

injustice. We call upon God to make things right, for otherwise we risk seeking our own vindication, which leads to unforgiveness, laughing at other people's misfortune, pre-meditated hurting and and judging. Remember it is God who judges all, and He has no favourites. [see Romans 12:19-21]

[3] This Christ-centred way of understanding the Psalms and indeed all the OT enables us to see all the psalms, all scripture as Christian, as our scriptures.

Even the shortest Psalm, no 117, speaks to this:

**Praise the Lord, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.**

**For great is his love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.**

[NB by the way how one phrase parallels another, a regular psalm style]

We know that the nations are not all praising the Lord, and the peoples are not all extolling Him. As Psalms & scripture suggest this is because the nations & peoples trust other gods or live the this-is-all-there-is-life, and either way give no care to the one true God, treating Him as not interested or non-existent.

Yet – and Christ is the evidence for this – the Lord's love is great towards us. [eg John c3:16-17 and his first letter, c3:1]

The faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. His love is not for today and gone tomorrow. When you love someone do you want to be bereaved by them? No, we long for continued togetherness. This longing is in us because it is in God. We are made in His image.

So can see here a good news prayer for the nations and the peoples to realise God's eternal love, and turn to Him and be saved.

It is also a prayer of comfort for us, for we trust God's love for us, His eternal faithfulness to us. His love for us cannot end with our death. Therefore be assured no matter how your life is now, stand faithful to God for God is faithful to you. His faithfulness means your death is the gate to your utterly good resurrection life.

Let's Read the Bible!

Reading the psalms

No 5 in our occasional series

Introduction

Many of us enjoy the loving words we can find in the Psalms, such as in psalm 133, but some of them say very challenging things that we may find it hard to come to terms with, such as psalm 137.

I was recently looking at a book called "The Message of Prayer" by Tim Chester. It's published by IVP and it's ISBN number [which helps identify books] is 0-85111-406-7. Chester has some helpful advice about how to read the Psalms, from which this is drawn.

But firstly a personal thought.

I think that the psalms are written in the context of life experience. They are not philosophical poems, in my view, written from the mind – not even psalm 119 - though they often use poetic techniques, but rather like popular music they spring from the heart.

The heart that joys in God, the heart that is hurt by the unfairness of life, the heart that clings to God even in the midst of suffering. The heart that hopes in God even when you are battered, bashed about and bruised by life. Psalm 88 seems utterly empty of any hope, yet its very darkness can speak into the despair of deep distress. It's in the depths of life that the comfort of Psalm 23 can work deepest. And in the pain of life the difficult words of some psalms help you to say what you want to say, knowing that God prefers to hear the truth of our hurts, rather than pretence that all's OK. Like Jesus on the cross citing psalm 22, we can express our trust in God, even amid our suffering the scorn of men and women and the despite of people.

Written under the Old Testament but pointing to the New.

Have you noticed that life tends to move in fashions? A new idea comes along and it's all the rage. Soon there's no other way than to see things and to speak of them but in the terms of that fashion. One of the Bible fashions of our time is to speak of the OT as the Hebrew scriptures. That helps us see the OT in its original context. So the psalms express events in Israel's life, e.g. to celebrate kings and kingship as in 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 132, and 144. But none of these royal psalms were ever fulfilled or ever could be fulfilled by a king of Israel, not even David. Their ultimate meaning lies in the messianic hope of God's rule through His Anointed One, ie Christ.

The psalms speak of Jesus

The psalms were not written for a people to look backward. There is no hope for us if all we have is the good old days. To see God at work only in the past is to live in a present despair. Gideon speaks of that in Judges 6. The Midianites are oppressing Israel when the angel of the Lord appears to him, saying, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." to which Gideon responds, "if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" [6:12-13]

The psalms and all scripture is written with a forward view. As Jesus explains twice in Luke 24, once on the road to Emmaus and again in the upper room: He is written about in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms – the traditional description for the Hebrew scriptures, our OT. It is not just in the Prophets that the Bible is prophetic. The Psalms and all scripture speak of Him.

And what applies to Jesus applies to us, His people.

The psalms, Chester suggests, speak of our experience as Christ's people – even our suffering as we extend His kingdom.

Psalms 23 for example while seeing us in the midst of opposition offers us hope, because it is about Christ. God's rescue of Christ from death assures Christians of our rescue from death. Our comfort is that we have a kingdom future in and through Christ.

The psalms deal with the reality of life in the truth of our faith

The psalms are more than religious poems speaking about old Israelite events and ways. They speak about the challenges of faith in a broken world. Chester refers to them having three voices, which I would express as:

- the voice of joyful security – life is good, and all is going well in God's good care.
- the voice of lament and suffering – life is not as it should be; it is or has become disrupted, I'm bothered, battered, bashed about, and feeling bewildered, angry, sorrowful.
- the voice of trust and praise – God will act, restoring goodness - which in my view is not always about restoring a better present life but points also to our future resurrection peace and joy.

These 3 voices can be seen in any psalm e.g. psalm 22, but also across the psalms as a whole, so psalms 3 to 7 are psalms of lament whereas psalms 144-150 are psalms of trust and praise.

These voices speak into what the early Church saw as a "cosmic movement focused on Jesus Christ." The good creation was sadly ripped apart by the Fall, plunging all life into loss, sorrow and pain. But through Christ there will be a new creation, fully good, without evil. Death and any form of suffering will be no more. This is not yet but it is sign-posted by Easter and resurrection.

The psalms are real for us for they wrestle with the tension we experience between life as it is and the Easter promise, and point to the tension being resolved by God's coming reign in the new creation.

Chester concludes: this Christ-centred approach means:

[1] when the psalms refer to a person's righteousness we can trust in that for ourselves for they speak of the righteousness that is ours in Christ.

[2] the language of violence that disturbs us can be seen not as justifying our hitting out but as the cry for vindication in the face of