

St. Mary's Holy Communion 3rd March 2013

3rd Sunday of Lent: Praying the Psalms I

Psalms 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 Luke 13:1-9

last week we began to think about how we can use the Psalms as a way of 'setting our compass correctly' towards God; the enduring popularity of the Psalms even after some 3000 years – translated into nearly every language, set to every style of music, plainsong to country-&-western, prayed in every imaginable circumstance – is testament to the vividness and power of their language, and to their immediacy as expressions of the spiritual life

read the NT carefully and you will find hundreds of references to the Psalms; even as Jesus hangs on the cross we can hear him praying the Psalms, in the words that escape his lips: Psalm 22 – 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'; Psalm 31 – 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'

the New Testament writers also frequently see the Psalms as prophetic of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, for example, when Peter quotes from Psalm 110 on the day of Pentecost

but I don't want to focus today on ways of 'co-opting' the Psalms for Christian purposes; the Psalms are not mostly about Jesus, and we may miss some of what they can say to us if we treat them as though they had been written by Christians

what are the Psalms? they are not systematic theology or doctrine – though they are firmly grounded in an understanding of God as creator, Lord and saviour; they're not organised instruction on how to behave – though a strong sense of God's law, of right and wrong, underpins them; they don't lay out the history of the people who wrote them – though each one arose in a historical context

above all the Psalms are an expression of faith – faith wrestled with, celebrated, lived, and shared; the Psalms were the songs and prayers of Jesus' own people, and down the centuries since they have provided a framework for Christian communities, as they prayed through their own experience of life and faith; how might they help us?

let's take a look at today's Psalm, Psalm 63: in our lectionary it is stripped of both its heading and its final three verses; start with the heading – 'a Psalm of David, when he was in the desert of Judah'

we can't be sure if this is an original title, or added later; and the Hebrew phrase 'mizmor le-David' could be translated 'a Psalm *for* David, or 'about David'; but if we take it at its face value, one possible context is from 2 Samuel chapters 15 to 17, where David and his entourage are forced to flee Jerusalem, when his son Absalom rebels and proclaims himself king; there are repeated references here to the physical hunger, thirst and exhaustion of that flight, down into the desert from Jerusalem, and across the river Jordan to relative safety

so we can imagine David enduring a long night, waiting for dawn, praying and wondering what future there may be for him, betrayed by his own son; he's tired, hungry and thirsty – and his prayer turns those physical and emotional needs into a spiritual longing

so the Psalm begins: ‘O God, you are my God, eagerly I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water’

most other Psalms written in times of trouble lay out in great detail the writer’s woes, they lament and question God’s presence and purpose, but here David (or whoever) turns immediately to God in faith – v.6 sets the context, ‘when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the night watches’; there, from the place of desolation, David calls to mind what he has known of God in the past, when he ‘gazed upon God in his holy place’, in the temple at Jerusalem, and ‘beheld his power and glory’ (v.2)

as David remembers God’s love and faithfulness, his response is one of praise and rejoicing; as he waits in the darkness he declares (v.5), ‘my soul is content, as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips’

could we make this Psalm our own prayer? when oppressed by pain, grief, anxiety, stress, anger, worry or guilt, why not take these words and pray them for ourselves? perhaps we won’t ‘feel’ them immediately, but this is where we make a deliberate choice of faith; by allowing words such as these to dwell deeply within us, we have a resource that can carry us through those hard times

what follows when we pray like this? instant release from all our woes? not at all – not for David, not for us; you can read David’s story – his devastating grief at the death of Absalom, the unsettling conviction that these troubles are largely the result of his own failings as king and father

but carrying him – and us – through it all, is an assurance of God’s goodness and faithfulness, that leads to a desire to cling, to be close to him; praying won’t necessarily solve our problems, or take them away, but it will help us to cope; for when we pray, things look different, they come into a new perspective – and that’s what this Psalm – and so many – helps us to express

now for those missing verses at the end of the Psalm:

‘Those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth; they shall be given over to the power of the sword, they shall be prey for jackals. But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by him shall exult, for the mouths of liars will be stopped.’

if we find ourselves thinking such vengeful thoughts, what do we do with them? suppress them, as inappropriate for a Christian? or let them spill out in anger towards someone else? perhaps we feel that there are some aspects of our lives that God is not interested in, or that there are some emotions that we can’t express before him? is that why the lectionary leaves out verses like these?

one thing that the Psalms teach us is to be really honest before God – never to exclude him from whatever situation we find ourselves in, never to pretend before him that we are ‘nicer’ than we are! the Psalms encourage us to own up to feelings of anger, hatred, grief, guilt, despair, and so on, and to bring them into the place of prayer

if our faith is to be real, if our daily lives, our prayers, our worship are to be truly ‘joined up’, we need a habit and a language of prayer that is adequate to express the full range of our experience

we need prayer that enables us to draw near and receive from God, whatever our circumstances, not just when we are feeling 'religious'; and the Psalms are one place – *the* place? – where we can find that richness and depth

so take home today's Psalm, or read it again in a favourite version; get to know it – its rhythms, cadences, highs, lows; then next time you are lying awake, fretting over some problem, let those words become your prayer; you might not 'feel' them yet, but they have the power to shape your thoughts and feelings

the Psalms are God's gift to us for times of both joy and distress; they are part of God's provision in times of trial – what Paul promises us in 1 Corinthians 10: 'God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it'

a Psalm like Psalm 63 can be a great help in this; if we can make it our own prayer, then we can say with the psalmist:

'You have been my helper, and under the shadow of your wings I rejoice. My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast'

St. Mary's Holy Communion 17th March 2013

5th Sunday of Lent / Passion Sunday – Praying the Psalms II

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

during Lent this year, as we have been reading the Psalm for the day, we've seen how the Psalms help us to 'set our compass' correctly towards God; how they allow us to 'see God' in difficult circumstances, and enable us to express difficult feelings in our prayers – such as anger, grief or frustration

today's Psalm, 126 (see below) is at first sight a happy one, full of words like 'joy', 'glad' and 'laughter'; it is a nice coincidence that the Lent groups have been thinking about 'joy' this week too – I will come back to that later

Psalm 126 is headed, 'A Song of Ascents', and comes in a group of 15 Psalms with the same heading; this collection was probably used by pilgrims, as they climbed the steps towards the temple in Jerusalem on festival days; something of the same flavour is carried by our term 'Gradual Hymn', derived from the Latin for 'step' – it too marks a progression in the service, as the Gospel is brought to be read in the centre of the church – it is our 'song of ascents'

here are verses 1 to 4:

'When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy. Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed.'

such words would suit a great variety of celebrations, but the alternative translation, 'When the LORD restored the captives of Zion', suggests a link to the first return of the Jews from exile in about 538BC; for some 70 years, they'd been held captive in Babylon; then the Persian empire had taken over, and King Cyrus allowed some of the exiles to return home; you can read about this in the first chapters of the book of Ezra

now try to imagine that moment of return! your people have been uprooted, torn from home and fields they've occupied for hundreds of years; your nation has been destroyed and subjected to a foreign power; and the heart of your identity, your place of worship and of meeting with God, the temple, has been demolished

after two generations in captivity, many have been assimilated into the culture around them in Babylon, but a memory of 'home' has been kept alive and there remains a longing, to return, to rebuild, to be 'yourself' again; and so you set out on the long journey home together

now, at last, you arrive; the place is a terrible mess – the city walls have been pulled down, the temple is a ruin – but this is *home*, a dream come true; no wonder 'your mouth is filled with laughter and your tongue with shouts of joy'!

it would be tempting to stop there: 'and they all lived happily ever after'; we do like happy endings, but real joy is not usually as simple as that; Ezra 3 records how, amid the rejoicing at the foundation of the new temple, some also wept as they remembered the former glory of the place; yes, they were back home, but there was still so much to be done, so much to be restored; so, as the Psalm continues, joy is mixed with longing and hope:

‘Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses of the Negev. Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.’

in our Lent study this last week, we were asked, what is *Christian* joy? where does it come from? how does it show itself? is it just a cheesy grin, a superficial cheeriness, that has no deeper reality?

in our Lent group we described Christian joy as a steady inner contentment, rooted in a sense of God’s goodness and provision, and not dependent on outer circumstances; true joy includes being glad of the good that *is*, without fretting over what is *not*, but also being hopeful of what *may* be

this Psalm expresses that kind of joy very well, combining a sense of celebration (‘good stuff happens’), with an awareness of more to come, and a confidence in what lies beyond sorrow and struggle (‘those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy’)

do we allow our sense of joy to be undermined, spoiled, because things are not quite perfect, by worries or regrets, that prevent us from seeing present good, or hoping for good in future? that is true joy, and Paul clearly had that kind of joy; he did not have an easy time of it, but he could rejoice in what he saw already, while longing for more, and looking ahead in hope towards it; Phil 3:

‘I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus’ – that’s a joy that is firmly rooted in faith and hope

what are we to make of this incident in John 12, at the house of Lazarus, whose raising from the dead occupied most of chapter 11? we see three very different responses to Jesus; recent events are very much in mind (a matter for joy!), together with great uncertainty about the future – after all, Good Friday is now less than a week away!

Martha goes into default mode, and cooks and serves the dinner; Mary does her ‘sitting at Jesus’ feet’ bit again, but this time it is not to hear him speak, but to pour out her love for him in a most extravagant way – a whole pound of best perfume, rubbed into his feet and wiped with her hair – scandalous!

and Judas, watching, is duly shocked: ‘what a waste of money, we could have given it to the poor; 300 denarii is a year’s wages –where’s the sense?’ yes, Judas is sensible, logical, but he doesn’t ‘get’ Jesus, and that failure to understand will lead him very shortly to betray his master

I see Mary’s passionate love and worship as a kind of joy – a celebration of Jesus’ being with her, coloured by a foreboding of the loss that is to come; this is a joy that doesn’t seek to control, like Judas, or be busy, like Martha; Mary’s joy is one simply of presence and devotion, and Jesus commends it

is it ok to express such joy, when there is a world of need around us? should we ‘waste’ precious resources on maintaining this ancient building, or paying the vicar? can we really sing hymns of praise and thanksgiving on a Sunday morning, while others suffer?

there can be a temptation to hide away in our Christian ghetto, singing happy songs, pretending that everything is fine; but if our joy is real, it must be *both* rooted in faith *and* realistic about the world we live in; the Psalms help us to hold these two together, not avoiding the suffering and confusion, but seeing them all within the perspective of faith in God's purposes

Judas did not get this, he tried to fix things himself, and we know the result of that; Mary put her devotion and love for Jesus first, and that, Jesus says, is the better example for us! for it is from the place of prayer and worship that we begin to see things with God's eyes, that we are resourced for service and generosity, and equipped to face and deal with the problems of the world

in terms of our Vision for St Mary's: as we Nurture our relationship with God, we are empowered to Welcome, Serve and Engage ...

some of the most joyous people I have known were South Sudanese refugees in Kenya – they had lost homes, communities, loved ones, health, but they had joy in what was, and hope for what might be

perhaps we have everything too easy, we expect things to be perfect, so that it's hard for us to have that simple joy? but at the start of Passiontide, as we move towards Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter, that is the joy, rooted in faith and hope, to which we are being called

St. Mary's Holy Communion 24th March 2013

Palm Sunday – Praying the Psalms III

Psalm 118:1-2,19-29

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 19:28-40

today is our last Lenten visit to the Psalms; from people's responses it has been interesting and worthwhile to focus on the Psalms, to see how they help us to express all our joys and sorrows, to bring all of life before God in prayer

the focus today is on the Palm Sunday story, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, riding on a young donkey; here we set out on Holy Week with Jesus on a wave of popularity, crowds cheering, waving their palm branches, acclaiming him as their saviour and king

here we find clear references back to Psalm 118, not only quoting parts of it, but connecting with it in other ways: the Psalm appears originally to celebrate a great royal victory; the missing verses, 3 to 18, tell of fierce battles with neighbouring nations; it was a close call, but God gave the victory; as v.13 says, 'I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me'

so now the cry, 'Hosanna', or 'save us!', becomes a shout of triumph, as the royal procession makes its way up to the temple, to give thanks to God

Luke makes the parallels between this Psalm and Jesus' 'triumphal entry' even more explicit, by adapting verse 26 to read, 'blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord!'

so far, so happy, but there are dissenting voices amid the shouts of praise, as the Pharisees, shocked at this adulation, that borders on blasphemy, say to Jesus, 'teacher, order your disciples to stop!'

this comment brings to mind another part of Psalm 118, verse 22: 'the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone'; in the context of the Psalm, the rejection is past, and the victory won; but for Jesus on Palm Sunday this verse is only now approaching its true fulfilment, as the authorities put in place their plans to dispose of him – Good Friday is looming and Easter seems but a distant hope

so, in the verses immediately following today's Gospel, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, and prophesies her destruction – 'if you had only recognized on this day the things that would make for your peace!'; Jesus knows that his celebrity bubble is about to burst, that the same crowds who today are praising his deeds of power, will shortly be shouting, 'Crucify!'

on Palm Sunday Jesus acknowledges the people's praises as his due – he is indeed their king, and their saviour – but he knows better than to depend on their approval, or on their understanding of what he has really come to do

I wonder how we see our own 'successes', how we treat the praise and value that others put on us? it is natural for us to look for approval and affirmation from other people, but then it is all too easy for our fragile egos to be devastated by a word of criticism! I reckon the ratio is 10:1 or more – a single negative comment needs at least ten positive ones to outweigh it in our minds, because we depend so on other people's opinions of us in order to feel good about ourselves

Jesus was not like that! he knew both praise and opposition, but he never let either define his sense of his own value

or again, perhaps we look to ourselves for approval? you hear people say, with some satisfaction, 'I am my own harshest critic', 'I set myself such high standards that no one else's opinion matters'; I can certainly relate to that, but our own approval is even more precarious and fragile than that of others! though it might sound humble and self-deprecating, it is really another kind of pride, and just as far from the true humility of Jesus as an obsessive desire for the good opinion of others

Jesus looked neither to others nor to himself for affirmation, because his sense of value and purpose was firmly rooted elsewhere – in the love of his heavenly Father; I imagine Jesus setting out on this Holy Week with words spoken at his Baptism ringing in his mind: 'you are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'; that was all Jesus needed, to keep him going on the path God had set for him, right until near the end, when those agonised words escaped his lips, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

so, Paul tells us in Philippians 2 (the same verses that we will use in Lent as our Creed): 'though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself; and taking the form of a slave he humbled himself and was obedient to death, even death on a cross'

we tend to lurch from self-satisfaction to self-criticism, from self-aggrandisement to self-pity, because we don't understand where our true value lies; why is it that so many 'celebrities' come unstuck, becoming addicted to drugs or moving from one high-profile relationship to another, without any settled sense of identity? they are just living out in public what most of us experience, most of the time, a deep sense of inadequacy and uncertainty about themselves

Jesus is able to treat both popularity and rejection with the same calm detachment because he is so firmly rooted in his identity as God's beloved Son; it might look as though he is courting popularity by 'staging' this procession into Jerusalem; but, come on, riding on a little donkey, feet dragging on the ground either side? hardly very kingly or dignified! Jesus always undermines people's attempts to put him on a pedestal, just as much as he is always unmoved by their hostility

how can we achieve that kind of humble self-confidence? I have been reading a short book by Timothy Keller, called, 'The Freedom of Self-forgetfulness'; he says we need to move beyond caring what others think of us, and even beyond caring what we think of ourselves, and let our sense of worth rest solely on what God thinks of us – it is his judgement alone that we need to hear

and God says to each of us, who put our trust in him, 'you are my child and I love you'; simple, isn't it? he doesn't wait for us to do anything good, or stop doing anything bad, before he will love us; his approval is unconditional, a free gift of grace

in our final Lent group this last week, we asked: 'is there something *distinctive* about the way Christians show *concern* for others?'; we agreed that it wasn't that Christians were necessarily nicer or more generous than people of other faiths, or of no faith at all

it is matter of where that concern flows from, and how it is resourced and directed; our motivation for doing good is not to gain approval from others, or to feel better about ourselves; it flows rather from an assurance of who we are as God's children, and we then have His guidance and help in the way we act for the good of others

that is, we 'perform' on the basis of God's love for us rather than in order to earn his love if we don't get that basic fact of grace, we'll always be striving to achieve the success and approval that will make us feel worthwhile; and that will always slip away from us

but if we do get it, then we are set free to follow in the steps of Jesus, forgetful of self, entrusting ourselves fully into God's hands as he did

on this Palm Sunday, and through Holy Week, Jesus sets the pattern of a life lived wholly towards God never dependent on the good opinion of men

if we can live by grace in that way, then we can say with Psalm 118, whatever our circumstances, 'Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his mercy endures for ever!'