

I was helping to train her as a lay preacher, and one day she asked me if I could think of something to help her panic attacks. She was not panicking about preaching, or anything in particular, but she was a theatre nurse, and panic attacks in an operating theatre must be a nightmare. I suggested she learn some verses of the Psalms: their rhythm alone is calming, often with the parallel form of Hebrew poetry, to reassure us of God's presence and strength.

Bless the Lord, O my soul:
and all that is within me bless God's holy name,
who forgives all your sins,
and heals all your sickness. (Ps. 103)

Well, it gets me through the dentist anyway, and it seemed to help her, creating a safe space of reassurance in the midst of panic. Music proved for the Hebrew people, as for the Jews of the Holocaust, the black slaves and many refugees since, a sanctuary. You can lose your homeland, your place of worship, your family, as the Jews of the Exile did, and have many times since, but you can carry with you a song, a rhythm, to help you remember and remember a past tradition of faith, a rhythm to give you a sense that life is moving somewhere purposefully.

But it's not just the form: it's what the Psalms say. They are, as part of Scripture, the Word of God, yet more than most Scripture, they are also an intensely human word and there are no human emotions censored here. In my childhood as a choirboy (and still now) I have felt the words of Paul lecturing me from a great height. Even Jesus seems to challenge us to live an impossible dream. But the Psalms are where we are. They give us permission to admit we are angry, depressed, vengeful, arrogant, complacent, confident, hopeful, jubilant, even at others' expense. They don't tidy away our feelings. They are not like those nice Christians who are so nice that you feel there's something nasty about them. What you see here is what you get. It's not (thank God) the last word in faith in Scripture, but unless we can recognize where people are, as Jane Chevous said about the victims of abuse, we cannot find a faith that will do for healing and living. So, the Psalms are not (not often anyway) a creed, they are (as their Hebrew name suggests) a prayer, releasing in us, even subconsciously, all kinds of uncomfortable feelings. They are not our last word to God, but, having brought our emotions into the open, they allow us to move on in prayer.

Sometimes these emotions are extreme, even ridiculous. We didn't need modern comedy to see the satire in

Moab is my washpot;
over Edom I cast my shoe. (Ps. 60.10)

Throwing sandals in the Middle East is a recipe for a diplomatic incident, as we have seen.

Or we may turn to the complacency of Psalm 119:

More than all my teachers I have understanding...

(How often in some dreadful lecture or sermon have we thought that — you may be thinking it now!)

Compared to the elders, I am so wise,
because I have kept your commandments. (Ps. 119.99-100)

‘I have been young and now am old,
yet never have I seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging their bread. (Ps.37.25)

Yet that same Psalm 37 helped to shape Jesus’ words in the Beatitudes. The Psalms are (as the title of my book says) ‘Songs for the Journey’. They meet us here we are, not where religion tells us we should be. They are on our side, moving us on through pain and joy to see our lives on a broader canvas. And, at their most human, I believe, they are most keenly the voice of God within us.

Some years ago, I was talking about this at a meeting and afterwards the priest came and gave me his own personal meditation on that most difficult of psalms, Psalm 137, ‘By the waters of Babylon.’ The Anglican Book of Common Prayer sets it to be read on the 28th evening of the month.

(Meditation used with permission)

28th Evening

“Blessed shall he be that taketh thy children; and
throweth them against the stones”

*You took our child, God. You threw her on the rocks of
cancer. You tortured her little body with surgery and
chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and you tortured us with
hope. You did that for eighteen months. And then for a
year you mocked us, as her hair grew back and that sharp
and musical mind grew and flourished as never before.*

*And then you struck and the laughter died in our throats.
At least you spared us hope the second time.*

*Now we could only watch with her, and wait, as the
talents which seemed about to burst so joyfully from
Hannah withered and die. And we talked together of
what would be, knowing, that as we did, that it was only
of what might have been.*

*You threw her against the stones one last time, and she
died on the 28th Evening – just ten days before her sixth
birthday. And I cannot forgive you for that, God.
Hannah has, that I know. For all that she endured at
your hands she still went on loving you. Your abused
child. Because she didn’t know any better Thank God I
do not have her faith, her incapacity to hate.*

*What were you doing? I was the one with her. I was the
one who held her in my arms for the injections. I was the
one who calmed her fears during the nose bleeds,*

Who held you?

Who gave you the strength?

Who so encompassed you around with love that it
flowed out from you to Hannah without despair?

She could only love me so trustingly because she knew what a Father's love could be.

By the waters of Babylon I sat down and wept –
with you. With you from the first morning to the
28th Evening
And with you now
And with Hannah now
And she with me though I need no longer
weep for her.
Though still I shall weep with you whenever you
visit the waters of Babylon.

Psalm 137 is unusual in Hebrew poetry because it has rhyme as well as rhythm:

al naharōth Bābel
shām yāshabnū gam bākīnū
bzākrēnū eth-Tsiyōn

On the 28th evening, like everyone who has prayed that psalm, this father was not on his own. Those long 'inu' sounds are the first person plural. 'We sat down', 'we wept', and in the Hebrew text, 'we also wept'. Why also? the Rabbis asked. Because, they answered, God also weeps with us. Rabbi Shapiro preaching to the Warsaw ghetto (14.3.1942) said, 'The pain that a person undergoes by himself alone may have the effect of breaking him ... but the weeping that the person does together with God – that strengthens him.' So many people struggling with life, never mind faith, could bear witness to that truth as they have found strength from the prayer and hospitality of religious houses – monks and nuns praying constantly, and especially for those who cannot pray.

The Psalms are a sanctuary because, however individualistic they seem, they are 'we' prayers with God, a community with a shared story of faith. These are songs people have sung in their need over centuries, and we can sing them, sharing their struggle for faith. Not only that, the Psalms open our ears and hearts to hear through the noise of our own crises the voice of God recalling how we have struggled in the past and found God lighten our darkness.

I said, 'My grief is this:
the right hand of the Most High has lost its strength.'
I will remember the works of the Lord,
and call to mind your wonders of old time. (Ps. 77)

Again and again, God's mercy in guiding our past becomes a rock on which we ground our hope.

And the greatest act of God's love is our very creation. Jesus' prayer on the cross, Psalm 22, reflects a mind of justified paranoia: we hear the voices of criticism roaring outside and within; we see the world laughing at us; we feel the worthlessness of a body like a worm in the dust compared with beasts tearing at us. Yet we remember that 'God is my God, even from my mother's womb. It is you who laid me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast ever since I was born.' Our sanctuary is a common memory of faith that God made us uniquely and has always loved us. Therefore we may hope, 'for his faithful love endures for ever' (Ps. 136). So Mary at the cross is the mother who embodies the psalmist's memory of our Maker and Lover since birth.

And the psalmist invites us to find God calling us into the future. The strength of shared pain, shared story and the strength of prayer lead to a conviction that from our need, from our very creation, we have something to offer others. So, in the Easter Garden, Jesus echoes the conclusion of Psalm 22: ‘I will tell of your name to my brothers’ as he bids Mary of Magdala out of her grief to ‘go and tell my brothers I am ascending to my Father and your Father’ (John 20).

We may start out like David, bringing our own abject failure of sin:

I acknowledge my faults,
my sin is ever before me...
Send me not away from your presence. (Ps. 51)

but the psalms will not let us wallow in self-pity.

We are not sent back to our own lack of self-worth, our marred image of ourselves, but sent on to bring hope to others.

Then shall I teach your ways to the wicked,
and sinners shall turn to you.
Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

When a penitent comes to make their confession to a priest, the last words they hear the priest say are not even words of forgiveness but a mission: ‘Go in peace, and pray for me, a sinner.’ Forgiven, our immediate task is to be back in God’s service, offering the hope we have been given.

I have talked about the Psalms as a sanctuary, a refuge – music that travels with us, rhythm that gives meaning, words that release in us our deepest human needs and emotions, from complacency to despair, and share those feelings with God and with a community that embodies a story of faith that has helped others in the past and helps us. It is prayer that opens our narrow introspection to see God calling us from our hiding place, from a safe community into the world.

And what a world the psalmist sets before us! In our depression the sun may taunt us, the rain and cloudy skies reinforce our inner darkness, but the psalms, if we say them regularly and completely, will not let us escape from a world God created to be good and beautiful. God sends the springs into the brooks, running among the hills, the birds make their nests beside them in the trees, trees full of sap. The mountains are a refuge for the goats. God makes awesome and apparently useless sea creatures just to watch them play in the deep. God’s breath renews the face of the earth (Ps. 104). All creatures here depend on each other – that’s the nature of God’s universe. All need each other. The whole world is a sanctuary, a holy place, a place of joy and fruitfulness, where we taste and see the goodness of God, bread from the earth, honey dripping from the comb, smell the fragrance of frankincense and oil, drink the wine, the cup of salvation. And we are called to keep this world as a sanctuary for all its creatures.

A last word. Because the Psalms are not a neatly-defined creed or mission statement, they are – like our faith – a paradox, and I want finally to set before you the paradox of sanctuary. When I was in a New Forest parish, where teenagers are often more isolated than in the city (and sometimes more vulnerable), they used to love singing a chorus from Psalm 32, crammed into a small candle-lit Lady Chapel on a Friday night, away from peer pressure, family tensions:

You are my hiding-place:
you always fill my heart
with songs of deliverance.

And so our God, our prayer with God, is a hiding-place, a refuge, whether it be the words or songs of Scripture or the community of faith, or a 'thin place' where we know we can sense God.

In the day of trouble he shall hide me in his shelter:
in the secret place of his dwelling shall he hide me
and set me high upon a rock. (Ps. 27)

'He shall hide me in his shelter'. 'Sukkah' is the Hebrew word here for 'shelter', as in the Jewish festival of Sukkoth, when Jews build a temporary hut outside to remind them of their journeying through the wilderness into the land of promise. In the midst of our vulnerability, our disorientation, with the security of home gone, future unknown, God absent or hiding, the psalms reorient us to find shelter in the special intimacy of God through our prayer to God in God's sanctuary. But the 'sukkah' is not our ultimate destination. It is the shepherd's hut out on the hills for the shepherd who needs a safe place for the night, the harvest shelter workers made to sleep in when time was critical for gathering in the crop, that in-between risky time between growing and rainy seasons, when the harvest hangs in the balance, a shelter in the wilderness between slavery and the land of promise.

Our sanctuary or holy place is God-given, a sacramental meeting of heaven and earth, reaffirming the material world which may be transfigured for the world to see our ultimate destiny, 'which is to be *implaced* where the nature of the places in which we will find ourselves will be a transfigured version of the places of the here and now'. John Inge's case for the vital holiness of place is compelling, but, as he says, our place, though not taken away, is changed and transfigured. There can be a comfortable complacency about being all our lives in one place, be it a village or a relationship, and we can be blinded by the deceptive sameness to think that it hasn't changed. The shelter, of which the psalmist sings, is a sanctuary for people on the move, looking forward. For Our God is a dynamic, creative God, for God is love and love changes everything. God moves like the breath of the wind, the pillar of cloud and fire, staying among us but moving us on to greater truth and love. And the Psalms are songs for that journey. Their expression of human need and life in the raw and the raw beauty of the world God creates (including you and me) calls is to find our true sanctuary, God's own self.