

The Psalms

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Reverend Rebecca Newland
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Daniel 12.1-3, Psalm 16, Hebrews 10.11-14, 19-25, Mark 13.1-11

One of the things I have enjoyed coming home to is the prayer space over in the corner there. Having a space to pray in that is designated just for prayer has become increasingly important for me...I have a corner down at the coast, a corner in the study in the rectory and now we have the corner here. Of course this whole church is a place of prayer and worship but it is also a community space, a music studio, a concert venue and a meeting place. It is also wonderful that people from the parish have been joining me in this space for morning prayer which we do four times a week. We use the prayer book, read the psalm and scripture set for the day and pray for the world and the church, including for each one of you and others as we cycle through the parish roll. It is enlightening and challenging reading scripture, especially those sections we would normally not bother with. We also find it challenging reading some of the psalms.

Like other parts of the bible the book of psalms have verses that appear very unchristian or un-Christlike. Anything that talks about the enemy being punished—horribly, I might add—just does not sit well with someone who is trying to put into practice Jesus commandment to love your enemies. It is also confronting all that hierarchical language and grovelling.

Despite the difficult passages the psalms are an integral part of our prayer book, which in turn was very influenced by the monastic practice of reading and praying all 150 psalms in a week, week after week. Everyday we have four psalms set for each day of the lectionary. It takes about 3 months to go through all 150. Every Sunday we sing or say a psalm. You could safely say we read from the psalms more regularly than any other book. We have this in common with people of the Jewish faith. The psalms are their liturgical book and for thousands of years Jews have been memorizing and reciting the psalms. The early Christians, who of course were mostly Jews, knew the psalms and the authors of the books of the New Testament quoted from them. The psalms then have been a central part of Christian worship since the beginning of the church and are well-loved by many people across many centuries. Just to mention one is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned by the Nazis, wrote a small book on the psalms. The book was written in 1940 but in a letter to his parents from prison he wrote, "I read the Psalms every day, as I have done for years; I know them and love them more than any other book."

The psalms are so well loved because for every odd verse that speaks about enemies being marked for destruction and wild dogs there are many more that speak of the wonder and beauty of creation, the power and glory of God, the sufferings and lament of the victim and the faith of the believer. The psalms are a collection of praises that encompass all the passions, desires, laments, joys, light and darkness of humanity. In the psalms you get the very best of humanity and our worst. If we are honest pray-ers we do not avoid this reality. As writers on Benedictine spirituality like to remind us when monks and nuns pray the psalms they are entering the universal experience of all humanity—the oppressed, the frightened, the outraged, the mourner, the grieved, the joyful, the peacemaker, the seeker for God, the awed and the thankful to name just some.

Esther de Waal, a well known Benedictine, writes of the psalms, "*here is a book which reaches the depths as well as the heights for all of us. In the psalms I find myself at my worst and my best. Here I can acclaim God with warmth and confidence and hope, but here also I*

can give vent to those black thoughts that might otherwise lie hidden in the dark and angry corners of my heart. Above all, the psalms express the reality of my longing for God.

So after that lengthy introduction to the psalms I'd like to turn to the psalm we read today, psalm 16, and briefly look at what it can tell us about the human experience and the place of God in our lives. You have it before you in the pew sheet.

Firstly, this psalm is about confidence and trust in God. In the midst of their troubles the psalmist believes that God will lead them to the fullness of life. I know that all of us can relate to having troubles. We have sick children, pressured marriages, difficult work places, ill-health and the depressing reality that we find on our news each night. More war, poverty, global warming and people generally behaving badly and stupidly. It is very easy to become overwhelmed with the troubles we face on a daily basis. Trust in these circumstances can seem very difficult, perhaps impossible.

As I was preparing this sermon I came across the story of Brother Yun, a Chinese pastor who was imprisoned because of his Christian faith. After facing weeks of torture, including electrocution, starvation, beatings, and having needles shoved under his fingernails, he was thrown in a box that was four feet long, three feet wide, and four feet high, where he would stay indefinitely. The day after he was put in this mini cell, he felt prompted to pray for a Bible — a ridiculous idea, considering that many people were in prison at that very moment for being in possession of such contraband. Yet he prayed anyway. He got a Bible the next day but what is truly astonishing for me is that he turned to God and prayed for a Bible, not release, not that his enemies would be beaten, but for a Bible through which he intended to minister to his captors. It shows an amazing trust in God and God's purposes in the middle of extraordinary troubles.

The author of Psalm 16 shows the same type of trust. They turn to God and sing of their trust and confidence 'Preserve me O God, for in you have I taken refuge. I have said to the Lord you are my Lord and all my good depends on you.' The psalmist believes their good depends not on health, success and wealth but on God. I don't know about you but I find this very hard to believe sometimes. We live in a culture obsessed with personal achievement and individual ability. We make heroes of people who alone fight against all odds, who seem to need no-one. We have to deal with the commentary that religion is just a crutch for needy people who cannot make it on their own. In stark contrast the psalmist knows there deep and abiding need for God and trusts that God alone is enough.

The psalmist makes it clear that trust in God is not a right belief, a warm feeling, or an impulse in times of trouble. Trust is a way of acting and living that opens the self to God as the most important reality in life. We do not take drastic action because we necessarily feel trust; our actions are a way of maintaining or cultivating our trust in God.

For the psalmist's God is the LORD, and he believes that all the good things that come his way are coming from God. The language of verses 5-6—*portion, cup, boundaries, pleasant land, rich inheritance*—evoke the Promised Land and God's salvation of Israel. For me they evoke the Eucharist and the beauty of the south coast. According to Psalm 16, we cultivate trust in God by keeping God as the focus of our undivided attention, worshiping God, being attentive to God's counsel and recognizing God as our one and only LORD.

In the psalm then trust is closely bound up with keeping God at the front and centre of life as in having no God but God. The first two commandments—'you shall have no other God's before me' and 'you shall not make for yourself a graven image and bow down to it' are not negative rules for the sake of God. They are about a positive outcome for the sake of us all where we follow and trust a loving power greater than ourselves and thereby are shown the

path of life where there are delights and joy. We humans have many, many Gods. We follow many, many authorities. We can make gods of our partners and friends—and then wonder how they can let us down. We make gods of sports and movie stars and military generals and then feel disappointed when they are caught cheating or behaving badly. We can make gods of our religion, our ideologies and philosophies and damn anyone who doesn't believe as we do. We can make a god of ourselves and have to spend most of our life picking up the pieces of our misguided decisions and stupid actions. God is not only a mighty and powerful creator. God is also infinitely wise to ask for our undivided and complete attention. The psalmist gives God just that in psalm 16 and the result is joy.

“I have set the Lord always before me; he is at my right hand and I shall not fall. Therefore my heart is glad and my spirit rejoices, my flesh also shall rest secure” it says in verses 8 and 9. Perhaps it was this trust and joy that lead Luke to use the psalm when he told the story of the first sermon preached by the early Christians. Psalm 16

In Acts (2:24-32; 13:34), Peter and Paul use Psalm 16:10 to proclaim that Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, makes it possible for us to pray the psalm with a level of trust that matches the psalm's claims. In Christ we can pray with trust and confidence, "For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit." In Christ we will not cease to exist. Even more, we will not lose the gift of God's presence and the joys that come from being in God's presence. The love of God revealed in Christ Jesus inspires the kind of trust so wonderfully described by the psalmist: "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore (16:11).

As followers of Jesus Christ we read the psalms through the eyes of his story—his story of teaching, death and resurrection. When we come across those psalm passages where the victim cries out for vindication we can imagine an innocent victim tortured and beaten, dying on a cross. When we the psalmist cries out in desperation for help we can imagine Jesus begging his Father to be released from the path but still obeying. When we read the psalms of thanksgiving and praise we can remember Jesus giving thanks and breaking bread with his companions. May we discover the hidden depths of praise, trust and thanksgiving in the words of the psalmist and may they bring us ever closer to Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.