

Reflective Worship 7th May

[Psalm 30](#)

A few weeks ago, Paul and I found ourselves in Salisbury Cathedral towards the end of the afternoon, and decided to stay for evensong. I confess that cathedral worship is not my natural habitat, but once or twice a year I find that there is something about the timelessness of the service that draws me in. The ancient words, faithfully repeated by countless voices over centuries, remind me of the constancy of the Living God and lead my heart into a different place of praise.

And deeply embedded in Evensong are the Psalms – chanted for generations in cathedrals and abbeys, and before that in Jewish worship for many centuries prior to their adoption by Christian communities.

And I suspect part of the reason for this is their sheer practicality (relatability?). They are open, honest – sometimes raw - expressions of human beings' relationships with God, with each other, and with their own selves. They express the emotions of nations and communities as well as individuals, and so – despite the fact that they were mostly written around 3,000 years ago, in a location and culture that was immensely different from 21st century Shirley - they resonate strongly with our own experience of life. Even if some of the language is rather more – extreme- than we would normally use today.

So today, we're going to spend some time with Psalm 30 – which is the 'set' psalm for this evening...

Read [Psalm 30](#)

On Thursday this week we began a new START course. After we've all introduced ourselves, had something to eat, and settled down with a cuppa we always begin with writing the words "Life is..." on a large sheet of paper, and inviting everyone to complete the sentence in whatever way they wish. As always we had some great suggestions, one of which was 'full of ups and downs'.

Life is.... full of ups and downs. How true.

And this psalm seems to reflect and speak into that experience perfectly.

It seems like the writer is on the up part of the cycle. He's been in the depths. In that dark place he's turned to God, and experienced God's love and mercy and healing – he's been restored. And now he turns to praise as he sees afresh that God *is* good. That God is always working to bring good out of bad, new beginnings out of old failures, resurrection out of apparent defeat. "Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."

The Bible contains the story of humanity's developing relationship with God. A relationship in which God takes all the initiative – speaking to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, and then to Moses and Aaron, and so on through his prophets. A relationship in which human beings try to fill in the gaps, try to make sense of these revelations in the context of where they are, and what they are experiencing.

Later on in our START course we were talking about what we meant by 'a nice home'. It turned out that what we meant was somewhere we felt safe and secure – rather than somewhere with all the latest décor and gadgets. And someone pointed out that our homes are infinitely more comfortable than kings and princesses lived in during mediaeval times. Comfort in their context meant something very different from comfort in ours.

In the context of a subsistence culture, where land was disputed and war was frequent, it's maybe not surprising that the Israelites saw periods of famine and plenty, war and peace, in terms of God's anger or God's favour. You break the rules and God unleashes his anger and retribution upon you as a punishment and until you repent – and then God brings the rains and life becomes prosperous as a reward for your good behaviour.

Jesus shows us a fuller picture of God. Not as a god who doesn't care about right and wrong, justice and exploitation, but as the God who recognises the negative outcomes such as war, famine, injustice as consequences of humanity's failure to live in the way God always intended us to live.¹ In Jesus we meet the God who comes among us to show us how to live, to open up the way back into relationship, and to offer us a new start in place of failure. And to enrol us in his mission to establish his kingdom of love, peace, justice and mercy.

It's generally believed that this psalm was written by King David - the great Old Testament king whose reign marked the high point of the nation of Israel. A

¹ "The sins of the fathers....."

king, a great leader and inspirer of people – but also very human. A man of many flaws and failures, but the one who the prophet Samuel described as “a man after God’s own heart.” A man whose whole life story seems to be characterised by falling down, turning back to God, and getting up again. Until the cycle repeats itself once more.

In the second half of the psalm he reviews his history - *When I felt secure, I said, “I will never be shaken.”*

I wonder how many of us can identify with that? The times when all is going well. When we feel strong in who we are and/or what we are doing. The times when we make that imperceptible shift from being confident that we are where God wants us to be, or doing what God wants us to do, to thinking we are indispensable. The times when we move from living and working in God’s strength – into doing it in our own. When confidence tips over into arrogance. When we lose sight of God, because we are focussing on ourselves rather than on the One we should have at the centre of our lives.

Of course, having the sense that God is ‘hiding his face’ is not always because we’ve lost our focus. “Life is full of ups and downs” – and life is also characterised by the circularity of the seasons. As is our relationship with God – sometimes we are in the height of the summer season, growing and becoming fruitful. And sometimes we are in a winter season. A time when all has been cut back – pruned even – and we wait in the nurturing earth of God’s presence, waiting for Spring and the next part of our adventure with God.

But here the psalmist seems to be referring to those times when we lose sight of God because we’re looking in the wrong place. When a remedy is called for, and that remedy is acknowledging our failure and crying out for God’s mercy and forgiveness. It’s going through that sickening feeling when we realise that we’ve got it wrong AGAIN. That although we were determined to learn last time, we’ve somehow just managed to go and repeat the same failure in a slightly different way. And coming back to God again to confess, to unburden, to seek help, and to be renewed and sent on our way to have another go. For surely if we recognise that sense of failing again, we also recognise the joy of knowing anew that God *is* God, and that he is always in the business of resurrection.

*“You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praise and not be silent.
Lord, my God, I will praise you forever.”*

Life is full of ups and downs. Like David, may we turn to God wherever we are on the roller-coaster of life, be that in sorrow and repentance, or in joy and praise. And may we know that God *is* God, and that God is good.

Take some time to do our own reflection

Life is full of ups and downs. We were talking about this in the JoT group this week; about how we are all human, and although we aspire to live lives characterised by the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace etc, we so often fall short.

Chris shared a story about a young person who was having a conversation with a monk.

“Yes, but, what do you *do* all day in the monastery?” they asked.

The monk smiled gently. “I fall down, and I get up again. I fall down and I get up...”

So let’s take some time to reflect on where we feel we are in the ups and downs of our lives with God.

Are we at the top – in a good place. In tune with God, others and ourself? Are we praising and thanking God and acknowledging his grace? Are we keeping God in the centre of our lives?

Are we tipping over the top, heading downwards. Losing sight of God in the success, the busyness, the frustrations of life?

Are we in freefall? Where life seems more and more chaotic and it seems that disaster is inevitable?

Have we hit rock bottom? In the darkness can we remember that God promises that even there he is waiting to be found when we re-focus and turn back to him?

Or are we on the rise, as the psalmist. Like them, can we use this time to reflect on the ups and downs, to see where things have gone wrong in the past, and to resolve to learn from our mistakes.

Or you may prefer to use the cycle of the seasons

Are you in the spring – new beginnings, excitement, discovery of more of God?
In the summer – growth, beauty, flourishing, beginning to see fruit develop?
In the autumn – fruitful, and then being pruned for the future?
In the winter – resting in God, held by God in a silence that sometimes seems deafening, trusting God for guidance in the dark, even though you cannot see or sense where God is? Waiting for Spring.

Wherever you are, can you trust that God is there, supporting you as a frame supports a growing plant?

And/or you may like to reflect on this passage from Philippians 4

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Music

Prayer (Ephesians 3:14-21)

¹⁴ [For this reason] I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family^[a] in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

