

Monday March 29 Psalm 103:1–12 - Praise my soul the king of heaven

- 1 Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
- 2 Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—
- 3 who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,
- 4 who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion,
- 5 who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- 6 The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.
- 7 He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel:
- 8 The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.
- 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;
- 10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

"The best example ... involves characteristic patterning and rhetoric, with suspension and inversion: it uses, as the metrical Psalms do, words in an unexpected order, but it does so in such a way as to make that departure from the normal speech order a source of strength rather than weakness."

This description on the web site *Hymnology Archive* of a well-known hymn is hardly going to make your heart race. Singing it might do the trick, though. It was sung at the wedding in 1947 of Princess Elizabeth, now our Queen, of course, and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh; it was also sung at the funeral in 2018 of former U.S. President George H.W. Bush. I'm talking about Henry Francis Lyte's 1834 work 'Praise my soul the king of heaven'. But when he was first ordained in 1815 after studying theology at Trinity College Dublin, he would not have been able to pen its marvellous words. His biographer B.G. Skinner says that his "sense of vocation was vague at this early stage. Perhaps he felt an indefinable desire to do something good in life." Not long after this, however, he visited a clergy colleague who was dying, who convinced Lyte that he had not taken Paul's New Testament epistles seriously enough. He undertook to study them afresh and the result was an inner revolution a little like that of John Wesley, whose heart had been "strangely warmed" years earlier when listening to the Epistle to the Romans being read. He was soon preaching very different sermons, following the example of local clergy colleagues whom he had previously laughed at and considered "enthusiastic rhapsodists."

As well as his sermons, he wrote hymns including 'Abide with me' and the hymn that I began with: 'Praise my soul the king of heaven', based on verses from Psalm 103. At the start of this Holy Week, when we follow the events that led to the Lord's crucifixion, let's dwell on Lyte's great hymn of praise, and especially on its 3rd line, in which, he proclaimed, we are 'ransom'd, healed, restored, forgiven'. For me this is a glorious statement of what took place when Jesus died on the cross, and how He accomplished His Father's work of seeking and saving the lost.

There are four words in that 3rd line, so I'll take one of them each day from tomorrow through to Good Friday. It's not dry theology: it's living theology pointing to One who can transform

lives in the way that He transformed Lyte's. The line that follows asks 'Who like me His praise should sing?' The question expresses awe and wonder; may we experience the same as we travel through this very different Holy Week.

Tuesday March 30

Ransomed

Isaiah 61:1-3

1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,
3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

Mark 10:35-45

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."
36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.
37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."
38 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"
39 "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with,
40 but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."
41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.
42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.
43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,
44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.
45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Today we begin to explore the hymn line 'Ransom'd, healed, restored, forgiven'. The first of those words is: RANSOMED. However varied the different books of the bible may be, however different their various authors, writing in different centuries and even different millennia, a single story runs through scripture from start to finish. One way to sum it up is through the theme of captivity and freedom.

At a turning point in the story, Jesus stands up in the synagogue and reads from Isaiah chapter 61, in which a servant of God announces his ministry of liberation. The language looks back to the event of the Exodus, in which God led his people out of slavery in Egypt and into the freedom of the Promised Land. It also looks forward; the same words from Isaiah anticipate what Jesus will accomplish upon the cross. Two of the gospels record how the disciples

squabbled among themselves as to which of them was the greatest; to which Jesus replied that He – and they – were servants, not masters. So, He said to them, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” *Ransom* is the word in my mind today – it opens up further the theme of release from captivity leading to freedom or, if you like, to liberation.

This Holy Week I’m inviting you to explore with me the 3rd line of Francis Henry Lyte’s hymn ‘Praise my soul the king of heaven’, a line that proclaims that in Christ we are ‘ransom’s, healed, restored, forgiven’. So if Jesus’ ministry of liberation points on to the church as, at least in its best moments, a community of liberation, what ought that to look like in individual Christian lives? Too big a subject to unpack in just 3 minutes today, but let me end by quoting from Matthew Parris, a columnist in *The Times*. Listen to his experiences of Christianity in Africa, where he has spent many years:

“Now a confirmed atheist, I’ve become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa ... In Africa Christianity changes people’s hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good ... In the city we had working for us Africans who had converted and were strong believers. The Christians were always different. Far from having cowed or confined its converts, their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world - a directness in their dealings with others - that seemed to be missing in traditional African life. They stood tall.”

Ah, I like that: ‘They stood tall’. That is what people ought to be seeing in Christians today, and not just in Africa.

Wednesday March 31

Healed

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

13 See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness—

15 so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

1 Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

11 After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

1 Peter 2:21–25 (NIV84)

21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

25 For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

What Jesus accomplished for us on the cross is far too big to be summed up in a single word. Yesterday, we thought of it in terms of liberation; today, continuing with Henry Francis Lyte's hymn 'Praise my soul the king of heaven' we come to the second of the words in the 3rd line: HEALED. Lyte may have had in mind what Peter says in his first letter to the Christians in Asia Minor: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." This in turn echoes what the prophet Isaiah announced: "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."

In a pandemic, it's hardly surprising that when we hear the word 'healing' the focus narrows to doctors' surgeries, hospital wards, medicines and vaccines. But in the bible it means far more than that, so some of the theologians in the early church talked of the bread and wine of Holy Communion as 'medicine'. A woman was once helped by her son into a church which had a healing ministry. She was helped in because of a crippling medical condition that had left her wracked with pain and completely unable to walk unaided. As the minister gently probed her about her life history, they explored a terrible row she had had with her husband many years previously. Not only were words thrown at each other; so was some of the crockery. She had never forgiven him; it continued to lurk deep inside her, spreading like a cancer. In the church that day she was challenged to forgive him. At the end of her appointment she went home.

When she returned some days later, she walked in unaided and pain-free.

The woundedness that vividly describes the old-fashioned but accurate term 'sin' affects not only our dealings with other people. It disfigures us as well, in all sorts of ways including sometimes the physical. So when that woundedness is dealt with and healing – in its broadest sense – takes place, the results will be visible.

Yesterday I quoted the atheist Matthew Parris. Today, let me quote from another – the former Labour politician Roy Hattersley He once write this:

"We atheists have to accept that believers are better human beings ... The only possible conclusion is that faith comes with a packet of moral imperatives that, while they do not condition the attitude of believers, influence enough of them to make them morally superior to atheists like me. The truth may make us free. But it has not made us as admirable as the average captain in the Salvation Army."

Maundy Thursday April 1

Restored

Luke 15:11-32

11 Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons.

12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

13 “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!

18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’

20 So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.

24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

25 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

27 ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

31 “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ ”

Even when knowledge of what's in the bible grows dim, the story of the Prodigal Son continues to shine. What a heart-warming story! It's a tale of tragedy and suffering, until the sorrowful son wends his weary way home, falls into the arms of a loving father, and lives happily ever after – just the way life ought to be! Thank you, Jesus, for telling us a story like this to make us glad.

Except that Jesus' first audiences wouldn't have heard it that way. To their ears, this story was nothing short of *scandalous*. He told it to shock them, not to make them feel all warm and fuzzy inside. The sort of culture that existed in the Mediterranean world in those days was what sociologists call an 'honour/shame culture', similar to what exists in parts of Asia and in some minority ethnic communities in modern Europe. Honour is supremely important; a family has to be able to hold its head up high in the community; if a son or daughter goes off the rails, it shames the whole family; they lose a place of respect in their community. It is a tragedy that is difficult to bear.

That's what the Prodigal Son did to his family, and especially to his father. But – hey! - it all ended well, didn't it? Well, yes, but not in the way you might think. In going back to his father with his tail between his legs, with a nice little speech saying 'I'm sorry' he was actually risking his life. To shame his father like that was one of the worst crimes a son could inflict on his father; how could he know how a really angry father might react?

Well, we *know* how his father reacted. Yes, he welcomed him back with arms of love. But what would that look like in the eyes of the wider community? An act of love? No – more likely an act of *weakness*! Take that on board and you see afresh the depth of God's love for his errant and rebellious children, for that is what we are. At the cross, in the words of Henry Francis Lyte's hymn, we are 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven'. Today, we've been thinking about the third of these categories – RESTORED. And if we hear the story of the Prodigal Son the way Jesus meant us to hear it, we get an amazing glimpse of the wonder of how it can be that we can be RESTORED.

Good Friday April 2

Forgiven

Luke 23:32-43

32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.

33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.

34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”

36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar

37 and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

38 There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

40 But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence?

41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

43 Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Yesterday we revisited the story of the Prodigal Son, who sees the enormous error of his ways, goes back home and finds that he is RESTORED in the arms of his loving father. It is also a story of forgiveness: the son has grievously wronged his father and, indeed, the whole family. By his wilful actions he has brought shame upon them all in the eyes of the community. Jesus’ first audience might well have expected the father to deal very severely with this disgraceful young man. Instead, he finds that he has been FORGIVEN.

From there the jump to the sins perpetrated on Jesus on that first Good Friday is not as big as we might have originally thought. When Jesus cries out “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” we would be wrong to apply the words only to the soldiers dividing up his clothes, no feeling for their victim, simply doing their job. It’s not ‘someone else’ who crucified him: the one who dies on the cross is all alone - abandoned by the authorities, by a howling mob, by fearful disciples, by the religious establishment. All are involved, not in a straightforward miscarriage of justice. The Saviour of the world has been rejected by everyone, enthusiastically consigned to what is arguably the cruellest and most excruciating means of execution every devised. Crucifixion was also designed to humiliate: crucifixions took place beside roads or on hillsides, where everyone would see them: the soldiers divided Jesus’ clothing because, like others, he was crucified naked: the humiliation was complete.

And Jesus says “Father, forgive them ...” So now we see how scandalous is the message of the cross at the heart of the Christian faith. And it means we have to face up to ways in which we have castrated that message. Thank you, Lord, for forgiving me – well, I know I’ve never done

anything really bad so that's all right then, isn't it? But surely, Lord, you can't compare *me* with that guy I read about in the papers, did time for murder and then he says he became a Christian in prison. Well, he would say that, wouldn't he? He just wanted an easier life inside, angling to have his sentence reduced for good behaviour. Just wait till he wants to come to *my* church! We don't want the likes of him around our place ...

A man was once serving a long prison sentence for a murder he had committed. In jail he became a Christian. He studied theology. After release, the day eventually came when he went forward for ordination training. A few years later, the appointments committee met members of a church looking for a new minister. They told them about this man. 'Will you have him as your minister?' they asked.

What answer would you have given?

They answered: "Yes, we will."

Saturday April 3

An in-between day

John 19:38–42

38 Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away.

39 He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.

40 Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

41 At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid.

42 Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Between Good Friday evening and the first Easter Sunday morning service, nothing much happens in most churches even in 'normal' years, apart from arranging new floral decorations. Following a tradition that goes back many centuries, some churches have an Easter Vigil service on the Saturday evening. It includes a series of readings from the Old and New Testaments, retelling God's work in creation and in the salvation of men and women. The Old Testament readings include verses from Exodus chapter 14. The Israelites, on the edge of the Red Sea and with freedom on the other side beckoning them, look back. They panic as they see the Egyptian army bearing down on them. When they turn on Moses, he answers them:

"Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Stillness is a spiritual discipline, one that many of us learn only with difficulty. The bible reminds us repeatedly how much we need it. Recall, for example, Psalm 46, which envisions a world in turmoil: what are God's people to do?

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

Being still is, in a sense, what we are to do on this day. After Jesus' death, the tumult stirred up in Jerusalem by the events of the previous days, might have subsided, replaced by a strange kind of stillness. All that remained was a dead body to be dealt with. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea ask Pilate's permission to take it away and lay it in a new tomb in a garden, another quiet place. While this stillness descended over the city, and some undoubtedly breathed sighs of relief, God was at work, behind the scenes in a sense, in the hours between the death and resurrection of His Son. So on this day, there is nothing for us to do. When Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome he said this: *"... at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."*

Meanwhile, think on this: if your day today is filled with a myriad of problems to be solved, take a moment to ask the Father to give you the stillness of heart with which to hear Him more clearly. And allow Him to gently tell you what you must do *with* Him, and what you must *leave* to Him - what He will handle without you.