

Wednesday March 10

Psalm 95 – we sang this on Sundays

- 1 Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
- 2 Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.
- 3 For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods.
- 4 In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him.
- 5 The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.
- 6 Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;
- 7 for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice,
- 8 do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert,
- 9 where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did.
- 10 For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways."
- 11 So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."

During the first three weeks of Lent we've visited some sombre themes: LAMENT, FEAR and PENITENCE. For the next two and a half weeks let's change the mood a little. Three new themes: THANKSGIVING, PERSEVERANCE and HOPE. Let's start with THANKSGIVING.

In the Anglican service of Morning Prayer some congregations sing Psalm 95 as a canticle; we call it the *Venite*. Other congregations that don't do chanting have some good metrical versions they can sing. Because we have just confessed our sin and been assured of God's forgiveness the dominant note, rightly, is one of thanksgiving:

"Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song."

Put this note of thanksgiving into the psalm as a whole, and there's a whole lot to give thanks for, even if it's painful not to be able to gather together to worship at the moment. The God of Psalm 95 is a rock and the mighty creator God of all that is, a God who wants to be known personally by his people, and upon whom we can learn gladly to depend. We sometimes omit verses 8-11, which does tidy things up nicely; all the words to this point are of praise and thanksgiving while what follows is much more sombre:

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did."

As the people who had escaped from Egypt trudged through the desert on their way to the Promised Land, what happened at Meribah and then at Massah, sum up what the author of a book on the psalms has called Israel's 'sour, sceptical spirit'. In both cases they started moaning about how tough things were, they turned on their leaders and they questioned whether they could trust God to provide for their material needs.

Yes, it's tough living through times like we've had in the past 12 months. Some people have had it *really* tough, but for some of us, what's happened could be summed up in the word 'inconvenience'. So during this week, when our theme is THANKSGIVING, think about these words from the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

"In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich."

Thursday March 11 **Philippians 4:4-9 – old advice rediscovered**

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

While we've been living under lockdown restrictions, we've had a lot of advice on how to nurture healthy minds alongside healthy bodies. I saw an interview on TV breakfast news with a psychologist from Edinburgh University; it's important for good mental health, she said, to find things to be thankful for. The web site *Psychology Today* reports that leading gratitude researcher Robert Emmons has been studying the link between gratitude and well-being; his research confirms that gratitude increases happiness and reduces depression. It reduces an army of poisonous emotions, from frustration and regret to envy, resentment and anger.

So this suggestion of finding things to be thankful for is a good one! But it's not new. Nearly two thousand years before this research, Paul was saying the same thing in his letter to the Christians in the Macedonian city of Philippi. This is what he said:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Note the phrase 'prayer with thanksgiving'. It's the THANKSGIVING bit that we're not good at. An American pastor once wrote about his disappointment when he suggested a time of thanksgiving in his Sunday morning service, and all his congregation could come up with was to give thanks for waking up and being alive for a new day. If you get out of the habit of giving thanks, it's difficult to think of what it is that you ought to be giving thanks for; try getting *back* into the habit, and that might begin to change ...

So here is just one suggestion: give thanks to the Lord for the new vaccines. Until Covid came along, it took years and years to develop new drugs; now we have Pfizer-BioNTech, Oxford-AstraZeneca and Moderna, with other anti-Covid vaccines still being developed, and it's all been done in a matter of months. Every day in the UK 500,000 people are getting their jabs. I had my first one several weeks ago. That is truly amazing, and the new techniques that the boffins have come up with means that the process could be speeded up in future for other new medicines. If that's not cause for THANKSGIVING, then I don't know what is!

Friday March 12

Psalm 126 – anticipating the ‘new normal’

- 1 When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed.
- 2 Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.”
- 3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.
- 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.
- 5 Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.
- 6 He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

I’ve been looking on the internet at some graphs which plot the ups and downs of the past twelve months of the pandemic in the UK. One showed the R-number (the reproduction rate for the virus as it jumped from one person to another). Another plotted the numbers of new infections, while a third graph plotted the numbers of daily reported deaths. One feature that’s immediately obvious on each of these graphs is all the ups and downs. These coincided, of course, with the ups and downs of our own experience. The downs were the times when we were locked down, with infections, hospital admissions and deaths rising; the ups were when the figures were at low levels, when we could meet up with family and friends, go out for a coffee – or even a slap-up meal. Some people even got away for holidays!

There was another slightly different kind of up-and-down. There have been days when the news has been relatively hopeful: the day when initial vaccine trials turned in exciting results, the day later on when one of the new vaccines was passed for use in the population and the days when we talked about the lifting of restrictions in time for the coming summer. And then there were the other days – the down days. There was a particularly bad one early in February when the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland announced that some restrictions would need to stay in place until 2022. What did this mean, we all wondered: another 12 months of lockdown – another year of *this*? The morning radio news the next day was infested with deep gloom; the poor presenters were struck down with it as much as all their poor listeners.

That up-and-down experience is reflected in Psalm 126. It starts with joy: *“When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.”*

Then it descends into despair: *“Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.”*

It finishes by saying: yes, things are really tough at the moment, but the day will come when we’re full of joy and THANKSGIVING again:

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

That’s picture language for us, but it would have meant a lot to an agricultural community. What would we carry with us, I wonder, on that day when all is back to some sort of normality and we want to give thanks?

Saturday March 13 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 – what we can't do just yet

14 Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.

15 I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.

16 Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?

17 Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

18 Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?

19 Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything?

20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.

21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

On Sundays, I'd love to go to the church where I'm a member. But I can't. It's closed, along with all the others. Church services are something so many of us are missing. It's not all about the music, the liturgy, the preaching and the architecture. Don't misunderstand me; all those things can play their part in making worship come alive. As important as all of them are, there's something else which is just as vital: it's when we gather *together*. Think of the word 'congregation': that's about people 'congregating – coming together.

When Paul wrote his first letter to the Christians in the city of Corinth, he talked to them twice about what some churches now call The Lord's Supper, some Holy Communion. Others call it the Eucharist (from a Greek verb meaning 'to give thanks'). Since we're thinking this week about the importance of THANKSGIVING, let's ask the question: what exactly are we giving thanks for when we are able again to gather together for that service in church? The answer comes in two parts.

Firstly, it brings us together to give thanks for what Jesus did for us when He died on the cross. We'll be coming back to that later in Lent.

Secondly, we can give thanks for *one other*. If you read Paul's letters in the New Testament, he starts most of them with THANKSGIVING for their fellowship with him. As I look back on congregations I have belonged to since I first became a Christian more than 50 years ago, there are so many people I can think of who have encouraged me, befriended me, supported me and, on a few occasions, lovingly rebuked me.

But looking beyond our local congregations, there are all sorts of other people to give thanks for, whether we know them or not. Last spring we stood on our doorsteps, clapped, blew whistles and banged saucepan lids, to say a big 'thank you' to all the NHS staff for the work they were doing. We've long since stopped clapping, but their work goes on, with greater and greater demands made upon them. Some have died of Covid, others are off sick, exhausted, or suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress. We owe them far more than we can imagine. Then there are the people who keep stocking our supermarket shelves, driving the

lorries, delivering our food, keeping buses and trains running; and so many more, often at greater risk than the rest of us because they deal face-to-face with the general public.

We mustn't forget them; and whenever and however we can, we need to say a big 'thank you' to them. Where would we have been without them? It really doesn't bear thinking about.

Monday March 15 John 6:1-13 – thanks for our food (in spite of Brexit)

1 Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias),

2 and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick.

3 Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples.

4 The Jewish Passover Feast was near.

5 When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?”

6 He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

7 Philip answered him, “Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”

8 Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up,

9 “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

10 Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them.

11 Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

12 When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.”

13 So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

In 1990 my work with a missionary society took me to east Africa. On one occasion I was in the Tanzanian coastal city of Dar es Salaam. One stifling hot and humid afternoon, I went with my colleagues to visit someone in their home. We were delighted to see our host bring out ice-cold bottles of Seven-Up for us all to drink, but we had to wait while he said a prayer of thanks over them; that was the first time I had ever heard grace being said over bottles of fizzy drinks!

Perhaps it’s in parts of the world where people can’t take regular supplies of food for granted the way we do in Europe that they consciously express their dependence upon God for it with THANKSGIVING. We say ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ often enough, but I wonder how often we stop to really think about what we’re saying here? And another question: how often do we say grace over our meals?

At the moment food seems more important than usual; after Brexit some of our supermarket shelves aren’t so full any more, but I’m not going to get into the politics of that. Because of the pandemic, restaurants are closed; so are coffee shops. I do miss my occasional morning scone. Meanwhile, if you want to eat a cooked meal, you cook it yourself, day after day, week after week, unless you can find somewhere that you can collect from or that delivers to your doorstep. While cafés and restaurants suffer, the supermarkets are doing a roaring trade. When I go out for a walk, I might see several delivery vans out on their rounds. When our

fortnightly order arrives at the front door, it's one of the events that add variety to the routine of the week. So why not learn – or learn *again* – to say grace before your next meal, whether it be a slap-up evening nosh, or a snack lunch, or your morning porridge and toast? You might be a bit embarrassed at first, but that soon wears off.

And you would be in good company. Jesus started off feeding the 5,000 plus in John's Gospel chapter 6 by giving thanks for the bread and the fish that a boy had given him. Then everyone got fed, and there were basketfuls left over when they'd all finished. I wonder if we would enjoy our food more if we started off each time with THANKSGIVING to a Creator God who knows how to provide, in the words of Psalm 104, wine to gladden our hearts and bread to sustain us.

Tuesday March 16 Psalm 100 – we also sang this on Sundays

1 Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.

2 Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

3 Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.

5 For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

When the first lockdown began a year ago, we made some decisions in our house about negotiating it as best we could. One of those decisions was that we would continue to set the alarm for seven o'clock each morning. Our internal 24-hour clocks were already programmed that way, so by half past six we're always stirring. At the first signs of life our cat might jump on the bed and walk all over us, purring loudly and dropping hints that he would like his breakfast served up, please, at our earliest convenience. About that time each morning, a car turns out of a side road next to us, and accelerates fast up the hill. The owner has fitted one of those exhausts that make a frightful amount of noise, and you can still hear it when it reaches the top of the hill half a mile away.

Now the world might not be as noisy during lockdown as it normally is, but there's still plenty of it about. It's still not easy to find a place where there's silence. That's one of the things that people appreciate about the way we worship, especially in a large church; there's something sacred about quietness, something precious in silence. So when we chant the psalms, as some of us do, its restraint and dignity work nicely. But what about Psalm 100, which Anglicans call the *Jubilate*? It starts like this:

"Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. "

Shout to the Lord! Psalm 95, the Venite, says the same thing: "Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation". In a lovely paraphrase called 'The Message', Eugene Petersen writes about 'raising the roof'! Nothing about dignity and restraint here.

So as we continue to look forward, to dare to dream of what we're going to do when things eventually return to some sort of normality, perhaps we're going to need at least one act of THANKSGIVING in each church or cathedral that lays aside restraint and aims to raise the roof instead. And if we choose to throw off our reserve, and dance in the aisles instead of being rooted to the ground in our pews, then let it happen; and if the Peace at Holy Communion goes on for longer than usual and people want to hug instead of the customary polite handshake, then let them hug. And if people want to weep with joy, then make sure there are plenty of tissues at the end of each row!