

## Pentecost 20

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 Psalm 22:1-15 Hebrews 4:12-16 Mark 10:17-31

Odd as it may sound to us the Psalms were not first written and then sung but the other way around. Most of the Psalms were first sung and prayed for a long, long time before they were written down. And then, those who actually wrote them down were not the same people as those who composed them. Instead, they were the ones who collected and collated them. So, the psalms had a long, rich and varied life in oral tradition before they were recorded.

The psalms originated in the worship of Israel that worship wasn't what we might expect based on what we experience today. Worship in the culture of that day was the centre of an entire community's life. For Israel it wasn't just the place where people interested in religion gathered, rather worship was at the heart of the life of the whole community. So, it's important to recognise that everything that happened in the life of the people as a whole and in the life of individuals found its way into with worship. So, a great national crisis, drought, threat of attack, defeat or plague *had* to be brought before God in lament and supplication.

However, if, on the other hand victory had been granted to the nation, the threat of danger had been averted, or a bumper crop had been harvested, God *had* to be praised.

These two contrasting types of experiences gave rise to the two major groupings of psalms: Lament and praise, both corporate and individual.

Even in the later period when songs were being collected their origin was still understood to have been based in experiences of crisis and rescue. This is reflected in the superscriptions attached to the psalms as they were collected for example Psalm 18, "A Psalm of David ... on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul".

The psalm set for today, Psalm 22 falls into the previous category, written by King David, it is regarded as a psalm of individual lament although it is highly emotive, sinking to the deepest depths only to ascend to the highest heights and ending triumphantly. It is noteworthy for being quoted no less than 14 times in the NT.

The psalm begins abruptly, with a disturbing scene: someone who knows and trusts God feels forsaken, and cries out to God in agony. This forsaken one had a relationship with God but he was a victim of the cruelty of men. His cry and complaint, however, are to God – even My God – and not to or against man. The repetition of the plea illustrates the intensity of the agony he suffers.

There were many instances in the life of David where he might have been prompted to write such an agonised prayer-poem. Both before and after becoming king of Israel, he lived through times of great danger and deprivation.

Just one example of this is the psalm about which I spoke some weeks ago: Psalm 51, which is annotated thus: “For the Director of Music. A Psalm of David when the Prophet Nathan came to him, after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.”

Clearly, David’s life experience provided ample inspiration for psalms of lament. However, if this is true of David, it is perhaps more so of Jesus the Christ.

When you read this Psalm earlier, I am certain that many of you, perhaps not even consciously, were reminded of Holy Week and Easter. Understood as a prophecy of the Suffering Servant, this psalm has been thoroughly absorbed into Christian narrative and worship because the opening words are the words Jesus used on the cross (Matthew 27:46). Hence, the need to remind ourselves that it was written originally by David about some experience he had.

One scholar commented that: “No doubt David experienced this, but only as a shadow compared to how Jesus experienced this.” Noting that “Prior to the cross, Jesus lived every moment in conscious fellowship with God the Father, combined with a continual dependence upon the help of both the Father and the Spirit.” (enduringword.com: Guzik)

I imagine that many of you have favourite passages of Scripture. Perhaps passages you associate with great celebrations or other moments of joy, but more commonly, perhaps, passages that have been a great comfort to you. Passages you have recited in prayer in dark or difficult times. Perhaps mostly texts from the NT, sayings of Jesus, perhaps.

As a good Jew of his day, the scriptures to which Jesus would have clung, that he would have known by heart, would have been from the OT. One commentator noted: “We can be fairly certain that Jesus was meditating on the Old Testament during the hours of his suffering and that he saw his crucifixion as a fulfillment of Psalm 22 particularly.” (Boice)

I want to conclude by focusing on those Aramaic words from Psalm 22 that Jesus quoted from the cross, as recorded in Matthew 27 and Mark 15 “*Eli Eli lama sabachtani*” as he felt alone, in excruciating pain, dying slowly in a horrendous and humiliating way.

In ancient Israel rabbinical students were expected to memorise all 150 psalms. One of the ways that their rabbi might test their proficiency was to recite the first line of a psalm and then wait for his students to recite the rest of it back to him. So when Jesus cried out the first line of Psalm 22 every learned Jew present at the scene of his crucifixion would have immediately recognised the text as Psalm 22 and probably each automatically recited to himself the rest of the psalm. Imagine their astonishment as they suddenly realised, if they did, that the words of the psalm were being played out right before their eyes, including Jesus’ being mocked and taunted, some of his garments being divided up and lots cast for others.

Perhaps it is not surprising then, to read in Acts 6: 7 that even many of the *Kohanim*, the Jewish priests were becoming believers.

I often use art to illustrate sermons, so recognising that some people are aural and auditory rather than visual, I conclude by playing two short pieces from the *Messiah* that quote lines from Psalm 22: From Scene 1 of Part 2, the *Passion*, the pieces are “All they that see him” (Verse 7) and “He trusted in God” (Verse 8).

#### References

Enduringword.com: David Guzik

Shema.com: Rabbi Glenn

Ligonier.org

*The Message*, Eugene H. Peterson, 2002, Navpress

*The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message*, Claus Westermann, 1980, Augsburg Publishing House