

There's more to the Psalms than 'The Lord's My Shepherd'

Looking at some of the difficult Psalms

Hello!

I'm the Reverend Alison Cox, a member of St Thomas' church and I've written a short course – 4 sessions – looking at some of the psalms that can be a bit difficult to read.

In each session I'll offer some input, interspersed with some questions and points to reflect on. Whether you are following by yourself or in a small group, you may find it helpful to have to hand a Bible and some way of making notes of things that occur to you.

So let's start with an introduction and a question..

A quick question!

What do you expect to read / find when your bible falls open in the book of Psalms?



If you've said anything along the lines of 'songs /poems / praise / comfort / challenge / God's voice' you would be right. The collection of 150 songs and poems making up the Book of Psalms in our Old Testament has all this – and more!

In this short series we're going to look at some of those that fall into the 'more' category - specifically at some of the so-called 'difficult' psalms.

Some psalms are difficult because we live at such a remove from the time and place of their origin that it's not easy to understand them or apply their teaching. Some are difficult because of their content.

Of the latter, many are cries of lament (mostly individual, occasionally national) about God being absent, silent, inactive or even powerless. Others question God and express anger at what is seen as injustice on God's part and some, at different times, have been censored or banned altogether from public worship.

... So if your response to the opening question was something like 'anger/ despair/ hopelessness/ lack of faith' you would also have been right!

Welcome to the 'difficult' psalms.

A bit of introduction

The Old Testament Book of Psalms, a collection of ancient Hebrew poetic songs was compiled over a period of about five hundred years . One of the earliest is Psalm 29, widely thought to have originally been a hymn to the Canaanite god Baal. Others were composed after the Exile and most were apparently written for worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. They

vary enormously in length (**Look up Psalm 117 and 119!**) Some have individual titles; some are addressed to worship leaders and musicians and have musical directions or instructions for how the psalm was to be used in the service. Many have individual names attached to them, most famously the psalms attributed to the great king of Israel, David.

Our Old Testament book of 150 psalms is subdivided into 5 Books (1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106 and 107-150, following an ancient Jewish tradition to imitate the Pentateuch (the Torah, the 5 Books of Moses – our first 5 OT books.) Whatever the theme of a psalm, each ends with some form of doxology – a short "hymn" of praise to God or in praise of God's deeds.

The place of Psalms in worship

Psalms have always had a particular place in Hebrew and Christian worship, the latter because of its rootedness in both Jewish worship and later monastic tradition, where psalms were fundamental to worship.

In many churches today, psalms are less familiar to worshippers than to those in previous generations. The centuries of chanting psalms during Morning and Evening

Prayer has been largely replaced by hymns and songs (many of which are based fairly and squarely on a psalm) during services of Holy Communion and / or more informal services and our readings often focus on the gospel and epistle. And while much of scripture is difficult to understand and interpret, this is particularly true for many of the psalms.

Look up these psalms and think...

What does **Psalm 2**, composed for an ancient coronation in Jerusalem, have to do with me? What does it have to say to us?

What do you make of **Psalm 58**? ...and in the light of the Cross?

What's **Psalm 87** about?

And how do we apply the word of God, that comes to us through these contrasting psalms, to our own individual lives ... our nation ... our world?

Even before the events of 2020, we could see how tempting it was to stick to psalms that are familiar, straightforward, comforting or joyful! But there is real value to us in engaging with others that are perhaps less familiar and certainly more challenging because in facing the often raw emotion these psalms express, we can find strength to be honest with God, learn that God can cope with this and find new depths of faith in God who is never absent, silent, inactive or powerless.