**11th August 2024
Psalm 130
John 6.35, 41-51**

## Travelling Hopefully

Do you, or did you, ever sing songs in the car on a long journey?

I remember both singing and listening to songs En route to Scotland or the Lake District when our children were young and restlessly occupied the back seat. I even compiled a series of cassette tapes of eclectic music especially for journeys. I thought my choice of songs would have long been forgotten, so the other day I was rather chuffed when one of the boys referenced a song he now regularly plays from his library of two thousand on his phone, a song first heard, he said, from one of Dad’s car tapes! Well, perhaps he was just being kind!

This morning’s set Psalm of the Day is the eleventh of fifteen specially written for pilgrims travelling En route to Jerusalem and known as the Psalms of Ascent.

The city was, and is, set upon a hill, so worshippers always had to go *up* to the temple. They might have left their home village ten miles or a hundred miles away for a festival like Passover or Tabernacles and the closer they got to Jerusalem the more people were walking their way. By the time they entered the city and began approaching the temple they would become a community of singers, using one of these fifteen psalms to herald their arrival at journey’s end.

In this section of the Old Testament’s hymn book, four Psalms of Ascent are Community Laments, including this one, three are songs of Thanksgiving, four are Community Hymns, a further three are Wisdom Songs and one is a Royal Psalm in praise of Kings. Tradition has it they were all written by David – he must have been regarded as the Charles Wesley of his day! And like my car tapes these fifteen Psalms of Ascent are an eclectic mix.

It strikes me that music, especially community singing, has such a central place in the Judaeo Christian tradition. We rather naturally frame our faith in music and it’s still something we do every week here in church. In fact, music is so important in contemporary worship there is a sense in which it has created new denominations. Perhaps today the real question isn’t whether you are a Methodist or Baptist, but do you find hymns or songs, organs or bands, more helpful in your praise of God? And so, your musical preference will heavily influence which sort of church you more naturally gravitate towards.

I chuckled the other week whilst watching one of my favourite Livestream recordings from a wonderful church in Canada, as the minister suggested that folk like me tuning in at home might like to become a little less passive and actually stand in our living rooms whilst watching the service on TV and join in with the hymns!

So, let’s be clear about Psalm 130 this morning, it was meant to be sung, especially by pilgrims as they ascended the hill to worship on Temple Mount.

And yet it has to be said it doesn’t have the most upbeat of beginnings, and maybe that’s one of its good points. How does it begin: *Lord out of the depths I have called to you…*This is about as far away from *Shine Jesus shine* as its possible to be. Lord, I feel at rock bottom. God, I’m going through it. Jahweh, I’m struggling and my singing is infused with tears.

Of course, music, songs and singing can cope with that. And, if you are like me, it’s often music written in the minor key that makes the deepest impact.

St Augustine said that the lament found in Psalm 130 reminded him of what Jonah might have said as he prayed in the belly of the great fish. These are the words of someone who feels lost, lonely and in despair. And yet, Augustine loved this Psalm and the way it moved towards hope, even from this immensely honest beginning. Indeed, he loved it so much that he had it etched onto the walls of his bedroom. Perhaps those words nourished his soul as he died in that room.

Worship needs to make room for lament and fragility, it’s never enough just to stuff a service only with praise. And perhaps this Psalm of Lament is a good teacher for liturgists. We might have expected, at the end of a long journey, that all the songs to be used as the temple was approached would have been jolly. But no. Four of them are songs of lament, perhaps recognising that pilgrims came to pray with a hundred and one varying emotions, and all are valid. Their journeys might well have represented struggle as well as joy and verses like this from Psalm 130 helped accommodate everyone’s experience.

Surely, we’d do well to reflect that in our services too. To include a variety of hymns, prayers and readings that reflect the variety of experiences held in a typical Sunday congregation.

What is so encouraging for the singer of this Psalm is the idea that such prayer-filled songs are worthwhile because, how does verse 2 go: *hear my cry, Lord and let your ears be attentive to my supplication.*

People sometimes ask us why do we pray? Why do you have those intercessions in church? Well, maybe the simplest answer is that God invites us to pray and bring our intercessions. Again and again the Bible encourages us to pray. It paints an understanding of a God who isn’t stoical and deaf, disconnected from creation, but of a Loving Father eager to hear the sighs and longings of his beloved children.

And let’s not drive that most unhelpful dividing line between what some say is a different God found in the Old rather than New Testament, because in psalms like today’s the singer is glad to come to God and believes there is one in heaven who receives our prayers, even, or maybe especially, when they begin with lament.

In today’s Psalm we get the sense that when the words: *hear my cry O Lord* were sung, the singer really believed that to be true and that God was indeed listening.

Another aspect of the song they sang approaching Jerusalem is the idea that God not only hears our cries but also forgives our sins.

It would be wrong of us Christians to think of God in these terms only since the cross, which for us has becomes such a powerful symbol of forgiveness, and neglect to recognise that say, a piece of Jewish theology such as Psalm 130 has such inspiring verses as 3 and 4: *If you Lord, should keep account of my sins, who could hold his ground? But with you is forgiveness, so that you may be revered.*

Don’t you just love that line: *But with you is forgiveness…*

It’s a line that matters because what we believe about God creates the faith we practise and the lives we lead. To believe in the God who forgives forges in us generous faith and a life open to forgive others.

A thirteenth century Pope, Innocent III, loved this Psalm and ordered it to be said, along with six others, everyday in Lent, or at the very least every Friday in Lent.

So, whilst on a physical journey to temple, the singer of Psalm 130 is also on a spiritual journey. She starts feeling fragile and weighed down, yet believes prayer brings hope. And then she sings of her sins yet believes with God there is forgiveness and new beginnings.

This is a good journey to be on.

Now the last part of today’s Psalm blends the ideas of waiting and hoping together. Verse 5: *I wait for the Lord with longing, I put my hope in his word.*Waiting is a theme we closely associate with Advent. And the idea of waiting is often spoken of in the Bible. Faith often needs patience and sometimes what we experience in the waiting can be just as valuable as the prize of arriving.

Scholars tell us that the word used for waiting in Psalm 130 has the sense of tense expectation about it. Apparently, it’s like pulling a rope at both ends knowing that at any moment it will almost certainly break and snap in the middle.

So, if you are waiting like that, says the Psalmist, then you have a real sense of hope. Waiting and hoping go together in this Jewish song. And to have hope, or as Barak Obama entitled his biography, to believe in the *Audacity of Hope,* is to have that positive and optimistic mindset that things can change. The psalmist put it like this: *For in the Lord is love unfailing, and great is his power to deliver.*

Ruth Valerio, one of the directors of TearFund and a prominent Christian campaigner for ecology talks about two types of hope in her own faith. Her faith is clearly a faith that believes in change, as she longs to see us value creation more, so she says for her there is *Proximate Hope –* that’s hope that is near at hand, close by, proximate. Hope based on all that we can do as humans in our relationship with the planet and with each other. And *Ultimate Hope* – which she places in God and his good purposes for us and the world. Proximate and Ultimate Hope – I find that a helpful understanding.

Hope energies us even as wait.

I had the privilege of attending the Child Contact Centre AGM in our church hall last month and I met up with such committed Trustees and Volunteers who run the centre on our premises every other Saturday enabling children to meet up with their estranged, non-resident parent in a safe environment. Love is at the centre of all they do. And it became clear as the reports we read out that their hope – the hope that motivates them, is a hope that one day the relationship between the two estranged parents will repair enough so that the Contact Centre is no longer needed by them, and that the courts and professionals around them will draft a judgement that from now on they might meet up together in a park or coffee shop. The one hope the Contact Centre staff really have above everything else, is that some family relationships will change so much for the better that they, the Centre, are out of a job and no longer needed. And, they say, that happens from time to time and makes their day.

We wait for hope. We pray for hope that will bring change. And the change offers new beginnings. That’s the journey that today’s Psalm wants us to take. A journey worth singing about.

I’ve left the most beautiful verse to last. A real classic from Scripture. Verse 6: *My soul waits for the Lord, more eagerly than watchmen wait for the morning.*I wonder what you might be waiting for, and hoping for in your faith and in your life today? Maybe such longing fills your praying and your singing. And you’d love to believe that God hears your sighs and that change – based on both proximate and ultimate hope – is possible.

Well, perhaps it’s back to those long drives in the car up to the Lakes with two boys in the back listening to dad’s tapes. We’ve set off early in the darkness and then at around Manchester the dawn begins to break and the sun pierces the darkness and even the M6 looks utterly beautiful!

What sort of hope is it to believe in a new day and the rising sun. A Rabbinic understanding of this verse says such hope is very strong. It’s different to the sort of hope that we’ll meet up with someone because the date is in both of our diaries, because that is utterly dependant on whether or not we look at our diaries that morning. But hope in the sunrise is different, because on every day of your life so far, without exception, the sun has always risen. You can depend on it.

So, as these pilgrim worshippers approach their journey’s end and as they sing a Psalm of Assent, they recognise both their fragility and inadequacies, yet they wait upon the Lord and put their hope in him believing that change based on love is possible, and they do this with as much conviction as the *watchmen* wait for the morning.

May it be so as we too travel hopefully and make our journeys towards the dawn and the rising sun. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 6th August 2024*