

Teaching with the Psalms

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“...in every generation wisdom passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;” (Wis 7:27b)

The wisdom and poetry books of the Old Testament are among the most quoted books of the bible. The Psalms are included in this body of biblical literature. The distilled wisdom they contain and the beauty of the language they use have universal appeal. Across cultures and across time, these books touch thoughtful minds and inquiring hearts. They have application in life.

- ▶ Most worshipping Catholics would be familiar with the *Responsorial Psalm* during the Liturgy of the Word in the Mass.
- ▶ Some Catholics would be familiar with their inclusion in the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine office).
- ▶ Shakespeare included text from the Psalms in many of his plays.
- ▶ My local newspaper often includes part of a psalm in its *Wisdom Quote of the day*.



The psalms can be incorporated into the religious education offered by the Catholic school. They can be one vehicle through which students, in Scripture study in the classroom, can come to learn about the Christian ideas of knowing God, praise and lament. They can also be used to show students how Christians express their desire and relationship with the incomprehensible God. To use the language of Gabriel Moran (1991, p. 249), the psalms can be used to both teach students religion and to show students how to be religious in a Catholic Christian way.

The Book of Psalms

The Book of Psalms is a book of the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) consisting of 150 psalms, or hymns of praise to God. The 150 psalms are divided into five smaller books, of unequal length and thematic variation, each ending with a doxology (41:13, 72:18, 89:52, 106:48, 150). A doxology is a short hymn-like expression of praise, and usually blessing, to God. For example, Book III of the Psalms concludes with “Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen and Amen.” (Ps 89:52). Psalm 150 is a doxology in its entirety. The book of Psalms includes hymns of praise to God, hymns of lament, hymns for liturgy, hymns of wisdom and justice and hymns of historicity. Traditionally, authorship of the psalms has been attributed to King David who is depicted as a musician competent with the lyre in 1 Sam 16:16-23, whose name appears in the subscript of the title of 73 of the psalms and to whom, on 13 occasions, a psalm is associated with an event in his life. The psalm scroll from Qum’ran claims that David wrote 3600 psalms (Collins, 2007). However, biblical scholarship has taught us that many of the psalms were written after David’s death. In the main, the psalms are intended to be sung; they are rhythmic in style and regarded as poetry. Jesus frequently turned to the psalms:

- ▶ immediately before his final breath on the cross (Luke 23:46 – Ps 31:5),
- ▶ in questioning the Pharisees about his messianic identity (Matt 22:42-44 – Ps 110:1),
- ▶ in dialogue with the tempter in the desert (Matt 4:3-11 – Ps 91:9-13),
- ▶ and for proclaiming trust in the omnipresent care of God (Luke 12:22 – Ps 55:23) (Stuhlmüller, 2002).

Religious educators can use the psalms to teach students about perhaps the most basic premise of the Christian life: recognising that God is God, and we offer praise to God because God exists (CCC, para. 2639). Praise is part

of human activity and the psalmists turn their thoughts away from themselves and onto the object of supreme delight, the creator God, who is Israel's redeemer. The psalms are filled with expressions of human sentiment and are a natural outpouring of the heart and soul. They are a window into ancient Israelite spirituality.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) reminds us that,

Like the inspired writers of the New Testament, the first Christian communities read the Book of Psalms in a new way, singing in it the mystery of Christ. ...Doxology, the praise of God, arises from this 'marvellous work' of the whole economy of salvation. (para. 2641)

There are numerous ways that religious educators in schools can use the psalms in the liturgical, prayer and religious life of the school in order to foster a culture of Christian praise. The number of psalms set to music and available to schools is voluminous. The use of this music in school liturgies, especially the Eucharist, is widespread. Schools can also be more musically creative as well. Using a particular text from the psalms that might have resonance with the charism of the school, the school might invite a musician in the community to compose original music for regular performance at school functions. A recording of such a composition could be used on the school website, the school phone-answering service or a school app. A snippet of such a recording might even replace the drone of the traditional bell used to mark the end of a period or part of the day. Further, a whole psalm or part of a psalm might be used in school prayer each day for a calendar year. How impressive for a school to be able to say "we prayed all the psalms this year!" Composing for the psalms or singing the psalms might be a focus of a unit of work for the music department or music teachers in a school. The possibilities seem limitless.

Psalm 148 – Praise for God's Universal Glory

Psalm 148 is perhaps one of the most well-known songs of praise. Filled with emotion, Psalm 148 is a poem of praise for God the Creator. It contains addresses and calls to glorify YHWH. Both verses 5 and 13 end the praise with "Let them praise the name of the Lord." (Kraus, 1993, p. 561). This psalm is a hymn of wonder and awe of creation. It is like a double choir, heaven and earth are situated over against each other in the psalm, where both are called to praise YHWH. In this psalm, the universe is to resound with praise and homage before the Creator. The universe constitutes the sacred place for worshipping God and almost all the psalm is a call to praise (Stuhlmüller, 1983). A version of the Genesis creation story, this hymn of cosmic wonder conveys intense feelings of exhortation and praise and is one of the most detailed psalms which call all creatures into a circle of praise. (Rogerson & McKay, 1977)

Psalm 148 is a short psalm, consisting of 14 verses. Most likely, it is a hymn for public worship (Kraus, 1993). It is an imperatival hymn that has two main sections. The first section, verses 1-6, consists of praise of YHWH from heaven. The heavenly realm is exhorted to praise Yahweh.

Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
Praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts!
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.
He established them forever and ever, he fixed their bounds,
which cannot be passed. (vv. 1-6)

The second section, verses 7-14, consists of an invitation for the praise of YHWH from the Earth, including the oceans and great creatures of the waters. It directs the listener's gaze to planet earth (Rogerson & McKay, 1977).

Praise the Lord from the Earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!
Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!
Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

Young men and women alike, old and young together!
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him,
Praise the Lord! (vv. 7-14)

In this section of the psalm the creatures are called to look at God in trust and in praise (Eaton, 2003). When reading this psalm it becomes clear that the reign of God is cosmic, universal and all-encompassing. Salvation is not limited to the people of God. Rather, the “innumerable identities in God’s cosmos... is enough to burst the confines of narrow-minded, imagination-less worship” (Eaton, 2003, p. 481).

Teaching Psalm 148

It is important in religious education programs to discuss social justice and, in particular, the call of justice to stewardship of the Earth. Catholic social teaching expects all people of good will to be stewards of creation. Many schools are beginning to take up their calling to be stewards of creation through recycling and reusing as a whole school policy. Using Psalm 148 could aid this process when discussing the wonder and awe of creation. When teaching psalms in religious education, students should be reminded that the psalms are part of an oral tradition, they were not read quietly, but sung with accompaniment. Students need to focus on key words and the flow of the poem and read aloud with imagination. The psalms can be studied alongside poetry in the subject of English, as several of the psalms are filled with parallelism and many are acrostic poems beginning with a different letter of the alphabet in sequence. (Ps 9-10; 25; 34; 37; 111-112; 145). The teacher can highlight the use of metaphor and figurative language.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* perhaps best expresses the beauty of the psalms and their value for the Catholic school community:

Whether hymns or prayers of lamentation or thanksgiving, whether individual or communal, whether royal chants, songs of pilgrimage or wisdom-meditations, the Psalms are a mirror of God’s marvellous deeds in the history of [God’s] people, as well as reflections of the human experiences of the Psalmist. Though a given psalm may reflect an event of the past, it still possesses such direct simplicity that it can be prayed in truth by [people] of all times and conditions. (CCC, para. 2588).

Catholic schools would do well to consider the Psalms for use in their prayer, liturgical and educational endeavours.

Reference List

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