

As I mentioned last Sunday, I intend to speak several Psalms in the coming few Sundays. I don't think I can be like St. Augustine who has spoken on every psalm of the Bible. I shall only choose a few and I hope it may whet your appetite so that you can go on reading the Psalms as a regular feature of your private devotion.

Let me reiterate what I said last Sunday, *'The Psalms have always been the Prayer Book of the Christian Church; if we wish to learn to pray, there is no better method than to study the Psalms carefully, and to use them as the expression of personal devotion.'*

Personal devotion is the main theme of Psalm 1. You would probably be surprised to hear me say that. The two ways of living are just the outcome of attention and inattention to the law of the Lord, that is, the word of God. A person's life is solely determined by whether he devotes to God's word daily or not. The former dean of St. Andrews Cathedral is famous for his personal evangelism tool *'Two ways to live.'* However, for God's chosen people, there are always two ways to live. Two ways to live are not just a choice before one becomes a Christian.

Before we come to the content of Psalm 1, a word on the modern translation of it in our latest Australian Prayer Book and in NRSV; both are wrong in changing the singular person to the plural persons. Don't be misguided by the misconception that the latest product is the best in every aspect of life. I am sure we're familiar with its beginning, 'Blessed is the man...' But in A Prayer Book for Australia and NRSV we have, 'Blessed are they'. Psalm 1 is not about the difference between God's chosen people and the gentile in regard to God's words. Modern translators have made Psalm 1 the same category as the former Dean's 'Two ways to live'. No, it is about a person, how he responds to God's words attentively or inattentively.

Around the late seventh century BC, Old Testament scholars would call this period 'Deuteronomistic period' as, suddenly, there arose a new phenomenon in the history of Israel. The reading of God's words takes priority over listening to prophets. The opening verses of the first Psalm bear witness to the discovery: *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; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.* The twice-daily recitation of the legal text will shape

the career of one who is to be successful in life. Why do I say it is the legal text? The law of the Lord to Israel was indeed legal text because for Israel, with its conscious identity as the community of the divine covenant, the legal text was no simple text. It was the paradigm of all texts and legal literacy was the paradigm of all literacy.

The poet points out the importance of reading the law for everyone in Israel: each Israelite home would have its law texts inscribed on the doorpost, each Israelite would carry a text around on the hand and the forehead and would learn to recite and rehearse it, so becoming a living expression of the law, *circumcised in the heart*, not dependent, as they ironically comment, on legal counsel that must be sought either from heaven or from beyond the sea. *The word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart.*

The poet very delicately contrasts the mind of the blessed man who is the reader and the minds of the wicked. The blessed person has an independence of mind, that is to say, he is not influenced by what is surrounding him. He seeks answers from the law of the Lord. A very independent act. On the contrary, the wicked are subjected to social influence of those living around them. These *walk* in the *counsel* of the wicked; they *stand* in the *way* of sinners; they *sit* in the *seat* of scoffers. Well said by a commentator: *'Taking practical advice from those who know their way around, observing current practice carefully and repeating commonplace judgments, they pass effortlessly from a flurry of occupation (walk) to a condition of static complacency (sit).'* If I may give an up-dated example, in Victoria this weekend, a young man texts to all his friends in social media, 'Who cares, let us get together and enjoy the evening.' The reader, on the other hand, from rooted stillness grows like a fruiting tree, motionless attention to the text yielding energy and life for others to benefit from.

Psalm 1 depicts the outcome of the blessed man who daily meditates on God's word twice and the wicked man who completely ignores God's word. The question we have to ask is whether we find these two persons in real life. We live in the era in which the Holy Spirit guides our thoughts and helps our searching of the whole Bible, immediately we are aware of St. Paul's teaching in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, the contrast between the Old Adam and New Adam (i.e. Christ). The Blessed man is the New Adam, and the wicked man is the Old Adam.

We all once belonged to the Old Adam, that is to say, we once completely ignored God's word. We followed those around us, the old Adam. Now we declare ourselves to be followers of Christ, the New Adam. The question is whether we know we are the blessed ones. The proof is very simple. We meditate on God's Word day and night; that is twice daily. By the way, many pastors advocate daily devotion as though once a day is good enough for personal spiritual well-being. But the poet of Psalm 1 emphasizes day and night! And this will produce fruit which will benefit not only us but others as well.

The supreme example of daily mediation on God's word is Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. It produces personal as well as cosmic results. Personal result: Jesus being more assured of himself as God's Messiah. Cosmic result: The world will be saved by the Son of God, the Saviour of the world. We cannot simply say that Jesus as soon as he was born, being Son of God, knew what he had to do to fulfill God's will. That is too simplistic and dogmatic. Instead, as the episode of temptations in the wilderness clearly indicates, Jesus spent all his time meditating on God's word, to find out what God's purpose was. Hence, his answer to every temptation came from his quotation of God's word. This is the supreme example of how a person, the New Adam, becomes a blessed one. He meditates on God's Word, and therefore can tackle whatever problems he encounters.

In our baptism we make the promise to follow Christ. Sometimes people say it is too abstract to follow Christ. There is nothing abstract to follow Christ in meditating on God's word twice daily. It will produce much fruits to our own benefits as well as to others. Think of Jesus' parable of two buildings at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. I believe Jesus in fact has in mind Psalm 1 when he speaks on the parable. If your house can withstand rains and winds, not only will you be absolutely secure, other people may come to your safe house for protection as well. Blessed is the man who meditates on God's word day and night.