

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 3 JANUARY 2021

Note: In the congregation for which this material was prepared, a member of the congregation leads Prayers of the People, so there is no prayer of that genre in these resources on this occasion.

1 **Prayers of Adoration and Confession**

O God, there is none like you.
You are almighty, all-knowing;
you are everywhere, present in the microcosm,
yet standing astride the whole creation.
At your word, the universe trembles,
for you are its creator,
the maker of all that is.
You are beyond our comprehension,
unfathomable and infinite.
Yet, God, you look upon your humble creation with such love.
You look into our lives, and weep for our pain,
weep for the pain we inflict on ourselves and on each other.
You reach out to us,
offering us newness of life,
a fresh start, a new beginning.
In your son, Jesus Christ,
you have revealed yourself,
not as a God who lords it over the creation,
but as a God who loves and cares for his created world;
a God who serves and suffers, whose very self is love.
So we praise you.
Our words can never be adequate,
but our hearts sing with our love for you.
O God, there is none like you!

But, eternal God, our judge and redeemer,
We confess that we have tried to hide from you, for we have done wrong.
We have lived for ourselves,
and turned from our neighbours.
We have refused to bear the troubles of others.
We have ignored the pain of the world,
and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed.
We have happily condemned the sin we see in others,
but failed to recognise the evil which is in us.
O God,
in your great mercy forgive our sin,
and free us from our selfishness, our judgmentalism,
and our inability to see ourselves as we truly are,
that we may choose your will
and obey your commandments;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.
Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

The writer of I John assures us of this:

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves
and the truth is not in us.*

*If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins
and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

Believe the Gospel:
in Christ Jesus, our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings** –
Matthew 2:1-12
Psalm 72:1-14

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Blessing and Dismissal**
What does the LORD require of us?
To act justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with our God.
So go now into the world,
to be the champions of integrity,
the voices of compassion,
the embodiment of humility,
and the champions of the poor and outcast.
For such are the people of God.

And the blessing of almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with you and abide with you always.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

SERMON

In 2013, Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham, now an Oxford academic, published a book called *The Case for the Psalms*. It was a plea to Christians everywhere not to neglect the treasury of sacred poetry that is the book of Psalms. More recently, for Christmas, one of the ladies in Lauris' and my Bible study group gave us a book by Timothy and Kathy Keller. It's a daily devotional to take you through the 150 psalms in the course of a year. Both the Kellers and Tom Wright point out the important place the psalms hold in the history of the Church; yet they are alarmed by the neglect into which they've fallen in more recent years. They, and others, are concerned that we have jettisoned not only part of our heritage, but a rich source of wisdom and knowledge that has been a lifeblood to people of faith for millennia. They encourage us to rediscover the wealth of the psalms.

The book of Psalms was, after all, the hymnbook used by Jesus, and its contents were ancient even then. In Christian times, for centuries, the only hymns sung in the Church were the psalms. It was regarded as improper to write new sacred songs. John Calvin, the great reformer, continued to hold that view, that no worship songs other than the psalms should be permitted, and he launched a great project to translate all the psalms into various vernacular languages. Our great hymn, "All people that on earth do dwell" (*The Old 100th*) is one result of that effort. It's the oldest hymn in the English language. Our grandparents, and perhaps our parents too, all had a favourite psalm, where they found inspiration, comfort, courage or wisdom. And even now, despite our own neglect of the psalms, virtually every week, the Lectionary sets a psalm as one of the four readings.

Yet despite all this, the malaise spoken of by the Kellers, Tom Wright, and many others is real enough. We *do* tend to neglect the psalms these days. And without knowing about this congregation in particular, overall in the Church it's not often that you'll hear a sermon on a psalm.

But today you will. Nevertheless, I do have to concede that our modern Western culture does make the psalms – or some of them at any rate – a bit less accessible to us than they were even perhaps to our grandparents. Today's psalm illustrates one reason why that's so. Psalm 72 is about the kings of Judah, and it speaks about those kings having a level of authority and power from which we would simply recoil. Whether you're a *constitutional* monarchist or not, very few people in the modern West would want to return to government by an *absolute* monarch. We abhor authoritarian governments of any kind, whether they're monarchies or republics, as unjust and unfair. To offer praise to some powerful king, as the psalm does, goes very much against the grain.

I once read a book called *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus*. The author pointed out that we in the modern West really do find it difficult to understand and relate to the Biblical world, because of who we are. As far as the biblical world is concerned, she said, we are WEIRD. W-E-I-R-D.

W - we are Western
E - we are Educated
I - we are Industrialised
R - we are Rich
D - we are Democratic

The peoples who populate the pages of the Old and New Testaments were none of those things. The people who wrote and sang the psalms were none of those things. So far as government was concerned, monarchy was by far the most common model, especially in the world of the Old Testament. We just have to understand that. We don't all have to become monarchists.

So, yes, for us who are in the third decade of the 21st century, there are some impediments which can seem like barriers to our appreciating the psalms in the way the Kellers and Tom Wright enjoin us to do. The psalms are from a world very different from our own. But let's tackle Psalm 72

anyway and see where we get.

This psalm is universally regarded as a hymn that was used at the coronation of the kings of Judah in the time before the Babylonian captivity. It may also have been used at the anniversaries of those coronations. So it is about kingly power and duties – it's monarchical and it's male. But right from the very beginning, the psalm strikes an unexpected note.

The kings of the nations which surrounded Israel and Judah measured their success in terms of their power, their conquests, and their wealth. Their status was often symbolised by their magnificent building programs. Think the pyramids and the great temples of Egypt, or the giant ziggurats of the Tigris-Euphrates civilisations. Even *we*, in more modern times, are familiar with that kind of focus on monarchical power and glory. Some of us old are enough to remember when *God Save the Queen* was our national anthem; and we recall singing, of the Queen,

*Send her victorious,
happy and glorious*

Perhaps you've been to one or more of the not-a-few royal residences in the UK: grandiose architecture as a display of wealth and power is not unfamiliar to us either.

But our psalm strikes a very different note. None of this is for the King of Judah. The king of Judah is to be different. The opening words of the psalm paint a picture that stands out from the norm:

*Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.*

The focus of this king's reign is not to be his own power, glory and majesty; it is to be the poor of the nation. To them, he is to deliver justice, righteousness, prosperity; he is to defend their cause, bring about deliverance, and crush their oppressors.

"Righteousness" and "justice" in this context don't mean what we may assume they do. "Righteousness" translates a word that means more like "rightly ordered world". This king's role in justice is not to be the impartial judge that *we* might expect, judging cases from a disinterested arm's length, treating rich and poor exactly the same. This king's "justice" is to be shown through *caring* for the poor, *advocating* for the poor, in the way we might speak today of *social* justice. The word translated "prosperity" is *shalom*, which we all know can also mean "peace", but which actually means something more like "wholeness" or "wellbeing". "Deliverance" was the rescue you might accord someone who'd fallen into debt slavery, literally by buying back their freedom. Rescue, social justice, wellbeing in a rightly ordered world. These opening verses of the psalm make it very clear that the king's duty is first and foremost to care actively for the poor and the oppressed, indeed to *crush* their oppressors. This is to be an activist king on behalf of the most needy of his subjects. He is to be quite unlike any of his contemporaries. It's revolutionary stuff.

While we might have developed a healthy distrust for monarchy, this passage is not about the kind of monarchy that we have come to despise. This psalm surely has great relevance for us even as 21st century citizens in a Western democracy. We need to sit up and take notice. At the heart of this

psalm is a deliberately disproportionate focus on the needs of the poor and disadvantaged. It's the same focus that is consistently reflected in the Old Testament prophets. It's the same focus that is at the very centre of the teachings of Jesus. It is self-evident that what God requires of righteous human governments, is that their greatest priority be the wellbeing, the wholeness, and the welfare of their whole society, but especially of the poorest and most disadvantaged of their citizens.

There are, without doubt, some Western governments which do see their role in this way – some; but there are more than a few which do not, which are beholden to wealthy and vested interests, and which are uninterested in the injustices and social ills that surround them. Psalm 72 has a message which we need to revisit at every election time, before we make up our minds as voters. A great test to apply to every candidate in every election would be to ask whether they would measure up to the psalm's yardstick, expressed in these lines about the king:

*For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.*

I think we could all think of one or two politicians who would grow very pale, if that were the test to be applied to their time in public office!

But there's a lot more for us in this psalm, than establishing an ideal for the governments we elect. We should not let ourselves off as lightly as that. We can't duck our own responsibilities by simply blaming our politicians when they don't measure up. That's too easy. There are two other very obvious lessons for us as individuals from this psalm.

The first requires us to take a step back from the psalm and to remember that it is essentially a public prayer for the king. We are far better at grumbling about our governments than we are at praying for them. Perhaps 2020 was an exception, as we all prayed for those who led our nations' responses to the pandemic, and we temporarily set aside our partisanship and political points-scoring. But in a "normal" year, do we routinely pray for those in government, even or especially for those for whom we didn't vote? Do we accept that it's in the best interests of everyone that even those whom we didn't support do a good job, and bring them to God in our prayers? It wouldn't be a bad new year's resolution to make a point of doing just that from now on.

The second lesson applies to us because we *are* Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic. We are not the powerless, dependent people of ancient times, who could make little or no difference in their societies. We *can* make a difference, not only by how we vote, but in how we behave in every aspect of our lives. In how we spend our money, and how we spend our spare time, and how we exercise authority we may have by virtue of a role or a position, and by what causes we choose to support and not support.

Compared to the people of Judah, who stood powerless before their king, we do have power. And in that sense, the psalm is also for us, also *about* us. In that sense, we *are* the king, who is called upon to deliver justice, righteousness, and wellbeing; to defend the cause of the poor and the powerless, to bring about their deliverance, and to crush their oppressors. Like the king, we're called to have these things at the very centre of our lives. This psalm is very much for all of *us*, not just for our governments. And certainly not just for some ancient Jewish kings.

Do we finish there? Should we conclude that this psalm offers us yet another set of admonitions that challenge us to our very core? Should we all go home with our tail between our legs because all this

is just too hard? Because we know that we'll struggle to live up to the ideals that have been set before us? If we were to finish like that, we would have overlooked the very reason why we're all here this morning. We would have forgotten that we have gathered in the name of Jesus Christ.

It would be a long bow to draw to suggest that the writer of Psalm 72, hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, actually had Jesus in mind. Nevertheless, the one ruler of any time who completely fits the ideal profile drawn by the psalmist *is* undoubtedly Jesus Christ. In his earthly ministry, Jesus *did* reach out to the poor and the outsider. Jesus' ministry *was* disproportionately to the powerless and to the outcast. Jesus *did* completely eschew any glory, any earthly power, any riches. Jesus *was* the servant king of whom the Jews, hundreds of years before, had sung.

Indeed, so faithfully and selflessly did Jesus discharge his role, that he gave his very life for the lives of all who would believe in him. In rising from death, Jesus gave birth to a new rightly ordered world, to a world in which social justice, and the wellbeing and the deliverance of the poor and the marginalised, are at the very centre of priorities. Our calling is not to achieve this all on our own; to think that would be to lead to despair. Jesus has already achieved it for us. Our calling is to be loyal citizens of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, and to do our best to play our part in building the world to which the ancient singers of Psalm 72 could only aspire.

For the King whom we crown is not a ruler who can ever fail; our King is sure; for the King whom we crown is Jesus Christ, the Lord of Creation.

*... he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.*

Amen