



Anglican Diocese of  
**BENDIGO**



*Seasons of the Soul*



## *A Song for Every Season*

Songs have a way of getting stuck in our heads like this don't they? There's even a term for it, which is pretty apt for this Mainly Music song. A song that gets stuck in your head is called an 'earworm'. Sometimes songs just get stuck in our heads for a week, but they can also burrow deep down and take root in our brains. Those who've helped at any of the nursing home services will be able to tell you of people who rarely speak, who don't engage much with the world. But when we start singing, they come alive again. We connect with songs in a deep way.

Martin Luther knew that theological treatises and lectures weren't enough to get the message of the Reformation out. So being a decent musician himself, Luther also wrote hymns. He actually did something clever, using the tunes of the best pub songs of his day but rewriting their words to carry the message of the Reformation to the masses. He did this because he knew songs have a way of slipping past our conscious minds and having a deep impact. A song can connect, teach and even transform us more than any letter or lecture, even more than even a sermon!

In a way that's exactly what the Psalms do. They take timeless truths and deep theology and express them in poetic form, as songs of worship. You could write a treatise on the difference between the righteous and the wicked, but Psalm 1's illustration of the righteous as fruitful trees and the wicked as tumbleweeds works far better! Again, you could write a book about God's care and provision for his people, even in the most dire of circumstances, but would that resonate as deeply as the words of Psalm 23?

But the Psalms also connect with us because they're deeply human. They're full of power and passion, horrendous misery and unrestrained jubilation, tender sensitivity and powerful hope. You can find just about every human emotion, every experience, every longing in the Psalms. There are Songs for every Season of the Soul. There are Psalms of Joy, of Yearning, of Lament and Hope, and about everything in-between.

The Psalms express the emotions we feel and they give us the words to express ourselves when we don't know how. When we're feeling joy we have words to express our joy, when we feel trapped, or abandoned, or betrayed, the Psalms give us a guide as to how to pour we can pour our thoughts out to God. The Psalms pull no punches. At times they challenge God. At times they challenge the world around us. But at all times they challenge us. If we read the Psalms, if we pray through them, if we sing them we cannot help but be transformed.

When Cranmer was crafting the Prayer Book and the Lectionary to go with it he specified that the Psalms should be read through in their entirety every month! He wasn't just trying to bulk out the service. Cranmer knew that the more we read the Psalms, the more we would be transformed. And the more we read the Psalms, the more we'd have the words to speak to God when circumstances overtook us.

This little devotional booklet doesn't cover all 150 Psalms, but it does look at four representative Psalms, songs of Joy, of Yearning, of Lament and Hope. It is our prayer that no matter what season you find yourself, something in these reflections, and more significantly in the Psalms themselves will resonate with you and that you can sing along with them!

*Archdeacon George*

# Autumn – Psalm 27

*of David*

<sup>1</sup> The Lord is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid?

<sup>2</sup> When evildoers assail me  
to devour my flesh—  
my adversaries and foes—  
they shall stumble and fall.

<sup>3</sup> Though an army encamp against me,  
my heart shall not fear;  
though war rise up against me,  
yet I will be confident.

<sup>4</sup> One thing I asked of the Lord,  
that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the Lord  
all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord,  
and to inquire in his temple.

<sup>5</sup> For he will hide me in his shelter  
in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his  
tent;  
he will set me high on a rock.

<sup>6</sup> Now my head is lifted up  
above my enemies all around me,  
and I will offer in his tent  
sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

<sup>7</sup> Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,  
be gracious to me and answer me!

<sup>8</sup> ‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face!’  
Your face, Lord, do I seek.

<sup>9</sup> Do not hide your face from me.  
Do not turn your servant away in anger,  
you who have been my help.  
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,  
O God of my salvation!

<sup>10</sup> If my father and mother forsake me,  
the Lord will take me up.

<sup>11</sup> Teach me your way, O Lord,  
and lead me on a level path  
because of my enemies.

<sup>12</sup> Do not give me up to the will of  
my adversaries,  
for false witnesses have risen against me,  
and they are breathing out violence.

<sup>13</sup> I believe that I shall see the goodness of  
the Lord  
in the land of the living.

<sup>14</sup> Wait for the Lord;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the Lord!

## Psalm 27 – A Song of Yearning

There's an old story of a young man who grew up on the wrong side of town. He was bright and full of good intentions, but down on his luck. Until one day, through a series of events he came into possession of a magic lamp that could grant his wishes. If you believe the Disney version, he was only allowed three wishes. And he couldn't wish for more wishes, couldn't wish for someone to die, and couldn't wish for someone to fall in love with him. I wonder if you had Aladdin's lamp, what would you wish for? What are your deepest desires? Would you wish for fame, fortune, happiness? Maybe a good job, a happy family, and long life? A packet of Tim-Tams that never runs out? What would you wish for?

The writer of Psalm 27 could do with a few wishes. Right from the start of the Psalm we see trouble. Verse 1 is a bold expression of confidence. But there's also the hint that there *is* something to be afraid of. The next two verses use great poetical license to describe the situation. The Psalmist is surrounded by people who have it in for him. There's a bloodthirsty horde out to get him.

Towards the end of the Psalm we see that the attacks come from those around him too! Look at verse 12, *'Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.'* The false witnesses aren't foreign foes. They're likely to be fellow Israelites who are trying to accuse him of blasphemy or some other capital offence. There's no shortage of people out to get him!

The introduction to Psalm 27 tells us that the writer is David. If you're familiar with his story you know this reflects David's early life. He faced no shortage of confrontations! At times you could say he was without a friend in the world. Even his King and best friend were

against him! In this situation there are plenty of things that David might've wished for. He might wish for the downfall of his enemies. He might wish for his own protection. He might wish that he could live happily ever after.

But David only wishes for one thing! He doesn't need three wishes. There's only one thing he's longing for, which we see in verse 4. The only thing David is longing for is to dwell in God's house. The temple is the place where God had especially promised to dwell. It was where God's people could seek his presence. Coming into the sanctuary, coming into God's presence helps us readjust to the reality of the world. It helps put things into perspective. In Psalm 27, we see it gives a sense of peace, of comfort and security.

Faced with all, sorts of trouble, it's no wonder that David wants to dwell in the temple forever. But I don't think we're to take this literally. He's not wishing that he could live in the temple 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks of the year! Sometimes that's how much it feels like I'm at church, but it's not something I wish for!

Instead, what David is yearning for, is for God to be with him always, no matter where he is. He wants God to be present in his everyday life, just as he's present in the temple. He wants to be able to see God's beauty all around him. He wants to delight in what God is doing in his people, as his plans are fulfilled. And David wants God to be with him, guiding him in his life. He wants to be able to inquire of God, to be taught and led on level paths as verse 11 puts it. He wants to God to be present with him as he journeys through life.

In this, David is echoing a longing that's present throughout the Psalms. It's something we're all encouraged to yearn for, the Psalms

tell us that there's nothing better than being in God's presence. Really though, the Psalm's are just picking up a theme that's present through the whole bible.

Remember back in Genesis 3. After they'd sinned Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden and they hid from his presence. Likewise, when he rebelled Jonah tried to flee from God's presence. The Bible tells us that sin separates us from being with God. It cuts us off from the blessing that comes from being in his presence. Psalm 51, reminds us that the worst thing that could ever happen to us, is for God to remove withdraw his presence.

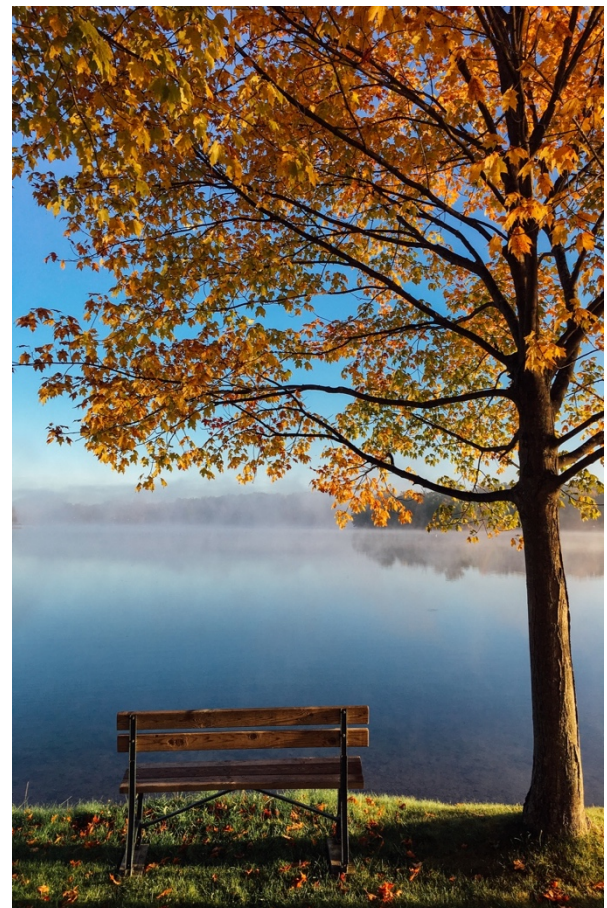
Why is this so bad? We read in the Bible that God's presence is where we find peace and joy. Moses knew that without God's presence there was no point in the people going on after the Exodus. And think of that great picture that we are given at the end of Revelations. In his vision John sees the new heaven and the new earth as a place where we dwell in God's presence forever (Rev. 21:3-4).

So in Psalm 27 David can say that the one thing that he wants, more than anything else, is to be with God, and for God to be with him. David yearns to dwell with God forever. But he's not expressing a longing for heaven, a resigned trust that it's only after death we can know the peace and joy of God's presence. David longs for God to be with him in the present, in the here and now. And as he says in verse 13, he's confident that he will see God at work in the land of the living. Though, of course we don't see this hope fully fulfilled for some time. John tells us that God came to dwell with his people (John 1:14). Here's the beauty, the fullness of God's presence! We see it in Jesus. And now what's more, now God dwells within us! We heard in our series on Ephesians that Christ dwells in our hearts by faith. That God the Spirit dwells within us, strengthening us in our inmost parts! And, God's Spirit is making us

into a holy temple, the church is the dwelling place of God!

It's the promise of God's presence that gives David confidence in Psalm 27. David knows that no matter how numerous, or how ferocious his enemies are, if God is with him they will not ultimately prevail. And did you notice that the thought of God's presence doesn't just give him confidence, it makes him overflow with joy. Verse 6 could be translated as making a noisy sacrifice. God's presence leads us to make a holy din! David's bursting with praise, because God is with him.

It would be nice and easy if the Psalm ended here, wouldn't it? On this confident note of praise. But did you notice how the second half of the Psalm goes? From verse 7 we see that yearning after God doesn't mean the end of all our problems. God's presence doesn't make the bad things in life go away. In verse 12, the adversaries and foes are still there, still seeking violence.



So while he has renewed confidence and joy, he's still yearning. He cries all the more strongly to God. It's almost as if his yearning has gotten stronger, more passionate, more desperate. The more he knows of God's goodness, the more he thinks about the blessings that come from being in God's presence, the more he realizes he needs it in the here and now, so the more strongly he keeps calling out for it.

Desiring God's presence is something we need to keep urging ourselves to do. In verse 8, David has to keep reminding himself to seek God's face. Through verses 7-9, David pleads with God six times not to desert him. He might not fear his enemies, but what he does fear is that God's presence will be removed. His greatest fear is total abandonment. Even having his mother and father forsake him would be tolerable, just so long as God remains with him. There's just one thing that David has asked for, but it's something he continually

seeks, day after day. We have to be persistent in desiring God to be with us.

Yet in the end, the Psalm returns to that note of confidence and encouragement. It ends with a reminder that despite all distractions, despite all discouragements, the one thing we're to long for above anything else is God's presence. We're to wait for the Lord. We're to wait, to look for, to long for, to yearn for God's presence. We're to look to God for strength and courage. And we're to have strength and courage as we persist in our desire for God to be with us.

What are you waiting for? What do you wish for? What does your heart long for? Psalm 27 tells us that the first thing, the most important thing, the only thing we should be yearning for, is God's presence. We should desire nothing else than that God would dwell with us and that we might dwell with him. Would you trade in all your other wishes for this? Will you, as Jesus said, 'Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven?'

## A Prayer of Yearning

*Gracious God,  
Forgive me for the times I yearn for peace, prosperity or pleasure,  
More than I do for you.  
Teach me to long for you with all my heart,  
To place a desire for your presence above all else,  
Grant me, O God, more than the fleeting pleasure,  
But to live in your house all the days of my life,  
To see your beauty and dwell in your glory.  
Help me to follow in the way of Jesus,  
who taught we should seek your kingdom above all else.*

Amen.

# Winter – Psalm 38

*A Psalm of David, for the memorial offering.*

<sup>1</sup> O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,  
or discipline me in your wrath.  
<sup>2</sup> For your arrows have sunk into me,  
and your hand has come down on me.  
<sup>3</sup> There is no soundness in my flesh  
because of your indignation;  
there is no health in my bones  
because of my sin.  
<sup>4</sup> For my iniquities have gone over my head;  
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.  
<sup>5</sup> My wounds grow foul and fester  
because of my foolishness;  
<sup>6</sup> I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;  
all day long I go around mourning.  
<sup>7</sup> For my loins are filled with burning,  
and there is no soundness in my flesh.  
<sup>8</sup> I am utterly spent and crushed;  
I groan because of the tumult of my heart.  
<sup>9</sup> O Lord, all my longing is known to you;  
my sighing is not hidden from you.  
<sup>10</sup> My heart throbs, my strength fails me;  
as for the light of my eyes—it also has gone  
from me.  
<sup>11</sup> My friends and companions stand aloof  
from my affliction,  
and my neighbours stand far off.

<sup>12</sup> Those who seek my life lay their snares;  
those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin,  
and meditate treachery all day long.  
<sup>13</sup> But I am like the deaf, I do not hear;  
like the mute, who cannot speak.  
<sup>14</sup> Truly, I am like one who does not hear,  
and in whose mouth is no retort.  
<sup>15</sup> But it is for you, O Lord, that I wait;  
it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.  
<sup>16</sup> For I pray, ‘Only do not let them rejoice  
over me,  
those who boast against me when my foot  
slips.’  
<sup>17</sup> For I am ready to fall,  
and my pain is ever with me.  
<sup>18</sup> I confess my iniquity;  
I am sorry for my sin.  
<sup>19</sup> Those who are my foes without cause are  
mighty,  
and many are those who hate me  
wrongfully.  
<sup>20</sup> Those who render me evil for good  
are my adversaries because I follow after  
good.  
<sup>21</sup> Do not forsake me, O Lord;  
O my God, do not be far from me;  
<sup>22</sup> make haste to help me,  
O Lord, my salvation.



## Psalm 38 – A Song of Lament

As I write this news is coming in of Covid-19 spreading to Echuca, Kyabram and Shepparton, with nursing homes, schools and hospitals all listed as tier-1 or tier-2 sites. At the same time, reports are just coming in of a bombing in Kabul with at least sixty killed and many more wounded.

What do you say in the face of a terrible tragedies like these? At times like this we struggle to find suitable words. In fact, mere words do not seem sufficient. Think of Remembrance Day were at 11am, on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, people around the world stand in silence for a minute, because words cannot express the grief we feel in the face of immense loss.

But it's not just grief on a global scale that leaves us speechless. The same is true when we face tragedy. The pain might not be as widespread, but it is deep and personal. Which of us here has not at times found ourselves at a loss for words to express our grief? It might be in response to pain or illness. Some of us here have been hurt by a failed relationship, or at the hands of others. And which of us hasn't been affected by the death of a loved one? It might be it a friend or parent, or a child or spouse. How can we put our pain into words? And what can we say to others who are suffering in some way?

There are plenty of platitudes that we can wheel out, like:

*Everything happens for a reason*

*She'll be right*

*Time heals all wounds*

The problem is these sayings are a load of crap. They don't really help us express our grief. There are those who think the Bible is full of clichés like these, or just nice good stories. But the Bible isn't afraid to plummet the depths of despair or to explore the dark places of human

life. And the book of Psalms contains songs that are far better at expressing our pain and grief than any blues or country music song! In fact, perhaps more than any other book in the Bible, the Psalms give voice to the cries of our heart.

There are Psalms which are corporate laments, songs to sing in times of national or international crisis. In the face of national tragedy and global injustice they cry out, how long O Lord? (Ps 94:3-7) Other Psalms express deep personal cries of lament. And they ask the hard questions we're sometimes too afraid or too timid to. They don't pull any punches! (See for example Ps. 44:23-24)

The Psalms don't just ask hard questions, they provide answers, most of the time. And they show us that it's safe to pour out our hearts to God, to express our grief, our sorrow, our mourning, our anger to him, because as other Psalms show, he feels these things too! There's no problem too big, no pain too raw to pour out to God. We see that most clearly in Jesus. When he hung on the Cross, as he took on all the sins and the suffering of the whole world, what did Jesus say?

*'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'*

Where did he find these words? In Psalm 22:1!

This morning we're looking at Psalm 38 and it shows us another reason for lament. Last week, we saw in Psalm 27 that our greatest Yearning should be to be with God, to be in his presence. Psalm 38 shows us our greatest grief comes from being separated from God because of our sin. When we rebel against God, and his rule over our world and every aspect of our lives, we cut ourselves off from him. The pain that comes from that is worse than any other tragedy we might experience.

It's this pain that caused David to write Psalm 38. As we briefly look at this Psalm today, I want to point out a number of features about what it teaches us about how we should lament over our sins.

But first a caveat. The Bible teaches us that all suffering is the result of sin, of the broken and fallen world we live in. This is not the way God intended it to be. Such is not life! Or at least such was not meant to be life, in God's good plan. Some suffering is the clearly the result of some specific failure in our relationship with God, for instance if we overwork and become ill. David attributes his suffering to some particular sin in Psalm 38, possibly the whole thing with Bathsheba and Uriah.

But we can never know for certain. And the Bible cautions us against working backwards to say this suffering must be the result of that sin. That's the mistake Job's friends made. That's the mistake that Jesus' disciples made in John 9 when they asked, 'Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered them, 'Neither but this has happened that you may know the work of God.' Suffering is sometimes the result of the more general fact that we fail in our relationship with God or that we share in the failure of our communities.

With that caveat in mind, in Psalm 38 David cries out to God but he doesn't complain about the suffering he's going through. Look at the start of the Psalm. He's not crying out for God to take away all his pain. He's just asking that God would be merciful as he judges him. That he would discipline, but gently not out of wrath.

Next, David shares in graphic detail the consequences of his sin. He describes the suffering he's going through in very vivid images. It might be that David's actually ill, that he is physically suffering at this point and describing some malady, a wasting away.

But it could be a psychological, emotional or spiritual pain that he's describing in verses 3-8. I know when I've sinned, when I've hurt others by my words or actions, when I've failed to do what is right, I feel sick in my stomach. When I know I've done something that God has called us not to do, my guts feel all wrenched up, I feel utterly spent and crushed. I feel the burden of my sins and like David, at times they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.

David feels that weight, it drives him too his knees. He's bowed down, even prostrate before God. Which is handy, because it puts him in the perfect position to pour his heart out to God. Which he does day and night, all day long he mourns before God. His grief and sorrow is so great that even David struggles to find words to express it to God. In verse 8 he says he can only groan. His heart cries out, but he can find no words to express his lament. But still, he pours himself out before God, all his tears, all his longings and sighs. He holds nothing back, he hides nothing from God, who can see it all anyway. God can see into his heart and God hears the cries of his heart.

That's all David can do, because no one else will listen. From verse 11 we see that all his friends and companions have pulled back. At the moment when he most needs them to come near, to give him a hug, to be an ear to listen or a shoulder to cry on, they abandon him. Instead they've all taken a big step back. They don't want anything to do with him in his wretched state. Even Job, covered in sores, sitting on top of junk pile, had friends who came near, not that they were much help! There's no one left for David to turn to but God.

It's ironic in a way isn't it? Who has David offended? God. Who does he turn to? God. When we offend someone, we don't often go to them looking for sympathy or for help. We don't expect compassion from one we've wronged. But that's how big, how loving, God

is. He wants to forgive us if we confess, if we acknowledge our sins, if we repent. He's slow to anger, quick to forgive as we're told over and over in the Psalms (86:15; 103:8; 145:8). He's the one who loves us, who has shown compassion in Jesus. God's the only one standing by David.

Actually, David's not entirely alone. His friends might've stepped back, but his enemies have drawn near! Though they're only looking for an opportunity to trip him up. But in the way he responds, David gives us a model of how to handle conflict. How does David deal with it? While those who seek his life speak evil of him, he's like one deaf and mute. That's not to say he's giving them the cold shoulder or putting his hands on his ears saying 'I can't hear you!' In the face of conflict, David's chosen not to retaliate. He doesn't raise his voice in anger against them. He doesn't respond tit for tat. In fact, he does what Jesus says to do, and turns the other cheek.

The Psalms expect people to say and do nothing to the people who have wronged them. Instead the Psalms encourage us to speak to God about these people. The protest and lament of the Psalms give people opportunity to express their anger, but to do so to God rather than to the people who might deserve it. And then they ask us to trust in the God who judges and who shows mercy. (Notice that all he asks is that his enemies might not see him stumble and fall, not that God will smite them!)

## A Prayer of Lament

*Loving Lord,  
when we are faced with the tragedies of life,  
when we are overcome by sin and suffering,  
help us to turn to you and know your love,  
shown to us in your Son Jesus. Amen.*

Next the Psalm teaches us to engage in true confession. He doesn't just cry out 'woe is me!' Nor does he say, 'I feel really bad that I've done the wrong thing.' He is sorry for his sin and he tells God. But he commits to turning his life around. He is determined to follow after good (and God). That's what true confession is. David acknowledges his sin, failure or shortcoming, waywardness and stupidity, falling short of the goodness and glory of God, a positive but twisted activity outworking of a mind gone awry. But his plea is that God nevertheless relieves the pain and suffering. He seeks mercy from God.

And that's exactly what he's confident of finding. He's confident that God will comfort him.

*<sup>21</sup>Do not forsake me, O Lord;  
O my God, do not be far from me;  
<sup>22</sup>make haste to help me,  
O Lord, my salvation.*

In the end, in the midst of his pain, his lament and mourning, he does the only thing he can. He waits upon God to give him strength and comfort.

This Psalm, although it's a lament for suffering based upon sin, is a prayer that anyone undergoing suffering could use to express their pain, their trust, their repentance, their plea for God's help. No matter what's causing us to be downcast, no matter what's behind our distress. Whatever the storms, the trials or the pain or suffering, we can turn to God. Even if the cause of our pain is the pain we've caused God, we can turn to him.



# Spring - Psalm 46

*To the leader. Of the Korahites. According to Alamoth. A Song.*

<sup>1</sup> God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.

<sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

<sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

*Selah*

<sup>4</sup> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.

<sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;  
God will help it when the morning dawns.

<sup>6</sup> The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

<sup>7</sup> The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

*Selah*

<sup>8</sup> Come, behold the works of the Lord;  
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

<sup>9</sup> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.

<sup>10</sup> 'Be still, and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations,  
I am exalted in the earth.'

<sup>11</sup> The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

*Selah*

## Psalm 46 – A Song of Hope

When we look at the world today there seems to be very little to hope for. The real tragedy of the events of last week are that they aren't the only tragedy. Only a fraction of these make our news headlines, perhaps because if we were too confronted with the real state of the world we'd give up hope. There seems no hope for peace in our world in our lifetimes, or in the lifetime of our children or their children.

The hopelessness of the global state of affairs is mirrored by the hopelessness of our local community. Early in my time in Echuca I met with our local state MP. During our conversation I asked him what he thought the most pressing needs in our community were. Without needing to think about it, he gave three answers, none of which were a surprise, drug abuse, domestic violence and homelessness. The only surprise is that given successive policies and programs over the years, despite all the efforts of governments and churches and individuals, these problems still remain. We might ask, what hope is there for our world if these obvious problems persist?

The optimistic hope of the Enlightenment, and of secularism, is that given time humanity will conquer all evils. Their belief is that we as we gradually improve ourselves through education, science and philosophy we'll eventually arrive at a utopian society. I love science fiction. Growing up, I was a big fan of Star Trek. Shows, and stories, like that affirm this vision of a bright, shiny future, where humanity hasn't just thrown off the shackles of the earth to explore the stars, but has also bested racism, sexism, violence and war. But really, that seems more of a fantasy than all the fancy technology. It seems we'll have transporters and star ships before we have real peace, prosperity and paradise.

As we saw last week, there's much to lament in our world, in our society, in our selves, in our sin. What hope is there then? But whereas Psalm 38 was a lament in the face of suffering, Psalm 46 is a song of hope.

The Psalm begins by focusing on God.

*<sup>1</sup>God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.*

As Christians, we trust in something bigger than ourselves. God is a refuge and strength. The one we put our faith in is trustworthy. No matter if the even the earth were to heave under us, if the seas roar and rage, or the nations rise up against each other, we needn't be afraid. For God is our strength and refuge. We're reminded that no matter what our circumstances, God is bigger. God is also present. He is very present in times of trouble. This Psalm is a statement of faith, a faith that looks beyond what we see, beyond what's happening around us right now, beyond the pain and the difficulty and says that God himself is with us. Like all the Psalms, this Psalm is too honest to say that nothing bad will happen to us if we trust in God, but it does say that no matter what befalls us, even if its pain, catastrophe, failure of chaos, even then the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Martin Luther was very fond of this Psalm and in times of stress or trouble he would often say to his colleagues, 'Come let us sing the forty-sixth Psalm.' He took the words of Psalm 46 and made them the basis for his hymn, 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God'. Those words, the first line of that hymn and this Psalm are now etched around the tower of the Castle Church in Wittenberg where Luther lived and worked. There were no shortage of occasions that would've inspired Luther to express the confidence of his faith, his security in God, and his great trust for God. Despite the threats on

his life, his health, his family, the church and the gospel itself he continued to have trust in God as his strength and refuge, his help in times of trouble.

But the Psalm teaches us that we don't just have hope because of who God is, but because of what he's doing. There's a surprising shift in verse 4. In verses 2-3, the waters are depicted as roaring and raging. But in verse 4, suddenly we're presented with water that makes us glad. There's a river, whose streams makes glad the city of God.

Now at first we might think that the city of God is Jerusalem. It was after all the capital of Israel, God's chosen nation. And the temple, the place on earth where God had promised to dwell, stood in Jerusalem. But, there was and is no river in Jerusalem! Now, it could be that the Psalm is using poetic licence, painting an image of streams of blessings from God flowing through Jerusalem, refreshing the city. Or it might be that the Psalm is making a powerful promise that God will protect Jerusalem and provide for her needs in times of trouble and siege, the way a river would.

But I think there's another image at play here, one that is the source of our hope as Christians. It goes to the heart of the Christian worldview, and the way we understand time and God's purposes for the world.

In Genesis 2, there is a river that flowed out of the Garden of Eden and watered the earth. It was in the Garden of Eden that God dwelt with his people, where they were secure in his place, under his rule, obeying his word. But, as you know, we mucked it all up by disobeying God.

The rest of the Bible is the story of God's plan to rescue his creation, to redeem his people and to restore his plans for his world. That's why Jesus came, why he died on the cross and why he rose to new life. So that we could be

restored and forgiven. So that we could again be God's people, in God's place, under God's rule. But the picture the Bible gives of heaven, of what that future looks like, isn't a return to the Garden. God's plan isn't to put things back the way they were, not exactly.

See God never intended us to remain in the Garden of Eden, without change or progress. When he created humanity, he invited us to join him in the ongoing work of creation! So the picture we have in the prophets, and in the book of Revelation, is of heaven not as a garden, but a city! A city in which God dwells with his people. And in this city there is a river, whose streams make glad the city of God. Listen to how John sees it in his vision in Revelation:

*<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup>he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'*

*Rev. 21:1-4*

*<sup>1</sup>Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup>through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

*Rev. 22:1-2*

Doesn't this vision give you hope? While our world might at times seem out of control, while it might seem like we never really learn our lessons, or that history keeps repeating itself, the message of the Bible is one of great hope. God has a plan. God is in control. And the future God has in mind for his people is more glorious and wonderful than any science fiction story or utopian dream.

Christian hope is very different to the hope the rest of the world has. For the world, the word hope is more like vain optimism. I hope this will all work out. I hope that my football team will win next year's grand final. I hope that mum will get better. We have a sure and certain hope. For our hope is in God, he is our strength and refuge. We have the hope of eternal life, which God who never lies has promised to those who believe. We hope for the future, for God's future, which is sure and certain as he is.

The last stanza of the Psalm invites us to come and see this for ourselves. To look back and see all that God has done. To look forward and see what God has planned. But it's also an invitation to look here and now, to see the signs of God's kingdom springing to life around us, as the buds of spring give promise to the fruit of what is to come. We see God's kingdom advancing when we see others putting their faith in Jesus. When we see lives transformed

by the light, life and love of God in Jesus Christ. We're invited to come and taste of God's goodness for ourselves. So that we know our hope isn't blind, but is in a sure and certain thing.

And we're also invited to be still and know that he is God. How hard is it to be still sometimes. We see a problem and we want to fix it. We see something happening and we want to be part of it. We sit and we want to fill the void with noise. But God bursts into the song, to say, 'Be still and know that I am God.' He wants us to be still and know that he is in control. To be still and know that he is God. To know, in Hebrew, doesn't mean just to acknowledge something intellectually, but to internalize or to embody the truth fully. He wants us to know and live out the knowledge that he is God. And then God's voice closes the psalm by asserting his exaltation over both spheres of creation that have been in rebellion against God: "I am exalted among the nations" and "I am exalted in the earth."

That's the promise of both the psalm, and in a larger sense, of the entire Bible. That the God of Jacob and the Lord of Israel will, in the end of all things, prove a faithful refuge for those who are caught in the fallen condition of creation and humanity.

## A Prayer of Hope

*Heavenly Father,*

*We give you thanks for who you are,  
what you have done,  
and what you have promised to do.*

*Thank you that we do not hope in ourselves,  
but our hope is found in you.*

*Thank you for the hope of heaven,  
the promise of eternity spent in your presence,  
given to us through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*



# Summer – Psalm 148

<sup>1</sup> Praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord from the heavens;  
praise him in the heights!

<sup>2</sup> Praise him, all his angels;  
praise him, all his host!

<sup>3</sup> Praise him, sun and moon;  
praise him, all you shining stars!

<sup>4</sup> Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!

<sup>5</sup> Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for he commanded and they were created.

<sup>6</sup> He established them for ever and ever;  
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

<sup>7</sup> Praise the Lord from the earth,  
you sea monsters and all deeps,  
<sup>8</sup> fire and hail, snow and frost,  
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

<sup>9</sup> Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars!

<sup>10</sup> Wild animals and all cattle,  
creeping things and flying birds!

<sup>11</sup> Kings of the earth and all peoples,  
princes and all rulers of the earth!

<sup>12</sup> Young men and women alike,  
old and young together!

<sup>13</sup> Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for his name alone is exalted;  
his glory is above earth and heaven.

<sup>14</sup> He has raised up a horn for his people,  
praise for all his faithful,  
for the people of Israel who are close to him.

Praise the Lord!



## Psalm 148 – A Song of Joy

I have to be honest with you. It's been a long and tiring week. To be really honest, most weeks this year have been long and tiring! My days, and much of my nights, have been filled to the brim with church and family responsibilities and how I can be Christlike in my responses. While all our children are now sleeping through, most nights I've only had average sleep. I've missed my day off, or at least the quiet solitude that I find refreshing.

Now, I'm not telling you all this to garner sympathy. And I should say there have been some great times both this week and this year! In fact, I should say that if you've spent any time with me this week, that it's not you, it's me. For most of the week I've felt under a cloud, hard to feel particularly joyous. I suspect I'm not alone in this. Navigating lockdowns, working from home, managing children and family, plans that always seem to be postponed.

All in all, I haven't felt particularly joyous this week. At least that was until I sat down with Psalm 148. Like each of the last five Psalms it begins and ends with the words, 'Praise the Lord!' I challenge you to read this Psalm and not get to the end wanting to join in with the final shout, 'Praise the Lord!'

But while Psalm 148 begins, 'Praise the Lord' but it doesn't jump to telling us how we should praise God, or why we should praise him the way some of the other Psalms do. Instead it focuses on where that praise should come from. The call to worship doesn't start with us, but with the heavens and heights. All the angelic and celestial bodies that inhabit the heavens are to make a joyful noise as they praise the Lord. The sun, moon and stars are to join with the angels and all the host of heaven in worship. By beginning with the heavens, the Psalm lifts us up above our present

circumstances. The heavens themselves are crying out in praise to God. Life isn't just about me, or what I'm feeling or what I'm going through. We are surrounded by a vast universe the length and depth and breadth of which is shouting glory to God.

It's only when we get to the end of verse 5 that we find out why. It's because God made them, he commanded and they were created. These words should transport us back to the very start of the Bible, back to the book of Genesis. God spoke, he commanded, and the world came into being. That connection is made all the stronger if we notice the order in which the world is called to praise God. It loosely parallels the order in which God made the world. It even mentions the waters gathered above the heavens, as in Genesis 1:7. The second half of the Psalm follows this pattern in the way it describes the living things, the sea creatures, wild animals, the cattle, the creeping things and flying birds, and last of all people. God has created all these things and they are to join in joyfully praising him!

All the heavens and the earth and all that's within them owe God this praise because it is only through him that they exist. And it's only by God's decree that we continue to exist. He fixed their bounds and they cannot be passed. No force can end the world, except God. No power is sufficient to destroy the world, except God's. That too is a reason for joyfully praise.



From the heights of the heavens, the Psalm moves closer to home in verse 7. All things on earth, and under the sea, should join in the praise of God Almighty. Even those forces we might think as the most powerful on earth, the fire and hail, snow and frost, the stormy winds and all the seasons are called to acknowledge their place and to praise God. The mountains and hills, which would've dominated the author's landscape are to bow in worship. The fields of wheat and the trees laden with fruit are to wave in praise to God. All the creatures God has made, which walk the earth, or swim in the sea, or fill the air are to make a joyful noise, or bleat, or sound to God.

Eventually, in verse 11, the Psalm turns to humanity. All the kings and rulers, all the people of the earth, male and female, rich and poor, old and young should joyfully praise God together. God deserves universal praise, not just praise from all the universe, but universal praise from all the people of the earth. There is one action that should unite us all and that is the praise of God, whose name alone is exalted, who's glory is above the earth and the heaven.

But then in the last verse the Psalm springs another reason for why we should praise God. In verse 15 we're told we should praise the Lord for he has lifted up a horn for his people. In the context of praising God and making a joyful noise to the Lord you might imagine a ram's horn, a trumpet of sorts, being lifted up to lead God's people in their praise. But that's not what this picture intends. A horn is a symbol of strength. It makes sense when you think of a bull charging, or deer fighting. All of their force is concentrated in their horns. As creation looks at what God does for his people, it finds here another reason to praise him. The ancient Israelites who first read and sang this Psalm would've been reminded of God's

promises to give them strength, to protect them and to make them great among all the nations of the earth. But as Christians singing this Psalm we have an elevated perspective and understanding. The horn that God has lifted up is in fact Christ, who was lifted up on the Cross.

Which leads us to the second, and even more unexpected, twist in the next line. God is not only to be praised because he has lifted up this horn, but he is to be praised for his people, for his faithful ones who are close to him. It's kind of embarrassing in a way. Most of the Psalm has been a call for creation to join in praising God. Now we find out that we're actually one of the reasons they should praise him! In his first letter Peter writes about the joy we should rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy because of the salvation we have received from God. He then says that even the angels long to look in and see this salvation at work among us. Not only do they look on in wonder, Psalm 148 tells us that the heavens, sun, moon, stars, angels, earth, and creatures all praise God because of the church. Not because we're such a great group of people, but because of what God has done in us, and for us and through us. He has forgiven us in Christ Jesus, he has restored us, and through us he promises to restore the world.

William Tyndale defined the gospel as:

*'good, merry, glad and joyful tidings that makes a person's heart glad and makes them sing, dance and leap with joy!'*

What better way to express our joy in God our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer than to lift our voices praising the Lord? Wherever you are, whenever you're reading this, join with me in saying Psalm 148 together, joyfully!

I hope you've enjoyed this brief look at the Psalms and that it, and they, have been an encouragement and blessing to you.

I pray that as we read the Psalms, as we sing them, as we pray them, we'll find words to express our faith and trust in God, no matter what season we find ourselves in.

I'd love to hear what Psalms have sustained you, both through this present time and throughout your life and walk of faith.

Blessings,  
*Archdeacon George*



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