

Nostalgia is not the answer There is no return.

1. In the Hebrew Bible the book of psalms is entitled 'sepher tehillim' (Book of Praises). We have a collection of 150 psalms arranged in five books, with a short doxology or praise of God concluding the first four books, and the great paean of praise which is psalm 150 at the end. The opening rosy coloured view of the inevitable fate of the wicked and the prosperity of the just in psalm one moves forward to the accentuation of praise psalms in the latter books. Scholars suggest that this was not the 'Hymn book of the Second Temple'. Some individual psalms had a setting in Temple worship, others possibly in more domestic community settings, but the subsequent collection is rather a book of meditation on the human condition and the relationship with God.

2. Obviously there are other types of poetry in the Book of Psalms, other than psalms of praise and thanksgiving. Gunkel's (1) classification of types has been generally accepted as the basis for recognising the different types of psalms and the general pattern which they follow:

- Psalms of festival (Hymns and Thanksgiving psalms) with their call to praise and a variety of different reflections on the reason for responding to God in praise.

- Psalms of disaster (The so called 'Lamentation Psalms') where appalling aspects of the human condition are laid out and we witness the response of anger, pleading, cajoling of the deity to intervene and, usually, a return to praise.

- Truly these psalms swing from limit situations of joy to limit situations of great sorrow and grief. The psalmic book of meditations ranges through the whole gamut of human experience, though always in dialogue with the one who can be addressed as "My God", however tenuous that relationship may have been felt to have become.

3. While acknowledging the value of Gunkel's approach W. Brueggemann (2) proposes another classification of psalms which is less interested in the original composition and the community situation, social, religious and cultural, which gave rise to it. His focus is on the communities which have prayed the psalms down the ages. He asks "What was the function of these psalms in the life of the communities as they prayed them liturgically or privately?" What did they effect, how did they work in the life of the believer? Brueggemann talks of Psalms of Orientation - Psalms of disorientation - Psalms of Reorientation.

4. Brueggemann bases himself on the work of the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, for whom the dynamics of the human condition is a movement from orientation to disorientation. We are constantly in search of equilibrium. We wish to feel at home with ourselves, with our community, with our world. However there are the limit experiences of, for example, sickness, economic or natural disasters, the loss of loved ones, where that equilibrium is shattered. At these moments we suffer a loss of language, or at least the feeling that the old language of certainty and comfort no longer suffices to make sense of our world.

We long for the old certainties, nostalgically yearn to be as before. The psalmist helps us to put into language, to express our feelings of loss and anger - without such language the feelings cannot be handled, they fester and destroy. Somehow we are prepared for a new orientation. We move beyond the memory of the old orientation to readiness for a new orientation and, in this prayer and through the prayer, are gifted with a new grasp on life and its meaning such that we can find equilibrium again in the presence of the one who has been 'My God' right from birth. Brueggemann presents this dynamic movement as a circle around which we constantly move from petition, to plea, to praise.

5. In a novel called 'Disobedience' Naomi Alderman (3) portrays the return of a Jewish woman, who had lived a fairly liberal life style in New York, to a very orthodox Jewish community in Hendon on the death of her rabbi father. One can imagine the strains, tensions and questioning as she returns to old friends and, for her, long past traditions and customs. In this context the author poses a question about the nature of time. From one point of view time is circular. Qoheleth, in the Hebrew Bible, says that there is nothing new under the sun. From another point of view time is linear - life is a journey. The truth is that it is both - time is spiral. Alderman offers the image of going up around the outside of

a round tower. As we spiral upwards we constantly return to the same vistas but the viewpoint is always different. We travel, it is true, but can never return to the places we have left. Her conclusion is that there is no return to where we were before. We have moved further along on life's journey but we are not the same person we were before. We should, perhaps, then portray Brueggemann's dynamic movement, not as a circle, but as upward spiral as we move from disorientation to ever new visions of life and its meaning.

6. While preparing a series of lectures on 'Praying the psalms and the cycle of life' my thoughts turned to my participation in the European Federation of Catholic Married Priest. Before and since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church (i.e. not the institutional church, but the people of God) has felt the loss of equilibrium there is a feeling of disorientation. This is highlighted, in particular, by the frightful haemorrhaging of catholic priests from ministry - since the 1960s there is talk of 100,000. With such numbers, this is not a problem of certain individuals but a systemic problem in a community which has failed to adapt to changing demographic, social and cultural circumstances.

7. The church authorities, as would anyone, seek equilibrium. There seems to be nostalgia for the old ways of being at home : full seminaries; an abundant supply of male, clerical, celibate priests; a tightly controlled institution where the old pyramid model of church still prevails and all movement of command and blessing is always from the top down. Yet the crisis is here. We are in the grip of disorientation where the old certainties are now gone. We live in a different age - a responsible educated laity, a new model of church where all inclusiveness and equality are the focal characteristics, a different social and cultural setting, ... one could go on. As a friend once succinctly expressed it to me : "When the tooth paste is out of the tube, you cannot put it back in again". In spite of fear, in spite of uncertainties, in spite of yearnings for the so called simple faith of our fathers we need to realise that the past is past. There is no return. These fears need to be expressed or they will fester and destroy but we are required to find again a sure footing (the rock of the psalmist), not on nostalgia for the old certainties but on new emerging visions as we face the challenges of our journey through life as the people of God.

8. Individual priests who have left active ministry have certainly gone through a limit situation, suffered dislocation and disorientation. After all the choice to enter this particular form of ministry was a radical choice and a radical commitment. Some, perhaps, nostalgically have yearned for a 'return to ministry while fulfilling what they have felt as a call to the married state. Many, perhaps the majority, have been gifted with reorientation as they fulfil their baptismal call to ministry in the community in a variety of different ways side by side with so many 'lay' men and women who work to build up the people of God.

9. Crisis is always a challenge. Would that we could all collaborate in responding to that challenge as we spiral through life's journey.

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(1) H. Gunkel, *The Psalms* (Fortress Press 1967)

(2) W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms. A Theological Commentary* (Augsburg 1984). P.D. Miller (ed.), *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Fortress Press 1995, pp. 3-32)

(3) Naomi Alderman, *Disobedience* (Viking 2006, pp 101-102)