

Seven Psalms: Sermon for Sunday July 23rd 2023

Today we are going to take a brief summer's break from our gospel and New Testament readings. Each Sunday, the Church of England provides a set Psalm for the Sunday, so today we'll look at the one they have set, which is Psalm 139.

We're going to look today at why Psalms are so unique in the Bible and how we might make them our own prayers and songs, including the difficult bits that are often left out!

Psalms have been at the core of worship for Jewish and Christian people for over three and a half thousand years. They are a collection of 150 songs, gathered over a period of some one thousand years, for the purpose of individual and collective worship. The book of Psalms is the most quoted Old Testament book in the gospels and remains the most popular and used book in the Bible over these last two thousand years. But why?

John Calvin called it 'an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.' It gives us a vocabulary of how we can talk with and listen to God, through times of sheer happiness or deep pain and loss, a language of praise and worship and a language of complaint and anguish.

Briefly, I am going to look at three ways that we can use Psalms ourselves when we meet together and in our individual prayer lives.

The first way is the most obvious, but sometimes forgotten point: that the Psalms are designed to be sung.

I have here a book of the complete Beatles' songs. See if you can fill out the rest of these lines: 'It's been a hard..... And I've been working like a dog.' 'Oh yeh, I'll tell you something I think you'll understand, Then I'll say that something I wanna... ' 'When I find myself in times of trouble Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom....'

For some of us, these songs have become part of our lives for decades. I must admit though, I wouldn't pick up this book to read it just for the lyrics. It comes to life when we hear it sung by the Beatles or when we have a good old sing-along with others. In the same way, the Psalms we sing weave their way through our own lives, often sung at baptisms, weddings and funerals, or at national events such as the Queen's funeral and the King's coronation service.

The big themes of the psalms – from praising God and the beauty of God's creation to the lament at wars or in dealing with individual sorrow and loss – remain as relevant today as they have ever been. One of the key themes of the psalms is about dealing with malicious gossip; of the destructive power of the tongue, when it lies or spreads disinformation. This appears in some form in 43 of the 150 psalms, including in Psalm 139, and in our current world of social media and toxic political debate, it's perhaps more relevant than ever.

We've called today's service a service of seven psalms, and we've assembled a collection of different types of Psalms to sing in today's service. There are psalms of praise and thanksgiving and lament and complaint, including on based on today's Psalm 139. This is our own selection, or playlist, from the many Psalms we sing in our church. Do consider what you might have on your own playlist of seven psalms. Would you include any we sing today, perhaps with different tunes, or would you choose different ones? If that seems too many to pick, select one or two that resonate with you and make these your own by reading them and listening to different versions.

Another way people have engaged with the Psalms is by rewriting them as a prayer of their own, in their own language. In this morning's Psalm reading, I was reading an adapted version of Psalm 139 from this book by Carla Grosch-Miller called *Psalms Redux*. It's her attempt to reflect prayerfully on the psalms and to interpret it in language that makes sense

to her. I have to admit that journalling in any form doesn't come easy to me and I prefer singing the psalms.

However, I've found this book by Paula Gooder called 'Journalling the Psalms' to be a really helpful aid to reflect and engage with the Psalms. It's helped me to look afresh at the Psalms and to consider their relevance to me and to those around me. It asks questions to reflect upon such as : 'How did it make me feel? What did it make me think about? What or who do I now need to pray for or about?'

Two songwriters, who wouldn't probably profess to being practising Christians, released albums this last year with the same title called: Seven Psalms. Paul Simon's Seven Psalms is a beautiful collection of songs but has little to do with the Hebrew Psalms. The album by Nick Cave, though, is completely different. You might not like his style, which is to use spoken word over ambient electronic music, but he uses the language of the Psalms as a starting point to work through his yearning for faith and the grief at the loss of his teenage son, Jethro. What psalm might you write at this moment? Would it be a psalm like Psalm 139 or one of the other psalms that we are using in this service, or something completely different? If this form of journalling is new to you too, don't worry. There will be an opportunity for you to try this out with others in our church in September. But more about that in the future!

And finally, we come onto the part about how to pray through the difficult parts of the psalm; what are called the maledictions and curses. In Psalm 139, there seems to be a complete mindshift from the first few sections to what we read at the end:

'O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me - those who speak of you maliciously and lift themselves up against you for evil!

The church has often struggled with verses like these and how to interpret them. It's sad that in our own lectionary the difficult parts of the Psalms are often missed out. And this is the case too for Psalm 139. We're not supposed to read out in church these particular verses, so my apologies for breaking the rule and including them here.

But there's a good point to be made that the whole of the Psalm is leading to this point. The Psalm writer has been screwing up his courage in the first part of the Psalm to mention what is really on his mind. And it is hard to put to one side the fact that the Psalms are often about raising complaints, anger, sorrow, or fear before God. Over 70 of the 150 psalms include some element of raising a complaint or plea in them. We do now read these passages in the light of Christ's example of forgiveness and reconciliation. And almost always, the Psalm writer is asking God to take the vengeance, not trying to justify an act of vengeance they might take themselves.

However, it doesn't take away from the power and shock of passages like this. The theologian Walter Brueggemann in his article on The Costly Loss of Lament, talks about how dangerous it is to try and cancel out and smooth over the difficult bits in the psalms. The Psalms give us a freedom to come to God in anger or sorrow and have the words to express this pain. There is a brutal honesty in the Psalms that gives us hope that, even when we are at our lowest or feel most abandoned, we have words to help us cry out to God.

Today we've looked very briefly at using Psalms as collective and individual songs of worship, and how we can make them our own, through singing and listening, journalling or rewriting them in our own words. And we finished off looking at the more difficult parts of the Psalms and how we might also pray these honestly.

Whatever way you use the psalms yourselves, I do pray you'll find in them a vocabulary to help you in worship, praise, and joy; or in pain, anger and sorrow. They are a wonderful tool to use to help us as we sing and pray to God individually and with others. In the words of Psalm 96: 'Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all people. Amen