

Introduction

The human, in a classic definition, is the tool-making creature, *homo faber*. We are not animals, living by sheer instinct, in immediate touch with our environment. We are not angels, living by sheer intelligence, with unmediated access to God. We are creatures, heavily involved with tools. Unlike animals, we use knife and fork to get food to our mouths, and hammer and saw to build a home for ourselves. Unlike the angels, we use the scriptures to hear what God says to us, and the sacraments to receive his life among us.

The human, in another definition, is the creature that prays, *homo peccator*. The two definitions are the same. Prayer is technology. Prayers are tools.

Tools, though, are not the most important thing about us; God is: God in action creating, redeeming, and blessing. God makes the universe. God comes incarnate in Christ. God pours out his Spirit on creatures and creation.

And tools are not the most evident thing about us; we are: the way our bodies function and our minds work, making love and making a living, our feelings of goodness and awfulness, asking questions about our origins and ends, sometimes believing and sometimes doubting the answers that we receive.

But in the business of being human, even though neither most important or most evident, tools are required. Every distinctive human behavior requires tools: farming, loving, cooking, learning, building, believing. Some tools are made of wood, some of metal, some of words. A tool that is made of words is no less a tool than one made of steel. Prayer is a tool

that is made, mostly, of words.

All the tools are essential: the plow for farming, the book for learning, pots for cooking, prayers for believing. All the sources of our action—body, mind, spirit—are dependent on tools. Every part of our humanity is in the tool-using business. Life is the issue, human life: living well, living whole in a world in which God is in action. To live as a human being means that we use tools. Animals get by without tools, and angels get by without tools, but humans need tools. We live well or badly by means of the tools we have and how well we use them.

Tools for Being and Becoming

Prayers are tools, but with this clarification: prayers are not tools for doing or getting, but for being and becoming. In our largely externalized culture, we are urgently presented with tools that enable us to *do* things (a machine, for instance, to clean the carpet), and to *get* things (a computer, for instance, to get information). We are also well trained in their use. We are not so readily offered tools that enable our being and becoming human. We are accustomed to think of our age as conspicuously technological. But the largest area of the human continent is impoverished technologically. The vaunted technologies of our day are used only along the shoreline of the human condition; the vast interiors are bereft. The consequence is that, lacking adequate tools (a technology), most people don't venture into these interiors, at least not very far. Life is constricted on the boundary, between ocean and wilderness, where a narrow competence in doing and getting is exercised.

At the center of the whole enterprise of being human, prayers are the primary technology. Prayers are tools that God uses to work his will in our bodies and souls. Prayers are tools that we use to collaborate in his work with us.¹

For the tool-making, tool-using creatures who venture into the ocean depths of being and journey into the wilderness frontiers of becoming, making and being made into eternal habitations, the Psalms are the requisite toolbox. The Psalms are the best tools available for working the faith—one hundred and fifty carefully crafted prayers that deal with the great variety of operations that God carries on in us and attend to all the parts of our lives that are, at various times and in different ways, rebelling and trusting, hurting and praising. People of faith take possession of the Psalms with the same attitude and for the same reason that gardeners gather up rake and hoe on their way to the vegetable patch, and students carry paper and pencil as they enter a lecture hall. It is a simple matter of practicality—acquiring the tools for carrying out the human work at hand.

Two things are notable about the Psalms. One is that in the practice of prayer they have been marked by an extravagant claim. The other is that in the history of prayer they stand out with an awkward singularity.

An Extravagant Claim

The extravagant claim is that the Psalms are necessary. Is “necessary” too strong a word? They are not necessary to salvation—“by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). Our prayers, whether clumsy or skilled, heretical or orthodox, verbatim from the Psalter or ad libbed from a sinking ship, get us no merit with God. Nor are the Psalms necessary to validate our prayer as genuine—God hears anything we whisper or shout, say or sing. Right words and correct forms are not prerequisite to a heavenly audience. God is not fastidious in these matters.

All the same, they are necessary. The consensus on this, throughout the church’s praying life, is impressive.² If we wish

to develop in the life of faith, to mature in our humanity, and to glorify God with our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength, the Psalms are necessary. We cannot bypass the Psalms. They are God’s gift to train us in prayer that is comprehensive (not patched together from emotional fragments scattered around that we chance upon) and honest (not a series of more or less sincere verbal poses that we think might please our Lord).³

The Psalms are necessary because they are the prayer masters. What is a master?

“Not one who one imitates, emulates even, but rather, a powerful presence acknowledged, looked up to in all weathers, A mountain. A great upheaval of rock and earth. Contours, declivities, the tufted ridge that defines the horizon, curly bloom of foggy woods, a rock face far up implying ‘the sounding cataract’. . . . The mountain is master of the landscape in which it is a presence. One does not emulate such a master, except by being more oneself.”⁴

We apprentice ourselves to these masters, acquiring facility in using the tools, by which we become more and more ourselves.

If we are willfully ignorant of the Psalms, we are not thereby excluded from praying, but we will have to hack our way through formidable country by trial and error and with inferior tools. If we dismiss the Psalms, preferring a more up-to-date and less demanding school of prayer, we will not be without grace, but we will miss the center where Christ worked in his praying. Christ prayed the Psalms—the Christian community was early convinced that he continues praying them through us as we pray them: “we recite this prayer of the Psalm in Him, and He recites it in us.”⁵

An Awkward Singularity

The awkward singularity is that the Psalms do not “fit” into a form people naturally gravitate to in prayer. In the history of prayer, the Psalms are queer fish.

Most students of the human condition agree that prayer is basic to our existence. Prayer reaches into the unknown for whatever we sense, deep within us, will provide wholeness, or for what we hope, far off, will bring salvation. There is more to being human than simply surviving; there is God (or gods or “higher powers”)—looking for God, pleasing God, getting God’s help. We are unfinished creatures—longing, reaching, stretching towards fulfillment. We express these desires for completion in prayer. Prayers articulate our seeking after the best. Prayers give voice to aspiration towards the highest. Everything that is distinctively human gets formulated in prayers: our pathos, our nobility, our creativity. Also, interestingly, everything that is disreputable in us—lust, avarice, pride, pettiness—disguises itself in prayer in order, if possible, to get us credit instead of shame. But either way, whether in disguise or reality, prayers show us at our best.

Except for the Psalms. The Psalms set their faces against this lush eroticism, this rank jungle growth of desire seeking fulfillment. In a world of prayers that indulge the religious ego and cultivate passionate longings, the Psalms stand out with a kind of angular austerity. The Psalms are acts of obedience, answering the God who has addressed us. God’s word precedes these words: these prayers don’t seek God, they respond to the God who seeks us. These responses are often ones of surprise, for who expects God to come looking for us? And they are sometimes awkward, for in our religious striving we are usually looking for something quite other than the God who has come looking for us. God comes and speaks—his word catches us in sin, finds us in despair, invades us by grace. The Psalms are our answers. We don’t always like what God speaks to us, and we don’t always understand it. Left to ourselves, we will

pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing, or to the part of God that we manage to understand. But what is critical is that we speak to the God who speaks to us, and to everything that he speaks to us, and in our speaking (which gathers up our listening and answering) mature in the great art of conversation with God that is prayer. The Psalms—all of which listen in order to answer—train us in the conversation.

The erotic (human pathos, nobility, and creativity seeking for what it does not have) is not absent from the Psalms. It would not be possible to have authentically human speech here without it; but it is not encouraged—it is wrestled into obedience, subjected to the strenuous realities of living by faith in the God who reveals himself to us. And that accounts for the odd and awkward singularity of the Psalms, for instead of being tributaries into the flow of the great prayer-river of longing for the Absolute, they abruptly stand us up, our lungs half-full of water, coughing and sputtering our unrehearsed answers to the God who calls us into a life of covenant, speaking salvation to us.

There is a difference between praying to an unknown God whom we hope to discover in our praying, and praying to a known God, revealed through Israel and in Jesus Christ, who speaks our language. In the first we indulge our appetite for religious fulfillment; in the second we practice obedient faith. The first is a lot more fun; the second is a lot more important. What is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves, but that we learn to answer God. The Psalms show us how to answer.

Redigging the Wells the Philistines Filled

It is not easy to understand how anything so deeply understood and widely practiced—the Psalms as the technology of prayer—should have shrunk in our time to a mere remnant. For some, who don’t know their use, it is a matter of ignorance:

in the shattering of traditions and consequent amnesia in our world, it often happens that we get cut off from our sources without ever being aware of it. For others, it is intimidation: in an age of experts, when we come across things that seem complex and that we don't immediately understand, it is easy to conclude that these matters can only be handled by professionals. And for some, I hope not most, it is simply sloth: it is easier to pray on whim and by impulse than to apprentice ourselves to a master, be forced to leave the ruts of mediocrity, and *climb*.

But whatever the reasons, something can be done. A recovery of the Psalms as the primary technology for developing a life of prayer is possible. In the face of the appalling adolescence of so much American spirituality, I think it is imperative. I want to do what I can to assist in the recovery. I am helpless before the sloth, but I can do something about ignorance and intimidation, and I write to that purpose: to recover the Psalms in their character as the tools of faith for those who don't know that is what they are for or who have been intimidated from ever picking them up, supposing that one needs a lot of training to be competent in their use.

My work, like Isaac digging again the wells that the Philistines had filled, is to clear the ground and cart off the debris so that what was so excellently done once will again be usable. There is nothing (I hope) innovative in what I write. This is not the latest thing on prayer, but the oldest: the Psalms, obvious and accessible as tools for prayer in the work of faith. So

I do not explain them: commentary is not the primary need.⁶ I want to provide a kind of owner's manual. I don't mean to suggest that the Psalms are easy: prayer is not easy. But the practice of millions of Christians through centuries of use is adequate proof that we do not have to acquire expertise in the Psalms before we use them; they themselves—prayers that train us in prayer—are the means to proficiency. We don't have to understand a crowbar before we put it to use. Understanding comes with use.

The practice of Christians in praying the Psalms is straightforward: simply pray through the Psalms, psalm by psalm, regularly. John Calvin expressed the consensus of the praying church when he wrote that the Psalms are “the design of the Holy Spirit . . . to deliver to the church a common form of prayer.”⁷ People who belong to liturgical traditions (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Episcopal) have prayer books to guide them through a monthly cycle of praying the Psalms daily. The rest of us can easily mark the Psalms into thirty or sixty daily sections to guide an orderly monthly or bimonthly praying of all the Psalms. That's it: open our Bibles to the book of Psalms and pray them—sequentially, regularly, faithfully across a lifetime. This is how most Christians for most of the Christian centuries have matured in prayer. Nothing fancy. Just do it. The praying itself is deliberate and leisurely, letting (as St. Benedict directed) the motions of the heart come into harmony with the movements of the lips.⁸