

I wonder, how well do you know the Psalms?

Show of hands: how many have used them systematically?

Who knows some hymns that we sing in church?

*(Psalm 23; All People That on Earth Do Dwell (Old Hundredth). As the Deer Pants; I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes to the Hills).*

How about outside church? *By the Rivers of Bablyon* by Boney M or Don MacLean.

The psalms and books of proverbs form part of the Bible known as wisdom literature; they have been a mainstay of church life and worship since they were written. We could also add the book of Job into this. And Ecclesiastes (once described pithily as poetic reflections on pointlessness). We can also include the extra-canonical books of Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon (focussed on justice & wisdom).

Wisdom is back in fashion today – although you'd be forgiven for not noticing!

Especially after covid – I think there is a question to be asked of us: How to be wise?

Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* – sets out 5 ways by which the soul attains truth:

Episteme – knowledge from reasoning from established principles (how we know stuff for certain)

Techne – applied knowledge or skills (what we can do practically)

Phronesis – knowledge shown in the right choice of actions (practical wisdom – procedure – the knowledge to know what to do)

Nous – intuition; or intelligence or “awareness” (using your nous)

Sophia – wisdom; a uniting of episteme and nous like theoretical wisdom (learning how to live fully).

As I have shared before – and again you may think despite appearances – I have Proverbs 4:6 on my study wall:

“Cling to wisdom – she will protect you. Love her – she will guard you” (Prov. 4:6). We also have

Professor David Ford, when he took on his professorship at Cambridge called his first lecture “A long rumour of wisdom”. Two quote from it as we begin our series on the psalms:

Churches today: “I see the most important item on their theological agenda as the education of their membership for living in truth and wisdom”

*And*

“Wisdom is about the good shaping of understanding and of life... wisdom is not just concerned about more information and knowledge but also about how they relate to other experiences of reality, and how this raises us and assists salvation.

For those of us, all of us, who engage in a life of faith and can therefore be called theologians (however little we think we dip our toes into the water), Ford says that it should be “the most satisfactory overall interest to have, embracing truth, beauty and practice in relation to our reality lived before God”.

All of these are understood prophetically by the early church as relating to or being encapsulated by Jesus' life, teachings and works – see Luke 24:44 ***“He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”***

### **What are the psalms?**

PSALMS, as we will hear are a collection of prayers and songs to God, often used in ritual worship of Israel.

To open the Book of the Psalms is to open the door into the worship world of Jewish believers since 1,000 B.C. and Christian believers since the time of Christ. In the centuries before Christ, Jewish believers would sing the psalms as they made their way to Jerusalem for their annual religious festivals. Jesus and some of his disciples sang some of the same hymns as they left the upper room after their last supper together. Early Christians sang “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph 5:19) in prison (Acts 16:25) and in other difficult times. Today in monasteries, convents and religious houses all over the world, monks, priests, religious sisters and brothers gather at certain times of the day and night to pray the psalms. In some parishes, lay men and women gather before morning Mass to pray the psalms, and individuals pray them in the quiet of their homes. “In turbulent times of history, when the foundations are shaking (Ps 11:3) and the world seems on the verge of chaos, many people testify that the psalms enable them to speak to God “out of the depths” in company with the community of faith, visible and invisible, past and present, local and worldwide” (Bernhard Anderson).

We can say the Psalms have great staying power.

The word Psalm. The Book of Psalms, also known as the Psalter, is a collection of one hundred and fifty prayers-poems composed by the Hebrew people over a period of about 600 years, from around 1,000 B.C. to 400 B.C. The title Psalm in Hebrew—“tehillim”—means “praises” and the English title comes from the Greek word “psalmos,” meaning a song accompanied by a stringed instrument.

The word “praises” captures the context of the Psalter better than any other word. Even in the psalms of sorrow and distress, a note of confidence and trust in God comes through. The Psalms express every mood of the human heart. One of the reasons that people of all races and backgrounds are drawn to the Psalms is because they express every mood in the human heart: joy, despair, discouragement, anger, disappointment, weariness, etc. In the Psalter, we can find a psalm for every season and time.

In his book *Out of the Depths*, Bernhard Anderson writes: “The Psalms speak ‘for’ us by expressing the whole gamut of human responses to God’s reality in our midst and thereby teaching us how to pray with others in the various circumstances of our lives” (p.1X).

They still – as we discussed earlier – still inspired us today:

Joshua Aaron recorded this version of Psalm 133 – hineh ma tov. It uses some of the Hebrew so you will get a flavour of the language too. It is still used as a folk dance – and sung by schoolchildren and Jewish scout groups. The psalm means “how good and pleasant it is when people dwell in unity”. Hence the party feel!

Joshua Aaron “Hineh Ma Tov” ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoEg\\_jRtrHc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoEg_jRtrHc))

They are used in choral worship – any evensong will have a psalm.

A question for us to consider as we begin is:

What is the function of each psalm?

A larger question is “how does a collection of human prayers become divine revelation” – as Boenhoffer says: these words of men become God’s word to man?

The psalms are designed to open our hearts to God, individually and collectively. Poppy and I have “The Lord is our refuge and strength” (Psalm 46) on our bannisters with pictures of our family and adventures to greet and remind us at the start and end of the day.

Every time I have presided at the Eucharist; my prayer is a paraphrase of psalm 26:6 when I perform the ablutions (wash my hands before the eucharistic prayer): Lord, wash my hands and heart that I may go about your altar; to sing a song of joy and thanksgiving and tell of all your wondrous works. (*Psalm 26.6 - I wash my hands in innocence and go about your altar, Lord, proclaiming aloud your praise and telling of all your wonderful deeds*).

It grounds me and focuses me for what we are about to do and reminds me of the privilege it is to be your Vicar.

Let’s begin at the beginning – Psalm 1. What I’m going to do is play Psalm 1, then we will hear it read, and then I will ask you to turn to your neighbours and discuss it. After our discussion, we’ll listen to it in another style.

**Song:** Benedictine Monks of Worth Abbey: Psalm 1  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k42n8MUGlo>)

### **Questions on the psalm:**

Who is speaking in it?

What are the major turning points of the psalm?

What words/phrase jumped out at you? Why?

What would you ask the writer of this psalm if you could?

**Song:** Psalm 1: Sons of Korah (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYhQATf8HDw>)

Out of interest: Which style of music appealed most to you and why?

### **So, onto the structure of our psalms:**

Who wrote the Psalms? Traditionally, the Book of Psalms have been attributed to David because he is depicted in the books of Samuel as a musician (1Sam 16:16-23) who composes songs (2Sam 1:17, 2 Sam 22). Also, David’s name appears in the heading of 73 psalms. Thirteen of the Psalms are associated with an event in David’s life. Today it is generally agreed that many of the Psalms attributed to David were written at a much later time. Some Psalms are attributed to others, such as Asaph and the sons of Korah. About fifty of the Psalms are anonymous. Types of Psalms. There are three major groups of Psalms: Songs of Lament, Hymns of Praise, and Songs of Thanksgiving. Then there are several smaller groupings, such as the Royal Psalms and Wisdom Psalms.

*Gillingham, Poems & psalms of the Hebrew Bible, p. 243.*

Book 1 of the Psalms: contains 1-2 as introductory; then 3-41 of David.

Book 2 of the Psalms 42-72: contains 42-49 ‘of Korah’; 50 ‘of Asaph’; 51-72 ‘of David’

Book 4 90-106: Miscellaneous and 93-99 on kingship.

Book 5: 107-150: 112-118 ‘hallel’; 120-134 ‘ascents’ 138-145 ‘of David’ (119 is ‘torah’ and 146-150 ‘hallel’ or praise).

Developments in the psalter over the years can be seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls – and there is a scholarly debate that Psalm 89 is the end of the Psalter.

### **Theology of the Psalms**

A theology of the psalms asks: What do the psalms tell us what Israel believed about? In his book, *Reading the Old Testament*, Lawrence Boadt names the following seven of the characteristic or qualities of God found in the Psalms. • God is holy. He is addressed as the “Holy One of Israel” in Psalms 72:22, 78:41 and 89:19. This signifies that God is not one of us, but apart from and above human life.

- God is greater than all other gods. “Who is like the Lord our God enthroned on high?” (113:5- 6).  
“There is no God like you among all the gods, O Lord, nor any deeds like yours” (86:8).
- God is eternal. “Before the mountains were created, you had formed the earth and its surface, from eternity to eternity you are God” (90:2).
- God is a rock and fortress to defend us. Psalm 18 begins with these words: “O Lord, my rock, my fortress, my savior, my God, my rock, my savior.”
- God is a redeemer. In Psalm 31, the psalmist begs God to come and rescue him. “Incline your ear to me and rescue me quickly.”
- God is compassionate and merciful. “His mercy endures forever” is added after each verse in Psalm 136.
- God is just and upright. “The word of the Lord is upright, all his works show his faithfulness, he loves righteousness and justice” (33:4-5).

### **Psalms as poetry.**

The psalms are inspired prayer poems that bring us into contact with God. The dominant characteristic of Hebrew poetry is its parallelism which can be found in different forms throughout the psalms.

Most typical is where both parts of the verse say essentially the same thing. For example, Psalm 119:1 says: “Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk by the teaching of the Lord.”

Sometimes the parallel is one of contrast. For example, Psalm 1:6 says: “The Lord looks over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”

Another poetic characteristic of the Psalter is the use of metaphor and figurative language.

For example, Psalm 65: “Save me, O Lord, O Lord, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters and the flood sweeps over me.”

Rev Sue, Roddy & I will continue to delve into these themes – Rev Sue will cover psalms of Thanksgiving, Roddy will cover worship, and I will be covering lament.

Some questions for your own reflection through the next few weeks – and your own Bible reading.

Where does Jesus quote the psalms and what meaning might this have for our understanding of Jesus?

What do the psalms tell us:

About their theme? Do they capture it for you?

About us (as readers)? What am I noticing as I read them in myself?

About God?

### **Ending**

I am going to end with another psalm – psalm 19 14: by one of my favourite artists. I realise this has been a lot of information today but it is a lovely way to end. You may recognise the opening words from the prayer we sometimes pray before a sermon – may it be our prayer today as the psalms draw us nearer to God. Philippians 14: 8 is included in this song too.

Fernando Ortega – Let the words of my mouth

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr8QoQKmXfk>)

### **Bibliography**

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Lecture Notes on Psalms by Rev. Dr Richard Briggs and/or Rev. Dr Calvin Samuel (notes by Rev Nathan Thorpe, 2015).