

July 25: Psalm 85; Luke 11: 1-13 Their prayer is our prayer

I love the Psalms. In those times when my life and faith journey fails to make sense; in those times when I lose my focus, my centre, and want to address God with my list of complaints, I go to the Psalms and join my voice to the voice of the Hebrew people who addressed God all those years ago. And in repeating their words, I find myself aware of the God of my past, my present and my future. I find myself again aware that my God, our God is a God who acts, who meets my needs - who will meet our needs.

The psalms are not about who attacked whom and why; they are not the voice of God, through the prophets, addressing the people in judgement forecasting doom, gloom and hope in a future time. Neither are the psalms the voice of a people who are safe, secure and confident. The Psalms are the voice of a people addressing their God out of their experiences. They address God with voices raised in praise and thanksgiving **but**, also voices raised in distress; voices raised in confession, lament, complaint, and a list of pleas and then, when done, a joyful response to God's deliverance that they know and affirm will come. When we look closely, we find in the words detailing their experience, our experience, we find in their voice, our voice and we can join with them.

The psalms are about allowing life's experiences to touch us; the Psalms are about letting the situations they experienced touch us, become one with us because as we read the Psalms we realise that we share with them, a lot in common. The Psalms come from experiences that threaten, disrupt and anger and evoke a desperate need to cry out to God. And these needs are our needs, their suffering is our suffering; their pleas for help are our pleas for help; their joy and thanksgiving at their deliverance can be ours. It may be a different place and time, with different circumstances, but the human frailty and the emotions evoked are one with us today.

Because prayer is usually a response to experience; so the Psalms were written to help the people bring before God all the turmoil of life, the good, the bad and the ugly and what they thought about it happening to them. The Psalms are emotive poetry set to music in the form of prayers.

A study of the Psalms shows us that in fact these Psalms were intended to be sung by the people when they gathered for worship. The psalms are worship material, much as our modern prayer books or hymnals. This material was not written to communicate history or theology but the experience of the people of God in relationship with their God.

Expressing it simply, The Psalms are about the life and faith journey of the people. The Psalms tell us about their relationship with God. And there is in them much we can learn for our own lives, our own prayers, our own relationship with God.

Psalm 85: what about it? In Psalm 85 we have a prayer for when the people wanted to express their cries for help to their God. A prayer experience I can, at times, identify with!

Psalm 85 is a lament: a cry of sorrow as the people seek help in their distress by reminding God of past favours and forgiveness and begging for forgiveness and grace in the now. Knowing their God is a God who acts, the people wait humbly with open hearts filled with praise for God's response to their cries.

Why was this psalm written for corporate worship in the first instance and then become a standard Lament - a prayer for the Nation's welfare. It is rather like our hymns: certain hymns find a place in our hearts and we sing them regularly as the words, express something deep within our hearts about God and our relationship individually and corporately with God. The words - the images, the poetry, - express an emotion deep in our hearts we choose, desire to give voice to. I think of Hymn 452 "I the Lord of sea and sky .. I have heard my people cry". We don't have it today but we have it regularly and I am asked for it. It says something to us as a people here in this place at this time. It speaks for us and to us - so it is with the Psalms.

Psalm 85 is filled with the tension that is faith; belief up against what is daily experience. The people believe yet there is this struggle with daily experience and that raises the question of the place of God in daily experience. The question overflows into the life of the people and is picked up by the poets, the song writers, -

as happens today. What caused the writing of Psalm 85 and allowed it to enter the national worship psyche.

Many Bible scholars think Psalm 85 originally comes from about 520 BC. This was just after that time when the Hebrew people came back from their exile 'beside the waters of Babylon' - a place that gave birth to Psalm 137 when the people sang/prayed to the God they felt had deserted them:

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy. They said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" But, how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

Now in Psalm 85 they are restored. They are back in their homeland but the glorious times they had envisioned on their return - especially the words spoken by the prophet Isaiah had not happened in the way they had envisioned. There was no peace, the temple had not been restored in Jerusalem, the land yielded no produce. There was no prosperity. The people again need restoration; restoration within their homeland not just from exile in Babylon.

And so in their distress at what was their experience, the struggle of the people gave birth, gave voice to the writing of Psalm 85 ... a sung prayer for help - which was such a hit it goes on to become a part of their ongoing worship life because it speaks to them of their ongoing experience and relationship with their God.

It is worth our while to have a look at the structure of Psalm 85. This poem - song - comes in two parts: Firstly, a prayer for deliverance which includes remembrance & reflection upon God's promises.

"You showed favour to your land, O LORD; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity; turned from your fierce anger. Restore us again, O God our Saviour, and put away your displeasure toward us. Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger through all generations? Will you not revive us

again, that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your unfailing love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation” .

And then second part when I am quite sure their singing rose in great praise: the assurance of God’s deliverance which comes in the next verses of their Hymn.

“I will listen to what God the LORD will say; God promises peace to the people of God, God’s saints— but let them not return to folly. Surely God’s salvation is near those who fear God -that God’s glory may dwell in our land. Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. The LORD will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest. Righteousness goes before God and prepares the way for God’s steps.”

As they sing, they are brought back from the edge and into the hearts of the people flows hope, peace which is to be found in the faithfulness and steadfast love of their God. No wonder it found a home in their ongoing worship life together.

It is as appropriate for us now as it was for them then!

In our journeys of faith and life; the circumstances we encounter are no different to those experienced by the singers of this Psalm all those centuries ago. Every day we are taken through circumstances, problems, issues, pain we could do without. Such is our reality. Like the Hebrew People we cry out in our distress... God save me/us; God be with me/us. God deliver me ... God walk with us. We remember God’s faithfulness but we feel at alone in this moment in time.

This is the tension of faith: daily faith lived in daily experience, the rawness of life with its challenges to our faith. This is the cry of the people of God in every time, in every place. This is the experience of the people of God in every time, in every place. There are times when we feel dislocated and we need again to be centred, relocated in our faith in our God.

In God is the steadfastness, the faithfulness we need to journey on. We need to recognise this great truth and live it. We need to own and live out the truth that God is with us, our God whom we worship is the God of our Past, our Present and our Future.

This is how and why the Psalm came to be used in Worship - It is the needed assurance that God is in our process. It assures us as it did then that Faithfulness and steadfast love are at the heart of God's character and righteousness is God's fundamental policy for the universe.

God is in the Journey ... and we recognise that when we join our voice with those of long ago in the saying of the Psalms. Start to read the Psalms. Join in the prayers of the Hebrew people and let us find in them our own deliverance and Hope.

Amen