

VISION 4 *LIFE*

YEAR OF PRAYER

The 3rd in a series of sermons by Rev Peter Chave

The Book of Psalms contains 150 'Psalms' – that is, prayers or hymns. Some scholars say it was put together by King David – which makes it older than Homer's 'Iliad'. Others date the collection as late as the Second century BC – the time of Alexander the Great. In all probability the psalms collected in this book date from many different stages of Israel's journey down the centuries.

Not only was it - and is it - a sacred book in Judaism but it became - and remains - a spiritual resource for the Christian movement too. Paul tells the Ephesians not to get drunk and sing bawdy songs but rather to be filled with the Holy Spirit and: 'Speak to one another with the words of psalms, hymns and sacred songs; sing hymns and psalms to the Lord with praise in your hearts' (5:19).

In this, our Vision4Life Year of Prayer, the Book of Psalms can serve us as a treasury of prayers – but it is also a site of spiritual education for us, a school for our own praying.

The Book teaches us to put Praise first. Its Hebrew name 'Tehillim' means 'Praises'. Human beings tend to be self-centred. We like to be praised. We know our many good points - someone ought to praise us! But the Psalms turn us from ourselves toward God – to give God the praise that God deserves.

We do not praise God to 'butter him up'. Our praises must be the sincere outpourings of our grateful hearts: 'I will always thank the Lord'; I will never stop praising him. I will praise him for what he has done' (Psalm 34). Psalms cause us to stop and count our blessings, then to express our gratitude. They bring us face to face with God and we admire him and are grateful to him – and thus we love God.

A Psalm of praise is not an exercise in 'creeping' to a powerful person. It is a love song to the one who most deserves it: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...might' (Dt. 6:4). By using the Psalms as our prayers we express our love for God - and deepen it.

Interestingly, the Psalms seldom stop at a 'me-and-my God' relationship. The Psalmist usually looks round for a neighbour – someone else he can invite to join in the relationship. Thus, having said 'I will praise (God) for what he has done' Psalm 34 goes on 'May all who are oppressed listen and be glad! Proclaim with me the Lord's greatness; let us praise his name together!'

The Psalmist has experienced God's help: 'I prayed to the Lord, and he answered me; he freed me from all my fears'. This is good news and he wants to share it. It will work for others too. 'The helpless call to him, and he answers; he saves them from all their troubles'.

The Psalmist wants to share the gospel, to encourage others to try God out. His praises will gradually build up a whole community of praise and love for God.

We should not hold back the expression of our gratitude. We should not keep quiet about God's actions – others need to hear about them. 'Praise the Lord, for he is good' (Psalm 136).

The Psalms are in one sense very unspecific. They are not cluttered with personal details about the psalmist. We simply know that he has been 'oppressed' and God came to his rescue or that he is 'a sinner' and God forgave and rehabilitated him. It is quite easy to read ourselves into the Psalms and make their prayer our own.

But the Psalms are not all the happy outpourings of those who have been rescued from peril. Many of them are cries of distress from those currently going through it.

Still fresh in our memories is the cry that Jesus uttered on the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It is a quotation from Psalm 22:1 – but it is nonetheless real or sincere for that.

The Psalms give us the words, sometimes, to say what we feel, even if it seems shocking, almost blasphemous. Jesus was not playacting, nor was the psalm quotation a mere literary flourish.

'I have relied on you since the day I was born, and you have always been my God (Psalm 22 goes on), Do not stay away from me!... Many enemies surround me like bulls, they are all around me... My strength is gone ... you have left me for dead in the dust'.

Supplication is an important form of prayer. 'Help, Lord (and be quick about it)!' We must always pray as we genuinely feel – not utter pious platitudes because we think we ought. Only if we are 'honest to God' can we perhaps move on. I say 'perhaps', because sometimes we ourselves cannot 'trace the rainbow through the rain' at a time of crisis. We may need to be sustained and supported by the prayers of others until we are brought safely through.

The Psalmist of Psalm 22, in his distress, remembers God's record and draws strength from it. The third form of prayer in the Psalms is finding in God's character and actions a Promise of future good: This psalm affirms 'He does not neglect the poor or ignore their suffering; he does not turn away from them, but answers when they call for help... People not yet born will be told "The Lord saved his people".'

Praise, Supplication, Promise. The Psalms do not offer us 'Life made easy' but they do offer texts that we can use to express ourselves in all the ups-and-downs of our existence.

Two practical problems. What about the scandalous bits of Psalms? 'Babylon, you will be destroyed... happy is the man who takes your babies and smashes them against a rock' (137)?

First comment: Psalms provides only a few such difficulties, it is not littered with them. We can perhaps understand the strength of the psalmist's feeling at that point – but that does not mean we should share it. To quote the scholar Paul Beauchamp, the Psalmist is not our model but our brother. We must decide how much of his prayer to make our own.

The second practical difficulty is that the Book of Psalms tends to gather its material according to themes. So if we read it through in order we get lots of praise, then many cries of distress, then thanksgivings galore. Try reading Psalm 1, 11, 21, 31, etc. and then coming back to do 2, 12, 22, 32 and so on. Or just dip in and see what you can find – making a note somewhere of the highlights: so when a situation arises you can find again the psalm that really fits it.

Many poets have produced their own paraphrases of some psalms. You could try that – add some personal details as you make the prayer your own. Poets from Longfellow to Allen Ginsburg have written ‘Psalms’. You could try that too – Praise, Supplication and Promise arising from your life.

Or you can use the Psalms neat – read them or sing them. They often say what we deeply feel better than we could ourselves. One plea, one piece of homework, for this year of prayer: do something with the Psalms! Let the Letter of James have the last word (in the AV) (5:13) ‘Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms’. AMEN.