

Last week I reflected on the place of the Collect of the Day in our order of worship and focussed on the Collect of last Sunday, based on the words of Augustine:

Almighty God,  
you have made us for yourself,  
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you:  
Teach us to offer ourselves to your service,  
that here we may have your peace,  
and in the world to come may see you face to face;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Today I just want to reflect on another part of our weekly worship, the Psalms. Each Sunday the Lectionary specifies 3 Bible readings and a Psalm. Sometimes people will ask me, ‘Do we have to have a Psalm?’ Those of you brought up on the old Prayer Book will recall that in the old communion service there was indeed no psalm, it was just used in Morning and Evening Prayer. I suppose the Psalms, and our use of the Psalms, sometimes gets a bad press. I recall a scene in one of the ‘Monty Python’ films, ‘the Search for the Holy Grail’. In a rather zany encounter between the Knights of the Round Table and God, the subject of the Psalms came up and God complains, ‘Oh the Psalms – they go on and on and on.’

Why are the Psalms so important? They are of course an integral part of the Bible. They date back to the Jerusalem Temple and have a central place in Jewish piety. The more I reflect on them, the more I have come to appreciate their breadth in content and in style. There are passages that speak of unbridled joy and the psalmist encourages us to praise God with everything that is available, harps, drums, cymbals, tambourines, trumpets. There are psalms where he steps back in sheer wonder at the glory of creation – when I consider the moon and the stars that you have ordained, what is man that you are mindful of him? There are those psalms where the psalmist comes before God with his feelings of guilt and total unworthiness, such as in Psalm 51, which is traditionally associated with David’s adultery with Bathsheba and

consigning her husband Uriah to certain death in the battlefield. In Psalm 22, beginning ‘My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?’, the psalmist comes before God with his feelings of being abandoned by God, but works through his pain to recognise God’s faithfulness. And then there are some where the gloom does not lift, such as Psalm 88, which I heard recently described as a Psalm without a happy ending. But then life does not always have happy endings.

In short, there is a wonderful honesty in the Psalms. In fact some passages are so honest in the pain and the anger they express that they are not considered suitable for use in public worship. So instead of the Monty Python clip I want to offer you another image, not directly related to the Psalms but illustrative of that sense of honesty before God that I have been talking about. You may remember the film ‘Fiddler on the Roof’. The central character is a small Jewish farmer in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. Life is hard as he tries to bring up his family, as they face persecution and are forced to move on. Running through the story are a series of occasions as he argues his case with God; as he tries to understand his poverty, as he comes to grips with the fact his son does not want to stay on the land, his daughter wants to marry a Gentile. There is that lovely point where he demands of God, ‘Would it spoil some vast eternal plan if I were a wealthy man?’

As I read and re-read the Psalms I have this sense of engagement with God, in which hopes and hurts, regrets and confusion, praise and despair are expressed. I remember a lecturer saying that all too often we feel that we have to be so polite with God, whereas the Psalms remind us we can be totally open and honest with God. You get the sense that the Psalmist is not talking into thin air, that he is confident that the God to whom he addresses his praise and his pain, his hurts and his regrets is listening, not just hearing but listening. The God who listens is also a God who responds.

So it is with that sense of engagement with God, God listening, God responding, that I want to reflect on our Psalm for today, a portion of Psalm 91 in the context of prayers for wholeness and healing in the 11:00 service.

When things are going smoothly, when health is good, relationships are on an even keel, we can take life, take God for granted. Illness, serious illness in ourselves or a loved one can shake our confidence, can leave us vulnerable. We can feel the whole range of emotions – there can be hurt and fear, feelings of guilt, loneliness, even anger with God or with others. Sometimes in those situations God can feel close, at other times God can seem very far away. Over the years it is the very honesty of the psalms that has spoken to me, to my doubts and my fears, my joy, my hopes, my light and my darkness. The opening section of the Psalm speaks into that whole gamut of emotions. It is an invitation to trust in all circumstances. The opening section brings together a range of images; that of the stronghold, the castle holding out against attack; the bird sheltering chicks under its wings; nothing is going to be allowed to ultimately harm. Then towards the end the assurances become personal as the psalmist voices God's concern for the one in trouble:

- 14    Because they have set their love upon me,  
         therefore will | I de|liver them; @  
         I will lift them up, be|cause they | know my | name.
- 15    They will call upon me and | I will | answer them; @  
         I am with them in trouble,  
         I will de|liver them and | bring them to | honour.

I come back to this sense of engagement. That Psalm has started with the voice of the worshipper and ends with the voice of God. There is a very real sense in which God works in and through the community that reaches out to him in prayer. When I pray, I must be prepared to be used as part of the answer to my prayer, in word and deed bringing something of God's presence into the lives

of those for whom I pray. The Psalms are a reminder that we worship a God who gets involved in the joys and sorrows, the hurts, the pain, the hopes and fears of this world – and he calls us who say and sing these psalms to do the same, as we pray for the sick, the poor, the marginalised, for the peace of the world.

### **Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi**

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen