Perspectives

Undifferentiated Doxology?

IN THE FINAL CLASS SESSION OF MY RECENT SPRING QUARTER COURSE IN WORSHIP in Israel, students asked about resources for contemporary worship that made creative use of the results of recent biblical study in the psalms. It was a rich conversation, stimulated by bringing together, as that course does, a critical mass of students in three tracks: M.Div., M.A., and M.S.M. (master of sacred music).

The relevance of their question for an issue on the Trinity arose from a consideration of the psalms chosen for the Festival of the Holy Trinity in the Revised Common Lectionary: Psalms 8, 29, and 149. These are fine psalms, of course (aren't they all?), but they are interestingly undifferentiated for hymns to a trinitarian God. Psalm 8 is a creation psalm, wondering over God's exaltation of the human. Psalm 29 is an exuberant call to praise Yahweh the mighty—indeed, Yahweh the God of storms. Psalm 149 praises God the King, who defeats and judges the nations. On Trinity Sunday, then, churches who use these texts praise a majestic God of glorious creation or a mighty God of just and vengeful providence. Strong stuff, indeed, and no one can be faulted for breaking into praise of such a God. But missing is the grand and subtle differentiation and mutual relation of the works and person of God that mark the doctrine of the Trinity.[1]

Perhaps no one psalm will do this. But recent literary study of the psalms reminds us that one psalm wouldn't always do it then either—then, when the psalms were collected into their present shape and order. As we now re-learn, psalms weren't meant always and only to stand alone. Among other groupings, there are clear examples of psalm pairs: psalms meant to stand together, to be considered together, perhaps sung together, saying together what no one of them could say alone. Psalms 1 and 2 work that way, for example, introducing the Psalter as a book of instruction and meditation (Psalm 1) and a book of messianic hope (Psalm 2).

Another obvious psalm pair—obvious, once we learn to look—is formed by Psalms 103 and 104. Together they may be just what we need for Trinity worship. Both are rich psalms: Psalm 103 recalling the benefits of a redeeming God "who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's"; Psalm 104 praising a creating God, "clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment"—"You set the earth on its foundations....You cause the grass to grow for the cattle....You make darkness, and it is night....O LORD, how manifold are your works!" A redemption psalm, a creation psalm—two psalms, but one

[1]The Episcopal tradition doesn't help. It adds two more largely undifferentiated doxologies: Psalm 93, another creation psalm, and Psalm 150, an extended call to praise that provides (when it is heard alone) no basis for praise whatsoever. Roman Catholics sometimes use portions of Psalm 33, which combines at least creation by word and divine deliverance (creation and redemption), though it would work even better if the psalm were used in its entirety.

God, a God who could not adequately be described by one psalm alone. So, as James L. Mays observes, somebody put them together:

> Psalm 104 begins and ends with the same self-exhortation that opens and closes Psalm 103: "Bless the LORD, O my soul." The sentence appears only in these two psalms; its repetition holds them together as a pair. The first speaks of the abounding steadfast love of the LORD; the second, of the innumerable creatures made and sustained by the wisdom of the LORD. Together the pair praises the LORD as the savior who forgives and the creator who provides.[2]

In J. Clinton McCann's words, "Together the two psalms are another reminder that God's creating work and God's saving work...are finally inseparable."[3]

Indeed, we could say more: in their witness to the forgiving Savior and providential Creator, both Psalm 103 and 104 also make reference to God's wind or breath or Spirit—the power that kills and makes alive:

> As for mortals, their days are like grass;
> they flourish like a flower of the field;
> for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
> and its place knows it no more. (Psalm 103:15-16)

> When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
> when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.
> When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
> and you renew the face of the ground. (Psalm 104:30)

Creating Spirit, redeeming Spirit—a God worthy to be praised in this magnificent pair of ancient psalms, a God for whom other believers at a later date will also bring together different texts with different emphases to sing and say: "Praise to you, O Three in One."

Undifferentiated doxology, extolling the one true God in all his majesty and glory, is fine; indeed, it will often roll from our tongues unbidden. One simply does not want to allow it to replace the careful and creative, bold and beautiful articulations of God's work and God's nature that are inherent in biblical texts and then in Christian discussions of the triune God. We will always get to praise and mystery when we speak of God, but we don't always start there. We are brought there by hearing in all its trinitarian richness the wonderful message of who God is and what God does.

Hymnic psalms regularly have two primary elements: call to praise and basis for praise—"Praise the Lord, for...." The "for" (כִּי) brings the interesting part, the descriptive gospel that elicits wonder and praise, study and contemplation, service and love. As the essays in this issue of *Word & World* attest, Christian trinitarian tradition is profoundly interested in the "for"—the nuanced descriptions of God's person and work. Together Psalms 103 and 104 might help us praise just such a God.

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[2]James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1994) 331.

[3]J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck et al., vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 1096.