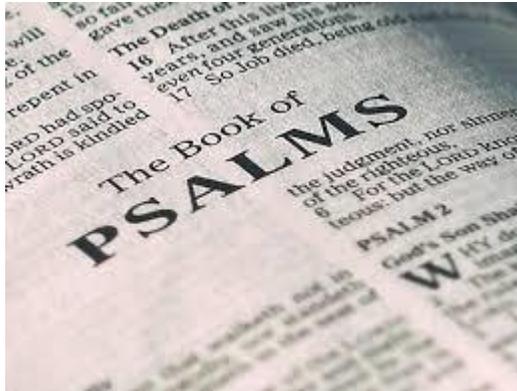


Exploring the Psalms



Readings and Activities

'The Psalms cover every facet of human emotion: happiness, sadness, hope, despair, lament, anger, joy, celebration' – my wife's husband said that.

The Psalms were Israel's song book. They are part of worship too. Often they are said together. When did you last look at them? There are different types of Psalm. Just like, there are different types of book. There are Psalms which celebrate national events, like Psalm 2, just like we have a poet who writes poems for national events today. There are Psalms of sadness and gladness, corporate and individual, thankful, and angry. Like poets today, the writers of the Psalms appear to draw us in and challenge us.

Wales, of course, is the home to many magnificent poets. One, R S Thomas, who was an Anglesey born Anglican priest is beautiful. He writes in English. One of my goals in this lock down period is to begin to read Welsh poetry. Here is one of Thomas's poems. It is called 'Praise'.

I praise you because
you are artist and scientist
in one. When I am somewhat
fearful of your power,
your ability to work miracles
with a set-square, I hear
you murmuring to yourself
in a notation Beethoven
dreamed of but never achieved.
You run off your scales of
rain water and sea water, play
the chords of the morning
and evening light, sculpture
with shadow, join together leaf
by leaf, when spring
comes, the stanzas of
an immense poem. You speak
all languages and none,
answering our most complex
prayers with the simplicity
of a flower, confronting
us, when we would domesticate you
to our uses, with the rioting
viruses under our lens.

Psalms of Lament account for over a third of the psalter. A well-known one is Ps. 137.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

² On the willows^[a] there
we hung up our harps.

³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

Some of us cannot begin to read this without hearing the tune of the pop group, 'Boney M'. It (the Psalm) is about a national life-changing event. It is a communal lament. Some of the other Psalms are individual.

Those who had taken the Jews captive were mocking them. They were asked to sing. But they could not, which is why the writer asks this question: *How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?*

Of course, Lament involves different emotions: sadness, despair and even anger. Christians in other cultures are particularly good at expressing such things in worship. In Britain, this is not usually the case.

The faith of writers of the Psalms and those who used them was everything to them. Worship was not something reserved for Sunday but took up the whole of life. Therefore, they could write and chant:

⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

⁶ Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

This passion for worship is not restricted to a particular age. The English hymn writer, George Herbert wrote these words: 'Sev'n

whole days, not one in sev'n, I will praise Thee'. It is from the hymn, 'King of Glory, King of peace' and set to the tune, Gwalchmai.

Activity:

Write a poem, letter, song about how you feel about God in the specific context of the coronavirus.

An Old Testament Theologian, Walter Brueggemann talks about three themes in the Psalms of Lament: orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Let me take a moment to explain.

All of us have a way of looking at life. It is shaped by our experiences. Circumstances can happen that disorientate us. The present coronavirus is one example. The Psalms give us a chance to bring our emotions into the presence of God. The purpose of Psalms of disorientation is to ask God why and to express everything that is happening.



One of my most vivid memories of as a toddler was being in such a tearful rage (yes, me) when for whatever reason the world was crashing in around me, and my dad held me as I beat my little hands against his chest. That is part of what we do in psalms of lament. We allow ourselves to admit that the world is unfair: we cry, shout and are frustrated. And, yet the God who is in relationship with us is constant and holds us.

Activity: Look at some of the following Psalms 13, 50, 74, 79, and 81

What reasons would you lament before God? Why not write some of them down, and then in a couple of weeks have another look and maybe draw or paint a picture of what you are thinking about.

There are also Psalms of **Thanksgiving and Praise**. These are hymns where we remind ourselves of who God is and about the story of God's involvement in our lives and as communities. There are individual songs of thanksgiving and communal ones too. Psalm 116 is an example of an individual psalm of thanksgiving. It begins:

I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.
² Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
³ The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD:
'O LORD, I pray, save my life!'
⁵ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
⁶ The LORD protects the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
⁷ Return, O my soul, to your rest,
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.

Take some time to read the rest of the Psalm as well. It is a mixture of God dealing personally with us as individuals and a reminder of the fact that God is involved in the whole of creation; loving and rescuing all that has been made.

Psalm 124 is an example of a communal thanksgiving.

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side
—let Israel now say—
² if it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,
³ then they would have swallowed us up alive,

when their anger was kindled against us;
4 then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
5 then over us would have gone
the raging waters.

It is sometimes called a psalm of ascent. We believe these would have been sung as pilgrims went towards Jerusalem.

Activity: Stop for a moment and think about what you have to be thankful for, and what we as a Christian community must give thanks for. Make a list.

You may like to share that list with other people. When you are speaking with a family member, friend or someone from church, let them know what you are thankful for.

There are also Wisdom Psalms. Psalms 34, 37, 73, 111 and 112 are good examples of such a category. The poet seems to be asking questions about the meaning of life. Psalm 37 is an example of trusting God, despite what we might see around us.

Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
2 for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.
3 Trust in the LORD, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
4 Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
5 Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.
6 He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.
7 Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.
8 Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.
Do not fret—it leads only to evil.

⁹ For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

In the Wisdom Psalms, the poet is not afraid of asking God difficult questions. In the R S Thomas poem, I quoted at the beginning of this booklet, he warns us against 'domesticating God'. The Psalmist never did.

Activity: Spend a little time with that question: do we domesticate God? Would our worship be different if we did not do so?

One of the features of the Book of Psalms, which is a collection of hymns, is that God is often portrayed as the Lord of all history. Psalm 77 reminds us for example of the time spent in Egypt.

I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD;
I will remember your wonders of old.
¹² I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.
¹³ Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?
¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might among the peoples.
¹⁵ With your strong arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.
¹⁶ When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
the very deep trembled.
¹⁷ The clouds poured out water;
the skies thundered;
your arrows flashed on every side.
¹⁸ The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
your lightnings lit up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.

Other examples can be found in 74, 79 136:10-15 and 137.

Activity: Thinking about the history of the nation (Wales, the UK or another nation) what would give thanks to God for. Try and remember a piece of music that helps express this.

Psalms for Sundays

There are Psalms set for each day. Usually, we say them on a Sunday together.

In this time of not meeting, why not read each Psalm, and jot down what you think it means?

26 April – Psalm 116

3 May – Psalm 23

10 May – Psalm 31

17 May – Psalm 66

24 May – Psalm 68

31 May – Psalm 104

Sunday 31 May is the Day of Pentecost. At some point between now and then, why not write your own Psalm? Writing might not be your own thing. If not, you might like to draw, paint or indeed make a model of what your Psalm might be.

If we are brave enough, we might share them with each other once we are back together again.



***Yr Eglwys Yng Nghymru yn Mro Eleth
The Church in Wales in Bro Eleth***