

# A Service to use at Home



**SUNDAY 25<sup>th</sup> JULY 2021**

## **HONEST WITH GOD**

**From Psalm 139:** O Lord you have searched me  
and you know me....  
you perceive my thoughts from afar...  
Before a word is on my tongue  
you know it completely, O Lord,  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.

**Something to sing:** Great is thy faithfulness!  
Great is thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
All I have needed thy hand hath provided,  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.

*[This is the chorus of a hymn by Thomas Chisholm (1866-1960) based on Lamentations 3 verse 23. This book is a lament about the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC. This was a time of great suffering and national tragedy that included the destruction of the Temple. All as a result of the refusal of God's people to obey him.... Yet in it all God is still faithful, loving and compassionate: there is hope.]*

**Confession:**            **Lord God, have mercy on us,  
according to your steadfast love;  
and in your abundant mercy,  
blot out our transgressions:  
cleanse us from our sin,  
create in us a clean heart and life  
and continually renew a right spirit  
within us.                    AMEN            (from Psalm 51)**

**God's forgiveness:** (From Psalm 103 verses 8, 10-12, 22)  
The Lord is compassionate and gracious...  
he does not treat us as our sins deserve,  
or repay us according to our iniquities.  
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us...  
Praise the Lord, O my soul. AMEN

**A prayer for commemorating St James:**  
Merciful God,  
whose holy apostle Saint James,  
leaving his father and all that he had,  
was obedient to the calling of your Son Jesus Christ  
and followed him even to death:  
help us to forsake the false attractions of the world and  
be ready at all times to answer your call without delay;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. **AMEN**

**Lord's Prayer:** Our Father, who art in heaven....

**July 25<sup>th</sup>** is the day for commemorating St James – the first apostle to be martyred (see Acts 12 verses 1 & 2). Imagine the sadness and alarm this caused for those first Christians: persecution was now real and serious....

**Reading: Psalm 56** [*headings added in red are for 'reflection'*]

**Address = prayer to God**

<sup>1</sup> Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me, all day long they press their attack.

**Complaint = description of problem**

<sup>2</sup> My slanderers pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride.

**Confidence = trust in God's help (1)**

<sup>3</sup> When I am afraid I will trust in you.

<sup>4</sup> *In God, whose word I praise,  
in God I trust, I will not be afraid.  
What can mortal man do to me?*

**Complaint continued (from v.2)**

<sup>5</sup> All day long they twist my words; they are always plotting against me.

<sup>6</sup> They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, eager to take my life.

**Request for a response from God**

<sup>7</sup> On no account let them escape; in your anger, O God, bring down the nations.

<sup>8</sup> Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll –  
are they not in your record?

**Motivation = the reason why God should help**

<sup>9</sup> Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help.  
By this I will know that God is for me.

**Confidence = trust in God's help (2)**

<sup>10</sup> *In God, whose word I praise,  
in the Lord, whose word I praise -  
<sup>11</sup> in God I trust, I will not be afraid.  
What can man do to me?*

**Confidence moving into service & thanksgiving**

<sup>12</sup> I am under vows to you, O God;  
I will present my thank-offerings to you.  
<sup>13</sup> For you have delivered me from death and  
my feet from stumbling,  
that I may walk before God in the light of life.

**Reflection:** 'Honest with God' – by Jill Wright

Psalm 56 is described as a psalm of Lament – depending how you classify the Psalms, between a third and a half of the 150 psalms in the Bible are psalms of lament, some personal, some national, some focussing on penitence. The headings I've added in red give the basic structure found in almost all of them: address; request; motivation; and confidence. In this particular psalm there is a sort of 'chorus of confidence' which I have put in italics.

Now think about the hymnbooks you have used: have you ever found a section labelled 'Lament'? I haven't! There may be 'hymns suitable for funerals', or sections on 'suffering and sorrow' and

'hope and consolation', but the more modern the book the greater the emphasis, it seems, on 'joy, praise and thanksgiving'. This can be very off-putting at times of individual stress, sadness, loss and depression or in great national trials such as the Covid pandemic, which has touched everyone's lives or when we want to rail against the inequality and injustice it has exposed. How can the church help people cope with painful memories, the side-effects of 'lockdown' and give them the courage to emerge safely?

The American theologian Walter Brueggeman has said that lament is largely absent from our Western churches because we are often reluctant to face suffering or to embrace negativity.... We don't want to be reminded of our own vulnerability or suffering, or the vulnerability and suffering of others.... Well, the pandemic has forced us to face all these: has it hardened our hearts or made us want to stand with those who are suffering and challenge some of the causes of their suffering? The D R Congo continues to witness appalling suffering – villages burned, children kidnapped, women raped, and now a volcano destroying parts of a city. The Catholic Archbishop of Bukavu, witnessing all this, wrote '*There are things that can be seen only with eyes that have cried.*'

Maybe the whole idea of Lament in the Book of Psalms (and elsewhere in the Bible) could help us all. Let's look at their pattern:

ADDRESS – these are prayers directed to God: even at their lowest points the psalmists believe there is a God to complain to – one who can hear and speak and act. And they express a deep confidence that he cares and he already know what I am going through and what I am thinking. There is a relationship of trust throughout each psalm – even when the writers are praying about their doubts. We opened the service with a quote from Psalm 139 which is all about God knowing all about us – so there is no point

in hiding anything from him. There is no room for pretence in his presence! Once we grasp that fact then we can tell him exactly how we feel – and encourage others to tell him what they feel.

COMPLAINT – the heading to Psalm 56 tells us that it was originally written by David about specific and very difficult circumstances when he was captured by the Philistines (Israel's enemies) and no doubt very scared as his life was in great danger. But it was written (or adapted) in such a way that it could be used by others to express their feelings in very different circumstances. But some people query whether we should ever grumble to God.... There are Bible verses that suggest grumbling is a sin, and examples of people punished for it – but these are about grumbling about leaders who are doing God's will so that the grumbling leads to rebellion and splits in a community (or church). In the lament psalm we are bringing our grumbles directly to God for him to sort out, knowing he knows what we feel anyway.

REQUEST – our plea for a response from God. In some psalms the writer seems to be telling God what to do! Sometimes there is a request for retribution that we find hard to handle – but notice that this is always asking God to deal with the enemy, the evil-doers, not for his help for me to bash them up! The psalmists held nothing back – nor should we. We can't fool God by bottling up our feelings – the lament psalms help us express them. There is a deep trust in a God of justice – and a deep awareness of how much God hates sin – that we might do well to ponder when we are inclined to shrug our shoulders at the injustices in this world.

MOTIVATION – almost always the psalmist gives a reason why God should act. In this psalm it is for his own salvation and growth in faith. After all, David has been anointed as king of God's people and yet was still being harassed by Saul, and now captured by his

enemies. No wonder he had doubts and needed to have his faith boosted! Often, the motivation is that God's name will be honoured among the nations.

CONFIDENCE – this particular psalm has a sort of chorus of confidence that appears twice as if to boost the writer and lift the reader. But one of the hallmarks of the psalms of lament is that they move from fear to faith; from confession to confidence; from pleas for help to praise. This is why they were and still can be part of worship, along with the psalms of praise and thanksgiving.

One of the bleakest psalms is Psalm 22 which begins 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' (v.1) – words on the lips of Jesus when he died – but it concludes with 'You who fear the Lord, praise him!.... He has listened to his cry for help....All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord...(vv.23, 24, 27). The lament psalms demonstrate a way to express grief, pain and doubt and come through with a new determination to praise and serve.

Is this merely an Old Testament expression of faith, superseded by the New? Seeing how Jesus used the psalms to express his feelings I don't think so! Christians have an even greater reason for believing that God understands what it is to suffer because he did – on a cross – in the person of Jesus. And he rose again and lives – giving us a sure and certain hope for the future which David and other psalmists only hinted at. The question for us is, do we trust him enough to tell him what we really think and feel?

The reformer, John Calvin likened the psalms to a mirror: '*There is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror*' he wrote, and suggested that in the Psalms we 'see' both God and ourselves. So let's read and learn from the Psalms, but also use them as a pattern to express our

own feelings. Writing a psalm can be a powerful way to come to terms with the things life has thrown at us to get us 'down'. It can also be a way to help others through suffering, depression or doubt – and maybe a way for the church to help the nation come to terms with this long period of pain and loss.

*Jill Wright* (who is happy to talk over these ideas with anyone)

**HYMN:** Just as I am, without one plea,  
but that thy blood was shed for me,  
and that thou bidst me come to thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about  
with many a conflict, many a doubt,  
fightings and fears within, without,  
O Lamb of God, I come.

(Charlotte Elliott, 1789 – 1871)

**Creed:** Let us affirm our faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God:  
**Though he was divine, he did not cling to equality with God,  
but made himself nothing.**

**Taking the form of a slave, he was born in human likeness.  
He humbled himself and was obedient to death,  
even death on a cross.**

**Therefore God has raised him on high,  
and given him the name above every name:  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
and every voice proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. AMEN** (Phil.2 vv.6-11)



**Prayers** of Intercession, using part of a familiar hymn:

Father, I place into your hands the things I cannot do.

Father, I place into your hands the things that I've been through:

*Bring to God thanks and frustrations from past week / month....*

Father, I place into your hands the way that I should go....

*Ask God's help for the way ahead*

Father, I place into your hands my friends and family:

*Bring to God thanksgiving, needs and ask for blessing*

Father, I place into your hands the things that trouble me:

*In our world, our nation, our local area... and especially pray for Christians who face persecution in many parts of the world.*

Father, I place into your hands the person I would be,

for I know I always can trust you. AMEN

**HYMN:**

Are we weak and heavy laden,  
cumbered with a load of care?

Precious Saviour, still our refuge -  
take it to the Lord in prayer.

Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?

Take it to the Lord in prayer,  
in his arms he'll take and shield thee,  
thou wilt find a solace there.

*[Final verse of 'What a Friend we have in Jesus' by Joseph M Scriven (1819 - 1886): his fiancée drowned the eve of their wedding day; he emigrated from Ireland to Canada and his 2<sup>nd</sup> fiancée died after a brief illness shortly before they were due to marry; and he wrote this for his mother when she was in great distress....]*

**Closing prayer:** In darkness and in light,  
in trouble and in joy,  
help us, heavenly Father,  
to trust your love,  
to serve your purpose,  
and to praise your name;  
through Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN

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## READINGS FOR THE WEEKS AHEAD

Short daily readings for the coming weeks (tick them off as you read) about people facing challenging circumstances...

A modern-language version of the Bible will help.

Before you read, PRAY 'Lord, help me understand this passage and speak to me through it.'

As you read, IMAGINE the circumstances recounted here;

NOTE anything that especially stands out;

THINK 'what does this say for my life today?'

1. Psalm 13: look again at the pattern of lament here.
2. Romans 4 vv. 18 – 25: a summary of Abraham facing disappointment
3. Genesis 50 vv. 15 – 21: hindsight helps!
4. Psalm 17
5. Exodus 2 vv. 1 – 10: Moses' mother and careful cunning
6. Exodus 32 vv. 1 – 20: Moses when God was angry over sin
7. Joshua 5 v.13 – 6 v.11: Joshua and a daunting challenge
8. 1 Samuel 19 vv. 8 – 18: David under threat

9. Psalm 59: the Psalm David wrote after yesterday's story
10. Psalm 57: notice the heading (tomorrow's story)
11. 1 Samuel 24 vv. 1 – 22: David saves his king & enemy
12. Psalm 142: also written about yesterday's story
13. 2 Samuel 15 vv. 1 – 18 & v.30: David and his rebellious son
14. Psalm 3: written about yesterday's story
15. 1 Kings 19 vv. 1 – 18: Elijah stressed and depressed
16. Isaiah 6: an amazing vision, but for problems ahead....
17. Jeremiah 1 vv. 4 – 10 & 17 – 19: Jeremiah's call
18. Jeremiah 12 (OR 20 vv. 7 – 18): complaint in tough times
19. Habakkuk 1 vv. 1 – II: another prophet laying bare his soul
20. Esther 4: a brave woman asking for prayer backing
21. Matthew 14 vv. 1 – 12: the cost of criticising evil
22. Luke 7 vv. 11 – 17: behind most of Jesus' miracles is a story of stress & tragedy – this is one example which HE noticed.
23. Matthew 27 vv. 32 – 50: God crucified
24. Psalm 22: much quoted by Jesus or alluded to in the gospels.
25. Acts 27 vv.9 – 44: calm in the storm
26. 2 Corinthians 6 vv. 1 – 10: no easy life!
27. Psalm 102: someone afflicted and weak cries to God
28. Psalm 70: brief and to the point!

Could you put your thoughts into a psalm, too?

## NOTICES FOR THE MONTH AHEAD:



### **Praying Your Goodbyes: a special invitation, now until 22 August**

Mulbarton Church will remain open during daylight hours throughout the summer break, and we are making a special set of resources available for people to come and pray their goodbyes. You may have said goodbye to a loved one over lockdown, or you may be grieving a loss of another kind. Your local church is here to provide space for you to respond to these inevitable but unwelcome goodbyes.

- Palm crosses to hang on the church railings in memory
- Candles to light inside the church in memory
- Space in the church for private prayer &/or stillness
- Printed resources available to browse in the church
- Online resources signposted to help in your grief journey

On Sunday 22 Aug, we will gather the palm crosses, which will have collected on the railings and pray over them in the morning service, inviting God to help with all the loss they represent.