

*One and Many*

- <sup>1</sup> To the choirmaster. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.  
Lord, you were favourable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
- <sup>2</sup> You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you covered all their sin.
- <sup>3</sup> You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.
- <sup>4</sup> Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us!
- <sup>5</sup> Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
- <sup>6</sup> Will you not revive us again,  
that your people may rejoice in you?
- <sup>7</sup> Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,  
and grant us your salvation.
- <sup>8</sup> Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;  
but let them not turn back to folly.
- <sup>9</sup> Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,  
that glory may dwell in our land.
- <sup>10</sup> Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;  
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
- <sup>11</sup> Faithfulness springs up from the ground,  
and righteousness looks down from the sky.
- <sup>12</sup> Yes, the Lord will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.
- <sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him  
and make his footsteps a way. (Psalm 85 ESV)

If you go to any choral or choir performance it isn't uncommon for someone to step forward to sing a solo. Perhaps it is an aria – or maybe a verse or two – sung when a single voice is needed rather than that of the group.

Now this image or context is not one we usually have when reading or listening to the psalms. My guess is that most people think of the psalms as individual poems or songs – solo items – ‘The Lord’s my shepherd’ sort of thing of Psalm 23 or David’s confession in Psalm 51 ‘Have mercy on me, O God’ or a traveller’s psalm ‘I lift up my eyes to the hills’ (Psalm 121). However while the psalms can be individual, they can also be communal, congregational, and choral. Some of the psalms were songs – the music of which we don’t have – sung by the levitical choirs.

The whole tradition of sacred music in the temple was understood as coming from God who gave instructions for this through the prophets Gad and Nathan and implemented by David and then supported by royal patronage. In this singing and song and music, the worship of God continued so that God dwelt with his people to bless them. God’s name was sung over the people, the trumpets sounded at the sacrifices, and the people rejoiced in the presence of God. And for this to occur, material was written such as today’s psalm – Psalm 85.

The way we said / sung the psalm earlier reflected in a small way – we don't have many stage directions or production notes – the sense of the choir and the soloist. Our sense of the demarcation comes of course from the words – when plural goes to singular and back to plural or when singular expands into plural – or whatever other combination we find – but there is a sense of a single voice sounding out. We also 'get a hint' when the psalm itself is addressed the choirmaster! The sons of Korah were one of the musical guilds appointed for such work.

These type of songs have a pattern almost as they describe a time of trial or trouble and how God helps them. They begin with calling to God and announcing the reason why they call out to God and note it's not that they're in trouble. It is because God is faithful. God can be trusted because he has acted in the past – and that invariably takes people back to God's rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt and his making them his worshipping people at Mt Sinai.

*Lord, you were favourable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. (Psalm 85:1b)*

Of course each generation could also think of its own time when God helped – as could each tribe or family or person but for the people of Israel, God can be called on because he has helped them in the past.

Their history shows the temptations one has when God is gracious to us. It isn't that we then struggle with our sin and live faithfully towards God – it is that we don't struggle with our sin and live unfaithfully towards God. It is easy for faith to become talk for us – 'God is gracious' – 'God is in his temple no harm can come to us' – 'God loves us' – and we really do what we want.

But our sin weaves its work and produces its fruit and God both allows it and uses it at times to show us our sin and to also draw us back to him. So people find themselves in trouble – some of it might be their own doing – some of it might be the doing of others – life gets tough at times and so we call out for help, we complain, we question.

*Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us! (Psalm 85:4)*

And then something happens. God acts. We usually don't know how or when or why in the person's life, in the community. Maybe it is a miracle – help happens. Maybe it is more prosaic – we have strength for the moment. Maybe it's a message heard – a Word from God – and his Word strengthens faith and creates hope. Something has happened because in the psalm there is a break – a change of direction. They've been waiting and complaining and now the psalm talks about something else. It is here that the individual voice can – not always though – speak up.

*Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints; but let them not turn back to folly. Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land. (Psalm 85:8,9)*

And now in this psalm we get the sense of being surrounded by God's gracious care. This was felt to be absent when the troubles were around but now the individual declares – though we don't know what has happened – that like big arms enfolding us or the four winds blowing – God's steadfast love, faithfulness, his righteousness and peace come close to us – even kiss around us. Beneath and above us, God's faithfulness and righteousness gather us up between earth and heaven and wrap us in God's

care. And so the person – the voice – calling to us all individually in our circumstances – goes forward not on his own terms – it is probably his sin that has caused this mess and so he has a path to follow and it is to struggle, to not sin, to obey God’s Word even when – especially when – we or the world don’t want to for God’s righteousness makes a path for us to tread.

I think we all live in the intersection of being an individual and a member of a community. Our experience of living is very personal. No one sees and experiences life exactly as we do and we are always part of a larger social group. It begins with family and then expands in all sorts of ways but the notable groups are our family, our profession, our nationality (our country), and our congregation (our faith group). Of course there are other groups as well. My point is that as the poet John Donne pointed out ‘no man is an island’ so there is a dimension of living when we’re part of the group and a dimension of living that is a unique part of us.

A city suffers a natural disaster and all citizens are affected. However those effects will have similarities and differences for individuals. A country is at war or there is a declaration of peace after a war and again all citizens are affected but not all in the same way. A football team loses a match and all feel despondent but perhaps the player who scored the only goal for the team that day feels differently. People sit in church and hear the same readings and the same sermon and some depart encouraged by the Gospel rejoicing in the Lord, while others depart convicted more of their sin and resolving, strengthened by the Gospel, to make amends.

Last week in our Advent readings we heard the voice of John the Baptist calling people to repentance – only sinners need to do that – and to prepare for the coming of the Lord. He spoke to the crowds and to individuals – those with abundance, tax collectors, soldiers, and to the powerful particularly Herod the tetrarch who was now married to his brother’s wife and who had also done many wicked things. John was in the long line of Old Testament prophets and so we can regard him as a member of an illustrious group. He is Elijah who would come again before the Messiah. Yet today we find the individual – by himself – imprisoned. We imagine him in the physical darkness – the dinginess – perhaps dank and depressing – depending on our imaginations! – and it isn’t hard to imagine spiritual darkness as well – something we can go through from time to time as the storm clouds gather – and so he, who baptised Jesus, sends messengers to ask Jesus “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Luke 7:19b).

Jesus replied, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Luke 7:22,23) Jesus was fulfilling what a colleague of John in the Old Testament prophecy business – Isaiah many hundred years earlier – said. Look at other groups – the blind, the lame, the deaf, and the dead – again not at individuals – not everyone – but God’s care is coming into the world.

And look at what didn’t come back to John. A key to the prison door. A get out of goal card. Words came back to the one called a ‘voice in the wilderness’ whose voice will soon be silenced as his head is separated from his body. John’s life ended but he is not forgotten and those who follow the One he pointed out know that we will meet John in the heavenly realm for death which comes to all humanity doesn’t have final say over those for whom this new individual – Jesus – the one John questioned and yet put his hope in – has come.

A psalm is really words. We don't even know what the music sounded like. The Advent message is just that a message – more words: 'Look! The Lord has come! The Lord is coming! The Lord will come again!'. The words are true because the cross and the empty grave have not been silenced. The manger message still sings out in the world – even if the world only listens because of habit, commercialism, or with amnesia – but each Christmas there are individuals who hear the words sung maybe for the first time and ask, 'Who is Jesus?' or 'What does this birth mean for me?' or something else because something individual has been triggered.

We live by the words of this coming Lord. Grounded in a cross – never lose the cross – it must be central – Jesus then makes water life giving by his words – morsels of bread and wine are vehicles where the mystery of the incarnation happens before our eyes. How can Jesus be truly human and truly God – the message of Christmas? In the same way, he is present for us physically, bodily in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

These words are spoken to groups and individuals respond and 'pour' their lives – a week at a time – into the liturgy to receive God himself – and his forgiveness and mercy and blessing – for the Advent message is true – God comes to us!

We, like the individual voice in the choir, can both sing with others and speak. Our words and song have the same themes – repentance for our sins – and thanks and praise for God's grace shown in Jesus. This is true no matter what the day brings.

There is no other way to live!