

LAMENT and HOPE

LAMENTATIONS 3: 19-23

"The Lord is my Shepherd"

"I lift up my eyes to the hills"

"O Come, let us sing to the Lord"

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord"

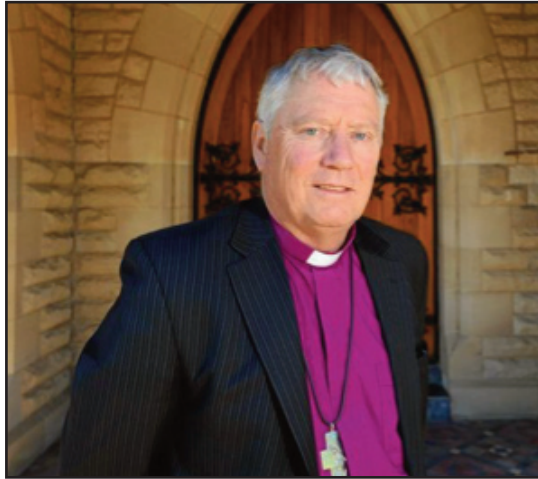
"Into your hand I commit my spirit"

"You are indeed my rock and fortress"

"I wait for the Lord, my soul waits"

Create in Me a Clean Heart

*The Psalms for Lent
Bishop David Robinson*



About this year's writer

Prior to ordination Bp David spent a number of years working in the field of Water Chemistry and Biology with the South Australian Government. In 1987 he, Jan and their two daughters, moved to Bangladesh to serve with ABM. They moved to Canberra in 1990 to complete theological studies and David was ordained in 1992. He served in the Parishes of Reid, Gundagai and Koorngal. He has been Area Dean, Chair of the Diocesan Stewardship Committee, a member of the Diocesan Property Trust and the Mission Task Group.

In 2007 Jan and David returned to Bangladesh where they taught at Grace International School. In 2009, upon their return to Australia, David took on the role of rector of the Parish of Curtin. In 2011 he was appointed Lecturer in Mission and Ministry and Ministry Formation Coordinator at St Mark's National Theological Centre.

Bp David was ordained 12th Bishop of Rockhampton in 2014.

His personal interests include photography, travel and walking.



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www.grassroots.com.au/Lent2020.htm

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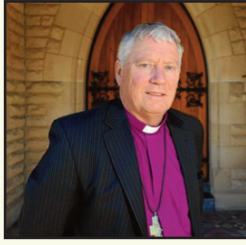
Additional material available on line for these studies at
www.grassroots.com.au/Lent2020.htm



To help your group get quickly, there is a suggested outline members could fill out at www.grassroots.com.au/Lent2020.htm and this would form a care basis for the group during the lent studies.

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Bishop David Robinson

Introduction

The Psalms 'present the extremes of human existence, when all coping mechanisms and defences are stripped away. As such, their cries are as appropriate for contemporary Christians to take on their lips as they were for ancient Israelites'¹.

In the Christian tradition Lent is time to reflect, on ourselves, our church and our world. It is a time of penitence and confession, a time to seek the restoration and salvation that God offers all who trust in him. With this in mind it is no surprise that the first two Psalms set down for Lent are Ps 51 and 32 both of which urge their readers to look deep within themselves and confess.

Many Psalms arise out of times of crisis. The nation has been defeated in battle, people are surrounded by enemies, they are exiled in a strange land and they cry out to God for help (Pss 22; 72; 79; 83; 137 are some examples). While these examples may not appear relevant today, we must admit that crises form part of the everyday existence of humankind. While living in the developed world offers us the ability and resources to mitigate many crisis situations, our complacency can soon be shattered: drought, fire

and flood take no account of personal wealth or position.

The people of Israel knew what it was like to suffer and, with an honesty that we sometimes find difficult, the Psalmist express the pain and anguish, and the joy and hope, of a people who lived through difficult times. They did not hold back in their expression of emotion. Sometimes raw and confronting, the cries of pain, anger and disappointment confront our sensibilities. Yet the cry does not end there. Lying behind these expressions of deep pain, of fear and uncertainty, is the sure and certain knowledge of God's salvation. The message of Psalms 'We find blessing in God's righteous king, which leads to a life of praise'² derives out of this deep sense of God's care for, and blessing of his people, in times of great trial.

As we read, say and sing the Psalms we can recognise that, even with all of our technological and scientific advances, we are powerless in the face of so much that makes for human suffering. It is a great shame that in many places today the Psalms are treated as an optional extra in our worship and liturgy. It has been commented that much of the worship offered today chooses to negotiate a path around the awkwardness of lament, offering a balm of relentlessly upbeat words – which, precisely because it does not allow the hurt to be voiced, brings no real healing³.

The Psalms gave hope to Israel, they

have given hope to a great cloud of witnesses down the centuries, and they give hope today as we cry out to God, from the depths of human existence, and find in these words the assurance of their hope and salvation.

Bishop Tom Wright has said, 'The Psalms call us to pray and sing at the intersection of times – of our time and God's time, of the then and the now and the not yet'. We are a people in transition who know that pain and suffering, as real as they are, will one day give way to joy through a faithful trust in God.⁴

We look forward with the author of the Book of Revelation to the time when *"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; 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 21:3-4).

Over the next few weeks we will look at the psalm set down for each Sunday in Lent. Each has its own specific theme and we will try and show how they can be as relevant today as they were to those who first spoke and heard these words many years ago.

Further background information that will be helpful as we begin our studies can be found on the website at www.grassroots.com.au/lent2020.htm
References

- ¹ Dan Wu in Finding Lost Words: The Churches right to Lament, p 136
- ² Dan Wu in Finding Lost Words: The Churches right to Lament, p 140
- ³ David G Firth in Finding Lost Words: The Churches right to Lament, p xvii
- ⁴ N T Wright, Finding God in the Psalms, SPCK, 2014, p44.

Be still
and know that
I AM
with you.
PSALM 46:10



Psalm 32 “The Joy of Forgiveness”

Preparation Material

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)

What is sin and how would you define it?

Many people, today, do not like the idea of sin – it is argued that this kind of language is barrier to evangelism. This may be so but, when we come to read and study the Psalms we should be prepared to think about and reflect upon the questions of sin and confession. The Psalmist readily acknowledges the refusal to obey God’s word, as a significant cause of the difficulties faced by both the individual and the community. While we might not accept some of the Psalmist’s views, I think we can agree that the idea of sin remains deep within the human psyche even if it is denied.

Halligan, quoted in ‘The Human Dark Side: Evolutionary Psychology and Original Sin’ has claimed that there is a growing and keen awareness of narcissism that is at the root of what is called original sin. He claims this narcissism is passed on from generation to generation and is acted out in defensive rage whenever insult or rejection occurs¹.

Is one of the reasons for the denial of God, by so many, nothing more than a desire to avoid facing the reality that we all fall short of our own standards not only God’s?

Early in Christian history a number of the Psalms were considered particularly helpful for reflection during Lent. The Penitential Psalms,

as they became known (Pss 6, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143) call their readers to confess their sin and to cast themselves on the mercy of God, trusting in God for their salvation. These Psalms help people to pause and reflect, to engage in honest self-examination, preparing them for confession and repentance. For many Christians Lent is also a time for self-denial – to give something up is a sign of commitment to God and a reminder to focus on those things that will help grow disciples of Jesus.

The Psalms, set down for each Sunday in Lent will challenge our discipleship, encourage us with the promises of God and reassure us that, in the midst of sin, pain and uncertainty, God remains ever faithful.

Psalm 51, set down for Ash Wednesday, recalls King David’s adulterous affair with Bathsheba and his plan to ensure the death of Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11). The Psalmist calls for an acknowledgement of sin and confession, recognising that such a response to God will bring about personal transformation. ‘Create within me a new heart and a right spirit’ (Psalm 51:10) serves as a reminder that God can do what we cannot do for ourselves.

Psalm 32, our Psalm for this week, follows a similar pattern. Urging readers not to keep silent about their failings, not to ignore or refuse to accept the truth of the dark side within each person, but rather to bring everything before God, even the deepest and most secret aspects

of our lives. To offer up those things that we are too ashamed, perhaps even to admit to ourselves and confess. This is a call to a level of vulnerability many of us find uncomfortable, as we strip away the masks we hide behind and acknowledge our true selves to God.

Such vulnerability will require a trust and a dependence upon God that is alien to many in our society. A society which seems to thrive on the idea of human goodness and the denial of human failure. While some things are almost universally seen as evil – think of the recent mass shootings in New Zealand and the United States – there remain many grey areas.

So often, it appears that the only real arbiter of right or wrong, in the world today, is what we can get away with or what our experience tells us is okay, what we might call the ‘if it feels right do it’ phenomenon. Community attitudes towards euthanasia, abortion, refugees, the environment, slavery, people trafficking etc. appear to be based more upon the rights of the individual than what is best for the common good, more on political expediency than compassion, more on fear than trust, more on economic advantage than a willingness to share. We have lost our moral compass.

That our society is permeated by this strong sense of this individuality and independence was illustrated quite rudely, I thought at the time, at a wedding I was taking. I commented during my address that many people

had a stake in this young couple’s marriage, parents, grandparents, other family members and friends, making the point that they don’t have to, and they should not try to, do it all alone. It was at this point someone from the back of the crowd stated, in a loud voice all could hear, ‘You can do it alone. You don’t need anyone else’.

Such self-assured independence is destructive of our relationship with God and with one another. Unfortunately, it is becoming more and more commonplace with a growing disregard for others expressed in terms like, ‘I can do whatever I want’. This attitude, which ignores the human need for love and acceptance, for the support and encouragement of others, leaves us striving for success on our own terms – ‘I made it’. But when the inevitable failure comes where can we go for help? Will we even acknowledge we need help?

An exalted sense of independence and individualism can easily lead into a situation where we are so afraid of failure, so afraid of saying, ‘I need help’, that we lock away our inner selves. Unwilling to share with others our doubts and fears, while projecting the strongest and most positive image we can, leads to superficial encounters, where relationships lack the depth and strength they need to make it through difficult times. These are people who the Psalmist describes as having wasted away, whose strength has dried up (vv3-4).

While we might think an exalted sense of independence and

individualism are modern issues, it would appear the Psalmist was well aware of such human failings reminding us we are not the centre of the universe we like to think we are. We are called to break our silence and reveal our deepest selves, those things of which we are deeply ashamed and embarrassed (vv 4-5). The Psalms accept the reality of human failure, that we all fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). In so doing we are challenged to reconsider our view of ourselves and the world in which we live. When we do this the sense of independence and individuality, prized by so many, the sense of self-sufficiency and, dare we say, the self-righteousness we feel, are profoundly challenged. This can lead to great discomfort.

This discomfort makes it difficult to be vulnerable, so the Psalmist opens with words of encouragement 'happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered' (v 1). He sees all humanity as rebellious, a people who distort God's truth to their own ends and in so doing turn away from the will of God. The only way out of this situation, the only hope for true happiness, is to be forgiven.

Drawing on the wisdom tradition where, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Prov 1:7); the Psalmist declares that the righteous person is the one whose awe and reverence for God affects their daily living. Such a person will not remain stubborn, they will avoid evil and live according to the instruction, the counsels of God (v

8-9). It is not that people become sinless – I don't think that's humanly possible – rather God covers over their sin, even those sins that have been committed unknowingly. It is in this covering over, in the knowledge that God has forgiven us, that true happiness can be found. Of course, this covering over presupposes confession and repentance. When these are honest and devoid of deceit then forgiveness and happiness will be experienced.

Psalm 32 calls us to confession, teaching us to pray in times of distress, urging us not to be stubborn, before leading us into praise, into thanking God for all that has been done for us. It reminds us of the need for honest self-appraisal and confession, revealing the power of forgiveness to restore and heal as God does that which we cannot do. It is a Psalm that lies at the very heart of the Apostle Paul's argument that justification and forgiveness are not achieved by law, but by divine grace, by faith in Jesus Christ 'who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification' (Romans 4:6-26).

¹ Lee J. 'The Human Dark Side: Evolutionary Psychology and Original Sin' *Journal of Religion and Health*, 53.2 (2013), pp 614-629



Introduction and welcome

Welcome members to the group.

Ask group members to introduce themselves and to share one thing that is well known about them and one thing that is not generally known; eg: My name is David, I am married to Jan, I have been white-water rafting on the Zambezi River.

Other questions that could also be used as icebreakers

- What do you hope to get out of this study?
- How did you come to faith in Jesus?

Opening prayer:

Pray together

Gracious and merciful God,
the light of your truth gives sight
to the darkness of human eyes.
May this season of repentance
bring to us the blessing of your forgiveness
and the gift of your light.
Grant this, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.



Reading:

Have someone read the following Psalm aloud.

Pause and read silently, spend a few moments reflecting on the passage before moving on to the questions and group discussion.



Psalm 32

The Joy of Forgiveness

- 1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
- 2 Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- 3 While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
- 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

- 6 Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.
- 7 You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.
- 8 I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
- 9 Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.
- 10 Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
- 11 Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.



For Discussion

It's not necessary to answer all the questions. These are offered as a guide to encourage reflection and conversation as we study the word, reflect on its meaning, and listen for the Spirit's promptings, praying that God would create a clean heart and a right spirit within us. Just select from the following suggestions.

1. As you reflect on Psalm 32 what elements – words, verses, ideas – stand out for you?
 - What challenges you?
 - What encourages you? Why?
2. In a world that increasingly denies the reality of sin what differences do you observe between the (a) secular world's response and (b) the Christian response to the issues of
 - sin?
 - the human response to sin?
 - the nature and character of God?
3. How, according to the Psalmist, is true happiness to be found?
 - How does this compare with what we read, see and hear in the daily media and particularly in many advertising campaigns that suggest happiness is to be found in ownership.
4. Are there times when you behave without understanding (v. 9)
 - What do you need to do to ensure you remain open to God's word and plan for your life?

5. The Psalmist is confident that God will forgive their sin.
Do you share this confidence?
 - It is said that ‘confession is good for the soul’. Have you ever made a private confession with a priest? If so, what did you gain from this experience?
6. What encouragement can we take from knowing that Jesus died for our sin?
 - How far are you prepared to go to show your commitment to faith in Jesus?
7. What might God be saying to you through this passage?
8. We live in a very “I” centred world today. How can you address this in everyday life in your family or community?
 - How could your local church make inroads into this serious problem?

Closing Prayer

- Ask group members if there are any particular points, they would like the group to pray for?
- Pray for any issues that may have been raised in the group study.
- Give thanks to God for your time together.



Close by praying together the collect for Ash Wednesday.

Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts,
that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.



Supper



To get the most out of these studies it will be helpful to prayerfully read through next week’s reading, Psalm 121. The accompanying notes are provided to help in our understanding of the passage but if time is limited please concentrate on reading the Psalm.