

The Lenten Psalms: Psalm 32

So we have finished the sermon on the mount. No, let me correct that. We have never finished it; we have barely begun the sermon on the mount. But you know what I mean. I have reminded you in our series that Matthew the evangelist wants us to see Jesus as a new Moses delivering a new law from the mountain just as the ten commandments and the old law came down from a mountain. In fact, Matthew is even more subtle than that for his gospel is shaped around five chunks of extended teaching, five new books of the Law, if you like, a new Pentateuch, the Pentateuch being the five books of the Law, the first five books of the Jewish bible, our Old Testament.

Today we move to a new series for Lent in which we look at the Lenten psalms, the psalms set for each week in our lectionary. We don't always use the psalms here on Sunday mornings; in fact we rarely do and we are therefore in danger of missing something quite precious. So here's a chance to do some catching up.

Let me begin by saying two things:

First, that the psalms are part of our Scriptures: that they were received by Jesus and his followers as part of the corpus of sacred writings that were inspired by the Holy Spirit and were foundational to the content and expression of their faith. Jesus knew and loved the psalms; he would have known them by heart. In the gospels we read of Jesus quoting them as inspired texts, challenging their interpretation with the teachers of the Law, but he also sings them with his disciples at the Last Supper and he prays them in Lament mode as he is hanging on the Cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', the opening words of Psalm 22. The history of the psalms is long and complicated and it seems that they have, like Hymns Ancient & Modern, gone through multiple editions with different orderings. If you look in a standard English translation of the bible, for instance, and turn to before Psalm 73 you will find it says 'The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended'. And then it says 'Book 3' – I'll come back to that later - and, sure enough, the next psalm says 'A psalm of Asaph'. So that's pretty clear. We have a number of psalms written by King David and then some others written by others - the headings of other psalms mention, for instance, Solomon, Moses, the Korahites, Heman and Ethan the Ezrahites. But going back to the oldest Hebrew and Greek manuscripts we have, there is no consistency in these titles and we don't know how many of them go back to the original and how many are just a bit of later guesswork. And though it says that 'the psalms of David son of Jesse are ended' they haven't because a few pages later there are more of them. At some point the psalms have been arranged into five books – we have already seen that book 3 begins with psalm 73. Each book ends with what we call a doxology, a short verse of praise to God, that probably didn't originally belong to the preceding psalm. That is reflected in the Christian habit of adding a Trinitarian doxology – 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost' – when we sing the psalms. There are five books of psalms, I just said – five books. Scholars think that's probably modelled on the Pentateuch, a way of saying that this too is Holy Scripture, this too is an essential part of the way God has chosen to make himself known to his special people. The psalms are part of our Scriptures.

But, secondly, though they are part of our Scriptures they are a different genre, a different type of being Scripture. They are not the Law, though they do celebrate the Law, and they were not the Prophets though they were read prophetically, something I hope to come back to another week. While these may be inspired texts they are inspired in a different kind of way to the Law and

Prophets, for these are mostly not divine utterances addressed to us from God; they are inspired utterances addressed by humans to God. And they are fully human in their expression; they are not afraid to question God, to blame God. They are uncensored both in their ecstatic thankfulness and in their bitter vengefulness. Some of their words we struggle to mean because our spirits are too leaden and unspiritual; some of them we struggle to mean because we have been taught by Jesus to respond differently. He did not pray an imprecatory psalm of vengeance on his enemies as he was dying on the cross but wrote a new psalm, sang a new song: 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.' Actually I'm being poetic there because it just says that Jesus said those words. But the psalm 22 words he cried out with a loud voice. He may not have been singing but he wasn't mumbling or reading. For the psalms weren't written to be read; that's too cerebral; too didactic; too rational. The psalms are in the language of the heart and need to be sung, cried, wailed, clapped (I'm afraid so). They need music, they need wings, they need to dance and sing and laugh and cry.

Today's psalm is one of the seven psalms the church calls penitential, but in fact it's one of only two that are focussed on personal sin, confession and forgiveness. That's interesting. Somehow Christians seem to have got the idea that in the Old Testament they spent all their time bringing animals to the Temple to be sacrificed so that their sins could be forgiven. And although it sort of worked, it didn't really do the job because they had to keep coming back again and again. And then Jesus came along and did away with all of that stuff because he died as a sacrifice for sin once and for all so that we miserable sinners, and we are all miserable sinners, can be forgiven properly for the first and last time. If we think that the Old Testament is all about building up as it were the problem of human sin and making us ready for what comes in the new then the psalms, I have to say, are a bit disappointing. If you want to find a good psalm to do some proper Lenten penitence then you're going to have to get used to going back to this one and the one we used on Ash Wednesday, psalm 51. That doesn't mean that we're not all miserable sinners. Of course we are – at least I am. But that's not the principle purpose of Old Testament religion. Sacrifice wasn't just all about – or even mainly about - sin and death. It was about life, it was about gratitude, it was about celebrating, it was about sharing and friendship and the sacredness of meals and parties. Sin offerings were not there to say sorry for when you knew you'd done wrong. They didn't even work for that. They were for unintentional sins. For the kind of sin that David committed with Bathsheba, committing adultery and engineering the death of her husband, no sacrifice would suffice. 'The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise.'

There comes a time when the ritual ways of forgiveness will not do – a sacrifice in the Old Testament, a prayer of confession such as we use in every Communion service. Lent first emerged in the church as a way of preparing new Christians for the rite of baptism by giving them an opportunity for a deep period of reflection and penitence so that they could truly die with Christ and begin again a new life with him on Easter Day. Fasting and self-denial enabled them to enter into the experience of the psalmist. It took them into the desert of the soul – dryness of spirit, being parched, refraining from complaint whilst experiencing bodily privation:

'For while I held my tongue : my bones consumed away through my daily complaining. For thy hand is heavy upon me day and night : and my moisture is like the drought in summer.

In the context of that privation the soul is led to confession:

'I will acknowledge my sin unto thee : and mine unrighteousness have I not hid. I said, I will confess my sins unto the Lord : and so thou forgavest the wickedness of my sin.'

And what the psalmist discovers when he – and it would have been a he – was sunk low in that experience of daily complaining, of heaviness of heart and dryness of spirit, when he reaches the point of contrition, of awareness of his sin, not trivial awareness but deep, radical awareness – and when that is named, confessed, then he finds that the one he is praying to has not abandoned him forever but is his sole protection. Like a cave in the rock,

'Thou art a place to hide me in, thou shalt preserve me from trouble : thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance.'

Compassed about, surrounded, by songs of deliverance – with psalms, inspired words that have wings.

And then the psalmist hears a voice. And this is one of those occasions in the psalms where it stops being us to God and becomes, as in the Prophets, God to us. In origin this may be a prophet or priest-prophet in the temple speaking these words on God's behalf:

'I will inform thee, and teach thee in the way wherein thou shalt go : and I will guide thee with mine eye.'

In time Lent became something observed by all Christians to revisit that journey of repentance and baptism and so we all pray that psalm, some of us more meaningfully or artificially than others.

So whether you are making this Lenten journey for the first time or the sixtieth time, whether you are making it though a chosen fast or because for you at the moment life sucks and your bones are consumed away through your daily complaining, you, though you may not think it now, are blessed. For this psalm, and the first psalm and other psalms too begin like the sermon on the mount with a beatitude. Blessed are you, poor in spirit; blessed are you, who mourn; blessed are you whose unrighteousness is forgiven. His hand may feel heavy now, your bones may now feel consumed away, your mouth may feel like drought in summer. Lent invites us to go through the gate of confession and forgiveness to find the hiding-place, to hear the songs of deliverance again and then the word of God himself addressing us: I will instruct you, I will teach you the way you should go, I will guide you with my eye upon you.