

Sunday Scribbling's No.13 – 2nd after Trinity

Lectionary readings¹ for today are;

Psalm 69: 8-11 & 18-20. Jeremiah 20: 7-13. Matthew 10:24-39. Romans 6:1b-11

Today's readings are once again linked together by a theme that's relevant to both the world that we live in and peoples lives which are constantly challenged by persecution; pain; suffering, and a general feeling about the fragility and uncertainty of life.

Meanwhile, the challenge of faith remains as a constant companion to the human condition as is evidenced by the falling numbers of folk of all Christian persuasions.²

***** Psalm 69: 8-11 & 18-20 *****

Did you know that, according to Judy Smith³, Psalm 69 is amongst the five most quoted psalms in the NT; (The others being 2,16,22, 69 & 110). There must be a reason for this, but what might it be?

Possibly because it's a psalm that points to wards the Messiah, i.e. a Messianic Psalm; or more likely because it points towards the suffering of the coming Messiah, and the similar model that Christians are called to follow.

It's worth remembering that the Psalms are a collection of ancient Hebrew prayers and poems. Some are personal laments, some laments for groups. Some were used in the Temple and some privately; but it's almost certain that none were sung by groups of people or by a choir. They were probably sung by an individual, possibly the original writer, but more likely by a professional lamenter thus making them more "prayer like" than "song like".

Indeed, Jeremiah alludes to this in 9:17-20; **"Call for the wailing women to come; send for the most skilful of them."** Q: Does that mean one person, or a group of women?

As with many psalms there are multiple themes in the psalm. In Psalm 69 the lamenter starts off with an admission to God; ¹**"Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck"** (Is this where the aphorism "In it up to you neck" comes from?). Then he moves on to acknowledging his failures; ⁵**"You, God, know my folly; my guilt is not hidden from you"** before starting to seek God's intervention through prayer in v13; **"But I pray to you, Lord, in the time of your favour."**

So far, so good; this seems like a reasonable way to approach God in prayer.

But in v22 things seem to take a turn for the worse as the Psalmist starts recommending styles of retribution that he wishes God to deliver on his persecutors culminating in v27; **"Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. ²⁸ May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous."**

WOW – that's strong and one might wonder if the Psalmist counts himself as being amongst the righteous?

"The 'imprecatory' utterance of the psalmist, i.e., the calling forth of a curse, of evil, upon one's enemies" may be surprising to us in our liberal, democratic society. But "it must be recognized that the Hebrew language is a very graphic medium of communication, rich in bold metaphors designed to

display the passion of burning religious zeal; one must be careful not to literalize every expression.”⁴

Wayne Jackson continues; “These pronouncements, therefore, were not hasty, emotional eruptions of personal vengeance; rather, they were dramatic expressions suggesting the need for divine justice upon those who set themselves against the cause of truth. Additionally, it has been well noted that every imprecatory prayer that seeks judgment upon those who oppose the reign of God is based upon the assumption of the wicked’s continued impenitence.”⁴

In v30, the Psalmist, or David, changes tack once again and starts to promise God good works and faithful service.

Now, bearing the aforementioned in mind, I’d like you to sit back with a cup of coffee and read Psalm 69 from the viewpoint of knowing what your own prayer life is like, and that of the Psalmist.

- Do you need to modify your approach?
- Would you feel comfortable in asking God to punish your accusers; bullies; political opponents; ex husband or wife; non conformers to the 2M rule?

Don’t worry if you cannot give a detailed and erudite theological answer. That’s not important. What is important is that you think about your prayers and supplications and modify them **if** appropriate.

That’s what growing in faith is all about.

***** **Jeremiah 20: 7-13** *****

Poor Jeremiah. He always seems to be at the wrong end of the stick. Or is he?

Our chapter starts off with; “¹...the priest Pashhur son of Immer, the official in charge of the temple of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, ²he had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the Lord’s temple. ³The next day, when Pashhur released him from the stocks Jeremiah said to him, “The Lord’s name for you is not Pashhur, but Terror on Every Side.”

He continues; “⁴I will give all Judah into the hands of the king of Babylon, who will carry them away to Babylon or put them to the sword.” (How about that for prophecy!)

Jeremiah is not to be cowed. He speaks out telling everyone what he believes is the truth from God.

Now we know that Jeremiah’s ministry extended for some forty years from about 625-585 BC and that this chapter (20) is not even half way through his book of 52 chapters, and still some time before “the Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar began expanding in the Middle East and Israel’s existence was threatened”⁵; which makes me wonder how many times God speaks to us but we are not listening.

In his relationship with God, Jeremiah is totally honest and like the psalmist is not hesitant at saying what’s on his mind; ⁷”You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived.”

He continues, as did the psalmist, with a graphic description of his plight.

And in v11 he changes tack and starts to praise the Lord once again, just as the psalmist did.

I wonder. Is that something you do when in prayer? No!

Me neither.

But I have been thinking about this conundrum and come to the conclusion that maybe they are right, and I am wrong.

There seems to be some considerable merit in 'telling God how it feels to be me" and getting all the negatives off ones chest precisely so that we can clear our minds of negative associations, and then concentrate on the positivity of faith and God.

Now you might think that speaking to God in such a manner is downright rude, possibly even heretical, but consider what Pierre Wolff has to say in his book "*May I hate God?*"⁶; "When people can express harsh feelings to the One or ones who are their object, love is *already* stronger in them than in their feelings. Love is *already* transforming, transfiguring, this feeling into something else, something closer to love than hatred."⁶

You might like to read that paragraph a second time

***** **Matthew 10:24-39** *****

This chapter makes for uncomfortable Christian reading.

It's easy to say to ourselves; 'Ah well, that was then for the early Jewish converts when Christ was alive'. Now life is different.'

Well, yes ... and no.

The problem we have today is that as we are called to be disciples, we are called to emulate the original disciples and thereby to face the world as Jesus faced it. In faith, with forbearance ... and with suffering.

Thankfully, there are no more crucifixions and we don't have to wear sackcloth like the psalmist (v11). Neither do we have to walk about without any sandals (Matthew 10:10), but we are still expected to be sacrificial in our giving; in helping those in need; and in speaking truth into life around us and in prayer.

And that's a difficult pill to swallow.

As Jesus says; ³⁴ **"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶ a man's enemies will be the members of his own household."**

Of course Jesus is not encouraging us to be militants as some have interpreted this passage, and neither is he encouraging us to hate our families. That's also nonsense. So what does he mean?

Verses 37 and 38 hold the answer; ³⁷ **"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me."**

And therein lies the conundrum for us today. How can we be truly sacrificial Christians to a God who knows us so well that he even knows the number of hairs on our heads when our faith is 'part time'; our giving derisory; our generosity to 'the other' wrapped in fear for ourselves; our bourgeois liberal existence being based on 'self'; my rights, my property, my entitlements ... rather than on the calling of Christ?

Maybe both the psalmist and Jeremiah knew something we have long forgotten?

***** **Romans 6:1b-11** *****

Paul pulls it all together for us.

He kicks off with a great wheeze and posits the question; 'If we are all forgiven by the grace of God, then let us continue sinning and receive more grace.' (What could possibly go wrong?)

Mercifully, he immediately puts this idea to bed in v2 when he says; **"²By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"**

The wording of the next verse enlightens us further; **"³Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"**

Read that again, but slowly. You were not just been baptized in the name of Christ, but you have been **"baptized into Christ"**, and therefore by inference, you are part of Christ and He is part of you.

Paul continues in typical Pauline fashion to make his point clear and our reading draws to a close in v11 when he says this; **"¹¹In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."**

If you had any doubt as to your standing with God, now is the time to correct matters and take on board Paul's teachings as he is someone who saw the light, was converted by Jesus Himself and who went on to become (arguably) the greatest ever exponent of Christianity after Jesus.

We all want to learn from other people who have 'been there'; 'walked the talk'; 'done the hard yards' - it's just human nature ... but somehow we let ourselves be diverted by film star flakes and cheesy soap operas. So, maybe now is the time to take Paul's teaching on board; to review your commitment to the Christian faith; to examine both the psalmist and Jeremiah's approach to prayer and to ask God, "What should I be doing?"

But first, take a leaf out of both the psalmist and Jeremiah's books and have a rant and rave at God about whatever gets your goat; and then tell Him what your plans for the future are.

I'm quite sure that God loves a good laugh. Either way having a good laugh together is a great way of getting to know each other better.

Amen.

To finish a short prayer. (which seems particularly relevant to today's Scribblings)

From the Gospel of Thomas, the word of Jesus; No.55 - "Whoever does not refuse father and mother cannot become my student. Whoever does not reject brother and sister, accepting the cross as I do, is not ready for me."⁷

Let us pray...

Oh God, who am I now?
Once, I was secure
 in familiar territory
 in my sense of belonging
unquestioning of
 the norms of my culture
 the assumptions built into my language
 the values shared by my society.

But now you have called me out and away from home,
And I do not know where you are leading.
I am empty, unsure, uncomfortable.
I have only a beckoning start to follow.

Journeying God,
pitch your tent with mine
so that I may not become deterred
by hardships, strangeness, doubt.

Show me the movement I must make
 toward a wealth not dependent on possessions
 toward a wisdom not based on books
 toward a strength not bolstered by might
 toward a God not confined to heaven
but scandalously earthed, poor, unrecognized ...
Help me to find myself
as I walk in others' shoes.⁸

Amen

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1. All biblical passages from the NIV.
2. <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html>
3. <http://sbsinternational.org/resource-material/psalms-3/>
4. <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/1140-psalm-69-a-plea-for-gods-deliverance>
5. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1944
6. Pierre Wolff, p57. "May I hate God?" Longman & Todd Ltd., 1966
7. Lynn C Bauman. 2008. "The Luminous Gospels." Praxis Publishing. p25
8. Angela Ashwin. 2002. (Kate Compston). "The Book of a thousand Prayers". Zondervan. p112