

**SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE BY THE REVEREND
STUART LANGSHAW, LOCUM TENENS, SUNDAY 23 JULY 2017**

FIFTH SERMON IN SERIES ON HOLY COMMUNION

THE PSALMS

From Psalm 19:14 – *“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight: O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.”*

What a lot of songs there are – love songs; protest songs; story-telling songs; children’s songs; national songs, sporting songs; national anthems; nonsense songs; sensible songs; songs from musical shows; songs from operas; devotional songs ... and so we could go on. There are songs that inspire us; songs that spur us into action; songs that move us to tears; songs that are ho-hum.

In the book of Psalms in the Bible there are 150 songs and poems from different authors. Some were put to music and used in the Jewish people’s worship; some were used in Jewish national ceremonies. There are different sorts of Psalms just as we have different sorts of songs – Psalms that praise God; Psalms that lament a national calamity; Psalms that praise the king or his consort; Psalms where an individual expresses a lament; Psalms where an individual expresses thanksgiving; Psalms where someone pours out their heart in grief and dismay.

In our Communion Services we always read/sing a Psalm or part of a Psalm. Usually we read/sing the text as we find it in an English translation of the Bible; singing Psalms to a chant is a very Anglican practice. Sometimes we sing a Psalm that has been re-cast as a hymn (“The Lord’s my shepherd ... I’ll not want ...”).

Why did the people who put our Prayer Book together make singing/reading a Psalm compulsory? Part of the reason is found in the different sorts of passages set for our various readings from the Bible. Many portions of the Old Testament that we read in our Communion Service could be described as the words of people addressed to other people. The **historical parts** of the Bible are like this ... lots of the dialogue we’re reading at the moment in our Old Testament readings about the patriarchs is like this. Other parts of the Old Testament could be seen as the words of God addressed to people – there’s lots of this in the **prophets**. But then we come to the Psalms, and they are different from the other bits of the Old Testament. The **Psalms** contains the words of people addressed to God. The Psalms contain the words used by people to express their thoughts about God, their meditations about God, their cogitations about the meaning of life and God. You could say that the historical and prophet parts of the Old Testament are there for our minds and learning ... but the Psalms are there for our hearts and thinking. To use another picture ... the historical and prophet parts of the Old Testament are there to be directed at us by others to inform our **minds** ... the Psalms are there to be engendered by us, to settle in to an armchair and ponder, within us, to inform our **hearts**. The historical and prophet parts are objective teaching ... the psalms are subjective musing.

No doubt each of us has her or his favourite Psalm. If pressed, we could just about recite Psalm 23 from memory.

There are some expressions that we use in everyday conversation that come from the Psalms – to “*bite the dust*” comes from Psalm 72:9*. The mention of a “*broken heart*” comes from Psalm 34:18.* When we come to our *wit's end* we come to Psalm 107:27.* If someone is the *apple of your eye* then that person fulfils Psalm 17:8* Going from *strength to strength* is in Psalm 84:7.

Psalm 119 is the longest of the Psalms – it has 176 verses. It is a clever bit of writing. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet** – and there are 22 sections to Psalm 119. One section for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Within each section, each of the 8 verses begins with that letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So, verses 1-8 have each verse starting with the Hebrew letter *aleph* (א) the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Verses 9-16 (section 2) have each verse starting with the Hebrew letter *bet* (ב), the second letter. And so on and so forth. All 176 verses are about God’s law ... God’s word ... God’s ordinances ... God’s statutes ... God’s judgements ... God’s precepts.” It’s a literary and theological long gem.

By contrast Psalm 134 is the shortest Psalm – 2 verses – and encourages us to bless the Lord.

Psalm 51 is terribly moving. You know how King David committed adultery with Bath Sheba (not that she had any choice in the matter) ... and then David had her husband Uriah the Hittite killed in battle ... and then the prophet Nathan came and confronted the king ... and king David just fell apart with remorse and self-horror at what he had done ... you remember all that? It’s in 2 Samuel chapter 11. Psalm 51 is King David’s reflection on this incident and his heart-felt plea for mercy. “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” (Verse 2). “Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” (Verse 7). It’s an extraordinarily personal and private poem that has made its way into the Psalms we use in church.

Psalm 15 has been part of my own moral upbringing since Grade 4 in school. It was my “School Psalm” that we sang in chapel at the start and end of every term and on important days during the term. I must have sung it over 60 times at school. It is still the practice today at my school in Sydney. Psalm 15 is a Psalm that was written with the purpose of teaching the people who heard it – teaching them about being the kind of people who live God’s lives in theirs and so please God. Please turn to page 234 in the Church Prayer Book and we shall read it together. Really good and sound advice and teaching for everyone ... and especially the young.

What sort of Psalm would you write? Remember, the Psalms are our subjective musing upon our experience of life and God ... to reflect the feelings of our hearts. When all is going O.K. in our lives, the sort of Psalm we would write would be very different from the sort of Psalm we would write when we are emotionally stretched and under stress. When all is going well we would probably bless God’s name for the good things we experience. When we are under stress, we could well demand that God shows himself to be God to us – demand that God not be a stranger to us and our situation. Whatever sort of Psalm we would write in our different circumstances, that

Psalm would be personal and authentic and true and good and right – just like David’s Psalm 51 - because it reflects where our hearts and souls are at that moment in relationship to God and to others.

Christian growth contains numbers of facets – hearing God’s word; being surprised by what preachers say; putting faith into practice in Christian service for others. But Christian growth also consists in our own thoughts and meditations about God – those thoughts and meditations will be informed by what we have read and heard and done – but they will be our authentic reflections about our life and faith – and our thoughts and reflections will become our Psalms.

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*Psalm 72:9. “They who live in the wilderness shall bow before him, and his enemies shall lick the dust.”
 Psalm 34:18. “The Lord is near them who are of a broken heart; and saves those who are of a contrite spirit.”
 Psalm 107:27. “They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunk, and are at their wit’s end.”
 Psalm 17:8. “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me under the shadow of your wings.”
 Psalm 84:7. “They go from strength to strength: they appear every one of them before the God of gods in Zion.”

****THE 22-LETTER HEBREW ALPHABET THAT “FORMS” PSALM 119**

1	Aleph	Silent	א		12	Lamed	L	ל
2	Beit	B/V	ב		13	Mem	M	מ
3	Gimel	G	ג		14	Nun	N	נ
4	Dalet	D	ד		15	Samekh	S	ס
5	Hei	H	ה		16	Ayin	Silent	ע
6	Vav	V/U	ו		17	Pei	P/F	פ
7	Zayin	Z	ז		18	Tzadei	Tz	צ
8	Cheit	Ch	ח		19	Qof	Q	ק
9	Teit	T	ט		20	Reish	R	ר
10	Yod	Y	י		21	Shin	Sh/S	ש
11	Kaf	K/Kh	כ		22	Tav	T/S	ת

NB *The Hebrew alphabet has no vowels, but pronunciation aids are often added. It’s a system of dots and dashes written underneath the Hebrew letters.
 *Hebrew is written from right to left across the page.
 * Kaf – K/KH – כ – is pronounced as in German or Scottish, a throat-clearing noise.
 * There are 2 versions of some Hebrew letters! Kaf, Mem, Nun, Pei and Tzadei are all written differently when they occur at the end of a word rather than when they occur at the start or in the middle of a word. (It’s all very confusing).