

Welwyn Team Ministry

**Weekday Reflections for the week after the Third Sunday of Easter,
Sunday, 26 April 2020**

By the Revd Dr Justin Lewis-Anthony

Every day of the Christian year, and every hour of the day, is filled with the praise of God by the people of God. Christians, since the earliest times, have systematised the way in which we pray to and praise God, realising that our greatest calling, and our deepest fulfilment, is to be found in placing ourselves in His presence. And, recognising that the experience of our fathers and mothers in the faith is the true building block for our own faith, Christians have continually used the prayers, stories, and praises of those who went before us: what we call the Christian Scriptures.

The danger, of course, is that we might continually choose to read, hear, proclaim, or act upon, only our favourite passages of Scripture – those passages most familiar or most comforting. We might avoid the prickly, or the challenging, or the downright uncomfortable. Which is why the Church gives us a pattern of readings from Holy Scripture, for public and private worship, called the Lectionary. In following the lectionary we share, not only in the breadth of Jewish and Christian experience of God from three and a half thousand years of history, but also in the worship of God being offered today, around the world, in the places familiar to us, and places unimaginably different to our own homes and experiences. When we read and pray the Scriptures using the lectionary, we are travelling through space and time, worshipping with the Church Militant (here on earth today), and the Church Triumphant (in God's nearer presence in heaven). Quite a thing to be able to do from the comfort of our living rooms! Perhaps we should allow ourselves to be aware of the awesomeness of that action: our sofas, when we read Scripture in this way, can become the very gates of Heaven.

This week then, I want to reflect on the **psalms** that the Church of England's Common Worship lectionary gives us for morning prayer. The psalms are the hymnbook of the universal church, and our greatest and most familiar connection with the worshipping life of the earliest Christians, including Jesus himself.

If you want to use these readings for your own prayer and devotion, they are published every day at

https://daily.commonworship.com/daily.cgi?today_mp=1.

Monday, 27 April 2020

Psalms 96, 97

Our psalms this morning are part of a group known by modern scholars as the “enthronement psalms”, as they all speak of God using metaphors of kingship. The Lord is King, and as He takes His throne the world, the cosmos, will be changed. The lectionary gives us this psalm for our eucharistic worship on Christmas morning: so we see here already one way into praying with the psalm – the kingship of God in the birth of the infant Jesus and the kingship of God in the celebration of the risen Christ. “Kingship” though is a harder word for us to celebrate uncritically today than it might have been in the past. I realised this one day when I read Bernard Cornwell’s series of novels about King Arthur. The version of Arthur we get is a man who can lead you into battle, a man for whom you could imagine yourself dying. Heroic King Arthur and his heroic subjects! And then I thought – “Prince Charles”. The Prince of Wales is a good and serious man, with thoughtful and constructive things to say about the nature of society and our relationship with the created order, but can you imagine following him into battle? The God-touched nature of the ancient kings has dwindled down into the present-day philanthropist and amateur gardener.

This is not the sort of king that the enthronement psalms celebrate: the Lord is no constitutional monarch, Who might appear on Comic Relief. This is a king Who not only dispenses justice, but *is* Justice. He is righteous, and in Him is no unrighteousness at all.

It is possible that the enthronement psalms were written at the time of Israel’s exile. Scholars detect parallels with the second part of the prophet Isaiah, where people were puzzling what it meant to be the people of God when God’s rule and law and power and strength seemed to make no practical difference in the world. The truth is, the psalmist sings, God still reigns. Even on the cloudiest day, the sun still shines. Even on days when we don’t see it, “Light has sprung up for the righteous, and joy for the true of heart” because the Lord reigns.

Tuesday 28 April 2020

Psalms 98, 99, 100

Again, another group of enthronement psalms, celebrating the kingship of God, and psalms used by the Church on Christmas day. Psalm 98 is very similar to yesterday's psalm 96, instructing us to give God glory by singing Him a new song, for the new and great things He has won for us. Because God has won great victories over the enemies of human flourishing in the past, He will win new victories for us in the present and the future, for He remembers His mercy and faithfulness.

We make music because there is no other way as fully to express the joy that comes from knowing the present and ultimate victory of God. Again, like the strangeness of talking about God as "King" yesterday, here we have another cultural stumbling-block. We aren't much cop at singing. There is a folk-group called *Show of Hands* who lament this absence in English culture today:

When the Indians, Asians, Afro-Celts
It's in their blood, below their belt
They're playing and dancing all night long
So what have they got right that we've got wrong?

The Welsh can sing, so what's wrong with the English? And not just the English. There was a spate of American TV shows about 20 years ago in which a "musical version" of the programme was broadcast – for some reason (magical or mysterious) the cast felt themselves bursting into song to explain their feelings or advance the plot, just as they did in the classic Hollywood musicals of the twentieth century. How you feel about singing in public will determine a lot of your attitude, being uncomfortable or being entertained, to such an idea. But singing for joy is not just a purely "Church" thing. When we are gathered together, in church, certainly, but also in football stadium, or concerts, or parties, the singing comes out: *Abide With Me*, or *Calon Lân*, or even *Who Ate All The Pies!*

When we can't help ourselves, we sing, and sing we must according to the psalmist: "come before the Lord's presence with a song" (Psalm 100). Imagine if you could do that. Imagine if you could, as the tea-towel slogan says, dance as if no one was watching, or sing as if no one was listening! How would that feel? What song would be on your lips? And how would it deepen your praise and thanksgiving for the Lord and everything He has done?

Wednesday, 29 April 2020

Psalm 105

When you pick your car up from the garage, do you serenade the mechanic with a song? Would you sing a little ditty to the woman who delivers your milk? Croon a tune to your solicitor, doctor, estate agent? Probably not, no matter how important music has become these days of lock down. And yet, that is what the psalmist seems to be recommending in Psalm 105. We are to sing praises to the Lord, giving praise to Him for fulfilling the contract He made with Abraham (which is one of the meanings of the word “covenant”). Because God has done what He agreed to do, we sing songs to Him.

Perhaps that is over the top for the paper girl or the milkman, but not when you remember what it is that God did agree to do, and has actually done. Psalm 105 is a “salvation history”, a description of all the ways that God has intervened in history to bless His people. We hear about Abraham, promised to be the father of nations, and Isaac, whose life was spared, and Jacob, who was given a land as an inheritance, and God’s protection of the wandering and lost people of Israel, and the care He showed to Joseph, and the famines and safety found in Egypt, and the guidance and rescue that came through Moses and Aaron, and the bringing of the Israelites into the land promised to them so many years before. It is the first five books of the Old Testament in one single hymn of praise. Look at everything that God did! Look at all the ways we might have despaired! But look at how God has remained faithful to us, never abandoning us, always protecting us, going before us, and walking beside us.

No wonder we sing this psalm in the days after we celebrate Easter. Even down to the days of Jesus and the first Christians God has been looking after His people. That’s worth a song, isn’t it?

Thursday, 30 April 2020

Psalm 136

Known to our Jewish brothers and sisters as the “Great Hallel” (the Great Praise), this psalm is one that we can most easily imagine being used in public worship. Each verse is actually a half-verse, matched with a response. We give thanks to God, for a particular reason, and respond “for His mercy endures for ever.” Again, we have a summary of salvation history, how God has worked in and with human history, for the raising up of a people who know Him. We begin with God Himself (God of gods, Lord of lords), and His first actions in the world of time and space (“Who laid out the earth upon the waters / Who made the great lights”). Then we hear the story of the Exodus rescue, and how Israel was brought out of Egypt, and the wandering in the desert, until we enter into our heritage, and God continues to protect and bless us (“Who remembered us when we were in trouble / And delivered us from our enemies / Who gives food to all creatures”).

So why do we respond with an affirmation of God’s *mercy*? This is one of the perennial puzzles of being human: how do we reconcile justice and mercy? I once worked in a cathedral where each year we marked the beginning of the sitting of the Crown Court with a special service called the Assize Sermon: a preacher was invited to deliver the homily to all the assembled judges and lawyers, and was given strict instructions not to mention mercy! And yet, in Psalm 136 we hear about God’s just actions and His mercy. A paradox? or just a contradiction? Perhaps a clue might come from the word which is translated as “mercy” in English. In Hebrew that word is *rāḥamîm*, which comes from the word for ‘womb’ (*reḥem*). When we say that God is merciful there is a half-hint of a memory that God envelops us as a mother shelters her children – and that endures for ever.

Friday, 1 May 2020

Psalms 139, 146

So far, we have had psalms that scholars can clearly and convincingly categorise: enthronement psalms or liturgical psalms. Psalm 139, despite being one of the most familiar and beloved of psalms, defies categorisation: is it a hymn of praise, or a contrition psalm, or a lament, or a wisdom psalm? 'Yes' and 'no' to all those descriptions. Perhaps the best way to understand the psalm is that it is an appeal to God in His role as all-knowing, all-seeing, all-loving judge: "there is not a word on my tongue, / but you, O Lord, know it altogether." The psalm reflects some of the language and the theology of the book of Job (a good book to be reading and meditating upon in these days of coronatide!). The psalmist suffers, but appeals to God to declare his suffering as undeserved, and that he, the psalmist, will eventually be vindicated by God. The first part of the psalm praises God for knowing the psalmist as intimately as anyone can be known: "Your eyes beheld my form, as yet unfinished; / already in your book were all my members written..." But the comfort of the first eighteen verses seem to be spoiled by the last section, vv19-22. Here the psalmist pleads to God to destroy His enemies, who have become the psalmist's enemies too: "Do I not abhor those who rise up against you? / I hate them with a perfect hatred ..." These are not verses that are printed on inspirational posters or counterpoint needlework!

It is good though that we keep these "cursing" verses in the Psalms, and don't bracket them out, as used to be done in prayer books of the twentieth century. These emotions of despair, and a desire for vengeance, are all part of our (fallen) human nature, and we don't make them go away, we don't heal them, by pretending they don't exist. Allowing them to be expressed as we bring them into God's presence lets us examine them in the face of He who is loving, just, and merciful. We can then see, having been searched out by God, tried, and examined, just how much we depend upon Him to become the true, loving, and merciful people that He intended us to be even "when as yet there was none of them." There is no limit to God's love or action: and not even our wickedness is beyond Him.

Saturday, 2 May 2020

Psalms 108, 110, 111

The Lord is Lord and there is no other Lord before Him! The Lord is King and there is no other king above Him! Such statements are commonplace in Christian circles, and so familiar, that it is hard to hear how radical and upsetting they are. Not just in a world in which there were many competing gods (“the God of Israel is not just more powerful than the gods of Egypt and Syria and Phoenicia, but those ‘gods’ are nothing more than idols and stories”), and not just in a world of competing political power (“Jesus is Lord, which means that Caesar is not!”), but also in our own time and place, where we might elevate other principles into principalities and powers. This is a constant temptation for humanity, and something that the psalmist warns us against. The Lord allows us to sit at His right hand (Ps 110:1), which both gives us power over enemies, but also reminds us whose is the power originally: the “sceptre of power” is the Lord’s, and the Lord’s only, to stretch out and use. That power is definitive, and the powers of this world are as nothing to Him. After all, in the time of the psalmist wouldn’t the kingdoms and lands of Shechem, and Succoth, and Gilead, and Manasseh, and Ephraim, and Judah, and Moab, and Edom, and Uncle Tom Cobley and all, have looked as if they would continue forever, strong and wilful in their permanence? But, like the power of Ozymandias in Percy Shelley’s poem “Nothing beside remains”, and round the ruins of those kingdoms “The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

The temptation is for us to think that we could never experience the same destruction, because, after all, we are different from all those lost civilisations, being cleverer, wiser, kinder, richer, better. Of course, that isn’t so. Human nature is human nature is human sinfulness; is now, and has always been. And yet, for the three and a half thousand years of the religious tradition that our psalms represent, a path away from the consequences of human sinfulness has been known and presented to us: “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” When we know that fear, paradoxically, all the other fears that beset us fall away, and we will know and live in the graciousness and compassion of the Lord, now and for ever.