



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 52

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Today's readings

Psalm 17 ("Prayer for deliverance from persecutors")

Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right.

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress.

As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words. Wondrously show your steadfast love, O saviour of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.

Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings, from the wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me.

They close their hearts to pity; with their mouths they speak arrogantly.

They track me down; now they surround me; they set their eyes to cast me to the ground. They are like a lion eager to tear, like a young lion lurking in ambush.

Rise up, O Lord, confront them, overthrow them! By your sword deliver my life from the wicked, from mortals—by your hand, O Lord—from mortals whose portion in life is in this world.

May their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them; may their children have more than enough; may they leave something over to their little ones.

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *Angel voices ever singing* (CH:498)
- 2 *Sing of the Lord's goodness* (CH:157)
- 3 *Praise, my soul* (CH:160)
- 4 *The King of Love* (CH:462)
- 5 *Now thank we all our God* (CH:182)

In the Name of the Father and of

A quick look at the very top of Psalm 17 reveals it to be a “prayer for deliverance from persecutors”. A quick look at the very foot of the same psalm, reveals a little more, and what we read there we might not like to consider. You see, while this is most certainly a prayer for deliverance from persecutors (as advertised, loud and clear) it is also a pretty clear call for heavenly retribution, a plea for divine revenge of the most brutal kind, placed right there in the very heart of the Christian Bible.

It is interesting to note that different translations of this psalm present it in a broad range of quite divergent meanings. So by way of contrast with our familiar New Revised Standard Version (as seen overleaf) consider this translation of verses 13 and 14, as found in the Good News Bible:

Come, Lord! Oppose my enemies and defeat them! Save me from the wicked by your sword; save me from those who in this life have all they want. Punish them with the sufferings you have stored up for them; may there be enough for their children and some left over for their children's children!

A call for punishment, then, to be dealt out by God through suffering in this generation ... and the next ... and the next. It hardly seems appropriate content for the Bibles in our homes and churches. But it's there ... undeniably there in black on white.

And there's more, for not only does the psalmist call down the sustained vengeance of God upon enemies and their offspring, he also maintains that if the Almighty were to put him to the test, the writer would pass with flying colours. Consider verse 3:

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress.

To be free of all blame in life is a claim that only a blessed saint or a deluded fool would ever be likely to make. As the apostle Paul so helpfully notes, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23, emphasis added.) Indeed, is it not safe to say that a blessed saint would be the very last person to claim a sinless character? Of that I feel sure. Yet here we find the writer of Psalm 17 laying it on thick. He's the good guy, while others, he claims, should be written off as the lowest of the low, fit only for damnation. It's his view, and he's sticking to it.

What's going on here? And what are we to make of this strangely high octane psalm as it burns with the searing heat of rocket fuel without necessarily generating that much light?

Let's hold these thoughts, because they are important thoughts by any measure. We will return to them in just a moment. For now, I want to take you back a couple of months to the annual meeting of the Scottish Church Theology Society. (Lucky you!) The SCTS hosts a get-together each January, at which people of a theological bent get together and do what theologians do. There's nothing unusual there, I'm sure you would agree. Yet this year's conference was a little different. For the first time ever, rather than meeting at a hotel, the gathering took place via Zoom, with everyone tuning in from home. The event had three speakers: a retired eminent Oxford Professor, a retired Archbishop of Canterbury; and a far from retired John Bell, Church of Scotland minister and prolific writer of hymns.

Each of these learned guests was there to consider one aspect or another of the Book of Psalms, and each one did their job brilliantly. It was as humbling as it was impressive for the conference to benefit from the many years of accumulated wisdom which these experts were able to share with us, laying out their presentations before answering our questions.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

When John Bell came to the microphone, he took as his subject “The Psalms and Scotland”, charting our nation’s rich history of reading and singing these ancient worship texts. At one point he focused on the troubling words of Psalm 137, verse 9, in which the writer addresses an enemy and issues a stark warning in these chilling tones:

Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

Like some of the most abhorrent actions of the Third Reich in the death camps of the Second World War, the writer of Psalm 137 is heard to support – and with some passion – the cold-blooded murder of babies and toddlers.

Once again, these are words which come to us straight out of the pages of the Bible – *our* Bible. We might well ask: “How can this be?” And who could blame us for asking? After all, is the Bible *really* trying to suggest that followers of the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob should live by vengeance and by cruelty of the most horrific kinds?

What John Bell said that day struck a chord with me. He invited us to stop thinking about the Book of Psalms as being a collection of writings sent by God to be received by human beings. No, he said. Turn that right around so that rather we come to see the psalms as profoundly human songs of praise *from people* – fallible people – *to God*.

Who knows what terrible experiences the writer of Psalm 137 endured to come to the point where he wanted to kill innocent infants. Such a demonic desire is so clearly wrong, and wrong in every possible instance. Yet we can see that it is also clearly human.

If we allow ourselves to read Scripture the wrong way, we come out with the wrong picture of God. To take this idea one stage further, we also run the risk of creating a picture of faith which is both misguided and deeply dangerous. To return to the days of the Third Reich, it is simplicity itself to see how ordinary Germans and Austrians, so many devout Christians, could find their faith fed by Nazi propaganda to the terrible extent of justifying the extermination of whole peoples, and all fuelled by a tragically warped reading of Scripture.

On our road through Lent, the psalms are teaching us a whole lot about God. But today they are showing us something different: the horror of a human character that is diverted from the path of love to the path of hatred. Just recall the words of Samuel Crossman, contrasting the joy of the crowd on Palm Sunday with what was to come only a few days later:

*Sometimes they strew his way, and his sweet praises sing;
resounding all the day hosannas to their King.
Then ‘Crucify!’ is all their breath,
and for his death they thirst and cry. (CH339, v.4)*

Anger is such a common trait of human living. And in many cases it can be a surprisingly enjoyable trait that proves hard to hand over or to give up. So what are we to do with such anger? Paradoxically, maybe we are to do just exactly what the psalmist does here. Instead of shouting at the enemy, he shouts at God, pouring out his heart in bitter, anguished prayer. This is a tirade that is certainly not pretty, but might just be heard as a troubled cry for help.

The writer John Edgerton puts it brilliantly:

... not all my anger is holy. A lot of my anger is just poison, poison I need some way to leave behind.

If I want to leave my anger behind, God can take it. But only if I offer.

Amen.

Praying for others

Lord,
hear our pleas for justice.

Today we remember Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe,
still unable to leave Iran and threatened with another trial.

We ask you to support her and her family.

We pray she may soon be re-united with her husband and daughter.
We ask that all others who are imprisoned for political reasons may be heard,
remembered and sustained by you.

We think of the protestors in Myanmar,
challenging the military coup leaders, putting their lives in danger.

We ask that you walk with them in their fight against tyranny
and we ask that you help peace and justice prevail in that country.

We pray that you show us how we can help combat injustice in your world,
be that at the ballot box, by petition, by march,
by support for other organisations or by prayer.

We ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

And finally . . .

Last week I updated you on your donations to your Jars of Grace in 2020. This week I have the pleasure of telling you about how we used your 2020 donations to our “Away Fund”. These donations are passed on to Christian organisations which work in international healthcare.

In 2020 our donations added up to £3,200. The Kirk Session agreed to donate this to Christian Aid (£1,280), the Church of Scotland HIV Programme (£1,280) and EMMS International (£640). You may wonder why our donation to EMMS was half the amount given to each of the other two charities – it’s because EMMS were part of a campaign where the Scottish government matched donations. They will receive £1,280 in total.

The donation to EMMS contributes to their “Every Girl Matters” appeal. This helps girls in hard-to-reach parts of Nepal. When there is no access to healthcare, families do what they can to care for their loved ones. All too often this means that children, girls in particular, drop out of school and become full-time caregivers.

There are 1,646 young carers in rural western Nepal who are kept from school by caring responsibilities – girls like 16-year-old Sunita. Her mother has a long-term disability and her father was diagnosed with incurable cancer. EMMS supports a specialist nurse who provides the care Sunita’s family need, thus freeing up Sunita to return to school and continue her education.

Thank you to everyone who donates to the Away Fund – you make a real difference to the lives of some of the poorest people in the world.

(I’m looking forward to telling you about Christian Aid and the HIV Programme later.)