A song for the Sabbath: Psalm 92

by Peter S. Hawkins in the June 2, 2009 issue

Most worshipers take the psalms for granted, treating them like background music that establishes a mood but has little grip on the imagination. Yes, the 23rd Psalm is brought in for comfort at funerals, and folks would miss the “green pastures” and “still waters” were they not invoked. But mostly psalms provide responsive readings no one really attends to, or offer a transition between more important scriptures.

This was not always the case. For most of the Christian era the psalms were taken seriously enough to be preached. They also formed the core of liturgy as well as the bedrock of prayer among monastics. Their regular recitation—from Psalm 1 to 150, and then starting all over again—meant that they were known by heart. Read any annotated page of the *Confessions* and note how freely Augustine expresses his thoughts and feelings in the language of the psalms. He has so thoroughly internalized their words—has in effect been marinated in them—that they have become the way he speaks.

I am reminded of this when I teach Dante’s *Purgatorio*, the second stage of *Divine Comedy’s* three-part journey through the afterlife. The poem not only is launched and concluded with psalm citations but is peppered throughout with quotations, allusions and echoes. In part this is Dante’s tribute to David, whom he celebrates as God’s minstrel par excellence, “the highest singer of the highest Lord.” In part it reflects Dante’s notion that living intimately with the psalms leads to being transformed by them. His purgatory becomes a kind of church in which penitent sinners work out their salvation with fear and trembling by praying the Psalter. What begins as an act of penance ends in praise.

Praise, in fact, is the mainstay of the Psalter. To be sure, lament has its say and rightfully so. Like the book of Job, the psalms license our complaint against the Almighty in words of extraordinary daring. They do so, moreover, with the blessings of synagogue and church, which, by treating even the angriest of them as holy writ, have honored a devastated man’s outrage at all that has befallen him and the community’s horror at the triumph of its enemies. How long, O Lord, how long? Why have you forsaken me?

Yet praise ultimately wins out, as it does in Psalm 92. This does not mean that exaltation is all: this song of thanksgiving acknowledges that “the wicked sprout like grass” and “evildoers flourish.” But the psalmist celebrates the bigger picture—the sheer miracle of creation. Take in the daily round of morning and night, the fabulous horn of the wild ox, the luxuriance of palm trees and cedars—the magnificent work of God’s hands. What can anyone do in the face of it all but offer up one’s utmost art of praise? Let the flourishing wicked be damned: bring on lute and harp, songs of joy, “the melody of the lyre”!

Dante considered Psalm 92 important enough to give it a particular role in the *Comedy*. At the top of the poet’s Mountain of Purgatory stands the Garden of Eden, the reward of those who have worked through all seven of the deadly sins and been washed clean of their stain. It is where they are born again. Once Dante enters Eden he sees a meadow thick with red and yellow flowers. Wending her way through this scene is a beautiful young woman. Dante can tell she is in love. Her eyes shine with the unmistakable gleam of the enamored; she walks as if in a dance, and as she makes a bouquet from the profusion at her feet, she sings a song. Might it reveal the identity of her beloved?

The woman can see Dante’s curiosity at a glance—he must be that obvious!—and graciously decides to satisfy it right away. Whom does she love? She does not say directly, but reveals that her song is something very like *Delectasti*, “You have made me glad.” For Dante this keyword in Latin is a clue pointing directly to Psalm 92:4-5:

> For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
> at the works of your hands I sing for joy.
> How great are your works, O Lord!
> Your thoughts are very deep!

The lady’s beloved is none other than the Lord! She loves God’s wisdom and handiwork, the marvel of grass and water and flowers.

The superscription to Psalm 92 makes it “A Song for the Sabbath Day.” No wonder the Saturday morning service of the Jews, with its prolonged celebration of the Creator’s work, should make this text required singing. No wonder too that by including it among the monastic hours, in the sunrise service of Lauds, the church should follow suit. In either case, we rightly begin our day by rejoicing in the work of God’s hands, whatever else may also be going on in the world. What better song to

sing not only in a sanctuary but anywhere else—say, walking across a meadow or enjoying the fragrant shade of a cedar tree?