

racecourse. Pleasant green spots are badly under pressure at the moment; I hope that the damage done by the crowds assembled there will not be irreversible. Yes, the crowds will – weather and fatigue permitting – enjoy themselves and see the Pope. But, the next morning, Knavesmire will indeed be mire, and all the filth and rubbish dropped there will have to be cleaned up. Which things are an allegory, aren't they? Euphoria is one thing, damage is another. And here I want no part with either.

Psalm Singing as Eucharistic Act

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What is the significance of singing the psalms? It is the one form of prayer shared by every major christian denomination. Whatever the disagreements about the Eucharist, charismatic prayer, the rosary or whatever, the singing of psalms has gone unchallenged as the typical form of christian prayer. And yet it is not immediately obvious in what sense the psalms are either christian or, for that matter, prayer. How can it be an act of christian prayer to long to dash out your neighbour's children's brains on a rock, to celebrate a law by which we are no longer bound, and to proclaim God's mysterious intention to use Moab as his washbowl? The question is not what this or that psalm, might have meant originally in the Temple. It is not even of what christian theological sense we might discover or construct for any or all of the psalms. That is an important question but its answer will not make sense of our practice of singing the psalms, in which there is no time to carry out complex theological hermeneutics and during which our minds are often enough dull, vacant or distracted. The question is not of the meaning of the psalms but of the meaning of singing them, though, as we shall see, the relationship between the two is complex.

The first thing to note is that we are not just singing the psalms, we are singing the psalter, and it is the canon of the psalter that gives us a preliminary definition of the significance of psalm singing.¹ It is true that we do not sing all the psalms in the psalter,

and even the psalms that we sing are sometimes bowdlerised of the nastier verses. But even if we only ever sung just a few of the psalms it would still be true that the canonical form of the psalter makes a claim about what sort of an activity psalm singing is. And the psalter opens with a psalm which identifies the man as blessed who “delights in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (v 2). And the psalter closes with psalm after psalm of wild jubilant praise. So the canon of the psalter identifies the psalms as God’s word given to us with which to praise Him. The Hebrew title of the psalter identifies the psalms as songs of praise, *tehillim*. So to sing the psalms is, in the first place, to praise God in words that are given, God’s Word. But that does not answer our question. We have to rephrase our original question. In what sense are we praising God when we spend hours chanting these ancient and curious songs? What sort of an activity is the praise of God, and how can the singing of these songs count as christian praise?

Once again it is the canon of the psalter that suggests the direction in which we may find an answer. The psalter is the book of praises and yet many of the psalms are laments, complaints, cries of frustration and anger at the absence of God and his failure to act. The largest single category of psalms is that of the individual lament. So the Book of Praises bears within itself its own negation, and the meaning of praise is given in the way in which it embraces and transcends this denial of praise. We discover what it means to praise God by seeing how lament and complaint become praise. And this movement occurs not only within the psalter as a whole but within each of the laments, except Ps 88. That is the only psalm which never moves beyond despair. And this movement is reflected not only within the psalm and the psalter but in our own singing of the psalms which, in the Catholic tradition, opens with a great cry of desolation, a quotation from one of the gloomier psalms, “O God, come to our aid; O Lord, make haste to help us”. And every psalm singing passes from that initial cry of desperation into the doxology with which we conclude every psalm, even Ps 88. So these laments, in their transfiguration of praise’s own negation, give us a privileged disclosure of what it might mean to praise God in singing the psalms. And this would be so even if only a minority of the psalms were laments. The laments are significant not because they are typical or numerous but because, like the psalter as a whole, they enact the achievement of praise and so disclose its deepest nature. To ask what it means to praise God is to try to discover how that which denies and refuses praise is encompassed and surpassed. The movement is the message. But within the psalter the only negation that can be transfigured is that of the lament, the recognition of the absence of God. There remains the

final defeat of praise which the psalter cannot encompass, death. Ps 88 asks:

Do the shades rise up to praise thee?
Is thy steadfast love declared in the grave,
or thy faithfulness in Abaddon?
Are thy wonders known in the darkness,
or thy saving help in the land of forgetfulness? (vv 10-12)

Within the canon of the psalter the answer is No. But the psalter belongs within the larger canon of the Old and New Testaments, within which the answer is Yes. We recognise this larger canon by concluding each psalm with a doxology to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and this transforms the meaning of the praise of God, and so of what we are doing in singing psalms as praise. So the question of what we are doing when we sing the psalms bears upon the relationship between these two senses of praise, praise as that which encompasses lament and as that which encompasses death. And I shall argue that it is the eucharist that provides us with the best analogy for this transfiguration of meaning, praise as a eucharistic act.

Originally it was simply the singing of the song which overcame lament. It was the song which healed. The individual came to the Temple and brought some complaint, some protest at an experience which defied significance, some token of God's absence, of alienation. The just man is persecuted; his friends have betrayed him; his wife bears no children; the judges are corrupt, or whatever. And the community offered him words with which to express and so transform this experience.² The cultic community, the locus of God's presence "enthroned on the praises of Israel", offered him a voice with which to speak out his alienation from God and man. Even if the lament was born of a particular experience of suffering it became a healing song in being appropriated by the community as a song which could be offered and in which alienation could be grasped and surpassed. Within the song the absence of God is brought within the community of his presence and the outsider became an insider in voicing his anomie, chaotic experience of the God who remained silent. In the singing of the song the community reached out to embrace that which did not belong. In Ps 22, for example, it is the community of God's presence which offers these words to be sung:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
Why art thou so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning? (v 1).

And it was the communal song which articulated the experience of its own failure:

But I am a worm and no man;

scorned by men and despised by the people.

All who see me mock at me,

they make mouths at me, they wag their heads. (v 6f)

The form of the psalm offers form to what Brueggemann has called the formlessness of grief.³ He says, "The griever is kept within the community and returned to the community by having it articulated that this experience does not lie outside the legitimate scope of the community".⁴ It is the communal song which enacts and enables the passage from alienation to community, so that the sufferer can come to say:

I will tell of thy name to my brethren;

in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee. (v 22)

The psalmist plays on the consonance between *halal* (praise) and *qahal* (community). He has brethren because he sings a song of praise, for praise is the form of the community in which God is enthroned. The singing of the song realises a form of life, that of the cultic community within which alone an individual's life might have meaning.

In some psalms the transition from lament to praise is so abrupt that many scholars believe that we have to suppose that there was a pause while a cultic prophet spoke an oracle of salvation. John Eaton,⁵ for example, has shown how many of the prophetic writings have the structure of lament, oracle and then praise, and so we can assume that the cultic liturgy within which the psalm of lament was sung had a similar pattern which would justify the sudden shift of mood within some psalms. This explanation has come under attack and most of the laments do not have the sort of break in their structure that one would expect if there was a pause in the singing of the song. But even if there was an oracle it is still the form of the psalm that enables the transition from lament to praise. Its recognition of the one who is alienated makes possible his recognition of the God who speaks; in being acknowledged he is brought to acknowledgement. He could not have heard if he had not been heard. In being given a voice he is heard. In a sense nothing has happened. The just man has presumably not recovered his land; his wife has not conceived any children; his friends may still despise him, and yet he can praise God, since praise is the celebration of a significance which is given, and the form of its gift is the singing of the song. The song embraces and so transforms his experience of the absence of God. Now God can be recognised as God, the God who has acted in the past and will act in the future to save those who belong inside the congregation. He can sing, like the prophet Habakkuk:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,

the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,

I will joy in the God of my salvation. (3: 17f)

Habakkuk does not praise God because he is grateful that there are no grapes on the vine but because even in this situation of God's apparent absence he can acknowledge God's presence. Praise is the recognition of God even in the face of his silence. The psalm discloses God as the God who is present, despite all the evidence to the contrary. The God who is enthroned in the empty space between the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, shows himself as the God who discloses his presence in the space between lament and praise within the singing of the song. The lament opens up a space in which God can show himself, in which his absence can be appropriated as a moment of presence. Praise is not primarily a question of thankfulness or gratitude. Hebrew has no word for gratitude.⁶ Being thankful is first of all a statement about the individual who is grateful and it implies a society which has a strong sense of the private individual. Westermann says, "Thanking presupposes that the community is no longer primary and no longer self evident".⁷ In these psalms praise is a question of recognition. Westermann points out that "thank" comes from "think", as *danken* comes from *denken*, and within the cult praise is more a question of thinking than of thanking. Praise is the acknowledgement of God made possible by the prior acknowledgement of the one who experienced his absence. Praise is disclosure. Even though by no means all the songs are laments, yet the laments give us a privileged insight into the nature of praise as the achievement of meaning in the face of its loss, the singing of a communal song that transfigures some experience of God's absence, that gives sense to the absurd. God is disclosed simply in the singing of the song.

A time came when what it meant to praise God was to change radically. The failure of the post-exilic cult to become the form of the community, the growth of individualism, meant that the singing of the song could no longer heal and transfigure lament into praise. In later centuries God was disclosed not in the song but in the form of the book. It was not the psalm but the psalter that could appropriate the experience of God's absence and so issue in praise. And the psalter opens with the picture of a man who is not defined by his place in the congregation but by the distance that he puts between himself and others:

Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,

nor sits in the seat of scoffers; (Ps 1: 1)

And his praise of God is not the communal activity of chant in the congregation, *halal* in the *qahal*, but solitary meditation on the law:

but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night. (v 2)

It is the form of the psalter, the Book, divided into five books like the five books of the law, that embraces lament and passes into praise. Praise is still the recognition of God, the acceptance of His self-disclosure, but it is achieved in the acknowledgement of and submission to the Law. God is praised in the opening up of a space, but not between lament and praise given in the form of a song, but between man's own and insufficient wisdom and the incomprehensible wisdom of God. It is not the singing of a song that opens up and bears that space, a song which the community reaches out to offer a voice to the silent, but in God's offer of a law which is His wisdom come to embrace man in his insufficiency. God is disclosed, and so praised, not in the gift of meaning to experiences that are anomic and absurd but in the acceptance of the limitation of any sense that man could make, and in the submission of the individual to the commandments.

There was another and even more fascinating way in which praise became individualised, and that was in the life of a particular individual, David.⁸ At a late stage titles were added to the psalms and, increasingly, they were attributed to David. The Massoretic text ascribes 73 psalms to David and the LXX even more. In later rabbinic tradition David was believed to have composed all the psalms. As Childs says, David became to Praise what Moses was to the Law. And this was not, I believe, because he played the harp but because the form of his life embodied the transition from lament to praise; his life embraced and transcended humiliation and despair. And this was necessary because obedience to the Law could not, like the singing of the song, make sense of one's experiences of alienation. Instead it sharply qualified any sense that man's wisdom could make of his own life. The form of life within which suffering could be borne could no longer be embodied in the form of the song but it could find shape in the form of the story, and the story of an individual in which any individual, alienated and isolated from the wider community, could find himself and hope. God is disclosed in the shape of the story which bears within it lament and carries forward to praise. Thirteen of the psalms were related to specific incidents in David's life. Ps 51, for example, became the song sung by David when Nathan confronted him with his sin with Bathsheba. Almost all the laments, including Ps 22, were attributed to David. And so we find a curious rever-

sal. Originally Ps 22 could have healed in being sung because its words were ritual and anonymous, available to anyone who found themselves in "the pit". Now the words could make sense precisely because they were not anonymous, but the words of David; they belonged within the canon of his life story in which one could find oneself. Beauchamp⁹ points out that the face of the singer was David, but the psalm was a mask that anyone could don. And so, for example, on the Feast of Purim, the feast of masks and disguises, the rabbis would remember how Esther donned the mask of this psalm, as it were, and re-enacted David's life in her victory over her Persian enemies. God was praised, disclosed, in the repetition of the movement of the psalm from lament to praise, the repetition of David's story in her story. While she fasted for three days she is supposed to have sung Ps 22.

On the first day she prayed: "My God!" On the second day again "My God!" On the third day: "Why hast thou forsaken me?" But when at last she prayed with a loud voice "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" her prayer was answered at once.¹⁰

The claim of the gospels is that in the story of Jesus this psalm is finally unmasked; it finds its true face. God is disclosed in the movement from death to resurrection which is the deep meaning of that from lament to praise. Whether Jesus did or did not actually cry out the opening words of Ps 22 on the cross, as Mark suggests, and whether the incidents of his passion did correspond historically to the details of the psalm, is not of any great theological importance. Matthew and John are certainly making a theological point in alluding to the first words of praise in that psalm in the first words of the risen Jesus to his disciples. It is in the story of Jesus, not David, that the movement of the psalm is accomplished.

Jesus un.masks all the psalms in an even more profound way in that it is in him that we discover what is the praise of God. We have argued that one can best discover what sort of an activity praise is by seeing how it encompasses and transcends its own negation. The cultic psalm did this by embracing within its own form the formlessness of grief, by giving sense to absurd experiences in which meaning and significance are lost. Through the singing of the song the alienated individual's experience of the absence of God was embraced and redeemed within the community of His presence. But Jesus recognises God in a far more radical manner in appropriating the ultimate negation of praise which is death, his death. The Last Supper is the final act of praise, in which Jesus takes upon himself his own death as moment in the coming of the Kingdom. It is *the* act of praise not because Jesus was thankful for his death or delighted in being betrayed, but it is eucharist, thanks-

giving, as the moment in which God is disclosed as the one who triumphs even over death. The psalm was praise in reaching out to embrace a life that had lost its meaning. The Last Supper embraces even the loss of life. So the psalms are unmasked as praise in their failure to hold within their form the ultimate limit which is death. In the light of the Last Supper they fall short. The *halal* that can be offered is only in the *qahal* of the living who will die.

One must go further and say that Jesus did not enact the ultimate praise of God, but that he is that praise in person. He is the disclosure of the Father. He says to Philip, "He who has seen me has seen the Father". Herbert McCabe says of Jesus, "He is not just the one who prays, not even the one who prays best, he is sheer prayer".¹¹ In a similar way one could say that Jesus is not just the one who praises the Father best, he is sheer praise. He is the Father's visibility. Clearly this must have profound consequences for what a christian means by the praise of God. Praise cannot be a question of having particular feelings about God, such as gratitude, or even special thoughts, such as that He is wonderful. Praise is not the creation of a relationship with God but the acceptance of a relationship with the Father in the Son. Praise is always the celebration and acceptance of our belonging within the life of the one who is, in person, the praise of the Father. That is to say that for us to praise God is always, in the first place, to celebrate the eucharist, to remember how on the night before he died Jesus shared bread and wine and took upon himself his own death as the will of the Father, the foundation of the new covenant in outpoured blood. But if that is the case, then why do we go on singing the psalms? If Jesus, as the praise of God in person, un.masks them as praise that falls short, that fails to disclose God as Lord of the living and the dead, then is there any more reason for us to go on singing them than for us to continue to obey the Torah or offer sacrifices? Are they not supplanted by the Eucharist? But I believe that we can and should go on singing these songs as, in a sense, a eucharistic act, and for much the same reasons that it is appropriate for us to go on eating and drinking together in remembrance of the Last Supper.

The sacraments, Aquinas tells us, are "*in genere signi*" (ST 3 q.60 a.1), in the category of signs. Gestures such as the eating of bread and the drinking of wine can be sacramental because they are significant. It is because the sharing of bread and wine express and realise human community that they can become sacramental of the community of Christ's body and blood. They have a depth that can be deepened. This had already happened in the celebration of the Passover. The shared meal of lamb is appropriated to symbolise a community born of the Exodus, the liberation from death

at the hands of the Egyptians. When, on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples in the context of a Passover meal, if we follow the account of the synoptic gospels, the meaning of eating and drinking together is both deepened and, in a sense, negated. Eating and drinking together can, of itself, only express human community this side of death, a community always threatened by extinction. But in the Eucharist these gestures are extrapolated beyond their proper context to become the sacrament of the community that embraces a death as the moment of its own foundation. Placed in the context of Christ's death and Resurrection these gestures come to mean more than they can properly mean, a community of the living and the dead. These significant human actions can be sacramental because of their proper intrinsic meaning, the realisation of human community, but within the context of faith this meaning is both fulfilled and negated. They have been stretched beyond their given meaning. There is no other way that we, who live before the fullness of the Resurrection, and who have not yet embraced and transcended death, can celebrate the community of the living and the dead. The only way that we can celebrate Easter Sunday is to go back to Maundy Thursday and remember what Jesus did in the face of the absolute limit of death. And this is characteristic of all theological practice. Herbert McCabe says, "In doing theology, as in any other kind of prayer, we are reaching out into a mystery for which our language is inadequate, whether we be using words or gestures. We take, for example, some fairly familiar word like 'making', 'speaking', 'changing', or 'forgiving' and we stretch it to breaking point in order to point towards more than the word can mean".¹²

When we sing songs as an act of christian praise we are engaged in a similar activity. Song singing can become christian praise in much the same way that eating and drinking can become the christian eucharist, and that is because of its intrinsic significance. It is a universal human activity by which community is sustained and created, from Anfield to the Arctic. And just as the significance of eating and drinking become deepened in the liturgy of the Passover, so songs become psalms of praise in the cult of the Temple. God is acknowledged and disclosed in the singing of the song which gives sense to man's experiences of absurdity and alienation. In and through the song he is embraced in the community of God's presence, the God who is "enthroned on the praises of Israel". In the context of the eucharist these songs of praise are transfigured in their meaning, like the eating and the drinking. They are stretched beyond their proper meaning. In their proper context, the cult, they can only praise God in the appropriation of that experience of his absence which is suffering. But Jesus

sang psalms in the face of his death, claiming his death as the final act of praise. "And when they had sung a hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Mk 14:26). This would have been the second half of the Passover Hallel, psalms 115 – 118. In this gesture the psalms are pushed to mean more than they can properly mean, the appropriation of the absence of God in death as the moment of His presence. In this gesture the psalms are both fulfilled and unmasked. For us, who have not yet embraced death and do not yet stand in the Kingdom, there are no other songs to sing, just as the evangelists could only express the meaning of Christ's death in the words of a psalm which draws back from the absolute limit of death. And just as we cannot make sacrament of the community of the Resurrection except through eating and drinking together, gestures which, in their proper context mean less, so we cannot express that praise which is Christ except through singing psalms of praise in the context of the Eucharist.

We are now in a position to say something about the relationship between the meaning of the psalms and the meaning of singing them. First of all, the act of singing them can be christian praise because of the intrinsic meaning of the psalms as songs of praise, just as eating and drinking can become christian eucharist because of their own proper meaning as human activities. It is because of what they mean that they are open, in the context of Christ's death and Resurrection, to mean more. Just as hitting someone on the head with an axe could never be a eucharistic gesture, since it has not got the right sort of meaning, so singing gobbledegook could never become christian praise since it is not in any sense praise. Yet one must make a distinction between one's understanding of the meaning of the psalms, and the significance of simply singing them, just as one makes a distinction between understanding what one is doing when one celebrates the eucharist and the significance of simply celebrating it. Though it would not be a eucharist unless the words and gestures were meaningful yet it is not constituted as a eucharist by one's grasp of their significance. It is the sacrament of Christ's eucharist in being re-enacted. Of course there would be something odd about someone who went to the Eucharist and never pondered on its significance, but that is quite different from saying that it is some intellectual act of understanding that constitutes it as a Eucharist. In a similar way it would be curious if someone spent long hours chanting the psalms and never reflected on the meaning of what he was singing, and yet it is not his understanding of the psalms as praise that constitutes his singing of them as christian praise. What matters is the doing. Jesus sang psalms in the face of death, and if his mind was elsewhere at the time one would not be at all surprised. I have suggested that

praise is the recognition of God as God. Originally the psalm was praise simply in the singing of the song, and above all in the songs through which God was recognised even in the moments of his apparent absence. It was in singing the song that God was disclosed as the one who granted significance even to those experiences of absurdity and anomie which brought people to protest at his absence, and say "There is no God above". Normally when theologians are speculating about the significance of singing the psalms they will point to this power of the psalms to bring to voice man's anguish and despair, to bring to language our fears and protests, as the great spiritual value of the psalms. And there is no doubt that for two thousand years christians have found meditation on the psalms to be a deeply enriching experience, but it is not that which constitutes the significance of singing them. One cannot justify psalm singing in terms of some universal human psychology. We are not members of the Temple congregation and our experiences of limitation are not theirs. We may never understand why God was so eager to have Moab as his washbowl and whatever threatens us, it is unlikely to be the bulls of Bashan. When Ernesto Cardinale, the Nicaraguan Minister of Culture, rewrote Psalm 22 he was forced to use quite different words to articulate a different experience of alienation:

They have tattooed me
and marked me with a number
They have photographed me behind the barbed wire
All my bones can be counted
as on an X-ray film. 13

Singing the psalms is significant as a eucharistic gesture, through which we express Christ's death as praise. It is not the form of the song but the form of the Singer that grants significance. In singing them we lay hold of our lives with their particular experiences of distress and frustration as coming somehow within God's predestination in Christ. It is simply in bothering to go, in pausing from whatever significant or insignificant activities that we may be engaged in, that we create a space in which God is disclosed as the one who grants meaning to our lives. It is in the gesture of leaving our beds or our rooms or our homes to go and sing songs of praise that the Father is acknowledged, and so praised, as the one who raised Jesus from the dead. The movement from lament to praise in which God is disclosed is enacted in the texture of our lives, simply in bothering to go and sing these songs. If we find this movement interpreted within the psalm itself, so much the better. In this practice, through which we take upon ourselves our lives, we express and celebrate Jesus' eucharistic gesture in taking upon himself his death. And if what matters is that one bothers to go,

then, in a sense, it is rather like a protest march, a protest against a world in which God is not disclosed except in the glory of a cross. And like any decent protest it is noisy and ritualised. It does not matter on a CND march whether what one chants is enormously significant to one at that moment. It does not matter whether the words on the banner were composed by oneself or offered by the organisers. It does not matter whether the marchers are pondering the horrors of nuclear war or just thinking of the next cup of tea. What matters is that they bother to turn up. The protest lies in the interruption of the routine and the movement of the march.

- 1 B S Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, London, 1979, pp 508-523.
- 2 Claus Westermann, "The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament", *Interpretation* vol 28, 1974, pp 20-38; Walter Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief", *Interpretation* vol 31, 1977, pp 263-275.
- 3 *Op. cit.*
- 4 *Op. cit.*, p 265.
- 5 John Eaton, *Vision in Worship*, London, 1981.
- 6 Claus Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, ET London, 1966, p 25.
- 7 *Op. cit.* p 28.
- 8 B S Childs, *op. cit.* p 520f; "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis", *Journal of Semitic Studies* vol 16, 1971, pp 137 - 150.
- 9 I am indebted to Paul Beauchamp's stimulating treatment of Ps 22 in *Psaumes Nuit et Jour*, Paris, 1980, pp 210 - 252.
- 10 Midr. Teh. xxii 2, quoted by John H Reumann, "Ps 22 at the Cross", *Interpretation* vol 28, 1974, p 56.
- 11 "Prayer", *Doctrine and Life*, August 1970, p 415.
- 12 "Transubstantiation: A Reply to G Egner", *New Blackfriars* 1972, p 547.
- 13 *Psalms*, ET London, 1981, p 25.