Praying For and Against Others

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# Intercessory Prayer

I want to talk first and mostly about the Psalms and intercessory prayer.

All being well, my wife’s son-in-law Gabriel will arrive today in a refugee camp in Chad in Central Africa where he seeks to minister among Darfuri refugees. He left Los Angeles on Saturday and he passed through Paris yesterday. This year is the tenth anniversary of the partial genocide of the Darfuri people in Sudan, which involved the deaths of several hundred thousand of the Darfuri. Many who escaped that atrocity, perhaps another two hundred thousand, fled to Chad and have been in refugee camps there ever since. My step-daughter Katie-Jay and Gabriel have spent most of these ten years seeking to get the West to recognize the Darfuri’s plight and to take action on their behalf.

When I married Katie-jay’s mother, Kathleen, four years ago, we started praying for the Darfuri as part of our prayer routine. The Episcopal Church has forms of prayer for families, for when you wake up and for midday and for early evening and for when you go to bed, and we use these as the basis for our prayer together. So when we are home, we use the form for early evening before we have dinner, and we started to include in it saying a psalm on the Darfuri’s behalf. We began at the beginning of the Book of Psalms, and we prayed the Psalms one after each other, one a day.

The idea came from my previous experience of praying the Psalms when I taught in a seimary in England, where we worshiped together every day and followed the church’s lectionary for reading Scripture, and we read through the Psalms one-by-one. We were not choosing a psalm to read each day because it corresponded to our current situation but reading (say) Psalm 47 because we read Psalm 46 yesterday and we will read Psalm 48 tomorrow. That practice made me ask what we were doing, and I came to two conclusions. One was that by reading the entire Book of Psalms we were shaping our habit of praise and prayer. We were learning to pray in a scriptural way, along the lines I suggested earlier this afternoon. The other was that in praying prayers or praises that didn’t correspond to our own circumstances, we were identifying with other parts of the Christian community, and the world community, whose circumstances corresponded to those out of which a particular psalm prayed. In other words, in our prayer we were involved in intercession.

This realization provided me with an answer to another question about the Psalms. The Psalms model the nature of supplication—of praying for oneself. But how did Israelites pray for other people—how did they intercede? There are only one or two explicitly intercessory prayers in the Psalter, and only a few elsewhere in the Old Testament. But some of those explicitly intercessory prayers pray in the first person, they pray as “we” or “I,” even though they are interceding. People such as Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah do that. They may not praying directly for themselves but they say “I” or “we.” In these prayers, the person praying is praying for other people, but identifying with them; not praying for *them*, but for *us*. These prayers illustrate how intercession involves putting oneself in someone else’s place.

This understanding fits nicely with the fact that etymologically “intercession” links with “intervention.” It means acting as a “go-between.” It implies interposing between two parties so as to bring them together. It entails identifying with one party and representing it to another. For a prophet, intercessory prayer involved identifying with people and representing them before God. The prophets sometimes describe themselves as people who are admitted into God’s cabinet so that they can overhear the decisions that get taken there, and they can then pass on those decisions to Israel. But in the meetings of this cabinet they also have voice, though I don’t know that they have vote. They can speak, and they can urge the cabinet to reconsider its decisions or to make this decision rather than that one. They can speak on behalf of the people they represent, the people they care about. That’s what prayer is. As believers in Jesus we become part of a prophetic people, a people that also has the right and the privilege and the responsibility of taking part in the debates in the heavenly cabinet. And insofar as we are speaking on behalf of the needs of other people, insofar as we are interceding, it is natural to speak as “we” or “I” not as “they” or “he” or “she.”

When I saw this point about the way people such as Hosea and Jeremiah and Ezra and Nehemiah pray, I realized that the apparent absence of intercessory prayers from the Psalter pointed to using the “I” and “we” psalms as intercessions as well as supplications. Perhaps Israel used them that way; certainly we might do so. In praying the psalms, one need not be praying for oneself.

Specifically, in praying the prayers in the Psalms that speak out of oppression, affliction, persecution, and tyranny, we might be praying not for ourselves but for people who experience oppression, affliction, persecution, and tyranny, with whom we identify. In these imprecatory psalms, as they are sometimes called, these prayers for trouble to come on people, we pray for God to put down tyrants and oppressors. In connection with the Darfuri, one might think of President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, for whose arrest the International Criminal Court has issued a warrant on counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.

It’s a feature of the Psalms that they virtually never speak of taking violent action to put down oppressors. The major exception is the psalms about the king, which assume that God works via the human king in putting down resistance to God in the world. I am tempted to describe the Psalter as the most pacifist book in the Bible, though I try to resist the temptation because speaking in terms of pacifism is anachronistic; pacifism implies a framework of thinking that does not appear in Old Testament or New Testament.

The Psalms don’t explicitly indicate why they talk mainly about God taking action and not about human beings taking action, but I suspect that two different considerations underlie the Psalms’ stance. One is the practicality that the people who prayed the Psalms were usually in no position to take action against their oppressors. Prayer was all they had. But what a powerful weapon they knew it was! That fact links with the other consideration. Prophets such as Isaiah frequently insist that the vocation of the people of God is to trust God for their destiny. Their vocation is not to take action in order to safeguard that destiny. The Psalms’ stance fits with that emphasis. “Praying the Psalms,” it’s been said, “is an audacious act of trust.”

# Praying for Justice

The ideas represented by these psalms don’t just come in the Old Testament. So let me talk now about prayer for justice in the New Testament.

Jesus tells a story about a widow who kept urging a judge to give her justice against her adversary. It’s in Luke 18. Other references to widows in the Scriptures could perhaps invite us to picture her as someone who’s being swindled out of her land or maneuvered out of her land after her husband has died. Losing her land will mean that she’s got no way of keeping going as a human being, like the Darfuri. But for a Jew it will also mean she has no way of maintaining her proper position as a member of the chosen people with a share in the land of Israel. Her adversary may be doing nothing illegal, but he’s maneuvering her out of her land. So she’s pressing a judge to take her side. But the judge doesn’t want to. Again, other passages in the Scriptures might encourage us to picture him as someone who works within the framework of the legal system but who is willing to let the system be taken advantage of by people with power and money. Things can be legal but not moral. As a judge he is himself a member of the power elite. So he’s prepared to rule against the woman. But the woman’s plea for justice eventually overwhelms him and he rules for her.

That’s a picture of God’s attitude to you, Jesus tells his disciples. His chosen people Israel are invited to pray to God day and night against their adversaries. The adversaries of the chosen people will be the superpower of the day, the Romans. Jesus declares that God will rule for the chosen people and against the superpower. His people will have justice.

The martyrs in the Book of Revelation 6 pray in a similar way to the woman. The martyrs ask God when he will judge and avenge their blood on the people who have the martyrs’ blood on their hands. These people, too, will be the Roman superpower, the empire that’s symbolized as Babylon in Revelation and in other parts of the New Testament. But the persecutors will maybe include religious leaders too.

Now one might have wondered whether a prayer for vengeance of the kind that comes in Revelation 6 is a prayer that God couldn’t say yes to. One might expect that God’s response, that Jesus’ response, would be to tell martyrs that they should be praying for God to forgive the people who killed them, not praying against them. Actually, God’s response is to tell them just to rest a bit longer until the full number of the martyrs is complete.

Jesus and God, Luke and Revelation, are both looking forward to the last day, to the End with a big E. They are praying “Come Lord Jesus,” as Revelation 21 puts it, or “Come Lord,” “Maranatha,” as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 16. There are two complementary aspects to this prayer that we should note.

On one hand, to pray for Jesus’ coming and to look forward to Jesus’ coming is to pray for justice. Jesus’ coming will be when prayers for justice will be answered. In the intervening period, the oppressed are encouraged to pray for the End as the time when justice will become a reality. It will be the time for the punishment of oppressors. So when we pray “Come Lord Jesus,” it’s a pretty serious prayer. It’s also a pretty worrying prayer, because if you ask whether we are more in the position of the martyrs, more in the position of a subordinate nation like the Jewish people in Jesus’ day, more in the position of a little Christian community like the one in Laodicea or Colossae to which Revelation was written, or whether we are more in the position of the Roman imperial superpower that controlled the everyday destiny of God’s people, then the answer is that we are the Romans. We are the superpower. We are the people the widow prays against, the people the martyrs pray against. Praying for Jesus’ coming is to pray for our judgment. So our prayer needs to be a prayer of repentance.

The complementary implication of this prayer for Jesus to come is that if you are concerned for justice, you do need to be praying for Jesus’ coming. When we pray for justice, we are praying for something impossible. We’re praying for something that’s part of the final implementing of God’s purpose. When Jesus tells the story about the widow, the question he asks at the end is, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith in the earth? It’s when the Son of Man comes that God will answer the prayer for justice that the elect pray. The question is, will they be praying? I hear lots of people expressing their concern for justice and wanting to work for justice, but are we praying for justice? Likewise, when Revelation talks about the vindication of the martyrs and the putting down of their oppressors, he associates it with the final fulfillment of God’s purpose. Our prayer needs to be prayer that takes up the prayer of the widow and the prayer of the martyrs, not because we are in their position but because we commit ourselves to identifying with them. It might even lead to a difference in our action, though it’s important that we don’t think of prayer in utilitarian or instrumental fashion, as if prayer is designed to change us. Prayer is designed to change God, to affect the plans of the cabinet, and it needs to change God because only God can bring in the reign of justice.

In church yesterday we were sharing topics for prayer—it’s only a little church so we can do that together. One of our members was saying how distraught she felt about the mess the world is in. If you look at the international situation, at what we read about Isis and Boko Haram, you get distraught. If you look at the situation within our country, you get distraught (our church is mainly African American, and is very aware of the tensions between black people and the police). The Darfuri refugees are desperately short of food, and the United States is a most generous people that responds generously to people in need, but it seems to be impossible to get food to these people. We like problems we can solve but we are surrounded by problems we cannot solve. It is as if God has withdrawn from the world and withdrawn the hand that restrains conflict and trouble and evil, as if God has turned his back on the world. And therefore the most important thing we as believers can do is to pray for the world, to insist that the cabinet listens to what we have to say and decides to do something about it. Well-meaning non-believers will seek to do something about the problems, but they cannot do this most important thing.

# Praying Against the Superpower

The imprecatory psalms, then, the psalms that pray for the putting down of oppressors, give the oppressed a way of urging God to take action against evil in the world, and they give people who identify with the oppressed a way of praying for them. It may well be that there is a therapeutic value in expressing anger in the way the Psalms do, though it is also possible that expressing anger may only feed the flame. Perhaps the question is whether the anger has truly been given to God. But the main point about the angry psalms is not to get things off one’s chest so that one feels better but to urge God to take action. And in this connection it is possible that they are more significant for the brothers and sisters of the oppressed than for the oppressed themselves. The Old Testament is aware that people who are wronged may recognize a call to turn the other cheek and not desire the punishment of the people who have wronged them. It is the stance Joseph takes in relation to his brothers. In contrast, perhaps it is the responsibility of people who care about the victims of wrongdoing and about the vindication of right in the world to pray for God to put wrongdoers down and to deliver their victims, which is what Kathleen and I were doing. The imprecatory psalms are then for praying by people who are not the victims of oppression. Indeed, if we do not want to pray them, it raises questions about the shallowness of our own spirituality, our theology, and our ethics. Do we not want to see wrongdoers put down and punished?

One reason for our not wanting it is that we may be on the receiving end of the putting down. Psalm 137 is the most notorious imprecatory psalm. It’s the one that begins “By the waters of Babylon” and ends with a chilling plea of babies to be dashed against the rocks. Now there is a reggae version of the psalm called “Rivers of Babylon”; it actually omits the closing verses that Western Christians find offensive, and replaces them by the closing line from Psalm 19 that asks for our words to be pleasing to God. I imagine the point of that last line is to underscore the prayer and urge God to respond to its plea for freedom. The song was a long-running number one record in the U.K. in the 1970s, though it was only a minor hit in the United States. The irony lies in the fact that we British who listened to and sang along with the song never realized that the Jamaican musicians who composed the song intended it to be about us. As Babylon stood for Rome in the New Testament, in the twentieth century it stood for the British Empire. So the song was about us, we were Babylon. Perhaps the BBC would have banned it if they had realized. Christians in countries such as Britain and the United States are therefore wise to take the view that nobody should use such psalms. It would be dangerous if people prayed them. God might listen and respond.

Christians commonly justify their opposition to the use of such psalms by suggesting that they are out of keeping with the New Testament, but that is hardly so. While the New Testament does not quote Psalm 137, it does utilize imprecatory parts of Psalm 69 which as a whole is more extensively imprecatory (see John 2; Acts 1). And we have seen that the New Testament reports the martyrs praying that way. Jesus himself declares, “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!” for not responding to his teaching, and goes on to describe the terrible punishment that will come on these cities. Paul, too, declares curses on various people (1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8-9). It looks as if Jesus and Paul want to see wrongdoers put down and punished.

# Praying for the Government

So justice belongs to the End with a big E, and prayer for justice needs to pray for the End. At the same time, if you believe in the Old Testament you don’t just look forward to what God will do at the end. You know that God is active now. So that’s the third aspect of what I want to talk about.

Here’s part of an Old Testament prayer for justice. Psalm 72.

1God, give the king your decisions, the royal son your faithfulness.

2May he govern your people with faithfulness, your lowly ones with your decision.

3May the mountains bear well-being for the people, and the hills, in faithfulness.

4May he decide for the lowly among the people, deliver the needy, crush the extortioner.

5May they be in awe of you while the sun shines and before the moon, generation after generation.

6May he come down like rain on mowed grass, like downpours, an overflowing on the earth.

7May the faithful person flourish in his days, and abundance of well-being, until the moon is no more….

11May all kings bow down to him, all nations serve him.

12Because he saves the needy person crying for deliverance and the lowly person who has no helper.

13May he have pity on the poor and needy, so that he saves the lives of needy people.

14From viciousness and from violence may he restore their life….

17bso that people may pray to be blessed through him; may all nations count him fortunate.

Given that there aren’t many intercessory prayers in the Bible, when you come across one, it’s worth looking at it carefully. Here’s a psalm that shows us how to pray for the government as well as how to pray for the people who are the victims of injustice. You pray for the victims of injustice by praying for the government.

The phrase “It’s the economy, stupid,” played a key role in the 1992 presidential campaign. Most ordinary people, most voters, are not finally interested in foreign policy but in whether they are feeling financially secure. This is the basis on which they evaluate their government. The phrase “It’s the economy, stupid” also encapsulates much of the dynamic of the Arab Spring. When ordinary people wanted to put down their dictators, it was not so much for the sake of introducing a democratic system but because they wanted jobs.

Psalm 72 is covertly a political statement along those lines to the government. I like imagining the king showing up at worship in the temple and hearing this psalm sung by the choir. The introduction to the psalm refers to Solomon. It doesn’t have to mean it was written by Solomon—it might mean it was written for Solomon or about Solomon. It’s the only psalm that refers to him. And I love to think of Solomon showing up at worship in the temple and hearing this psalm sung by the choir. The Old Testament portrays Solomon as the most economically successful of the kings but also as someone who puts many people to tough conscript labor, so it is nice to imagine him feeling embarrassed at the way the psalm betrays the Old Testament’s vision for kingship and the way it prays for people like him.

The vision for kingship involves the exercise of authority or the taking of decisions with faithfulness in relation to God and to the people. Now of course we don’t have kings with real power like Solomon, but the vision of the psalm is implicitly a vision that applies to any form of government, to presidents and prime ministers and parliaments and senates and congresses and dictators. The vision is of governance that is concerned with the good of the people as a whole. If this governance has a concern for particular groups, these groups will not be the people who are wealthy and powerful, who include the members of the government themselves (and who can look after themselves). They will be the lowly, the needy, and the poor, people like the widow in Jesus’ parable. The government will be concerned for their protection from the vicious, the violent, and the extortioners who find ways of robbing the people of their crops and their animals. It’s often the people who have power who are able to be the extortioners, so there’s a further bite to the psalm’s words about what people in power are supposed to do.

In the psalm, sandwiched in the midst of this emphasis on care for the needy is the reference to the land producing well-being as an expression of God’s faithfulness. The implication is that the government’s giving priority to faithfulness and a concern for the lowly will issue in God’s ensuring that prosperity follows for the country as a whole. The faithful will flourish. When the king governs with faithfulness and when he thus opens up the possibility of this prosperity, the king will be like rain on the land. Also alongside this emphasis is the note about people revering God through the ages; the exercise of authority in faithfulness will be an expression of obedience to God, it will lead to God blessing, and it will witness of God to the world. Foreign policy, the vision implies, will then look after itself in the same way as the flourishing of the crops. A king who works with these justice priorities will experience the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham; foreign peoples will see the way God blesses him and will pray for similar blessings.

Indirectly, then, the psalm lays before the government God’s vision for how it should work, and it makes promises about where implementing the right priorities will lead. But directly the psalm is a prayer, and it comes in a book of prayers and praises. What it directly does is set agenda for our praying for the government, an activity that may be even more important than our advocating for the poor, the need, and the lowly.

One of Eugene Peterson’s books on the Psalms is called *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms that Summon You from Self to Community*. It’s an instructive book on the subject of how to pray for your nation. Prayer, he comments, is political action. When we pray, we are affecting politics. That we have not collapsed into anarchy, he says, is due more to prayer than to the police. In many church’s prayer books, the form of worship involves praying every week for governments and people in authority. It makes it impossible to fall for what Peterson calls “the single most widespread misunderstanding of prayer,” that it is private. Prayer is not private. It’s not an escape from life in the world into our inner life. Peterson notes that the best school for prayer continues to be the Psalms and that the Psalms also turn out to be an immersion in politics. In the main body of his book he studies “psalms that shaped the politics of Israel” and can shape the politics of our nation. Though “writing about prayer,” he notes, “is not prayer; neither is reading about it. Prayer is, well—prayer.”

So, he suggests, “gather a few friends and commit yourselves to meet together for the “unselfing” of your nation. When you meet, pray the Psalm; discuss its application to your nation; pray it again; spend time in silence letting it soak in; and pray it a third time. Then look for God to draw you into action. But (my additional comment would again be) don’t think that prayer is subordinate to action. Don’t think that prayer is enough without action. But our danger may be the opposite one. It’s that we think our action is crucial. In being concerned for justice, we have to remember that we are concerned for something that requires the activity of God and something whose achievement belongs to the End with a big E. Our action will achieve little if it is not accompanied by as much energy given to the kind of prayer the widow prayed and the kind of prayer the martyrs pray and the kind of prayer the Israelites prayed in that prayer about Solomon.