and spiteful and perhaps even – to our ears – blasphemous. Such *moderation* in reading the psalms is highly risky. A comfortable, moderate reading of the psalms risks a moderate faith, a moderate prayer life, moderate compassion, moderate preaching and liturgy.

So, now to today's Psalm. In fact we have here an "easy" Psalm to pray. Something is said of the depths from which the psalmist feels that he has been lifted:

³ *The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish...*
¹¹ *I said in my consternation,
'Everyone is a liar.'*

Yet the focus is very much upon the response which the psalmist will make to God's redeeming deliverance from whatever specific thing it was which oppressed him.

¹² *What shall I return to the LORD
for all his bounty to me?*
¹³ *I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD,*
¹⁴ *I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.*

Precisely what this means – the lifting up of the cup of salvation – we don't know now from this distance. But we who gather in this way each week do know of a cup of salvation, and we can helpfully construct a link between the Psalms as an invitation to a new experience of ourselves and our Eucharist as embodying something parallel for us in our ritual eating and drinking.

We've already noted that the Psalms present to us a range of human experience which exceeds the actual experience of most of us, or the experience we are prepared to admit. It is possible to live a pretty charmed life in our modern world, however much our charmed life might cost the lives of others. The depth of the psalmists' experiences – and so also the height of their exultation – is not often present to us. To take the psalms seriously is to open ourselves to the possibility of such a range of experiences even for ourselves: to allow for the possibility that we might be – even might *need* to be – jolted out of life in mid-range in order to experience ourselves and God anew.

In the Eucharist, too, we mark an experience which is both ours and yet not ours. Under the guise of bread and wine the body and blood of one of us appears on a table in front of us, not unlike the prayers of some of us appear on the pages of the Psalms. We are not those who put this body and blood there – God has done this – and yet we hear that they are there for us. There is nothing desirable about such nourishment, for it is only *nourishment* for us who eat and drink if we move past mere eating and drinking to recognise that, here, what we put somewhere else – on a cross – is re-presented to us now in order to *move us* somewhere else, somewhere beyond the moderation that denies life, even crucifies.

There is something "psalmic" about the Eucharist, or something eucharistic about the Psalms. They are together an invitation into something which is ours, yet is not quite us, and yet must become so.

This is my body *for you*; feed on this, and be changed into it, and be healed.
These are my songs, my prayers, *for you*; pray these, and thereby learn to feel them, to live them, and be healed.

It is the same one who addresses us in the ancient Psalms and here in our Eucharist today: Christ who sings in both haunting and jubilant tones, Christ crucified and risen. This is to say that the psalms are not what remains of songs sung thousands of years ago. If they are to become *our* words, they are in fact the words of Christ, just as Christ's own humanity is the gift we receive in baptism and now await. Psalm 116 is a song of the crucified and risen Christ:

The snares of death encompassed me...Everyone is a liar...

[Yet] What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation...

The life of faith is a life *out* of ourselves, *into* ourselves. It is a training in sacred song beyond the keys we think suit us into a range of notes and styles we cannot yet imagine could be ours. It is a feeding on strange food, that we might become in the same way strange to ourselves.

This is possible because, as our psalmist sang today:

"gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful..."

In order, then, to grow into ourselves through this grace and righteousness, let us learn to pray with the psalmists, and with them,

*"...offer eucharist and call on the name of the Lord
...in the presence of all his people,
in the courts of the house of the lord,
in your midst, O Jerusalem."*

Amen.
