

Date: 27 August 2023
Services: *Across the Diocese*
Series: All about Jesus
Title: Psalms: God's hymn books
Books: Psalms 1 & 2; 103, esp. v8-12
READING: Malachi 2:17-3:3a; 3:6-10a; 3:13-4:6

I've got a collection of hymnbooks here....from over the years...different hymnbooks that I've used at church....some of these may be familiar to you:

Scripture in Song

The Australian Hymn Book

Mission Praise

...the list goes on...many different hymn books used in churches throughout the years.

But I wonder if you realise that the greatest hymnbook we have, is the one *God Himself* gave to us...!?

I'm talking about the book of Psalms...

That big book in the Old Testament....150 chapters, 150 Psalms.....which are actually 150 hymns.

God's hymns....God's hymnbook.

As we continue this series which sweeps across the Old Testament from 35,000 feet, we come today to the book of Psalms.

And, just as we've seen throughout this series regarding the rest of the Old Testament, the Psalms – God's hymnbook – is all about Jesus.

But before we focus on that today, we're firstly going to briefly look at What are the Psalms, and How should we use them?

POINT 1 – What are the Psalms?

So, what are the Psalms?

Well, mostly they're prayers....written originally to be sung.

Like many of the hymns we sing today at church, the Psalms see us prayerfully responding to God.

Meaning, the Psalms are directed to God...our words to Him.

And yet, as part of our Bibles: God's word to us, then the Psalms are actually words from God that He's given to us, to offer up to Him!

The Psalms are words God has given us to use to tell him about our lives, with Him...

So the Psalms invite us to express real life with God....with all its ups and down, bumps, bruises, joys, questions...

We all know that life isn't all chocolates and roses, and the Psalms confirm this.

And because they're words from God to use back to Him, the Psalms are our divine permission to question, mourn, lament, fear, wonder....as well as affirm, express hope, celebrate, love and praise....to our God.

Here's some examples:

⁴ For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods. (Psalm 96:4, a Psalm of praise).

Or this from Psalm 8, as wonder...

³ When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
⁴ what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3-4)

How about this lament from Psalm 88:

⁸ You have taken from me my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them.
I am confined and cannot escape;
⁹ my eyes are dim with grief. (Psalm 88:8-9)

And this really troubling curse, or imprecation:

If only you, God, would slay the wicked!
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty! (Psalm 139:19)

And then this wonderful affirmation from Psalm 12:

You, LORD, will keep the needy safe
and will protect us forever from the wicked, (Psalm 12:7)

The Psalms wrestle with every part of life, and do so in a way that God not only knows about: He wants to hear about, because they're words He's given us to use to say to Him!

POINT 2 – How should we use them?

So, how should we use the Psalms?

Often the words in the Psalm tell us.

For example, Psalm 17 says in the title that it's *a prayer of David*, and because it's written in the first person, it's best used as an individual prayer.

It begins:

¹ Hear me, Lord, my plea is just; listen to my cry.

Hear my prayer—it does not rise from deceitful lips.

² Let my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right.'

David there praying as someone who knows the LORD, so knows that He's there listening and able to, if He desires: vindicate David's prayer that the LORD will see his circumstances, and act.

Some of those examples I mentioned earlier are in the second person: using language such as "we" and "our"meaning they're intended to be used together...in community.

In fact, many of the Psalms were originally written to be sung communally...we miss many of the rhythms and rhymes now in our English translations from the original Hebrew, but it doesn't make them any less rich or impactful...helpful...and still very much inspired by God through His Spirit.

Like Psalm 126, a Psalm that was originally sung by the people of God as they ascended to the temple in Jerusalem to worship Him:

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

²Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."

³The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.'

And so, like the Apostle Paul exhorts us in Colossians 3:16 to *teach one another through the Psalms*, this sort of Psalm serves one of the purposes of our gathered worship: the encouragement of one another as the body of Christ, when we gather in His name before the LORD.

We too, can join with those around us – like those who've gone before us – and joyfully approach God in our gathered worship, affirming what He's done for us which gives us that joy!

And even if we can't sing them in our church gatherings – although there's many great songs out there which put the Psalms to music - one of the things I love about our Anglican liturgy is that we're encouraged daily to use the Psalms in our gathered worship.

We don't have to sing them, we can say them together....

Again: encouraging one another as we do that, while bringing those words from God, to Him.

But Andrew, I don't feel very grateful today, it's hard to thank and praise God right now!

Or you might think: *I rarely feel like lamenting to the LORD, I can't say those words today!*

And that's another of the wonderful thing about the Psalms, about God's design for our gathered worship, and about how the Psalms used in our gathered worship encourages all of us!

Let me explain:

My present circumstances in life may mean that I don't need to question God, or tell him how hard life is right now....but undoubtedly there's someone around me in church who is feeling that very thing right now!

So me standing alongside them – or sitting – and lamenting to God together with them – even if I'm not feeling that way – is such a blessing to them!

Social scientists might call it the chameleon effect, where things adapt to what's around them...it's a bit like that, yet much, much better!

And, chances are: I will need those words one day, and what a blessing to me to have someone there with me then, united to me as a brother or sister in Christ, and upholding me before God, as they share in that prayer of lament, or confession, or gratitude to God.

I trust some helpful, practical information there on how we use the Psalms!

POINT 3 – How are they all about Jesus (1 & 2; 103:8-12)

So, having briefly considered what the Psalms are, and how we can use them, we now turn to thinking about how they are all about Jesus!

I'm going to share with you how I was taught to understand the Psalms today....thousands of years since they were written, and this side of the cross of Jesus.

To do that, we start at the very beginning of the book of Psalms – a very good place to start, I hear some of you echo...

And when it comes to the Psalms: it is a good place to start!

These two Psalms introduce all the Psalms, and they're best understood when read together.

Really briefly:

Psalm 1 confirms blessing and warns of condemnation. Blessing for the one who lives according to God's Word; condemnation for the one who doesn't.

Yet we know that life doesn't always work out that way...

It's hard to always live the way God wants us to, we often get it wrong.

And we don't always see that pattern play out. The faithful believer often experiences pain and hardship...in fact, we're told to expect that.

And we often see those not following God appearing to prosper.

That's why we need something else for life....someone else...for life.

That someone is Jesus.

And that's where Psalm 2 comes in.

It's a Psalm that gives us perspective...helpfully pointing out that while the wicked may appear to prosper now, their schemes are no match for *the One enthroned in heaven*: which we know is Jesus.

It speaks of *a son who will break and dash* the mocking pride of the wicked: which we know is Jesus, who breaks and dashes sin and death through His own sacrificial death on the cross for the sins of the world!

Meaning that Psalm 1 calls for, and is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus: the only one who has ever lived a perfect life in full obedience to God's Word.

The One who – as we read in Psalm 2 - is *to be served* - having served us through his life, death and resurrection – and the One in whom there is the blessing of *refuge*, now and realised fully and eternally when He returns and takes us to be with Him.

That's the life-giving message we *share, about Jesus and the life* He provides.

These two Psalms then, set up the rest of the book, and confirm for us the tension in this life...tension between the way God intended it, and the way in which we live it with sin entering the world. This tension calls for a solution, and God Himself provides that solution by giving us His Son Jesus.

They're like a lens through which we look at all the other Psalms...or a key which opens up an understanding of the Psalms, as we now live this side of the cross as followers of the ascended, reigning King Jesus.

And so the way I read the Psalms, is to see how each one connects to those first two foundational Psalms and therefore how each one points us to the LORD Jesus.

Lets briefly look at an example:

I hope you've read from Psalm 103 today during your service as Mark suggested, and I encourage you to have it open in front of you...

It's a Psalm of King David which sees him wholeheartedly praising faithful God for 'all his benefits' (verse 2): including forgiveness, healing, redemption, satisfied desires, justice.

He then hones in on the merciful and gracious character of God, those well known verses 8-12 that you could very well say together at church after a prayer of confession when we move to assurance of forgiveness of sins (an example there of how we can use the Psalms together):

⁸The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.

⁹He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;

¹⁰he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;

¹²as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.'

Then, reading that through the lens of Psalm 1 and 2 and the way they point us to the enthroned King Jesus, highlights all sorts of connections:

- Where the life that doesn't stack up to the blessed life invited into by Psalm 1, is 'redeemed' – freed – 'from the pit' of the curse of sin and death, through the blood of Jesus;
- And so *God's installed King Jesus*, the 'One enthroned in heaven,' see the *Father* spare His *deserved wrath* on us, 'as our sins deserve' and instead pours out this on *the Son* at His crucifixion, meaning we are declared *righteous*, able to 'stand in the judgement,' because 'he has removed our transgressions from us.' That's his *compassion, grace and great, abounding love* to us.

And so like I've done there, you can step through verse by verse of any Psalm, looking through the lens or the key of Psalms 1 and 2, to see how the Psalms – God's hymn-book to us, for us – is all about Jesus!

These hymn-books age over time...many of the songs in them are rarely sung these days.

But God's hymn-book to us: the Psalms in our Bibles, doesn't age over time in any way...and all of the songs can be and should be and often are used today by God's people: in every situation of life.....the life God gives us and the abundant life God offers to us through Jesus. Amen.