



How to Pray the Psalms*

“The psalms will never reveal their meaning to those who simply observe them from an intellectual point of view. If you want the psalms to do their work for you, you must put them to use as you would a tool.... What we must bring to them is the desire to find God through them; if we do, they will never remain a closed book.

“Prayer always supposes a deep commitment of will.... Without desire and the inner need to rise up and go out to meet God these psalms will remain a dead letter. But when our heart reaches out towards God with the desire to be converted to him, to find itself in him, the psalms become for us what they have been for centuries of tradition: a means of spiritual growth and deep inner joy.

Some Working Principles

“A poem, says Goethe, is like a stained-glass window: from the outside it is all shadow and obscurity. But when you go in! — right away everything blazes with color, every little feature springs into relief. The eye is dazzled and the heart uplifted.

The same is true of a psalm. You have to go in: like a stained-glass window it reveals itself only from the inside. If we desire with great longing to speak with our Lord, we won't mind the cost of learning the language of divine conversation. It will not matter how much we have to work to achieve this understanding, once we realize its incalculable value. As soon as we begin to study the psalms, we come to recognize certain general ways of making them harmonize with our mind and heart. ... Here are a few samples of such principles which may help in your apprenticeship:

1. Work constantly toward a better understanding of the psalms. Use a good commentary; find a translation (or make one of your own) that is sensitive to the deep inner movement of the poetry; let yourself be carried along by it, give in to its rhythm.
2. Make every possible connection between the psalms and the gospel. For every psalm try to find some key... which opens up its Christian meaning. For some psalms you may find several leads; for others, just one.
3. Prefer the psalms to every other kind of vocal prayer, that is, every prayer in which you use words. This does not mean the exclusion of other prayers which may have a role to play in one's spiritual life, but a preference for speaking the language of the psalms, the language used by our Lord and his Mother and so many saints. It is a sure guide to genuineness in prayer.
4. Don't ask the psalms to do anything but what they were made for: to aid you in prayer.
5. Never leave off the study of the psalms; it should last a lifetime.”



* from How to Pray the Psalms by Gabriel Garrone, Archbishop of Toulouse