

Psalm 100

We end the Narrative Lectionary at Pentecost which we celebrated last week. The new Lectionary year starts the Sunday after Labour Day and this year will centre on John's Gospel. For the summer we will spend the next five weeks focussing on Psalms, followed by four weeks on Ephesians, and four weeks on Revelations which I'm sure you will find interesting as we unravel this mysterious book.

Our five-week Psalm series begins with Psalm 100. In Luke's Gospel, the disciples asked Jesus: "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." They had overheard him praying and wanted to learn from a master. So Jesus taught them a prayer. What is important here is that we need to be taught to pray. The apostle Paul confirms this idea in his letter to the Romans, where he says: "For we don't even know what we should pray for, nor how we should pray."

Prayer isn't something that is natural for most of us. Without some sort of teacher or guide, we inevitably end up speaking to the God we have imagined in our own minds; a God we have created in our own image; a God who thinks we're awesome!; a God who agrees with us about what is right and wrong with our neighbours and the world; a God who loves and hates the same things we do; a God who just wants us to be happy and get our way. Even those of us who have peered deep into the mystery and wildness of our God have only glimpsed a sliver of who God is. Without a guide, a master who teaches us to pray, even at our best, we will only be speaking to that tiny slice of God we already understand.

The Psalms can be our master and guide that teaches us to pray. The book of Psalms records the prayers of our faithful ancestors. Through the Psalms, we learn how the Old Testament saints talked to God. And as we pray and meditate on the Psalms, we may also be surprised to hear God answer us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the brave German preacher killed by the Nazis, wrote a commentary on Psalms called “The Prayer Book of the Bible.” This is what he said about letting the Psalms teach us to pray:

“The child learns to speak because his father speaks to him. He learns the speech of his father. So we learn to speak because God has spoken to us and speaks to us. Repeating God’s own words after him, we begin to pray to him. If we want to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Holy Scripture need to be the solid basis of our prayer.”

Over the next few weeks, we will be learning to pray from the Psalms. Jesus, referring to children, once told his disciples: “anyone who doesn’t have their kind of faith, will never get into the Kingdom of God.” As we make this short journey through the Psalms, I hope we will receive the Psalms like children. Just as children learn to speak from their parents, we learn the language of prayer from our parents in the faith. And since their words have been gathered up into scripture, these words have also become the words of our heavenly Father. His gift to us, is to teach us to speak to him, to teach us to pray.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has argued that the psalms can be understood as functioning within the life pattern of moving from "orientation" through "disorientation" and then to "new orientation." According to Brueggemann, the psalms of "orientation" function "to articulate and maintain a 'sacred canopy' under which the community of faith can live out its life." That is to say that these psalms sing the faith of Israel – and by so singing, they give believers a different imagination than those who sing only the broken songs of Canaan.

The orientation psalm says that this world is the loving creation of the Creator – *"It is he that made us, and we are his"*. It sings that we walk daily through a creation that God loves, and that God loves us (*"we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture"*). It sings that God's character is different than those other gods - money, success, youth, etc. – who would seek to rule us. The Lord is a God whose character is marked by "steadfast love" and "faithfulness."

According to Brueggemann, the Psalms of orientation see God as always good and faithful. His Torah, or Law, is always just. The world is viewed as a stable, fair, and orderly place. God is good all the time, and all the time God is good. These are prayers of joy, peace, and contentment with God. They help us express a life of simple faith and deep trust. Psalm 1 is an example of a psalm of orientation. This Psalm promises that people who love the Lord's Instruction are like are like a tree replanted by streams of water. And: "Whatever they do succeeds."

The second type of Psalms are psalms of disorientation. These are also called

Psalms of lament. They come from those seasons of life when our world has crumbled under our feet. They express anguish, betrayal, confusion, and self-pity. They question whether or not God is as good as we believed, whether the world is as fair and orderly as we imagined. There is still faith, but there are also many deep and troubling questions. Jesus quoted one of these kinds of Psalms from the cross: *“My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?”* These songs come from the long, dark nights of the soul, when God seems absent and our world makes no sense.

Finally, there’s another kind of praise Psalm known as psalms of new orientation. These come from the time after God’s people have experienced disorientation. The people who composed these prayers have come through the crisis, and God has surprised them on the other side of their ordeal with new gifts and blessings and insights into God’s faithfulness. These are Psalms about coming out of darkness into light, death emerging from life. They celebrate how God is faithful to deliver his people from impossible situations. Psalm 23 is a famous example of this kind of prayer. In the middle of this Psalm, the author tells God: *“Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me.”* This kind of prayer can only be prayed by someone who has come through a dark and lonely season of life, and realized that God had never left their side.

So there are Psalms for every season of life. The Psalms teach us the words to use to celebrate God’s goodness; to speak honestly to God when we are hurt; and to reaffirm our faith after times of deep distress. The well-rounded life of faith needs all of them.

Our Psalm today, Psalm 100, is a prayer of thanksgiving - a praise Psalm, a “new orientation” psalm. It is recognizable because it has recurring imperative “calls to praise” and “reasons for praise.” There are seven imperative calls to praise: “make a joyful noise,” “worship,” “come,” “acknowledge,” “enter,” and “give thanks.” It also offers reasons for praise. This short prayer of praise is intriguing. We don’t know who wrote it, or when, or exactly why. This Psalm is a bit unusual because it’s hard to know if its a psalm of orientation, or a psalm of new orientation. Brueggemann suspects it’s a psalm of new orientation that’s on its way to becoming old news, that whatever the crisis was that caused trauma and doubt for the people who first prayed this prayer was so far in the past, they’ve almost forgotten it. This is a prayer from people who have settled into a new life.

Think about it this way. There are some events – both good and evil – that change you forever. Like the thrill of your wedding day, or the dashed hopes and resentments that go along with divorce. The hopes and joys that well up in your soul when you’re expecting a child; or the nightmare that descends on you when that child dies in your womb or in its crib. After these things happen to you, you go on living, but your world is never the same. Eventually you adjust to your new normal. Psalm 100 is a prayer from the lips of a person or community that has adjusted to their new normal. It shows us the kind of trust in God and joy in life that comes from spiritual maturity. This Psalm expresses the seasoned faith of someone who has learned from experience that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God. According to the Westminster Confession of the Church of England,

humanity's "chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." And that's also what this Psalm teaches us.

This Psalm opens with a command that is also an invitation to glorify and enjoy God: *"Shout with joy to the Lord, O earth! Worship the Lord with gladness! Come before him singing with joy!"*

The Psalmist didn't just call the faithful saints, or God's people, or even the church to celebrate God, but all the earth. All peoples, every tribe and tongue, all creatures great and small. Yes, and even for the trees of the field to clap their hands, and the stones cry out. Everyone and everything is invited to serve Israel's God with joy, because the God who has rescued Israel time and time again is also the King of the Cosmos.

And why should everyone and everything praise God that way? Because we have come to know that the Lord is God – he made us; we belong to him. We are his people, the sheep of his own pasture.

This image of God as the shepherd of his people comes from their experiences of salvation. Israel knows that God has saved them, from slavery in Egypt, from captivity in Babylon. They know their God created everything, and their God makes everything new. And they have learned that the Lord has saved them not for their own sake, but the sake of all creation, so that all the families of the earth will be blessed because of them. And so they gladly invite all the families of the earth to join the flock of their Good Shepherd, the Lord. They know God has created all

humanity to serve him, and care for his creation – so they invite everyone to do just that.

The Psalmist is speaking for everyone God has rescued when they extend God's own invitation: *"Enter his gates with thanks; enter his courtyards with praise! Thank him! Bless his name!"* They're talking about the temple in Jerusalem, but they know that all creation is God's temple. They don't want anyone to remain a stranger to God.

Above all, the Psalmist wants everyone on earth to know from experience and confess with their lips that the God of Israel and King of the Cosmos: is good, his loyal love lasts forever; his faithfulness lasts generation after generation.

The Psalmist knows this because God has saved them by his grace. He has been faithful and loyal to his people even when they sinned and forgot him. Nothing has ever made the Lord stop loving them, and nothing ever will. Today, the church should be able to say this even louder, because through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God has gone through hell and back for us. We of all people can testify to all creation that his loyal love lasts forever.

I introduced today's psalm with the disciples asking Jesus to teach them to pray. So, what's the connection? Jesus taught them a prayer, which has been passed down to us through the ages. If Jesus has taught us a prayer, known by all Christians, why do we need the Psalms to teach us to pray?

In his little commentary on the Psalms, the German martyr-preacher Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains that the Psalms and the Lord's Prayer go together, hand in hand. They illuminate one another. Bonhoeffer says: *"Every prayer is contained in the Lord's Prayer ... All the prayers of Holy Scripture are summarized in the Lord's Prayer, and are contained in its immeasurable breadth."*

So we shouldn't think that just because we have the Lord's Prayer we don't need the Psalms anymore. The Lord's Prayer summarizes the Psalms, and the Psalms help us learn what the Lord's Prayer means. So what if we read Psalm 100 as a commentary on the Lord's Prayer? What do we learn?

The Lord's Prayer is found in Luke's Gospel as well as Matthew's Gospel. The first thing we learn when Jesus teaches us to pray is to call God Father. Psalm 100 helps us understand what it means to call God our Father. It means confessing that he made us; and resting in the assurance that we belong to him "he made us and we are his." It also means humbly acknowledging that even though God is our Father, he is not our private property, because we've also learned that God is Father of all the earth.

Next, Jesus teaches us to pray: *"may your name be honoured. May your kingdom come soon."* The psalm invites all the peoples of the earth to: *"Give thanks to him and bless his name!"* The holiness of God's name is upheld when his creation blesses him, serves him with thankfulness, and enjoys his good gifts. This verse also invites all the earth to: *"Enter his gates with thanks; enter his courtyards with praise!"*

God's kingdom is wherever and whenever God's will is done on earth as in heaven. All creation is God's temple, so we enter his gates and his courtyards and his kingdom whenever we serve him with thankfulness, whenever others can see our good works and glorify God.

Next, we are taught to pray: "Give us our food day by day." We can be assured that Father God will sustain us every day in every way because the Lord is good, and his unfailing love lasts forever. Because God is a good Father who faithfully loves his children, he provides for us every day.

Jesus also teaches us to ask God to: "*Forgive us our sins - just as we forgive those who have sinned against us.*" We know that Father God forgives his children because the Psalm teaches us: "*his unfailing love continues forever and his faithfulness continues to each generation.*" He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins because he loves us. One of the ways we, as his children, bear his image and likeness is by forgiving others as we have been forgiven.

Finally, Jesus teaches us to pray: "*don't let us yield to temptation.*" And our Psalm promises us Father God would never do that, because we are his people, the sheep of his own pasture. Our Good Shepherd doesn't lead us into temptation. Even when he leads us through the darkest valley, he is always leading us to life and blessings.

So the Psalms do teach us to pray. We're invited to speak them aloud to God, as prayers, and meditate on them, as God's response to our prayers. Let us begin

learning to pray, as Bonhoeffer advised, by repeating God's own words after him.

It is important to note that praise of God is fundamentally "witness." We do not praise God for God's personal sake, but for the sake of God's mission. In praise, we do two things:

First, by praising God we give ourselves to God fully - praise is a way of being in relationship with God.

Second, by praising God to others, through praise we give God away to our neighbour. Praise is witness to who God is and what God has done.

Amen.