

Why are the psalms so violent?

Dear Father Kerper: A few months ago I felt called to expand my prayer life beyond going to Mass. A friend urged me to begin praying the Liturgy of the Hours. I did so, but was put off by all the psalms, which seem so violent, harsh, and angry. I don't understand why this is even called "Christian Prayer." Most of it comes from the Old Testament. And I want something that connects me personally with God. Can you suggest a better alternative?

You certainly deserve praise for trying to deepen your prayer life. Though the Liturgy of the Hours has disappointed you, I suggest you give it a second look.

Your comments about the psalms are understandable and on target. Indeed, many of these prayers — actually hymns meant for singing — are very strange and deeply troubling. Yet, from earliest times, the Church has embraced these prayers as her own.

Why did the Church settle on the psalms as the core of formal Christian prayer?

First, and most important, Jesus used the prayers himself. As a devout Jewish man of his time, Jesus would have sung and recited the psalms from his early



childhood and throughout his life. Even as he suffered on the cross, he prayed Psalm 22, which begins with the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Because genuine Christian prayer is never solitary, but always in complete union with Christ, the psalms pass from the lips and tongue of Jesus on to the lips and tongues of Christians. To put it another way, we have in our mouths the same prayers that flowed from his mouth. We all speak together; no other prayers are like that. While the New Testament contains some inspired prayers, such as the beautiful canticles in Saint Paul's writings, Jesus never actually prayed them himself.

Second, we use the psalms so much because they pull us away from ourselves and compel us to embrace the whole experience of humanity, which Jesus entered, endured, and redeemed.

This helps us to understand the harshness, anger, and gloominess

of some psalms. These ancient prayers express the whole range of human emotions: joy and sorrow, confidence and fear, gratitude and disappointment, and so on. At a particular moment, we may be experiencing the opposite emotion; the psalms, however, foster solidarity with Christ and the whole of humanity, which concerns him so intensely. When we pray the psalms as the "Voice of Christ" they finally begin to make sense.

Now, let's turn to the "un-Christian" passages in the psalms. One needn't go too far into the psalms before some very harsh words appear. Yes, some psalms pulsate with hatred, anger, and vengeance. How can these be the sentiments of Christ, who promoted peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation?

Here we need to distinguish between two levels of meaning: the literal and the spiritual.

Please remember that all the

psalms originated in some specific historical situation, such as war, disaster, or serious personal sin. The “literal psalm,” then, is profoundly human in its heated emotions of anger and outright hatred.

Christians, however, “spiritualize” these psalms, directing the anger and hatred against the Evil One, not other people. These psalms, then, remind us of the endless conflict between God’s goodness and the Evil One who offers constant resistance. All the psalms, even those that wail in lamentation over defeat and disaster, point us to the ultimate triumph of God’s way. After all, they flow from the mouth of the Risen — not defeated — Christ who prays with and for those still on their earthly journey.

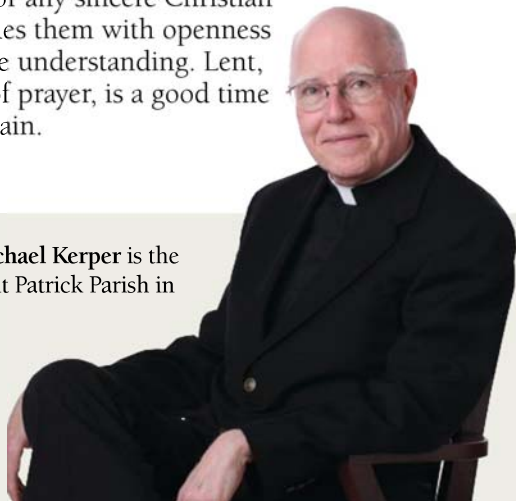
As to your last point about seeking a “personal connection,” the psalms help us to understand that we become “connected” with God through our membership in the Body of Christ, not as isolated individuals. Today, much popular spirituality misses this key point. Christian prayer is not primarily about “God and me” but “God and us.” The plural, not the singular, takes precedence.

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Saint Augustine understood this so well. In his Confessions he wrote: “How loudly I cried out to you, my God, as I read the psalms of David, songs full of faith, outbursts of devotion with no room in them for the breath of pride!”

For Saint Augustine, the psalms cured him of his own excessive egoism by fusing his lips with those of Christ and the whole Church. Today, the psalms can do the same for any sincere Christian who approaches them with openness and just a little understanding. Lent, being a time of prayer, is a good time to try them again.

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