

Sermon preached by The Rev'd Glenn Maytum

Seventh Sunday after Easter

Psalm 1.

Every week we read from a Psalm.

The word “psalm” comes from the Greek word (psalmoi) which refers to songs sung to the accompaniment of plucked stringed instruments, such as a zither.

Their Hebrew word (Tehillim) translates to mean “praises” and, in Hebrew, they have rhyme and rhythm, which is mostly lost in English translation: which is a pity as they are known as the most beautiful of Hebrew praise and poetry.

For me, one of the highlights of Sunday liturgy is to follow the words of the Psalm being sung by the choir. Psalms are, after all, meant to be sung. And the music and the phrasing and the volume of the sound all help me to engage with the movement and message of the psalm. Thank you, choir!

The psalms use precise wording, well-crafted and written in couplets, as a personal conversation with God. They are a condensed account of the whole of Israel's history, from the time of David to the late period of the Old Testament.

It is just because of this that the Psalms have fallen out of favour with many, modern, evangelical preachers. I have had it said to me that the Psalms are part of the Old Testament which Jesus came to fulfil, so we really do not have to pay any real attention to what is written. Our focus, they say, is to be only on the New Testament.

I don't completely agree.

For my part, I can say there may be some difficulty for city people to comprehend the messages found in a psalm because of its rural, agricultural images. That is also true of other scripture with its sheep and vines and wheat crops and weeds, etc. And, the Psalms do speak directly to those who live in rural areas because, of course, it was to that very audience the Psalms were originally intended. Even for us, the movements of life, both personal and corporate, are found in the images presented.

The writers speak in real, even raw ways. Direction is given. Words are written which even we can appropriate. We can find God's rich resources for navigating through the difficulties of life. I was inspired when I heard about a priest I knew who recently died, who had a list of his favourite psalms stuck to the wall of his hospital room, and friends and family would pick up his prayerbook and read aloud one of those psalms. For him, this was great comfort.

So, today we have the picturesque Psalm 1, with its scenic images of water and vegetation.

Both Psalms 1 and 2 are really a “Gateway”, as it were, to the whole book as they tell the reader how to be wise and blessed by God.

In Psalm 1 the reader is to meditate on God's instructions; In Psalm 2 the reader is to take refuge in the anointed; and both psalms warn the reader to avoid the way that perishes.

In Psalm 1 we have the beautiful rural image which resonates with me. As you travel through rural NSW and Victoria you can often drive alongside a river: maybe the Murrumbidgee, or the Edwards, or the Darling or even the mighty Murray. A particularly inviting and refreshing place for me is Tocumwal, on the Murray River. When you cross to the Victorian side and drive towards Koonoomoo, the road travels beside the river through a stunning River Red Gum forest.

The river is to your left; you can see the water and the beach and the exposed roots of the Red Gum trees as they reach down; and you are surrounded by those amazing trees: tall and straight; wide of girth; ancient; with leaves of muted green and the air heavy with the scent of eucalyptus (verse 4).

See how majestic and strong these trees grow next to the water! See how they prosper (v 4). And, scripture often refers to the "fragrance" of God. Here, in Toc, you can taste the scent and see how great the Lord is, in creation.

[I have here a hand held meditation cross made of River Red Gum and given to me by a priest's wife from the diocese of The Murray (in South Australia). In it you can see the beauty of the wood and texture and imagine the tree it is from.]

But, there is also a fragility! The trees need to experience flooding from time-to-time. No water for a protracted period will lead to their literal downfall: where, as the Psalm says in verses 5 & 6, the wind will blow away all of their withered leaves, like chaff and only the skeleton of a trunk and broken limbs will remain.

That is a message for us, too! Though deeply rooted in worship and prayer, we still need the occasional Quiet Day or retreat or study to flood us into the way we should be going. Or else, the evil one may enter and redirect us!

Like a great River Red Gum the people we find here in Psalm 1 are drawing up life and the presence of God by putting their spiritual roots down into His Word (v 2).

Their "lowly estate" will be fulfilled with the coming of the Messiah. But, as this may take a while to be fulfilled, until then the people will need to keep growing by meditating on God's Word.

We, too, are people who grow by meditating on and learning from God's instructions in Scripture. Then, we, too, can stand tall and majestic knowing that the Lord is watching over us (verse 6).

I say, don't discard them, but keep reading and singing and learning from the Psalms.