

Douglas Union with Frankfield

Biblical Byways

Some less familiar parts of the Bible



A Daily Lent Course

Written by Archdeacon Adrian Wilkinson

Lent Course 2021

If you turn to page 338 in the Book of Common Prayer, you will find a service written specially to be used on Ash Wednesday. The preface, at the start of this service, concludes 'I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Lord to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.' This simple pattern of daily readings and reflections is designed to help with the last part of that challenge.

This Lent Course is called 'Biblical Byways'. A byway is a less familiar or used route way, a minor road or path. When I was walking around the parish in January, I discovered some short cuts connecting different housing estates, which are not often used except by pedestrians. And so, this Lent I will take you to what are perhaps some of the less well known parts of the Bible which are interesting and fascinating in themselves. The material is deliberately short so it should only take you 5 minutes, but I hope it will sit with you for the rest of the day to encourage your own thoughts and reflections.

I have written this course with all of you in mind. We cannot gather to attend the usual mid-week and Sunday services in Lent this year. We are all missing not seeing one another. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot all commit ourselves to travel through Lent together. I hope you will enjoy these daily readings and be mindful of the fact that many others in the parish will be reading the same material as you are each day. You are on your Lenten journey with them.

Adrian Wilkinson



Day 33 – Sunday 21 March

Collect – 5th Sunday in Lent

Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world:

Grant that faith in him who suffered on the cross,
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Psalm 119: 9-16

How shall young people cleanse their way
to keep themselves according to your word?

With my whole heart have I sought you;
O let me not go astray from your commandments.

Your words have I hidden within my heart,
that I should not sin against you.

Blessed are you, O Lord;
O teach me your statutes.

With my lips have I been telling
of all the judgments of your mouth.

I have taken greater delight in the way of your testimonies
than in all manner of riches.

I will meditate on your commandments
and contemplate your ways.

My delight shall be in your statutes
and I will forget your word.

Day 34 – Monday 22 March

The Psalms - an introduction

The Psalms are the great hymnbook at the heart of the Bible. They have been read and sung by Christians and of course by the Jewish people from the earliest times. Yet for many Christians today, they are simply not used and where they are, they are often reduced to a few verses recited as a 'filler' between other parts of the liturgy in church services. In the latter case, people often do not seem to realise what they are singing. In the former case, they do not seem to realise with they are missing.

The Psalms are among the oldest poems in the world. Like all good poetry, they are full of power and passion, horrendous misery and unrestrained jubilation, tender sensitivity, and powerful hope. In life, some of the most important things we want to say remain just a little beyond even our best words. Poetry recognises this, and with precision and economy of language, does its best to point beyond the words to realities that transcend even the heights of our descriptive imagination.

The Psalms represent the Bible's own spiritual root system for the great tree we call Christianity. Worship and liturgy, whether formal or informal, ought never to be simply about a corporate upsurge in emotion, but a fresh and awed attempt to inhabit the great unceasing liturgy that is happening all the time in heaven. The Psalms offer us a way of joining in a chorus of praise and prayer that has been going on for millennia and across all cultures. The Psalms are the hymnbook that Jesus and his first followers would have known by heart. Later, people like St Paul came to believe and understand Jesus and his place in the history of God's activity in the world, through a psalm-shaped lens. They lived in a psalm-shaped world. I hope that over the next week, you will enjoy dipping your toes into the world of the Psalms or for those of you who are already familiar with them, you might be tempted to plunge a little deeper into them, in this season of Lent.

Psalm 115

Not to us, Lord, not to us,
but to your name give the glory,
for the sake of your loving mercy and truth.

Why should the nations say,
'Where is now their God?'

As for our God, he is in heaven;
he does whatever he pleases.

Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.

They have mouths, but cannot speak;
eyes have they, but cannot see;

They have ears, but cannot hear;
noses have they, but cannot smell'

They have hands, but cannot feel;
feet have they, but cannot walk;
not a whisper do they make from their throats.

Those who make them shall be come like them
and so will all who put their trust in them.

But you, Israel, put your trust in the Lord;
he is their help and their shield.

House of Aaron, trust in the Lord;
he is their help and their shield.

You that fear the Lord, trust in the Lord;
he is their help and their shield.

The Lord has been mindful of us and he will bless us;
may he bless the house of Israel;
may he bless the house of Aaron;

May he bless those who fear the Lord,
both small and great together.

May the Lord increase you more and more,
you and your children after you.

May you be blest by the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.

The heavens are the heavens of the Lord,
but the earth he has entrusted to his children.

The dead do not praise the Lord,
nor those gone down into silence;

But we will bless the Lord,
from this time forth for ever more. Alleluia.

Reflection

I love the way this psalm begins with its repetition 'Not to us, Lord, not to us'. The author asks that the Lord's name be glorified, not his, or any group of people or indeed the nation's, but God's. This is a type of hymn and as such, it has three elements: (a) a call to praise, (b) a statement of the motive or reason for praise and (c) a renewed summons to praise. These psalms lift the eyes and heart of the worshipper, from their individual preoccupations and crises, to the God whom the congregation has assembled to honour. Therefore, God is praised, not so much for what he gives to his people, but for who God is and what he does.

In this psalm, God's people are contrasted with those of other religions who have their own idols and deities. At the time the psalms were written, other tribes and cultures were polytheistic and relied on images

of wood, stone and metal. They focused on the visual and what they could control. We can be tempted to do the same thing, overly focusing on tangible objects rather than intangible realities. Here we are called to put such distractions aside, to worship the Lord who is above and beyond anything we can construct or even imagine. This is not necessarily an easy thing. We might feel that such a God is distant, remote and we are insignificant. Yet in verse 12 we are reminded that 'The Lord is mindful of us'. When we feel alone or abandoned by God, the reality is very different. When depressed by problems or struggling with self-worth, be encouraged that God keeps you in his thoughts. If God thinks about you, surely help is near at hand.

Day 35 – Tuesday 23 March

Psalm 45

My heart is astir with gracious words;
as I make my song for the king,
my tongue is the pen of a ready writer.

You are the fairest of men;
full of grace are your lips,
for God has blest you for ever.

Gird your sword upon your thigh, O mighty one;
gird on your majesty and glory.

Ride on and prosper in the cause of truth
and for the sake of humility and righteousness.

Your right hand will teach you terrible things;
your arrows will be sharp in the heart of the king's enemies
so that peoples fall beneath you.

Your throne is God's throne, for ever;
the sceptre of your kingdom is the sceptre of righteousness.

You love righteousness and hate iniquity;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with oil of gladness above your fellows.

All your garments are fragrant with myrrh, aloes and cassia;
from ivory palaces the music of strings make you glad.

Kings' daughters are among your honourable women;
at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.

Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear;
forget your own people and your father's house.

So shall the king have pleasure in your beauty;
he is your lord, so do him honour.

The people of Tyre shall bring you gifts;
the richest of the people shall see your favour.

The king's daughter is all glorious within;
her clothing is embroidered cloth of gold.

She shall be brought to the king in raiment of needlework;
after her the virgins that are her companions.

With joy and gladness shall they be brought
and enter into the palace of the king.

'Instead of your fathers you shall have sons,
whom you shall make princes over all the land.

'I will make your name to be remembered
through all generations;
therefore shall the peoples praise you for ever and ever.'

Reflection

One of the very unfortunate outcomes of the current pandemic, is the way family celebrations, and in particular weddings have been impacted. Couples have postponed their wedding day perhaps several times, or if they decide to go ahead, they do so only in the presence of a very small number of family members and friends.

This is a psalm for a royal wedding in the court of Israel or Judah where both the bridegroom (verses 1-9) and the bride (10-17) are addressed. The groom is 'the fairest of men' with his sword at his thigh. It is almost as if the bride is being adorned for the great event, the hair and make-up is being done and the attendants are dressing her to look her most beautiful.

The groom is a king and so is reminded of his role to both lead in war and always maintain justice. The bride is to leave behind her foreign origin and as queen is to be a devoted wife. Her fame is to rest on the sons she will bear and so perpetuate the royal line. As an ancient text written for royal occasions, it should come as no surprise that it is perhaps somewhat patriarchal to our modern ears. Yet at its heart it is a celebration of love and devotion which is full of optimism for the future.

This is an unashamedly sensuous psalm and so is particularly appropriate for a wedding. Physical intimacy, in the context of deep love and mutual respect, is always worth celebrating!

Day 36 – Wednesday 24 March

Psalm 145:1-13

I will exalt you, O God my King,
and bless your name for ever and ever.

Every day will I bless you
and praise your name for ever and ever.

Great is the Lord and highly to be praised;
his greatness is beyond all searching out.

One generation shall praise your works to another
and declare your mighty acts.

They shall speak of the majesty of your glory,
and I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.

They shall speak of the might of your marvellous acts,
and I will also tell of your greatness.

They shall pour forth the story of your abundant kindness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
long-suffering and of great goodness.

The Lord is loving to everyone
and his mercy is over all his creatures.

All your works praise you, O Lord,
and your faithful servants bless you.

They tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your mighty power,

To make known to all peoples your mighty acts and the glorious
splendour of your kingdom.

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom; your dominion endures
throughout all ages.

Reflection

This is the psalm which was read in our churches last Wednesday, St Patrick's Day. It is a psalm of praise and celebration. Undoubtedly the religious significance of St Patrick in national consciousness, is not as prominent as it once was. However, it is always worth pausing to reflect on the fundamental values of our society.

For the psalmist here the place of God in his life is obvious. It is a personal proclamation where the singer praises the various qualities which unite in the name of God. The transmission of knowledge about God and religious values from one generation to another is important.

In verse 9 we are reminded that 'the Lord is loving to everyone', an important message to us all to be an inclusive and welcoming society. Also, the point is made that 'his mercy is over all his creatures.' What does this verse have to say to us about how we should care for all creation and sentient beings? In verses 11-13 we are reminded that the God's kingdom is not a geographical or political entity. Instead, it is made real where God's rule is evident in the lives of people, and not just one generation, but for all time. Much to ponder, not only on St Patrick's Day, but at day of the year!

Day 37 – Thursday 25 March

Psalm 130

Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord;
Lord, hear my voice;
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.

If you, Lord, were to mark what is done amiss,
O Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you shall be feared.

I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him;
in his word is my hope.

My soul waits for the Lord,
more than the night watch for the morning,
more than the night watch for the morning.

O Israel, wait for the Lord,
for with the Lord there is mercy;

With him is plenteous redemption
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

Reflection

De Profundis (from the Latin 'Out of the depths') is the title of a long letter written by Oscar Wilde during his time as a prisoner in Reading Gaol. He was there on the charge of gross indecency because of his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. It recounts their relationship before charting his spiritual development while in prison. It was later published posthumously.

The title comes from the open verse of psalm 130. This is obviously a psalm of personal lament. It speaks profoundly to anyone who is going through a severe crisis or experiencing deep depression. The psalms are sometimes raw, almost visceral in how they address God from the lowest points of human experience. Here the writer knows his own predicament as a sinner. Fortunately, he also recognises that God is no bookkeeper of offences. If he were, none of us could stand before him.

Have you ever experienced times of deep darkness and despair? If so then maybe these words can be a source of honest reflection and hope. It has been said that the darkest hour at night is just before the dawn. Maybe there are times when you feel that all is hopeless and you long for your situation to improve. You feel like that nightwatchman in verse 5 straining to see the hint of light on the distant horizon. You wait and wait and wait.

The final two verses end on a note of hope. God wants to forgive us. He holds nothing back. His lines of communication are always completely open.

Day 38 – Friday 26 March

Psalm 137

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.

As for our lyres, we hung them up
on the willows that grow in that land.

For there our captors asked for a song,
our tormentors called for mirth:
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'

How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a strange – land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand forget its skill.

Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
If I set not Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Remember, O Lord, against the people of Edom
the day of Jerusalem,
how they said, 'Down with it, down with it, even to the ground.'

O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy the one who repays
you for all you have done to us;

Who takes your little ones,
and dashes them against the rock.

Reflection

Perhaps the first verse of this psalm has you humming the tune of the famous version of it sung by Boney M in the late 1970's! Unlike the psalm we read yesterday, this is not an individual lament, but a corporate one. The setting is Babylon, where the exiles who are in captivity, gather on the banks of the irrigation canals which bring the water from the river Euphrates to irrigate the fields near the city. The people are mourning the destruction of Jerusalem with its Temple and long for the day when they can return there to worship. There is no music. Their instruments are silent and hang on the trees. What is the point of singing 'the Lord's song' when this would only arouse the contempt and ridicule of their conquerors? Anyway, it belongs to the ritual of a temple that is no more.

There is no happy ending to this psalm. Perhaps that is why it is so powerful. It calls for two curses. The first is on the Edomites who had joined the Babylonian armies in the sack of Jerusalem. This was an especially heinous offense since as descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, they were the nation most closely related to Israel. To wish a blessing on those who would come to destroy them and dash their children against the rocks, is both horrific and gruesome. It is an extreme version of 'tit for tat'. Throughout the centuries these sorts of things have happened and today history repeats itself in places such as Sudan and Yemen. The psalms are nothing if they are not realistic about the depths to which humanity can plunge. No one is immune from such sentiments, not even some of God's people! That should be a timely warning to us all.

Fridays in Lent are traditional days in the Church for discipline and self-denial. It is an opportunity for us all to strip away the distractions of life and reorient ourselves, individually and corporately, to find our 'true north'. As we watch news stories this weekend and read our newspapers, perhaps this psalm will prompt some honest and hard reflection.

Day 39 – Saturday 27 March

Psalm 84

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul has a desire and longing to enter the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.

The sparrow has found her a house
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young:
at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

Blessed are they who dwell in your house:
they will always be praising you.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion,

Who going through the barren valley find there a spring,
and the early rains will clothe it with blessing.

They will go from strength to strength
and appear before God in Zion.

O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
listen, O God of Jacob.

Behold our defender, O God,
and look upon the face of your anointed.

For one day in your courts
is better than a thousand.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of ungodliness.

For the Lord God is both sun and shield;
he will give grace and glory;
no good thing shall the Lord withhold
from those who walk with integrity.

O Lord God of hosts,
blessed are those who put their trust in you.

Reflection

One of the things I have missed greatly since public worship stopped immediately after Christmas, is our church buildings. Yes, I am privileged in that I have keys to all of them and occasionally find myself in them on my own during the week to check something. I often stop and sit for a minute or two to pray in what are now lonely, forlorn and somewhat cold and damp buildings. I look forward to the day when they will be open again for Sunday worship even if the numbers are still restricted.

This is one of the pilgrim psalms and it reminds us that, while we can meet God anywhere and at any time, buildings and place still matters. We know that going inside a church building can help us step aside from the busy mainstream of life so we can quietly meditate and pray. We can find joy in worship and fellowship we share with other pilgrims when we gather places where to quote the poet TS Eliot, 'prayer has been valid.'

Here the writer is remembering a visit to the Temple in Jerusalem, which no doubt was on a pilgrimage there. He shares the vivid picture of a swallow, high up in the rafters of a building in the Temple precincts making a nest where she can lay eggs and hatch her chicks. He concludes that God's house is a place of shelter for all.

However, God's blessing is not limited to the building, but radiates out from it to even remote places. Verses 5 and 6 describe the spiritual refreshment that comes as pilgrims get closer in their journey towards Zion. God is the only one who can refresh us and restore our parched devotional life. Verse 10 also contains a vivid image. However, it is better translated as referring to a single day standing at the threshold of the temple gate, rather than being a doorkeeper. It reminds us of the heightened sense of excitement we might have as we are about to go into a concert venue, or through the turnstiles for a match, rather than being a bouncer!

Towards the end of this psalm, we are reminded that God does not promise to give us everything we think is good, but he will not withhold what is permanently good. He helps us to walk his paths, but we must do the walking. What sense of excitement will you have when you can again go through the door into your church on a Sunday morning? How will you prioritise attending church again when you are permitted to do so?

