

Chelmsford Cathedral



The Seven Psalms
a Lent Journey of Lament and Hope
led by Nicholas Henshall, Dean of Chelmsford

Introduction

The Psalms are an extraordinary treasure store of poetry and song which give voice to very human emotion. The Psalms give us words to praise God and express our deepest thanksgivings and desires. They also give us words to express human tragedy, to sound the darkest realities of our human experience. The Psalms give us permission to dance and sing in the Lord's presence and to bring our most heart-breaking lament before the Lord.

The "Seven Psalms" – or the "Seven Penitential Psalms" – have had a long association with the season of Lent. They bring together a diverse group of Psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143) all of which are in different ways reflecting on the transformative role of lament in the life of faith. These psalms have a particular power to speak into our present context. They invite us to journey into the depths of the human experience and of the God we meet there – the God we know in Jesus Christ reaching out arms of his mercy and assuring us of his love.

Each session will take either a single psalm from the seven, or two psalms together. We will read through them with some detailed commentary so we grow familiar with their structure and content. And then we ask ourselves what God is inviting us to notice in these timeless texts. Where God is drawing our attention?

Everyone is warmly welcome, and no prior knowledge of the Psalms is necessary.

The Psalms

Down the centuries the Psalms have played a central role in Christian worship and in personal prayer, just as they have in the Jewish community. They are one of the most remarkable features of our shared heritage.

The Psalms a collection of 150 texts that have been said and sung in every conceivable context and in response to every conceivable human need. They are a treasure house of corporate and personal reflections which give us a language to talk to God intimately about our deepest experiences grief, ecstatic joy, thanksgiving, sorrow, an outpouring of praise, a song of bitter regret.

The oldest psalms date back traditionally to King David around 1,000 BC, and the collection as a whole is sometimes called the "Psalms of David". That is misleading as the titles of many of the Psalms tell us about different authors such as Asaph and the Sons of Korah.

It seems clear that the Psalms – along with the Old Testament as a whole – reached the form familiar to us today in the period following the Exile (6th to 5th centuries BC). This was a massive period of challenge and change for the people of Israel. The Exile had called into question almost everything and raised big questions for the future. The Psalms are part of the response.

As Christians and Jews have discovered in every century, the Psalms are timeless and have the capacity to speak in fresh ways to each generation. They are a unique resource for our current context.

Lament and Hope

The saying of the seven penitential psalms became a popular prayer practice some 600 years ago, and many people - even though unable to read or write - knew them by heart and used them in their daily prayers. This Lent - the great season of penitence and prayer - we are invited to rediscover this tradition and find in these ancient texts food for our journey.

Over the six Sundays running up to Easter we will reflect on each of the seven psalms in turn (taking two of the shorter psalms together in the first talk). We will look at shape and structure, reflect on the language, give space to how we might use these in our own prayers. And throughout the journey we will seek to discern the thread of lament and hope that runs through these psalms, and which make them a special gift to us this year as we find ourselves spending a second Lent under the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic.

My prayer is that we will discover extraordinary resources that enable us both to grapple with the challenging realities and to live in hope.

Note about Psalm titles and Psalm Prayers

Many of the psalms (116 out of 150) have titles (or superscriptions as they are often called). They contain a range of information such as indications of the tune, the type of composition, the musical instruments to be used and the author(s) of the psalm. These have been included in the psalms contained in this booklet.

There is also an ancient Christian tradition of Psalm Prayers, often improvised reflections during worship. There are many different collections down the centuries and in this booklet the ones contained in *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* have been included after each Psalm, both to use and as an encouragement to our own prayerful reflection on the Psalms.

The First Sunday of Lent

Psalm 6

For the lead player, on stringed instruments, on the eight-stringed lute, a David psalm.

- 2 Stop rebuking me, Lord,
hold back your rage.
- 3 Have pity, for I am spent;
heal me, hurt to the bone,
4 wracked to the limit.
Lord, how long? How long?
- 5 Repent. Lord, save me.
You promised; keep faith!
- 6 In death, who remembers you?
In Sheol, who gives you thanks?
- 7 Night after night I lie exhausted,
hollow-eyed with grief,
8 my pillow soaked with tears:
all because of my foes.
- 9 Get away, from me, scoundrels!
The Lord has heard my tears.
- 10 God hears my pleading
and will answer my prayer.
- 11 My foes will be shamed, shocked,
turned back in sudden panic.

*Lord Jesus Christ,
may the tears shed in your earthly life
be balm for all who weep,
and may the prayers of your pilgrimage
give strength to all who suffer;
for your mercy's sake.*

A David maskil

- 2 Happy the pardoned,
whose sin is cancelled,
in whom God finds
no evil, no deceit.
- 3 While I hid my sin,
my bones grew weak
from endless groaning.
- 4 Day and night,
under the weight of your hand,
my strength withered
as in a summer drought.
- 5 Then I stopped hiding my sin
and spoke out,
“God, I confess my wrong.”
And you pardoned me.
- 6 No wonder the faithful
pray to you in danger!
Even a sudden flood
will never touch them.
- 7 You, my shelter,
you save me from ruin.
You encircle me
with songs of freedom.
- 8 “I show you the path to walk.
As your teacher,
I watch out for you.
- 9 “Do not be a stubborn mule,
needing bridle and bit
to be tamed.”

10 Evil brings grief;
trusting in God brings love.

Rejoice in the Lord.
Be glad and sing,
you faithful and just.

*Give us honest hearts, O God,
and send your kindly Spirit
to help us confess our sins
and bring us the peace of your forgiveness;
in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The Second Sunday of Lent

Psalm 38

A David psalm; to call to mind

- 2 God, do not punish me
or strike me in your anger.
- 3 Your arrows have pierced deep,
your hand has struck hard.
- 4 Because of your wrath,
my whole body withers.
Because of my sin,
all my bones grow brittle.
- 5 For my sins weigh me down,
too heavy to bear.
- 6 My wounds fester and reek
because of my folly.
- 7 Bent over and humbled,
I walk in misery all day long.
- 8 Fever consumes me;
there is no health in my body.
- 9 Feeble and broken, I cry out,
groaning from the heart.
- 10 Lord, you see what I long for,
you hear all my sighs.
- 11 My heart pounds, my strength fails,
the light of my eyes is snuffed out.
- 12 Friends and neighbours avoid me,
keeping their distance.
- 13 My mortal foes scheme against me,
hatching plots day after day
and spreading lies to trap me.
- 14 Like someone born deaf
or unable to speak,

- 15 I can no longer hear,
I have no words for my defence.
- 16 But I wait for you, Lord,
and you, my God, will answer.
- 17 I said, "Don't let them gloat,
those who laugh when I fall."
18 For I am about to collapse,
there is no relief from my pain.
- 19 I know my guilt
and grieve over my sin.
20 My enemies are strong;
many hate me for no reason.
21 Those who deal evil for good
blame me for seeking what is right.
- 22 Do not abandon me, God,
do not stay far from me.
23 Hurry, Lord, help me!
for you keep me safe.

*Almighty Lord and Saviour,
behold with pity the wounds of your people;
do not forsake us, sinful as we are,
but for the sake of the passion of your
Beloved One, Jesus,
come quickly to our aid,
for his mercy's sake.*

The Third Sunday of Lent

Psalm 51

For the lead player; a David psalm

- 3 Have mercy, tender God,
forget that I defied you.
- 4 Wash away my sin,
cleanse me from my guilt.
- 5 I know my evil well,
it stares me in the face,
6 evil done to you alone
before your very eyes.
- How right your condemnation!
Your verdict clearly just.
- 7 You see me for what I am,
a sinner before my birth.
- 8 You love those centred in truth;
teach me your hidden wisdom.
- 9 Wash me with fresh water,
wash me bright as snow.
- 10 Fill me with happy songs,
let the bones you bruised now dance.
- 11 Shut your eyes to my sin,
make my guilt disappear.
- 12 Creator, reshape my heart,
God, steady my spirit.
- 13 Do not cast me aside
stripped of your holy spirit.
- 14 Save me, bring back my joy,
support me, strengthen my will.
- 15 Then I will teach your way
and sinners will turn to you.

- 16 Help me, stop my tears,
and I will sing your goodness.
- 17 Lord, give me words
and I will shout your praise.
- 18 When I offer a holocaust,
the gift does not please you.
- 19 So I offer my shattered spirit;
a changed heart you welcome.
- 20 In your love make Zion lovely,
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
- 21 Then sacrifice will please you,
young bulls upon your altar.

*Take away, good Lord, the sin that corrupts us;
give us the sorrow that heals
and the joy that praises
and restore by grace your own image within us,
that we may take our place among your people;
in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Psalm 102

*A prayer for the lowly when they grow faint
and pour out their plea before the Lord*

- 2 Hear my prayer, Lord,
let my cry reach you.
- 3 Do not turn from me
in my hour of need.
When I call, listen,
answer me at once.
- 4 For my days dissolve like smoke,
my bones are burned to ash.
- 5 My heart withers away like grass.
I even forget to eat,
- 6 so consumed am I with grief.
My skin hangs on my bones.
- 7 Like a gull lost in the desert,
like an owl haunting the ruins,
- 8 I keep a solitary watch,
a lone bird on a roof.
- 9 All day my enemies mock me,
they make my name a curse.
- 10 For bread, I eat ashes,
tears salt my drink.
- 11 You lifted me up in anger
and threw me to the ground.
- 12 My days pass into evening,
I wither like the grass.
- 13 But you, Lord, preside for ever,
every age remembers you.
- 14 Rise with mercy for Zion,
for now is the time for pity.
- 15 Your servants treasure every stone,
they cherish even the rubble.

- 16 Nations will fear your name,
your glory will humble kings.
- 17 When you rebuild Zion's walls,
you will appear in glory, Lord.
- 18 You hear the homeless pleading
and do not mock their prayer.
- 19 Write this down for those to come,
a people created to praise our God:
- 20 "The Lord watches from on high,
searches the earth from heaven.
- 21 "God hears the prisoner's groan
and sets the doomed free
22 to sing the Lord's name in Zion,
God's praise in Jerusalem.
- 23 There the nations and peoples
gather to serve the Lord."
- 24 God has broken me in my prime,
has cut short my days.
- 25 I say: "My God, do not take me.
My life is only half-spent,
while you live from age to age."
- 26 Long ago you made the earth,
the heavens, too, are your work.
- 27 Should they decay, you remain.
Should they wear out like a robe,
like clothing changed and thrown away,
28 you are still the same.
Your years will never end.
- 29 May your servants' line last for ever,
our children grow strong before you.

*Have pity on our frailty, O God,
and in the hour of our death
cast us not away as clothing that is worn,
for you are our eternal refuge;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Psalm 130

A song of ascents

2 From the depths I call to you,
Lord, hear my cry.
Catch the sound of my voice
raised up, pleading.

3 If you record our sins,
Lord, who could survive?
4 But because you forgive
we stand in awe.

5 I trust in God's word,
I trust in the Lord.
6 More than sentries for dawn
I watch for the Lord.

7 More than sentries for dawn
let Israel watch.
The Lord will bring mercy
and grant full pardon.
8 The Lord will free Israel
from all its sins.

*Father, we commend to your faithful love
those who are crying from the depths;
help them to watch and pray
through their time of darkness,
in sure hope of the dawn of your
forgiveness and redemption;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Palm Sunday

Psalm 143

A David psalm

- Hear me, faithful Lord!
bend to my prayer,
show compassion.
- 2 Do not judge me harshly;
in your sight, no one is just.
- 3 My enemy hunts me down,,
grinding me to dust,
caging me with the dead
in lasting darkness.
- 4 My strength drains away,
my heart is numb.
- 5 I remember the ancient days,
I recall your wonders,
the work of your hands.
- 6 Dry as thirsty land,
I reach out for you.
- 7 Answer me quickly, Lord.
My strength is spent.
Do not hide from me
or I will fall into the grave.
- 8 Let morning announce your love,
for it is you I trust.
Show me the right way,
I offer you myself.
- 9 Rescue me from my foes,
you are my only refuge, Lord.
- 10 Teach me your will,
for you are my God.

Graciously lead me, Lord,
on to level ground.

11 I call on your just name,
keep me safe, free from danger.

12 In your great love for me,
disarm my enemies,
destroy their power,
for I belong to you.

*Jesus, our companion,
when we are driven to despair,
help us, through the friends and strangers
we encounter on our path,
to know you as our refuge,
our way, our truth and our life.*

