

## ‘Mothering Sunday: Thanksgiving to the Lord

In our theme of ‘The Psalms’, my focus today is psalms of thanksgiving with Psalm 107 as an example (and you might like to have the leaflet to hand). Commentators tell us that the 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms, and a number of additional psalms spread through the Hebrew bible (in Ex 15 v.1-18; 1 Sam 2 v.1-10; Isa 38 v.10-20; Jonah 2 v.2-9), were composed over a very extended period from pre-exilic times to well after the exile – certainly over more than 500 years. There is wide agreement that the provenance of the psalms was principally the worshipping life of the Israelite community. There is much debate, however, over the particular forms of worship within which the psalms found their setting, and to which eras of Israel’s history they belong. The psalms are sometimes spoken of as the ‘hymn book of the Second Temple’ – i.e. the temple re-built after the exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC after Solomon’s temple (of 10<sup>th</sup> century) had been destroyed by the Babylonians. This masks the fact, however, that many psalms derive from much earlier times. Next Sunday, in our all age worship, with the help of Junior Church, we will be enacting a version of the annual pilgrim festival held in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles from the time of King Solomon, which includes psalms 24 and 118.

My commentary suggests that Psalm 107 is probably a *community thanksgiving* which may have been recited before the offering of sacrifices of thanksgiving in the temple. This is deduced from verse 22 in which the priests are calling on the people to “let them offer him sacrifices of thanksgiving and tell of his acts with shouts of joy”. In the story of the birth of Samuel, his father Elkanah goes up to Jerusalem once a year with his two wives Hannah and Peninah to sacrifice in thanksgiving to the Lord. As proscribed in Deuteronomy chapter 12, journies of thanksgiving should be made, with sacrifices offered for the goodness of God. The faithful should go to “the place where the Lord your God will choose as a

dwelling for his name;” (the temple) and, “You shall go there, bringing there your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks.” And, there is to be feasting, joy and celebration; “and you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your households together, rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed you.”

Verse 3 of Psalm 107 suggests that the worship is a gathering of festival pilgrims from every part of the known Jewish world, most probably in Jerusalem, for worshippers are “gathered out of the lands from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south”. You will see by the way I have laid out the psalm, that there is liturgical call and response between the priests and the people, the assembled congregation, both at the beginning in verse 1, “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is gracious – for his steadfast love endures for ever”, and then on two further occasions in verses 8 & 9 and verses 15 & 16: If I am the priest, would you take the part of the people:....

JF v. 8 “Let them give thanks to the Lord for his goodness and the wonders he does for his children”

Cong: “for he satisfies the longing soul and fills the hungry soul with food”

JF v.15 “Let them give thanks to the Lord for his goodness and the wonders he does for his children”

Cong: “for he has broken the doors of bronze and breaks the bars of iron in pieces”.

There are two further calls to give thanks from the priests in verses 21 & 22 and verses 31 & 32, but these do not evoke a direct response. They do, however, give further structure to the liturgy of thanksgiving. They signify four instances of thanksgiving. Connected directly to the *call to thanksgiving* is the four-times-repeated declaration of the congregation,

as they recall the experiences of their forebears and their contemporaries, that, “then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress” – these cries to the Lord come in verses 6, 13, 19 and 28 – you’ll see that the first line in each case is italicised. This means that the core liturgical unit can be taken as four verses, constituted as the cry to the Lord, the Lord’s deliverance, the call to give thanks and the response of gratitude. If we take verses 13-16 as an instance, if you will say verses 13,14 & 16 I will interject with verse 15. Do start....

Cong: 13 *Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble*, • and he delivered them from their distress.

Cong: 14 He brought them out of darkness and out of the shadow of death, • and broke their bonds asunder.

JF v.15 “Let them give thanks to the Lord for his goodness and the wonders he does for his children”

Cong: 16 “for he has broken the doors of bronze and breaks the bars of iron in pieces”

The psalm can be considered as divided into an introduction of the first three verses, a major middle section composed of the four thanksgivings, from verses 4 to 32, and a closing congregational hymn from verses 33-43. In the middle section, our principal interest, the first thanksgiving in verses 4-7 points to the salvation vouchsafed to the people in the wilderness, where some perished and “went astray in desert wastes” yet others prevailed and “came to a city to dwell in”. In the wilderness, “hungry and thirsty their soul was fainting within them” (v.5). In thanksgiving, the people affirm, “for he satisfies the longing soul and fills the hungry with good” (v.9). Here, the psalm suggests that *the dispensation of thanksgiving is not to be separated from the experience of want*; in fact it is linked to it inextricably. This is reminiscent of a point Colin made two weeks ago about Psalm 44, where he spoke of a tension in the psalm of lament, between belief and experience, where the

worshipper is invited to choose to sustain their belief in God's providence despite the indications of adverse experience. Colin suggested that psalm 44, "is a psalm that insists that belief involves living with unresolved conflict and difficulty," In a parallel way, thanksgiving is set out here in Psalm 107 as a fundamental orientation that is to be sustained notwithstanding experiences of want, need and stress. It is proposed as a dynamic of spirituality that breaks through the constraining burden of our hesitations, qualifications and world-weariness. For if we relied only on the evidence of experience, how could thanksgiving ever be authentic or unqualified? And Paul insists, doesn't he – perhaps even in the light of this inspirational psalm! – that we should give thanks in all things, and always. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, *give thanks in all circumstances*; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." 1 Thessalonians 5 v.18.... "Let them give thanks to the Lord for his goodness and the wonders he does for his children".

In the psalm you will see that there are sections headed A, B and C. These are the additional three thanksgivings. Do have a look at them quietly. The first speaks of being held captive, and of the Lord being the one who "breaks the bars of iron asunder". The second refers to the experience of illness, 'being plagued', when "the soul abhorred all manner of food", yet, "the Lord sent forth his word and healed them". The third refers to the perils of being a seafarer which are described vividly: "they reeled and staggered like a drunkard and were at their wits end", yet the Lord, "made the storm be still,... then were they glad because they were at rest, and he brought them into the haven they desired". In each case the thanksgivings identify the particularities of life that challenge the individual – and in significant ways. In each case deep ambivalence gives way to an outpouring of thanksgiving for God's goodness. Thanksgiving is described, therefore, as a natural response to the providence, grace and salvation of God, notwithstanding the indications of experience. This is well illustrated in the earlier example of Hannah who goes with her

husband and his other wife to the sanctuary and does so year after year whilst living with the anguish of childlessness. She gives thanks with the others, and feasts on the larger portion that Elkanah gives her because he loves her (1 Samuel 1 v.5). This speaks to us profoundly.

1405

Today is of course Mothering Sunday, and it is naturally a time for being thankful for experiences of mothering. As you know, a fortnight ago, I was in Sarajevo in Bosnia spending three days on a visit with the charity 'Remembering Srebrenica'. The remembrance is of course of the genocide committed in Srebrenica that began on 11<sup>th</sup> July 1995, towards the end of the Bosnian War of 1992-95. Within five days, Bosnian Serb forces orchestrated the killing of 8372 Muslim men and boys and two women. This was part of a carefully planned campaign to advance the project for a Greater Serbia, by ridding eastern Bosnia of its Muslim population. The 8372 murdered from Srebrenica was out of a total figure for the genocide across Bosnia of 22,488. I am not about to say much about this just now, but bearing in mind that the genocide was focussed almost exclusively on men and boys, one of the products of this terrible crime was the impact on the mothers of Srebrenica. In so far as widespread crimes of sexual violence were also part of the campaign of hate and ethnic cleansing, Bosnian Muslim women suffered in multiple and extreme ways. The trauma and grief they suffered, and continue to experience, is deeply affecting when one hears the story and meets the women. What is most striking is the extraordinary way in which the mothers have refused to be robbed of their humanity and have somehow found ways to address the future. Srebrenica was once as a town 60% Muslim. In the genocide it was emptied of all Muslims. After the war and the signing of the Dayton Peace Accord, many of the mothers very courageously returned to Srebrenica which had become overwhelmingly Serbian majority. One of the mothers decided to open a flower shop and when we were there we visited her small outlet in the neighbouring

village. The flower shop is a symbol of many things, chiefly of a perspective of outwardness into her community which in itself is remarkable. The mothers have also been responsible for making the white crocheted 'flowers' that are the symbol of the charity 'Remembering Srebrenica'. This is one of them (display). The white is for innocence, the innocence of the murdered, and the green is for hope – hope in the growth of the nation into a place where all its constituent peoples can find commonality once again – which is a bold hope indeed. I know that Mothering Sunday is supposed to be a happy occasion, and I hope it is that very thing for all of us. It has always struck me, however, as noteworthy that one of the chosen Mothering Sunday gospel passages is today's description of the scene of the women around the cross of Jesus – which points us in a particular direction. It reminds us, of course, that it is so often the case that women are closest to the suffering of others in terms of both empathy and physical presence. One of the fine qualities of women and mothers is therefore signified. The figure of the crucified also reminds us that women continue disproportionately to be the objects of violence and suffering themselves, simply because of their gender – I note the training on domestic violence in the pew leaflet; and I note too a leaflet that came through with this week's Church Times for the victims of torture from the charity Freedom from Torture which featured a Cameroonian woman. And I am thinking also of the mothers of Srebrenica.

The thought that I am wrestling with, however, is to ask what connection can sensibly be made between the mothers of Srebrenica and the psalm of thanksgiving – or to put it more generally, what connection is there between the psalm of thanksgiving and all women who find themselves standing at the foot of the cross – who grieve out of time, are abused, face violence, who must suffer for their gender and face oppressions of any kind. Having met just one of the mothers of Srebrenica, a Muslim woman in her sixties, lined with sorrow yet with an undaunted will for the future and for her neighbours, I ask

myself what spiritual resources of her Muslim faith she has discovered that allow her to be who she is. It would be wrong for me to put words into her mouth and I won't try. All I see is that Allah is within her and beside her. But what I sense is that she somehow helps me understand what it means to sing the Lord's song in a strange land – what it might mean to be thankful for one's life even after your life has almost been stripped from you in its entirety. If she can smile and sell flowers to the people who murdered her son and her husband and find meaning in life and express thanksgiving in her demeanour, then so perhaps might I and we... There is no doubt that suffering, violence and pain can destroy us. It can and it sometimes does. I wonder however, whether one of our strongest spiritual weapons, one of our surest pieces of the whole armour of God, is a heart turned in thanksgiving, if only we can get there. Through the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit, Let us never let our heart of thanksgiving be silent or turned to stone or the hardships of life rob us of the wellsprings of joy which make us human.

Reverend Julian Francis

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2387 Words

## ADDITIONAL PARAGRAPHS

There are 'royal psalms' that have been identified, drawn from life under the monarchy in pre-exilic times. Psalms are also said to have been in use in the time of the tribal confederacy before the kingship of David and Solomon. Another debate has been over the annual festival in Jerusalem to mark the New Year at which psalms were sung. Was this primarily a festival to mark the kingship of Yahweh, an 'enthronement' ceremony with singing of the songs of Zion? To what extent was it also a festival of creation to mark the regeneration of natural cycles? Or was it more a festival of the Covenant, an occasion of the renewal of that core relationship between God and the people? What is clear is that themes of covenant, kingship, royalty, judgement and creation and recreation all feature in the psalms alongside many other theological and spiritual motifs.

The second part of Psalm 107 is verses 33-43, the congregational hymn. It begins with an enigmatic three verses which point to the unpredictability of life. I will let you ponder on these. It goes on to reaffirm the irrepressible qualities of God in safeguarding the poor and the hungry and providing for the people. The closing verse declares that whereas "all wickedness will shut its mouth" i.e. the wilful will be rendered speechless at the actions of God, so "the upright will see this and rejoice". The final verse then observes, "whoever is wise will ponder these things and consider the loving-kindness of the Lord". Let us never let our heart of thanksgiving be silent or turned to stone or the hardships of life rob us of the wellsprings of joy which make us human.