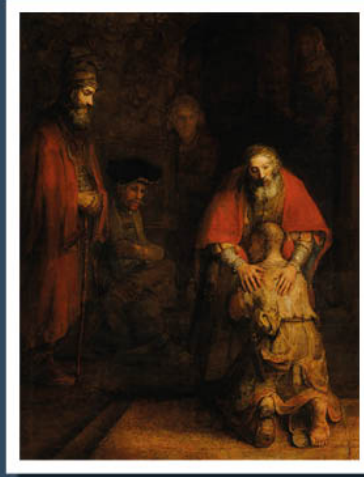


The Penitential Psalms during Lent:

'Words we can use when we can't find the words we need.'



Psalm 38

Will Ukraine drive us back to the Psalms?

Will widespread bushfire, pestilence, or flood lead us to call out to the Almighty in the words of the Psalter?

Is there evidence of this in your own prayer life? Or of that of your churches? If not, what does your relationship with God mean? If you do pray, what have you learned about God?

What strikes me initially as I read Psalm 38 is the **loneliness** of the voice crying out, as I try to identify with the distress of my fellow-believer. This makes echoing his/her words a challenge, because I can't just leave it there if I know my brother or sister is enwrapped in this prison of grief and alienation.

Yet there is a loneliness here that initially I am scarcely able to penetrate. I find I am with those in verse 11: 'My lovers and my neighbours did stand looking upon my trouble: and my kinsmen stood far off'.

This is confirmed by an examination of the language used by our lonely brother. It sounds like David's distress as he flees the revolt led by his son Absalom, expressed in similar terms (2 Samuel 16). We might equally have heard from several chapters of the Book of Job. Isaiah 53 also echoes the psalm, with the New Testament drawing out astonishing dimensions of these **innocent** sufferings of the Servant of the Lord. We should sit first with David, the central figure of the Psalms, however. The Servant, and Job, were undeserving of their suffering. David, though a servant of the Lord, and considered a man after God's own heart, is confessedly responsible for his predicament. It is the Lord who is chastening him (vv1-3a), and he deserves it (3b-5). The significant thing is that the psalmist, David, addresses himself to the Lord, who, for instance, he has failed in the matter of Uriah's wife and its consequences. But once he gets all his agony out, and owns up to all the ramifications of his foolishness, he can utter the confession that alone can lead to a breakthrough (v18), and for the Lord to restore his anointed to his throne.

But through the centuries God's people have found this psalm, and the Psalms as a whole, a source of help, comfort and blessing, not because we can watch David from a distance, but because of the way the psalm may lead us into a dynamic entering-into this extraordinary one-way conversation with the Lord, the Almighty. We all get into situations of distress, sometimes through our own folly or carelessness, as with David; sometimes through random violence or general persecution, as with the people of Ukraine, Christians included, or the believers in China or Northern Nigeria.

This is particularly relevant when we consider that the psalms have always been said or sung as an act of the whole church, more than as personal or private devotions. It is much easier to say the Psalms with others, because while I might not find a particular psalm speaks of my immediate circumstances, I am able to extend my vision to realise there is a believer somewhere for whom these words are precise, or virtually so, and uphold my brother or sister, or erring neighbour, in the presence of the Lord. But there is more going on here.

For most of the Church's history, the Psalms were recognised as covering the whole range of human experiences and emotions, and by regularly reading all of them, and in company with other believers, as in church, or a community, Christians gained empathy with 'all sorts and conditions of men' and a sense that they too were understood when they were in any particular situation, especially one of distress. Hear what Athanasius (4th Century) wrote:

'There every one may see and perceive the motions and affections of his own heart and soul, both to see whereto he is inclined, and where he is strained and pitched, so that he may have a very good form of prayer therefore... There be in other books words and sentences, which forbid diverse vices and enormities, but this book prescribeth a form, how a man may be clear of them, & how to avoid them... Whosoever take this book in his hand, he reputeth and thinketh all the words he readeth to be as his very own words spoken in his own person.'

Athanasius's younger contemporary, St Basil, similarly remarks that "the revelation of all mysteries... be laid and couched up in the Psalter book, as in a great treasure house common to all men." Over one thousand years later, John Calvin exclaims that it is "not without cause [that] I am wont to term this book the Anatomy of all the parts of the soul, inasmuch as a man shall not find any affection in himself, whereof the Image appeareth not in this glass".

What has not been touched upon in these references, which themselves are echoed in more recent commentaries on the Psalms such as those of CS Lewis and Walter Brueggemann, is the salvific benefit of the 'Godly grief' (2 Corinthians 7) of entering sincerely into the honesty of the Psalms in the presence of the Lord. So the habit of serious regular reading of the Psalms can not only give us words to say, but ensure they are directed in the only direction that can enable us to redeem our situation. St Paul does not mention the Psalms in 2 Corinthians 7, but in his letters he quotes the Psalms more than any other book of the Old Testament, and urges their use (Ephesians 5.19; Colossians 3.16), so one might reasonably speculate that the use of the Psalms was a vehicle for such 'Godly grief'.

Walter Brueggemann [in several excellent books on the Psalms] sees all the Psalms falling into one or more of three states of experience: Orientation, Disorientation, and Re-Orientation. Psalms of Orientation speak out of the situation of security, prosperity, equilibrium, and are boring, the preferred voice of the complacent middle classes. They are similar to the Proverbs, emerging from a time of no external political or economic threats (eg Pss 37, 119, 145). Far more of the Psalms capture 'the Rawness of Life': the pain of disorientation, across a spectrum of the stages of the life-cycle, or the ups and downs of relationships, or the challenges of engagement in public life, and perhaps the anxiety of existential or National threat. The miracle of the psalms is that when we bring our disorientation to God, in honest, impassioned appeal, something happens. Our exposed humanity, our felling of falling off the edge, is the best thing we have going for us when it comes to God. Reorientation is his gift. Dislocation gives place to relocation.

And no Psalms are so powerful a test of this gracious character of God as those we know as the Penitential Psalms, where speaking truth with God opens up the path to hope: to renewal and restoration.

Martin B Robinson 16.3.22