

Trusting and Following, even in the Fog (Ps. 25.1-15; Mk 9.2-9)

“Most of Scripture speaks to us, but the Psalms speak for us” or so the saying goes. How appropriate therefore that we have as our first reading at the start of our series on prayer, and on the launch date of our Lent prayer booklet, a Psalm so fundamental to our Christian life that it actually occurs in the Lectionary three times in the Church year, including the First Sundays of Advent and Lent. Yes, I know it’s not Lent yet, but we like to be early for things at All Saints, don’t we?

The Psalms **put words into our mouths**, the kind of words we can use to address God in prayer. They include words of praise, of course, but alongside the loftiest words of praise and adoration we find words of pain, confusion and fear. The Psalms, including David’s Psalm 25, normally lift our spirits and encourage us to trust and follow God, although it’s worth pointing out that Psalm 88 is the one psalm with no “happy ending”.

If you look it up afterwards, something I would encourage you to do, you will find that the ending of **Psalm 88** is nothing less than bleak. That all goes to show that the full range of human emotion can be employed in our prayer. There is absolutely nothing that we think or feel that we cannot bring to God.

When we look specifically at David’s prayer in **Psalm 25**, we discover that it is the first of a number of acrostic psalms, including the famously long Psalm 119. Each verse (except the last one) begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Another thing about Psalm 25 is that it seems to have been written as a **model prayer**, based on the cries of individuals to God in earlier psalms. Psalms like this have a **recognisable structure** that we can see clearly in Psalm 25: they typically begin with complaint or petition (vv.1-12) and usually include a description of trouble and suffering (vv.16,19) as well as an assurance that God will hear and answer the plea (vv.12, 13-15).

If you will look at Psalm 25 with me, you will see that it is **carefully crafted**. The “bookend verses” (vv. 1-3,20-21) emphasise that the psalmist’s trust (vv.1,2) and hope (vv. 3,21) is in the Lord, so he should not be put to shame (vv. 2,3,20).

In the central part of Psalm 25, the middle of the “sandwich” as it were, we find a **blend of two different “fillings”** – the theme of instruction in the ways of the Lord (vv. 4-5, 8-9,12-14) and the theme of forgiveness (vv. 6-7, 15-19).

The Israelites would have held their **hands outstretched** when they said “*In you, Lord my God, I put my trust*” (v.1), indicating an openness to God's grace, leadership, and direction. Words like “*show*”, “*teach*”, “*guide*”, “*paths*” and “*ways*” dominate and suggest David is trusting and following God. The psalmist emphasises forgiveness saying God's “*great mercy and love*” (*hesed*) are “*from of old*” (v. 6). This may refer to God's goodness to Israel after the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 34) when God forgave Israel for making the golden calf.

Right at the very centre, in verses 10 and 11, we find the **two themes combined** – instruction in the way and forgiveness for failure:

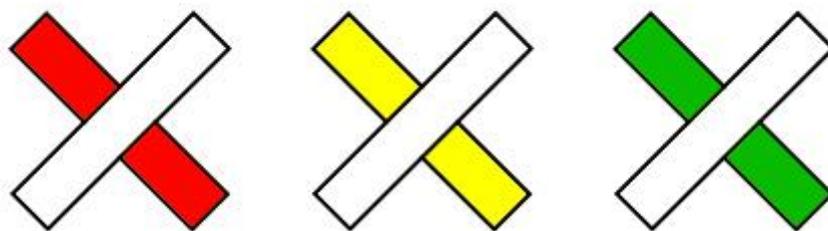
¹⁰*All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.* ¹¹*For the sake of your name, Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.*

Psalm 25 speaks to the church at any time of the year with themes of faith and dependence on God that are crucially important. As the believer anticipates God's Salvation, he or she displays the kind of dependence on God that characterises the whole psalm and the whole Christian faith. The person who waits for the Lord must be actively attentive to what God will do. Prayer and reflection are the main expressions of this waiting. Such active waiting, in turn, naturally encourages kindness and compassion to others. Verse 9 says this directly: *He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.*

David's prayer in Psalm 25 really does emphasise our need for guidance as we seek to trust and follow the Lord, as well as our need for forgiveness. **Both are valuable topics for Christian prayer**. Hopefully the new prayer booklet (available at the back of church along with other Lenten material) will help us as disciples of Jesus.

So what's the link with our second reading from Mark 9? Our **Gospel** passage also deals with the themes of trusting and following. Jesus' **Transfiguration** must have been an uncanny event for his disciples, but it's a story that appeals to me as I love mountains.

Anyone who goes **mountain walking** knows how important it is to trust and follow maps, compass, GPS or whatever, particularly when the clouds are down as they were in the Transfiguration story. In Europe we're always looking out for coloured crosses like these showing us which turning NOT to take:



I would suggest to you that the highlight our Gospel passage is verse 7: “***This is my Son, whom I love; listen to him!***”

“***This is my Son***”: this is the second of the three occasions when Mark emphasises Jesus’ unique identity. The first is at his baptism (1:11: *You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased*); the last, the centurion’s words at his death (15:39: *Surely this man was the Son of God*). These are no normal appearances - the curtain is drawn away, allowing us a glimpse of God behind them. Of these revelations, Mark 9:2-8 may be the weirdest. It is the least public, being *up a high mountain* (9.2) so the furthest removed from the here and now. Events are literally beclouded (9:7). Jesus alone [contrast Luke 9.30] is *transfigured before them* (9.2), metamorphosed in raiment that is *dazzling white* (9:3). Here Mark is dramatizing what John claims about Jesus in our traditional Christmas Gospel: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it* (John 1:5, cf. 8:12; 9:5; 12:46).

“***This is my Son, whom I love***”: God is speaking here (cf. 1:11). In Mark no one else is designated “God’s Son”. Not Moses. Not Elijah. Not John the Baptist. None of Galilee’s other itinerant preachers or exorcists (Mark 6:7, 12-13; 9:38). Only Jesus is the beloved (*agapetos*) Son, just as Isaac was the only son to Abraham (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16). A father’s love for such a son is infinite, precisely because he is unique.

“***Listen to him!***” (Mark 9:7). For the first and only time in Mark, the voice from heaven orders Jesus’ disciples. To what should Jesus’ disciples pay attention? Presumably, everything Mark reports Jesus as saying and doing. The previous

chapter has just referred to God's plan for the Son of Man to *suffer many things ... be killed ... and after three days rise again* (8:31), and the need for disciples to *deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Jesus* (8:34-35). They were told to keep mum about what they had seen until after the resurrection (9:9). Mark repeatedly tells us that the disciples found all this very hard to understand, to accept, and to obey (9:31-34; 10:32-37; 14:26-31, 50, 66-72; 16:1-8).

"Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). What about us, **are WE listening?** Igor Stravinsky said, *"To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also."* If this is true of music, how much more is it true of Jesus' commands? It is one thing to admire the Messiah; to obey Him is something else. *"Follow me"* (Mark 1:17; 2:14). *"Consider carefully what you hear"* (4:24). *"When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone forgive them,"* (11:25).

These ideas of trusting and following resonate with David's prayer in Psalm 25. In his recent book, ***"Being Disciples"*** Rowan Williams says: *"We follow Him, not simply to the ends of the earth to do His work and His service but we follow Him to be next to the heart of the Father."*

On a **long walk in Spain last week**, we knew we had to get to the bus stop on a road above us on our left, so we trotted along the path quite happily until we saw the road far below us on our right and realised we would risk life and limb if we tried to get down the slippery slope in time for what we thought was the last bus of the day. We decided to retrace our steps in an attempt to find another bus stop. It was only when I looked at the GPS map that I saw we were actually standing above the road, and that the bus stop was next to the exit from a tunnel. **We were saved** – an expensive taxi fare at any rate!

It can be **the same in our spiritual life**. We may feel very distant from God, or feel in the depths of despair. Even when we are trying our hardest to trust and follow God we may see no light at the end of the Psalm 88 tunnel. Nevertheless, we can be assured that absolutely nothing is outside the scope of His care – or unworthy of our prayer. Please keep trusting and following God in all things in your prayers.

Just as we were literally standing above the road we wanted, we may be much closer to God than we realise. **We can be saved** – and much more than a taxi fare!