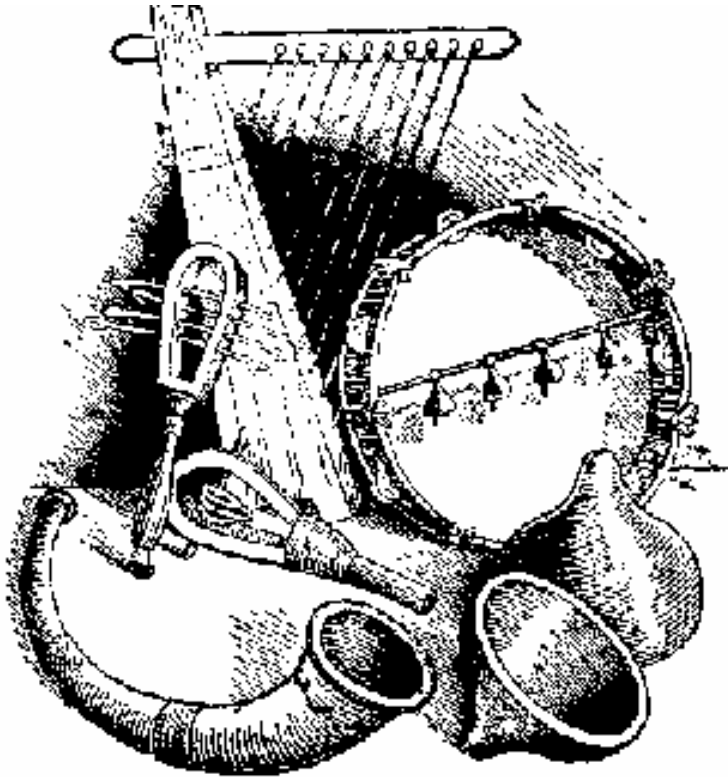


The Book of Psalms



Bible Notes January-March

50p

Psalms were meant to be sung. Their writers were poets. Psalms extend the imagination as they provide resources for worship, prayer and meditation. There are 150 psalms in the biblical Book of Psalms (and a few psalms elsewhere in the Old Testament). The Book of Psalms contains a huge variety of both style and content.

Psalms were used in the Jewish Temple. They are used in the synagogue and in many churches. They form part of the daily prayer of the clergy and of the religious orders. Yet they do present a bit of a problem for us in worship. Psalms are meant to be sung and they lose something if we simply recite them. On the other hand, translations of the psalms into English are not terribly easy to sing. The traditional Anglican chant makes it possible to sing any words to any chant if you understand the system of pointing. Many congregations, however, struggle with psalms and lose the sense of what the words are about in a desperate effort to fit them to the music. This means that many churches (including our own) have almost given up on the use of psalms in worship. This is a deprivation, though there is no point in flogging a dead horse and forcing traditional church music on people who do not appreciate it and do not wish to learn to appreciate it.

One solution is to rewrite psalms as hymns and many popular hymns such as *The Lord's My Shepherd*, *All People That on Earth Do Dwell* and *Lift Up Your Heads O You Gates* are based on psalms. These are good, but they are one step further away from the original words of scripture than the more or less literal translations in our bibles and prayer books.

I hope this study will help us all to rediscover the value of the psalms in personal devotion and maybe we shall think of a way to revive their use in our public worship. There are other ways of using the psalms than singing Tudor translations to Victorian music, but even more modern settings of the psalms require some effort on our part to learn them!

January 1st

Psalm 1

Appropriately we begin the year with Psalm 1. In many ways, this psalm summarises the whole of the Old Testament. If you delight in God's Law, the Torah, things go well. When people disregard God's Law, even scorn it, things go badly.

In the Communion service, we say that it is our duty and our joy to give thanks to God. St Augustine told us to love God and do as we like. Duty and joy coincide. Why do we so often think that they do not? The reason is that we do not love God sufficiently, that we do not sufficiently allow His love to fill our hearts. If we are full of the love of God, we delight to walk in His Law and we are like trees planted beside a water course.

January 2nd

Psalm 2

One theory is that this psalm was composed for the enthronement of kings of Israel. The king is the Lord's anointed, messiah or christ. He is anointed with oil to signify that he is God's choice and God's Spirit is upon Him.

Seen more clearly, the true King of Israel is God and the earthly king rules as God's vice-regent. The king is himself subject to God's Law (Torah) and it his duty to see that Torah is enforced in the kingdom. This means justice and mercy for all. The king is under God's protection and owes obedience to God. Metaphorically, he may be described as God's son.

All this is fulfilled in Jesus. He is truly God's Son and the Spirit is given to Him without measure. He fulfils in His own person God's Torah of love and those who follow Jesus are both under his protection, as Spirit-filled sons and daughters of God, and obligated to obey God's Torah of love.

For those who oppose Jesus, there is judgment. We are free human beings and there is a choice – to follow Jesus or not – but that choice has consequences!

January 3rd

Psalm 3

There are times when we all feel low, that everything is against us. People may question why we believe in God. We may wonder ourselves. Is there really a God? If there is a God, does He care what happens to me?

You see; the psalmist takes his troubles to God. You can be quite honest in your prayers and tell God what you really think, not what you think He wants to hear. (He knows what you are thinking anyway!)

But you've got to stay with it. Don't stay away from church. Don't stop praying. Don't give up your church meetings and your Christian friends. Maintain the relationship with God. Remember what He has done for you in the past. Continue to pray. Continue to worship. You will find that He has not forsaken you. So don't forsake Him.

The tenses of the verbs in Hebrew work rather differently from the way they do in English and you find different translations of the Bible may use future, present and past tenses to translate the same verses. The point is that God has completed certain actions and some are continuous, what He has done, what He is doing and what He will do. We trust Him for now and for the future as He has shown Himself in the past as being the One Whom we can trust.

January 4th

Psalm 4

I will lay me down in peace, and take my rest: for it is thou, Lord, only, that makest me dwell in safety.

This psalm is often used at the service of Compline – a service for bedtime. We often can't sleep because we are too keyed up. Our days are rushed. Our minds overwork. We just can't relax. Take time. Lean on the Lord. Offer all the things on your mind to Him in prayer. Relax in His presence. Get down into the depths of your own being, the depths of God, with you in Him and He in you. He is with you. He will protect and preserve you. Trust Him in peace.

January 5th

Psalm 5

We went to sleep resting in the Lord. It is good to wake up ready to serve Him. The good life is based on worship. We begin our day by praising God. We are aware of His presence with us all day. We talk to Him in prayer. We make a point of going to His House to worship with our fellow Christians on Sundays and other festivals. We cannot lead a good and satisfying life unless we worship, because worship is the basis of our relationship with God and God is the ground of our being.

January 6th

Psalm 6

We are very privileged people. We live in an advanced and prosperous society. We are not likely to be directly affected by war. We are unlikely to go hungry or unclothed or to find ourselves without shelter. Many of the diseases that used to kill us or disable us have been conquered. In fact, many of us feel that there must be something wrong with the world if ever we are not perfectly comfortable and happy.

In fact, of course, pain, grief and sickness are still very much realities for other people and sometimes for us too. There are times when things are very bad and God is with us in those bad times, too. We can cry out from the depths of our sorrow as the psalmist does. And, when we do, we find that God still loves us and cares for us. He may not take away the pain or give us what we think we should have, but He will give us the inner resources to stand firm. Pray for yourself and for other people in the depths of their need.

January 7th

Psalm 7

If we accept the idea underlying Psalm 1, the idea which underlies much of the Bible and the teaching of the Church, we expect that God will look after the righteous and punish the wicked. This raises the questions why do the wicked seem to flourish and why do good people suffer? Confronted with these questions, we may decide that there is, after all, no justice or that those who suffer are necessarily wicked. *What have I done to deserve this?* we may well ask.

No-one is without sin except Jesus and it may well be worthwhile to examine our lives and to ask ourselves where we are going wrong.

Then we can ask God to forgive us and start again, washed clean. That is worth doing, but it does not explain why someone trying their hardest to be good gets cancer and a criminal wins the lottery. You would have to go much deeper into the question of what really brings peace to the heart – a right relationship with God and other people or money in the bank and a healthy body?

January 8th

Psalm 8

This is one of my favourites. If we take time to look at the world around us, if we marvel, then we worship. If we have some inkling of Who and What God must be, we feel very humbled that He cares about you and me. But He does. He makes us a little lower than the angels*. He puts the earth and its welfare and its resources in our hands. He chooses what is apparently weak and foolish in this world to accomplish His purposes. And we Christians cannot read these verses without thinking of Jesus, the Son of God, Who was made a little lower than the angels, i.e. one of us, for the suffering of death, so that all who believe in Him receive the gift of eternal life and expect to dwell at His Right Hand in glory.

January 9th

Psalm 9

A lot of these psalms are a cry for peace and justice. For a lot of the time, the ancient Israelites were very vulnerable. There were wars with surrounding tribes. A king or a local leader might well oppress the poor, denying them justice, cheating them in financial transactions. If judges were ineffectual or corrupt, there might not be much that the poor man could do. So the oppressed cry out to God for justice and for peace. The Torah prescribes justice and peace and warns that the unjust and the violent can expect to be punished by God. This is liberation for the underdog. We need Law and it needs to be enforced. Law has its origin in the just God and ultimately He is the one Who enforces this Torah of love. Instead of getting bored with psalms lamenting troubles which don't affect us greatly, we might think about what we can do to secure peace and justice for the world's poor and oppressed.

* Some translations have God or "gods". The Hebrew is Elohim, which means God or gods or spiritual beings.

January 10th

Psalm 10

Law and order often seem to be about protecting the interests of the rich and powerful. People were taught to respect their betters. The people most afraid of thieves were the people with the most to have stolen. There is the suspicion that those already privileged use the police and the army to make sure that the less privileged masses do not take what they need or want from those who have more than enough already. Indeed those who have money make more money by lending at high rates of interest to the poor. Property developers in league with planning authorities use compulsory purchase to take away other people's land and make greater profits.

Biblical Law does not work like that. Biblical Law seeks to establish justice for everyone. In practice, this means a special concern for the poor and vulnerable and a special responsibility on those who are rich and powerful.

All this is enforced by the thought that God knows everything that goes on. So what is planned in the boardroom or the council offices or Whitehall is as much under God's scrutiny and judgment as the activities of the rough lads from the poor estate.

January 11th

Psalm 11

Be Still and Know That I Am God

Panic! Panic! Panic! Everything's going wrong! Everything's getting on top of me! I can't cope! I just want to run away.

But why? *The Lord is in his holy temple: the Lord's seat is in heaven.*

We can trust the One in charge. So pause. Take time. Pray. Then act rationally and faithfully.

January 12th

Psalm 12

When most of us were young England called itself a Christian country. We were allegedly governed on Christian principles. The Church was treated with respect. Most people said they were Christians. Commercial and leisure activities were arranged so that they did not

clash with Christian festivals. Nowadays, it is becoming increasingly lonely to be a Christian. Our faith is treated as just one among many in a multicultural society. Secular values prevail. People think you are weird if you put Church before business or even pleasure. And the world drifts into anarchy, addiction and immorality.

So choose. Does faith matter? If you think it does, you will cleave to God and try to live the way Jesus would have you live, come what may, in the belief that God will vindicate His people. Or are the people around us right? Church is just one among many lifestyle choices? If you think that, I guess you will eventually decide it's not worth bothering with and, if the world is right, the Church will die.

January 13th

Psalm 13

One cannot add much to this. The basically faithful person feels so low that he thinks that God has forsaken him. He can't find a way to deal with his troubles. He thinks that those who scoff at religion will think that they have been proved right. But, for all that he feels forgotten by God, he does not give up praying. He clings on. He still talks to God. He knows his own history with God, what God has done for him before. He knows the history of God's dealings with the whole people of God. In his head, he knows that God does not let His people down. As he prays, he comes to know it in his heart as well.

January 14th

Psalm 14

There is the famous story of the evangelist going into a pub and being accosted by a drunk who tells him that it says in the Bible that there is no God. The evangelist naturally refuses to believe this until the drunk shows him this psalm: *The fool hath said in his heart: There is no God.* It is foolish to believe that there is no God and the consequence of people believing that there is no God is what follows in the psalm, that the world is a place disfigured by human sin, where so many people suffer the effects of dishonesty, violence etc. St Paul quotes this psalm in Romans, establishing that the whole of humanity is judged as sinful. We all live as if there were no God. Accordingly, we all need the forgiveness which is only available through faith in Jesus Christ and that grace is sufficient for us all.

January 15th

Psalm 15

Approaching God. Originally, the psalmist was probably thinking about what kind of person would be acceptable as a worshipper at the Jerusalem Temple. We might think what sort of a person would be acceptable as a worshipper in our parish church – especially at Holy Communion. We might also think about who would be acceptable to go to Heaven and to join in the heavenly worship.

Is the ideal worshipper well-dressed, reasonably well off? Has he had a bath? Does he speak nicely? Does he know the ritual? The psalmist is concerned about the moral qualities of the worshipper. They are the things that matter to God. Honesty, integrity, sincerity, humility, these are the qualities required in the Temple. These are also the virtues required of those attending church. They are also necessary if we are to go to Heaven.

These are the kinds of things that God is looking for in the people He receives into His presence. Only Jesus truly has them and we only truly have access to the Father in Him.

January 16th

Psalm 16

The contrast is between those who follow the Lord and those who worship other gods. *In thy presence is the fulness of joy.* The person who worships the Lord is filled with delight in God and in the company of fellow worshippers. On the other hand, those who follow other gods are on the road to ruin. What other gods do people in C21 Britain follow? To worship is to devote your life to something. A false god is anything to which people devote their lives which is less than God – money, sex, drugs, self, anything that takes control of your life whether you are conscious or not that it has. The biblical message is that you cannot serve God and Mammon. There is no halfway house. We either belong to the LORD's people with all the blessings that brings or follow false gods and face the consequences of doing so. We have to make up our minds and if we decide to follow the LORD we cannot accept anything less than to love Him with our whole heart and our neighbours as ourselves.

January 17th

Psalm 17

Using this psalm troubled me. It seems that the person saying the psalm is asking God to save him because he is confident of his own righteousness. Now we all know that none of us is good enough for God. We are all sinners. We have no right to demand anything from God as our just reward.

This enables me to make an important point. As Christians, we should think of the psalms as on the lips of Jesus. He prays. He judges. He puts His faith in God. He is vindicated. We pray the psalms as in Him. In Christ, we pray for the blessings of the just, because Christ has justified us. We pray to God as Father, because we are brothers and sisters of God's Son. We pray for forgiveness because we trust in the power of His Cross. When psalms cry out for the judgment of the wicked or even vengeance on them, our thoughts and emotions are controlled by the thought that we are praying in Jesus Who died on the Cross so that even the worst sinner could be forgiven and escape punishment.

January 18th

Psalm 18

This is a magnificent psalm. At the heart of it is the theophany – the manifestation of God. Maybe we are supposed to think of the time when God appeared to Moses on Mt Sinai. Any manifestation of God's grandeur would do – the power of the storm, mountain ranges, oceans, as well as miracles like Sinai and the crossing of the Red Sea. Above all, remember, God reveals His glory in the mystery of the Cross. However His glory is revealed to us, however, it teaches us that we can put our trust in Him. What He requires of us is to live righteously. What He enables us to do is everything that He wants us to do. We might be very small in the face of the storm, but God is the power behind the storm and it is His power which upholds us and enables us to stand fast. What is required of us is to remain faithful.

January 19th

Psalm 19

Some people speak of God as revealed in two books – the Book of Nature and the Book of the Bible. One is studied by scientists, the other by theologians, but it is the same God, the same Truth to which they

aspire. Scientists uncover the laws of nature, the patterns and relationships which determine the behaviour of the physical universe. The Bible and the Church proclaim the laws which ought to determine human behaviour. They are all Torah; they are all the Law of God. It is the same God Who determined that $E=mc^2$ as said *Thou shalt not steal*.

Psalms 19 and 20 reveal in both aspects of God's law-giving.

January 20th

Psalm 20

The psalm begins with a blessing, perhaps spoken by the priest to the worshipper at the sanctuary. Maybe that worshipper is the king himself. Hence the reference to the Lord's care for His anointed. The recipient of the blessing is confirmed in his belief that he can depend on the Lord. He will not be saved by horses and chariots, but by the right hand of the Lord.

For us, Jesus is the priest Who pronounces the blessing. He is also the King Who receives the blessing. The enemies he conquers are not Amalekites or Philistines. He conquers sin and death. He does not conquer by horses and chariots but by self-sacrificial love.

In Christ, we receive God's blessing and we pronounce God's blessing on others. We reign with Him as kings and priests and we are soldiers in the fight against sin and death and our weapon too is self-sacrificial love.

January 21st

Psalm 21

The King of Israel is the minister of God. He is not a priest or a prophet. They have different functions, presiding in worship and intercession and proclaiming the Word of God. The king is, however, a minister answerable to God for the way he rules, dependent on God for the talents and virtues he needs to do his job. It is my belief that every Christian should see whatever he does for a living as service to God. If what he is doing is honourable, he ought to be doing it to the glory of God and asking God for the skills he needs to do it well. If he feels he cannot offer the work he does for a living to God, then he ought to look for another job.

January 22nd

Psalm 22

You could have read yesterday's psalm, interpreting the references to the King of Israel as referring to Jesus. They would have spoken about His glory and His triumph over His enemies. That would certainly be sin, the world and the devil. Would it also be the people who oppose Christ and His Church? He did say that those who are not for Him are against Him and *vice versa*.

Psalm 22 has certainly been seen as referring to Jesus. Read it in the light of the crucifixion story. One part of the psalm after another is fulfilled in it and He Himself quotes the first verse from the Cross. Saying this psalm enables us to some extent to enter into the depths of His grief and therefore to know His presence in our deepest troubles and also to inspire us to join our prayers with His for troubled people in the world. Do note that, grim as it is, the psalm finishes on a decisive note of confidence.

January 23rd

Psalm 23

This psalm must surely be the best known and best loved of all the psalms. It speaks of God's care for us, even at our darkest hours. It holds out the promise of eternity in His presence. Wow!

January 24th

Psalm 24

This is another favourite of mine. God's greatness in creation and His moral purity are two sides of one coin. The Book of Nature and the Book of Revelation are both manifestations of the Torah. As in Psalm 15, we see that what is required in order to enter the presence of the thrice holy God is pureness of heart. Vv 7-10 probably originally referred to a festival in the Jerusalem Temple. We could think of Jesus on Palm Sunday going up to the glory of the Cross. We could think of Him on Ascension Day, taking His place at God's right hand. We ought to think of ourselves offering our lives with His on the Cross, of cleansing our hearts for Him to dwell in us, of ascending with Him to His Father's side.

January 25th

Psalm 25

A virtuous circle. If we walk with God, our walk with God will inform the way we think and behave. If we think and behave in accordance with walking with God, our walk with Him will be closer. He forgives our sin and sets us free from sin to live virtuously. He supports us in our lives and protects us from those things which might divide us from Him. There is a peace in walking with God, but the psalmist puts all that far more beautifully than I can.

January 26th

Psalm 26

Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house: and the place where thine honour dwelleth.

This psalm seeks to justify the worshipper in approaching the presence of God because he leads an upright life. We have already spoken about the importance of being good if we want to see God and of the fact that we are only good enough if we are in Christ, Who cancels all our sin.

What strikes me here, however, is that the psalmist really seems to long to go to church (or the Temple anyway). What's gone wrong with us? Even for most Christians, churchgoing has become a sort of optional extra, even a chore. We might go from a sense of duty or to meet our friends. We might go so long as we like the form of service and it is held at a convenient time in the building of our choice and we have nothing better to do that Sunday. But we don't have a passion to go to Church. We don't have a burning longing. Church is somehow less important than our work or leisure activities or even than lying in bed. Is it that we experience God apart from church or is it that God is not very important in our lives?

To those who say that they have enough of God in their own personal spirituality, I would say that Jesus told His disciples that their prayers would be heard when they met together in His Name and that they should break bread in remembrance of Him. A personal walk with God is an excellent thing, but if there is no sharing with other Christians in common worship, that walk is incomplete and tinged with an arrogance that thinks it can manage perfectly well without people and the means of grace Christ gave us.

January 27th

Psalm 27

This is another of my favourite psalms. How ever black things get, the Lord is my light and my salvation. In the extremely unlikely event of my parents giving up on me, the Lord would still care for me.

And, just as my relationship with my parents is a personal one, so is my relationship with God. Jesus taught me to call God, *Abba*, Father. My relationship with my mother is not simply a matter of her looking after me (doing the washing up) with me, in turn, looking after her (unscrewing the marmalade jar). There is such a thing as love. And so it is with God. Our relationship with God is not simply that He creates and sustains and, in return, we try to keep the Ten Commandments. Our relationship with God is love and we delight to be in our Father's presence. As a child, you felt safe in your parents' arms and you felt loved. It wasn't just that you knew your dad would protect you from the bullies; you felt warm inside because you were holding his hand. Just so, with God. Our daily prayer time and our attendance at church should be the things we look forward to, just as a working man looks forward to coming home to his wife's embrace. You know there is something wrong with a marriage when a man will do anything to put off going home. Similarly, there is something wrong with our relationship with God if we will do anything rather than pray or worship. The husband could try communicating with his wife. He could ask the advice of his friends. He could see a marriage guidance counsellor. The cooling off of ardour does not have to lead to divorce. The Christian whose relationship with God has cooled could try talking to God about it. He could discuss his problems with his Christian friends. He could consult a minister of religion. It would be a shame if a cooling of ardour led to a divorce from God.

January 28th

Psalm 28

Am I right in thinking that the psalmist feels lonely here? There are plenty of people around him who oppose him and don't think much about God either. The psalmist seems to feel too that God isn't very bothered about him. He does, however, hang on in prayer and through talking to God becomes convinced that God is with all those who call on Him.

January 29th

Psalm 29

I'm not asking you what you like when you go to church, but what inspires you? What fills with you with a sense of God? What makes you worship (as opposed merely to saying the words or singing)? Is it the sound of the mighty organ? Is it exquisite singing by the choir? Is it a congregation in full voice? Is it dance, or hearing the word, or kneeling to receive Communion? Is it silence? Silence in a building consecrated for worship? Not, what do you like, but what inspires you?

January 30th

Psalm 30

Being a Christian can be something of a roller coaster experience. If you are like me, there are spiritual highs and spiritual lows. There are times when I think I've cracked it. My worship is in spirit and in truth. I'm not going to worry about anything because I know I can trust in God. Then I get derailed. My mind wanders in worship. Something happens in the parish – often some quite petty thing – and I'm nervous and on edge and in despair. Then, after prayer and thought and bible-reading and faithful attendance at Holy Communion, I get back on track and I'm again on top of the spiritual world. There will no doubt be future lowers. The thing is to get wiser at every up and every down.

January 31st

Psalm 31

*Into thy hand I commend my Spirit: for thou hast redeemed, O Lord,
thou God of truth.*

Jesus quotes these words from this psalm when He dies on the cross. These words are also used in that service of Compline, the service for bedtime. We think of all the terrible things that can happen to a person and how desperate people can be. The psalm deals with all sorts of troubles, hostility and treachery. We remember that Jesus endured all that for us. We should love Him accordingly. We remember that He sympathises with all our weaknesses because He shares them. We remember that God raised Jesus from the dead – and, with Him, all who believe in Him. God is with us at the darkest times and He brings us through into the light. These words are, therefore, an appropriate prayer when we are about to close our eyes in sleep or in death or at any time of the day or life.

February 1st

Psalm 32

I don't think we treat sin sufficiently seriously. We tend to equate the good life with the life of a respectable Englishman or woman. So most of us qualify quite easily. We are no worse than our neighbours and maybe we think we are a bit better than some of them. Saying a confession is rather a matter of going through the motions. But suppose we judged our lives against the standard of Torah. Suppose we asked ourselves whether we do in fact love the Lord our God with all our hearts, mind and strength and whether we do indeed love our neighbours as ourselves? Do we really think we are worthy to come into the presence of our holy and glorious God?

One answer is to make excuses as to why it would be impractical to live up to the biblical standard. Another answer is to say that God really doesn't mind as long as we are conventionally good and no worse than most people. Neither of these answers, however, is Christian. We stand before the infinity holiness of God and we are awestruck that He accepts us as His children.

February 2nd

Psalm 33

This is another one of my favourite psalms. It contemplates the infinite majesty of God. Everything that exists is made by His Word. His Word is Jesus. God knows everything that is happening. He knows what everyone is thinking and doing. The history of the world is in His Hands. So there is no point in worrying. There is no point in relying on our own strength, our own inventions. Everything is in the Hands of God.

I find that there is quite a resistance to the story of Mary and Martha. Martha is busy, tidying the house and cooking dinner. Mary sits and listens to Jesus. Martha protests, but Jesus says that Mary has made the right choice. It is not that dinners don't need cooking, nations don't need rulers, governments don't need armies or that armies don't need horses (or jeeps), but all these things have to be seen in the context of our relationship with God.

February 3rd

Psalm 34

Why should we tell people about God? I often have the horrible feeling that the main reason we try to get people to come to church is to keep the church going. We need a few more people, preferably young enough to do the chores and in a position to give fairly generously. I suspect that if we could get two or three dozen people like that – enough to make our church buildings look reasonably full – we would have little or no interest in communicating our faith to the rest of the parish.

This is, of course, completely wrong. We talk to people about God because we are so enthusiastic about Him. We are full of God, what He has done for us, Who He is. We can no more shut up about God than a teenage girl can keep quiet about her latest boyfriend or a young man can stop talking about his football team. We deeply, personally want other people to know God and to love Him too. It is also in their best interests to love God. So, if we love other people, we want them to know our God and to love Him too.

This ought to help our church, but the biblical evidence suggests that those who find the way of life will be few. The majority will very often refuse to listen. Moreover those whom we do succeed in converting may well decide to join other churches. That can be frustrating, but the point is that we bear faithful witness and rejoice that it bears fruit.

February 4th

Psalm 35

This is another psalm which makes us think of the Crucifixion. The psalmist is in deep trouble. People whom he has helped, people who ought to have been his friends, have turned against him and persecuted him. They have told lies about him. They have mocked him in his troubles. The psalmist, nevertheless, expects that God will protect him and save him. He demands justice. Jesus demands justice on the cross, but His Justice includes the concept, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

February 5th

Psalm 36

Can you have ethics without faith? The standard answer in our secular society is that you can have agreed standards of right and wrong and enforce them without any concept of God. I am not so sure. It wouldn't be true to say that all rational people agree about the way human beings ought to live. Neither is it clear where ideas like justice and goodness come from if there is no Infinite Intelligence at the root of all things to "wire into" the world such principles as *Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you* as well as the Law of Gravity. For the psalmist it is obvious. Those who reject God are also the people who reject Torah, an understanding of right and wrong. By contrast, it is only in God that we find concepts like mercy, justice, faithfulness and righteousness.

February 6th

Psalm 37

If the universe is governed by One Who is all powerful, all loving and all good, maybe we would expect that quite simply good people would prosper while the wicked would get their comeuppance. This is generally true, but not obviously so. This psalm is confident that the wicked are punished and the righteous rewarded but it is also aware that the wicked often have more money, better health and are generally better off in worldly terms than the righteous. There are perhaps two answers to this conundrum. One is that health and wealth are not necessarily the measures of blessing. A person in a right relationship with God is more whole than a healthy or wealthy person. The other is to look at the long term. Ill-gotten gains are not only unsatisfying; they also have a way of turning out to be short lived.

February 7th

Psalm 38

The ancient Greeks talked about a healthy mind in a healthy body. Holistic medicine is about the way how we feel affects our health as well as *vice versa*. How does sin relate to health? Obviously there is no simple link such that the wicked get sick and the righteous enjoy good health till they peacefully pass away at 110. But our moral, mental and physical health are all related. When Jesus healed the paralysed man, He first told him that his sins were forgiven. For C21 westerners that might have been a disappointment. We tend to regard sin as a trivial

matter and physical health as of paramount importance. *Take up thy bed and walk* would impress us much more than *Thy sins are forgiven thee*. I think, however, that Jesus really knew what that man needed and that was what He gave him first.

February 8th

Psalm 39

Again we think of the crucifixion, Jesus' reluctance to answer the high priest and Pilate. Words can be malicious or false. Even good words can be spoken in the wrong spirit, perhaps saying something which, while true, is unnecessarily hurtful or speaking out in anger. There is a time for silence. There are also times when we are not allowed to speak and times when we feel that we cannot speak. There is no point when we are wilfully misunderstood or people just refuse to listen. Maybe there are times when we are just too depressed to speak. And maybe there are times when we feel we cannot say what needs saying either to God or to other people. In all this confusion, we quite simply must cling on to God. Whatever happens to us is within His control, for His purposes. We trust Him. We trust Him enough to plead with Him.

February 9th

Psalm 40

The man of God is just so thankful for everything that God has done for him. He wants to shout about it, to tell God how wonderful He is, to praise God in the Church*, to shout about God's goodness to people at large. True devotion to God will not only be manifest in typical acts of worship – sacrifice, singing, praying. True devotion to God will be manifest in living a godly life. The person who really worships God will love God with all his heart and his neighbour as himself and act accordingly in every day life as well as in the Temple. Walking according to Torah, the man or woman of God will find that he is able to trust God for all the details of his every day life.

* The New Testament word for Church reflects Old Testament concepts like assembly, congregation. We are talking hear about the gathering together, even the calling together of the people of God.

February 10th

Psalm 41

The first three verses are a blessing. They tell us what we can expect if we care about the poor. What follows is something of a complaint. Perhaps the psalmist had believed in some sort of prosperity Gospel. He had expected that everything would go well for him so long as he treated other people decently. However, he has been attacked by his enemies and let down by his friend. There is often an unexpected cost in treating people kindly. They may resent you, turn against you, take advantage of what they see as your naïvety. Kindness to an addict may help them to overcome their addiction. Often you will be disappointed and hurt yourself. The thing is to keep loving, to keep caring, for their sake and for God's, not for any reward you personally hope to receive.

February 11th

Psalm 42

This is all about relationship with God. We reach out to God. Sometimes we feel that He is close. Sometimes He seems distant. Sometimes everything in the world is sunny. Sometimes it is all dark. Sometimes it doesn't matter whether the world is sunny or dark because we have a peace which transcends the world. I know that God loves us just the same whatever happens to us. In fact I am sure that it is He Who is in control. It follows that these experiences – good and bad – are to our advantage, to deepen our relationship with Him so that we can grow into maturity in Christ.

February 12th

Psalm 43

Psalm 43 is probably one composition with Psalm 42. It is often used as a preparation for Communion – especially the verse *I will go unto the altar of God, even unto the God of my joy and gladness*. Yes, joy and gladness.

February 13th

Psalm 44

When we look back, we can look at things two ways. It is very tempting to think that church life was very much better in the past and that, therefore, we are now in a decline and soon we will close. It may be that nostalgia exaggerates how good it was in the past, but it is certainly true that people in the past made huge sacrifices to spread the Gospel, that they created marvellous architecture, art and music for

worship, that they devoted themselves to education and the care of the sick and the poor and that many were willing to face a martyr's death. It contrasts with today when we are diffident or indifferent about sharing our faith, put ourselves before God in what passes for worship, leave education, health care and social services to the secular state and think it too much like martyrdom to go out in the rain in God's service. That is one way of looking at it. The other way is to remember that it was not the people who did all these marvellous things in the past, but God working in them. If we remember that all this is God's Work, we shall not despair. God is as powerful today as He was yesterday. If we want the church to recover what it was at its best in the past, we need to pray. We need God to transform the Church. If God does not work in us, maybe we should ask ourselves whether the reason is our failure to let Him. Are we open to breadth of what God can do or are we too wrapped up in petty parochialism?

February 14th

Psalm 45

Not inappropriately for today we have a psalm for a wedding – the wedding of the King of Israel to a princess of Tyre. The king is magnificent. The princess is beautiful. She is to leave her old home and set up a new life with the king. It is like the wedding of Christ and His Church. Jesus is magnificent. We Christians are beautiful because our sins are washed away by Him. We Christians are to leave behind the things of this world so that we may be united eternally with Him in perfect love.

February 15th

Psalm 46

Be still then and know that I am God.

That is such a hard thing to do. We fret. We worry. We rush round trying to sort out our own problems and those of other people. We are all Martha. But Mary chose the better part. She connected with Jesus. If we can take time to connect with Jesus, we find the resources to cope with all the rest. We are not afraid though the earth move and the hills be carried into the midst of the sea. But it is so hard to do. We were given one day in seven for rest and worship and we find any and every way to fill that day rather than contemplate God and our standing before Him.

February 16th

Psalm 47

Probably this psalm was originally used in battle. We may not like to think of worship and war going together. If we are pacifists, believing that God never wants us to go to war, it makes sense to say that those who pray before going into battle or thank God for victory are hypocrites. If, however, like most people, we think that there are times when it is right to fight, then we will pray for victory and give thanks if we win. No Christian can engage in an enterprise which he feels unable to share with God. We will, however, only fight as a last resort and do the minimum amount of damage to our enemies consistent with achieving a just victory. Transferring into a Christian context, however, I should want to use this psalm as celebrating God's triumph over our spiritual enemies like sin and temptation and His Victory over all those forces (human and demonic) which would oppose His Reign and destroy His Church.

February 17th

Psalm 48

We used to sing the first verse of this as a chorus at a Christian youth club I attended. (See SoF 144). That youth club would be one of the reasons I developed into the kind of Christian I am. What are we doing now to help young people to come to know Jesus and to help those who are Christians to grow in their faith instead of drifting away as so many do in our secular society? The people who ran the group were very loving and gave freely of their time and hospitality. We had a lot of fun together. There were fellowship and friendship. We sang a lot. We were given the opportunity to speak and to pray. We had a lot of good biblical teaching. We did things together like carol singing or performing in church. This gives a sense of responsibility, solidarity and usefulness – all important to young people. Our group had many of the characteristics of a good youth club and churches certainly can and do run good youth clubs. This was more than that, however. Psalm 48 is about the presence of God in the midst of His people. It is about the mighty works God performs. It is about the fact that human beings can always depend on Him and only depend on Him. We'd be doing a good thing if we started a youth club, we would be doing much more if we could get our young people to see themselves as potentially the temple of the Holy Spirit.

February 18th

Psalm 49

Psalm 48 was about Jerusalem and its Temple as the place in the Old Testament in which God was envisaged as dwelling. We Christians know that the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Jesus. We know that the Church is the Body of Christ. So we Christians, individually and together, constitute the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the dwelling place of God. This is the tremendous thing in our lives and this life is eternal.

By contrast, the world values property, possessions and posterity. As the psalm says, none of these amounts to much in the long run. Yet, we who call ourselves Christians, to which we dedicate the greater effort – to the things of this world or the things of God?

February 19th

Psalm 50

We start with the grandeur of God. Think of the sun rising in the east and setting in the west and think of all the things it shines down upon. Such is only a hint of the grandeur of God. The God of the Laws of Nature is also the God of the Moral Law. He will judge the earth beginning with His own people – the Israelites or the Church, depending whether you are Old or New Testament. On that day, He will not be impressed with the offerings you made. Everything comes from Him anyway. Neither will He be impressed that you knew, even that you were expert in, the Bible, the Prayer Book and all the traditions of the Church. What He wants is people who live by His Law of love.

February 20th

Psalm 51

This psalm is appointed for Lent. It used to be very well known. Some of you will notice that verses from this psalm form a regular part of Mattins and Evensong. It is probably less well known now. We don't take sin seriously any more. And we wonder why the Church is so feeble in this generation! Repent of your lack of ardour.

February 21st

Psalm 52

In the history of Israel and in the 2,000 years since the time of Jesus there have been plenty of tyrants who thought themselves invincible. Maybe they appeared invincible to their down-trodden subjects too.

Two obvious examples in C20 would be Stalin and Hitler, but I am sure you can think of many more, including some who are still strutting the world stage. But we are all answerable to God, including the high and mighty, no matter how rich they are, nor how ruthless their state security apparatus. We all stand before the judgment seat of God. Have faith.

February 22nd

Psalm 53

Psalm 53 is very like Psalm 14, a psalm about the consequences of not believing in God, not merely the belief that there is no God (atheism) but the belief that God does not really matter whether He exists or not. I doubt that there were many atheists in Israel BC, but the evidence of the Bible is that there were plenty of people who lived as if God did not matter. There are plenty of that sort around today, including many who call themselves Christians.

St Anselm was Archbishop of Canterbury 900 years ago. He sat down to consider how one might establish the existence of God. His first thought was, Could anyone in fact doubt the existence of God. He decided that it must be possible to doubt because the Bible says *The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God*. But why does the fool say this? asks Anselm. Why precisely because he is a fool! He answers.

We have got used to being on the defensive about faith. The idea is widespread that faith is somehow contrary to reason. The atheists in our society control public discourse. The majority of people are agnostics who do not take much notice of God. Many people are members of religions other than Christianity or are open to stupid superstitions like astrology and a lot of New Age nonsense. It is quite lonely being a Christian and we may feel we are swimming against the tide, hanging on to an outdated faith in the face of triumphant modernity or even post-modernism. Actually, faith is not irrational. Christianity does make sense. In fact it makes more sense of the world than rival philosophies. For Anselm it was sufficient to understand what God must be in order to prove to your own satisfaction that He is. St Thomas Aquinas demonstrated that it makes sense to believe that there

is One Who creates, sustains and guides the Universe to its ultimate destiny.

I would ask the following questions of those who say that it is irrational to believe in God:

- If there is no intelligent mind behind the universe analogous to ours, why do we find patterns that we can begin to understand – laws of nature? Bluntly, would science be possible if there were no God?
- Why do we feel instinctively that there is order and purpose in the universe (which there would not be if it existed by chance)?
- Why do we instinctively feel that words like justice and goodness have meaning in themselves, beyond the values we humans choose to give them?
- Why do almost all human cultures have some idea of God or gods and the belief that human life continues beyond human death?

There are non-religious answers to all these questions, but they are no more rational than the religious answer (that there is in fact God) and I think the religious answer is actually the more plausible.

We could (but we won't) go into the elegant way Christian doctrines like the Trinity and the Incarnation preserve the integrity of the Unmoved Mover and the specialness of the human race more effectively than other religions and philosophies!

February 23rd

Psalm 54

The psalmist may well have faced enemies who were literally after his blood. What are your enemies? People? Lack of time? Lack of confidence? Lack of skill? Ill health? Age? Lack of opportunity? Whatever your problems, commit them to the Lord.

February 24th

Psalm 55

The worst quarrels are family quarrels. We might not like our boss or our neighbour, but we can perhaps avoid seeing them too much. A stranger may cheat us, a big company may exploit us, we might feel

unfairly treated by government, but, to some extent, we expect it; we don't take it personally. Soldiers can be quite dispassionate in killing the enemy and make friends surprisingly quickly when the war is over. Quarrels between friends or within families are the hardest to get over. We do take it very personally and feel very badly let down. The same is true in the church family. It seems terrible when we have quarrels with people with whom we have shared Holy Communion. We know that we cannot receive Holy Communion unless we are in love and charity with our neighbours. So what happens when there is a quarrel in the Church? Do we stop coming to church? Do we find a new church where we no longer have to confront the other person? Do we ignore them in the setting of our own church? If we know we are in the wrong, it is easy to know what to do. We say sorry. If the other person admits to being wrong and says sorry, we know what to do. We have to forgive. If the person who is clearly in the wrong refuses to repent after being approached by representatives of the fellowship, excommunication is the logical outcome in serious cases. The real problem is when both are sure they are right and I wish I knew what to do then. Given good will it should at least be possible to maintain fellowship.

February 25th

Psalm 56

Schemes for reading the psalms in daily worship usually read them one after the other like we have been doing. These psalms around Ps 56 often seem like a sticky patch. They all seem to be about how desperate the writer is and how much he needs God. Maybe we don't feel we need these psalms because our lives are so much safer and more comfortable than life in Israel 2,500 years ago. Maybe that's why we don't feel we have much need of God and maybe that's why we shall get a rude awakening.

February 26th

Psalm 57

Awake up my glory; awake, lute and harp: I myself will awake right early.
I love this enthusiasm for praise. Is he going to leap out of bed and start praising in his bedroom or is he rushing off to the early service in the Temple? Again the context seems to be that the psalmist is in dire straits, but he is brimming over with praise. He trusts God. He knows God. He loves God. He worships God!

February 27th

Psalm 58

And this is a psalm which often gets left out of the daily reading of psalms as an act of worship. The psalmist's prayer for vengeance on the wicked just seems too horrible. Yet justice does have two sides. Wicked people cause abominable suffering. Think of murder victims and their families, other victims of violent crime, poor people conned out of such savings as they have, labourers forced to work for less than a living wage, abused children, slaves, people forced out of their homes by war, political prisoners. Human beings are capable of great evil with terrible consequences for their victims. Do we think that the Judge of all the earth just doesn't mind? Do we think that they are just going to get away with it? Or do we rejoice in the fact that the people who do these things will receive their just desserts?

God, of course, does not desire the death of a sinner, but He does not excuse the wicked or let them off. That would be an insult to their victims. God deals with the enormity of human wickedness by an act of extreme goodness, by the willing death of His Son on the Cross. The righteous cry is for justice. God combines justice and mercy in one act of divine self-sacrifice and so the sinner can be forgiven without ever excusing the sin.

*Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies,
But the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries.*

February 28th

Psalm 59

Who runs about the city looking for trouble? I'm not sure what the psalmist originally meant. The soldiers of an invading or occupying army? Rogue traders and con men? In our times, I thought of football hooligans, violent drunks, prostitutes, vandals. Some people do look for trouble, enjoying a fight or a fix or illicit sex or gambling. Maybe we all like a bit of dicing with impropriety as we pass on a bit of salacious gossip or try out just how fast our car will go. Security cameras, ASBOs, community support officers, are these the answers? To some extent, yes. Society needs law and law has to be enforced. But, looking again at yesterday's meditation, it is God's Will that these lost young people should be found, a harder task, but much more rewarding.

March 1st

Psalm 60

If there is one God and He is all powerful, then He is responsible for everything. This is very much the perspective of the Bible. If things are going wrong for Israel, it must be God's doing. There then follow two rather paradoxical thoughts. The first is that it is to God they have to pray even though it is God Who has brought the trouble on them. The second is that very often the troubles God brings on Israel are seen as punishment for their sins. Now unless they have free will they cannot be responsible for their actions and cannot deserve to be punished, but if human beings have free will, how can we claim that everything which happens is controlled by God? I do not think these paradoxes have ever been satisfactorily explained. Probably the best thing is to admit that we cannot understand all the mysteries of the universe and get on with our lives: trying to be good, trusting that God is in complete control and praying to Him in all our troubles and opportunities.

March 2nd

Psalm 61

A little while ago I was at a conference where someone rather aggressively made the point that prayer is useless when you are in trouble; what you need is scientific answers to your problems. I suggested that maybe science is the answer to prayer! No-one can deny that science has come up with some very good answers. This is why we live longer, more healthily and more comfortably than our forebears. But does science do away with the need for faith? This person's faith is expressed in the words of Psalm 61 centuries before the time of Jesus. It so resonated with other people's experience that they used it in worship and preserved it for posterity. Millions of people must have used this psalm because they recognised its essential truth for them. This psalm expresses what millions of people have found to be true. Those Christians who refuse to take medicine because they believe that prayer alone will heal them are blind to the facts and will probably die if there is anything seriously the matter with them. On the other hand, those who trust in human science alone and refuse to pray may find that they die spiritually – an even more serious death than the cessation of the heartbeat.

March 3rd

Psalm 62

I find myself getting quite excited preparing these notes. I do read psalms every day, but carrying out this study is making me look at them freshly. Get excited about God. You can base your life on Him. He is more powerful than all the things which confront you and sometimes threaten to overwhelm you. Don't set your heart on riches. Is that where our society went wrong? Rich in goods, but poor in soul, as the hymn says.

March 4th

Psalm 63

The king* was obviously a very busy man. There was justice to dispense. There were wars to wage. The state had to be administered. There was also political intrigue, enemies at court. Such a man might well be too busy for religion. Church is for elderly spinsters cycling to Mattins! Yet this king seeks God with a fierce thirst. He longs for God in the morning. He thinks of God when he wakes at night. His is an intense relationship with God. And the way he reigns is determined by his faith. He does not practise his religion in his spare time!

March 5th

Psalm 64

Jesus was a righteous man Who found Himself plotted against, betrayed, beaten up and murdered. Many saints have had similar experiences. Indeed there is something about leading an innocent life and speaking the truth which provokes the wicked to attack. I suppose they know that the saint is really right and so themselves feel threatened by his sanctity. The crowd has a way of going along with the powerful. So the martyr can find himself very much alone – as Jesus did when His friends deserted Him and the crowds cried *Crucify!* Nevertheless, goodness wins through in the end. Millions have found their salvation in Jesus, none in Caiaphas or Pontius Pilate. The blood of the martyrs proved to be the seed of the Church and so it will still prove.

* In the bible (but not the prayer book) psalms are usually given headings translated from the Hebrew, giving information such as by or for whom they were written, what music to use etc. These are not part of the original text and I think they should not be given the same authority as sacred scripture. This psalm is ascribed to King David, which may or may not be correct, but certainly the character of the psalmist is that of the David we read about in the history books of the bible.

March 6th

Psalm 65

When there is a severe drought in a foreign country and people are starving, many Christians pray for rain. Other Christians consider that unsophisticated. Rain is caused by physical factors such as the movement of moist air in the atmosphere leading to cooling to produce cloud. They do not think that God interferes in natural processes. Instead of praying for rain, such Christians may pray that governments will act wisely or that people in general will be more generous. If you think about it, however, such prayers are even more problematic than prayers for better weather. We are asking God to alter people's minds – i.e. to overrule their free will.

Yet prayer is the natural response to any bad situation, whatever awkward questions it may raise. The way the psalmist sees it God rules both the physical universe and the hearts of men. Based on that belief, the way I see it is that God's loving purposes encompass every human situation. When we pray, we become part of His purposes. Our love is united with His. Our prayers are part of the process by which He determines the weather and guides the hearts of men. We may pray naïvely. We can hardly do anything else given our extremely limited understanding of God and the way the universe works. However, if we pray sincerely, we are contributing to the process by which God's Will is done.

March 7th

Psalm 66

Jesus said that He came so that we should have joy in all its fullness. We must not lose sight of that fact. Christians go on about the seriousness of the world situation, the rotten state of British society, the mess people are making of their personal lives. Christians go on about the awfulness of sin. Petty parish politics exclude joy from many a Christian congregation. Yet Jesus came that we should have joy in all its fullness. That doesn't mean pretending that there are no serious problems or that sin doesn't matter or that we are indifferent to the mess some peoples' lives are. It does mean that we are confident in God. He is in charge and we can take all the troubles of the world joyfully to Him in prayer. That being the case, our worship is characterised by thankfulness.

March 8th

Psalm 67

This is a well known psalm. It is used at weddings and at Evensong as an alternative to the Nunc Dimittis. Jesus taught us to pray, *Hallowed be thy name*. God's holiness is manifest in the blessings which flow when the world is ordered by God's Torah of love.

March 9th

Psalm 68

It is very hard to understand what this psalm means literally. It is very powerful poetry. It is very moving. It exalts the spirit. But what it literally means is unclear. There are layers – literal meaning, poetry, any musical setting – layers of meaning in the use of texts in worship.

The general gist of the psalm is the community of Israel rejoicing in the triumphs of God. God wins great victories by defeating Israel's enemies and providing for everybody's needs – especially the needs of the poor. All good things come from God and the New Testament will quote this psalm referring to the way God pours out the gifts of the Holy Spirit on His people. (v18, Ephesians 4 v8). The overwhelming sense of the psalm is celebration and so should be our worship services.

March 10th

Psalm 69

This is another psalm which foreshadows the Crucifixion. It is directly quoted regarding the offering of vinegar to drink, which happened to Jesus on the Cross. There is a great deal about being rejected by the people whom the psalmist tried to help and the way all this trouble has come upon him precisely because he has tried to do God's Will. He depends utterly on God to save him and to give him justice. He is confident that Lord will give him justice and justice to all the poor and oppressed and that the Lord will establish the Holy City. We can easily imagine Jesus using this prayer as we can imagine many martyrs and poor, oppressed people. Except that Jesus prays for the forgiveness of his persecutors, rather than their destruction. When we use this psalm in prayer, it may be that we feel ourselves very low at the time. Maybe we don't; we're quite happy and everything is going well. We can, however, always join our prayers to those of Jesus for people who are at this time in great distress.

March 11th

Psalm 70

In Revelation 3 the church in Laodicea is described as lukewarm, neither cold nor hot. Jesus says He would rather they were one or the other and, because they are lukewarm, they are rejected by Him. Some people have suggested that the problem with the Church of England is that we are lukewarm. We are not passionate about Jesus. He does not matter to us all that much. Today's psalm is passionate. The psalmist knows his need of God and cries out to God urgently. Is our trouble that we are not really convinced that we need God and our reaching out to Him is half-hearted and lacking urgency?

March 12th

Psalm 71

We like to think of senior citizen Christians enjoying a serene old age, all their troubles behind them, sweetly and faithfully awaiting their final reward. But things are not always easy at the end of life, even for Christians. Loved ones have died. They may be lonely. Increasing frailty stops them doing what they want to do. They may often be in pain. Perhaps there is fear about where they will spend their last days or what will happen to a dependent relative if they die first or anxiety about what they suspect may be the first signs of dementia. Church congregations sometimes seem to forget faithful members when they can no longer make it to Church.

Older Christians may well find themselves sorely tested and crying out to God in frustration as well as faith. Hopefully, they will find spiritual resources in the depth of their being, but the Church must not forget them. The Church still needs the prayers, the wisdom and the loyalty of its older members, even if they can no longer carry tables for the church fête. Older members ought to be able to depend on the rest of the Church for company, prayer and help with those tasks which are becoming a little beyond them.

March 13th

Psalm 72

It is important that any nation is well governed. If rulers are oppressive or ineffective, the whole country suffers. We are duty bound to pray for rulers – even those who are not Christians. In Israel the king was explicitly God's vice-regent. He had to govern according to Torah,

God's perfect law of love. If he did, the nation would flourish. If he did not, everyone was in trouble. Reading this psalm, we think of Jesus as the perfect King Whose reign brings blessing in all eternity.

One puzzle for us today is the role of religion in politics. Do we want our country to be governed by Christians in accordance with Christian principles? Or do we want to keep religion out of politics and have a purely secular government? If the latter, on what principles will it govern and what should a Christian minister or civil servant do if he finds that the principles on which the country is governed differ from Christian values?

March 14th

Psalm 73

The problem faced by this psalm is now very familiar to us. In the world the faithful suffer, whereas those who deny God apparently flourish. I want us to concentrate on verses 22-27. It is the psalmist's communion with God which gives his life meaning and purpose. It is this communion which fills him with joy, whatever the world does to him. It is this communion which provides him with insight into the way things really are. Jesus said, *These things I have spoken unto you that in me ye might have peace, In the world ye shall tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.* (John 16 v33).

March 15th

Psalm 74

I was in a discussion this morning about closed churches. In some places, church buildings close because the houses around them are gone and they are no longer needed. But, more often, they close for lack of support. It is a sad sight to see a building which was once the home of a worshipping community pulled down, boarded up or converted to some secular use. It may be the case that an old building is no longer suitable for modern needs or that the demands of the heritage industry make it uneconomic. If so, the worshipping community needs a new place to meet. However, generally when churches close it is because there are too few young men offering themselves for the ministry or because there are too few Christians giving too little money to sustain the work of the church in an area. Closed church buildings usually are a sign of decline. The psalmist bewails the decline of religion in his own land.

There are no longer any prophets even. Yet the psalmist remembers the marvels God has done in the past. He is the same God. He can do the same in the present and the future. If we lack prophets, if God no longer sustains a church in England like He used to, what is the reason? Is it because God no longer pours out His grace or is it because we are too wrapped up in worldly matters to be able to receive it?

March 16th

Psalm 75

The psalmist looks to God for his own salvation and for the salvation of the nation. God is all-powerful and He is able and willing to look after us now and in all eternity. Some people, however, want to rely on their own insights. Their wealth, power and ingenuity will save them. If that means a certain ruthlessness, a willingness to crush those who get in the way, that is a price worth paying. They've got it wrong. The talents and resources you and I have are only of any use if they are used in accordance with the Torah of love of the One Who gave them. If we live our daily lives as if there were no God and then add on religion on our days off, we shall get nowhere. If, however, we earn our living, run our homes, use the time, talents and resources God has given us in whatever we undertake, we shall find that peace which the world cannot give and play our part in making this world a better place to the glory of Him Who made it.

March 17th

Psalm 76

At Salem is his tabernacle: and his dwelling in Sion.

What follows in the psalm follows from the fact that God's dwelling place is in the midst of His people. Because of God's presence among them, the people can hope for peace and justice. In Jeremiah, this will be turned upside down. The people forfeit the protection which ought to follow from having the Temple in their city because they ignore God in the way they live. They worship false gods and they disregard Torah, oppressing and cheating the poor etc. As Christians, our hearts are the dwelling place of God. He promises to be present when we assemble together for worship. He tells us that the bread and wine in Holy Communion are His Body & Blood. God's presence with us brings all these blessings, but do we forfeit them by not living our lives in accordance with the Love which is incarnate among us?

March 18th

Psalm 77

At the beginning of this psalm, the psalmist is desolate. He cries out desperately to God and feels that there is no answer. If you ever feel like this, you are in good company. Don't be put down by the people who tell you that, if you have faith, you will always be smiling. Faith runs much deeper than that and is for real people facing real problems. Eventually, the psalmist recognises that it is his human weakness which prevents him from seeing how things really are – that God has not forsaken him. In the *Footprints* passage, Jesus is seen walking alongside the Christian except in the bleakest times. There is only one set of footprints there, because Jesus is carrying the Christian at these times. But the Christian does not realise when he is being carried till he can look back! The psalmist sees all this, but not at first, perhaps not for a long time. You may have to cling on in faith through long dark tunnels where you can neither see nor feel God's presence. He has not deserted you, but you may not be able to see that. But the tunnel does eventually lead into the Light. You will by then be on the right side of the mountain.

March 19th

Psalm 78

This psalm tells the Old Testament story so that the hearer can learn wisdom. The Old Testament story is basically of God's faithfulness to His people and their faithlessness towards Him. When things are going wrong, they turn to God. When things are going well, they forget God and put their faith in what they think brings prosperity – pagan deities, ruthlessness and sharp practice. Some Christians put on their blinkers and imagine that things have been entirely different since the Church "replaced" Israel as the people of God. Wiser Christians are only too aware that our membership of the covenant is continuous with Israel's and we are subject to the same temptations and liability to fail.

March 20th

Psalm 79

This psalm is presumably written in the aftermath of the Babylonian invasion and conquest of Judaea. It reflects a terrible situation – a desecrated temple, a ruined city, people killed in battle or by famine or disease, many of the more skilful exiled and those left struggling to make ends meet. I think, when we read these parts of the Bible, we ought

to be moved to pray for people caught up in similar situations today. Maybe we can help to answer our own prayers by writing to MPs etc in the cause of peace, sending money and other relief, supporting organisations like Amnesty or the Red Cross. Arrogant people look at the devastation and ask *Where is now there God?* Let's show them that the God of Love still reigns by overcoming evil with good.

March 21st

Psalm 80

A very beautiful service which our resources are generally too limited to put on is the Advent Carol Service. This starts with a dark church into which a lighted candle is brought while we sing hauntingly beautifully of our longing for the coming of the Lord. The service also makes use of this psalm, this longing for the coming of God's Kingdom. Most people think we clergy are miserable old devils because we try to stop the Christmas season spilling forward to the beginning of December. Christmas is such a lovely time. People even want to come to Church. So why spoil things by not letting us put up the Xmas decorations and sing Christmas carols and hold Christmas social events?

There is a considerable danger that we lose sight of the significance of Christmas, burying the infant Son of God under a thick blanket of sentimentality. The point of Christmas is surely *the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight*. The Name Bethlehem means House of Bread. Jesus is the living Bread in Whom all our hungers are satisfied. This is the Christmas message. It is not just another excuse for a party, how ever much peace and good will we bring to that party.

March 22nd

Psalm 81

Celebration of Who God is and what He has done for His people leads to a contemplation of His commandments, which, if a man shall walk in them, he shall live. The sad fact is that individuals and the nation as a whole have disregarded the commandments and missed out on the blessing. What are we doing about proclaiming God's Law to the people of England?

March 23rd

Psalm 82

This psalm is a bit mysterious. It starts off clearly enough. Those who judge or rule the world are themselves judged by God. They must therefore judge according to God's Law. This means that they will especially defend the weak. The fact that those in power often disregard this basic fact condemns them in the eyes of God. The psalmist's final prayer is also simple enough, that God will take power and reign so that the long reign of sin is ended. The mystery is v6 which refers to these rulers as gods and sons of the Highest. Many rulers in the ancient world did see themselves as divine. Not so long ago, our kings thought they ruled by divine right. There is a picture of angels responsible for nations. I'm not sure quite what this means, but whatever it means, the point is clear that, how ever highly exalted a ruler may be, he is still subject to God. Jesus quotes this enigmatic verse to show that it is not unreasonable for Him to say that He is one with the Father (John 10).

March 24th

Psalm 83

Remember those who are physically persecuted for their faith, putting their lives, livelihoods or families at risk for their devotion to Jesus. Remember also the gentle but steady pressure in modern Britain to marginalise Christianity, gradually removing Christian symbols and standards from our public life. Pray for grace to withstand.

March 25th

Psalm 84

Imaginative romanticists think of the psalmist on pilgrimage to Jerusalem seeing a little bird building its nest in the Temple and wishing he could always live there himself. This romantic picture may or may not be correct. What is clear is the wonder of living in the presence of the Lord. I always think that we clergy are very privileged because so much of our lives is spent in prayer and acts of worship. We can all, however, freely go to church every Sunday or more often. We can all pray every day. If we are really open to God, we can know that we are in His presence all day and every day and that these blessings are ours for the asking.

March 26th

Psalm 85

Mercy and truth are met together: righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall flourish out of the earth: and righteousness hath looked down from heaven.

This is life in a truly Christian country. This is life in a truly Christian Church. This is a truly Christian life. We shall not really, fully know this life till we get to Heaven, but much more of this could be ours now if we let go and let God.

March 27th

Psalm 86

Teach me thy way, O Lord, and I will walk in thy truth.

Let go and let God. We can't know the fulness of these blessings until we shrug off the hindrance of the flesh, till we leave this mortal realm and, through the grace of God, dwell eternally in immortality. The prayers in today's psalm echo prayers in many of the psalms we have already read. We long to receive the blessings which God has stored up for those who believe in Him. We do experience a foretaste now, here on earth. We could experience more if only we walked more closely with God. Only God can help us to do that and so we ask Him, *me thy way, O Lord, and I will walk in thy truth.* But we have to mean it.

March 28th

Psalm 87

We sing a hymn *Glorious things of thee are spoken, Sion city of our God.* The hymn has taken this psalm and made it a meditation on the Church. The Church, the people of God, is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. The Church is secure on the promise of God. Its foundation stone is Christ. God keeps His Church secure. He pours out His grace to refresh His people and to enable them each to do the good works He has prepared for them to walk in. He protects, guides and nourishes His people and, despite the mockery of the people who think that a man's life consists in the things he possesses, only the members of the Church enjoy solid joys and lasting treasure. One of my hardest tasks as a preacher is to persuade our church of its true nature!

March 29th

Psalm 88

Some people reject this psalm because it apparently contains no word of hope. It is simply a lament, a recitation of all the terrible things which have happened to the psalmist. It would have been dishonest to put in conventional words of condolence if they didn't actually mean anything to the psalmist at the time of writing. We ought not to try to console ourselves or other people with sentiments which we do not believe in. We can use the faith of other people. We can lean on the faith of the church, quoting the Bible or the church's official teaching. That is honest and can support us and other people. But we must not claim to believe what we do not believe. That helps no-one, least of all ourselves.

This psalm is not, however, without faith, without some hope. If there were no hope, the psalmist would have given up talking to God at all. The very fact that we are questioning and complaining shows that we are still alive!

March 30th

Psalm 89

Another psalm with a quick summary of the history of Israel. History reminds them of the people they are, what God has done for them, how they have responded in the past and what the consequences were. The message is that God loves His people and it is a wonderful blessing to belong to the people of God. God has established David and his descendants as rulers of Israel and this too is a blessing insofar as these kings accept that they themselves are subject to God. The complaint is that everything has now gone wrong and the prayer relies on God's earlier promises as grounds to believe that God can and will set things right.

The Christian interpretation is that the history of Israel is fulfilled when the Gospel is also proclaimed to the gentiles and everyone is privileged to be given God's invitation to participate in the blessing of living under the Law of Love. Jesus is "great David's greater Son" and our King in all eternity. We might lament the state of the Church in our own day as the psalmist lamented his Israel. We cry out to God to restore His Church and we rely on His promise that He will.

March 31st

Psalm 90

I'm glad we're finishing on this psalm. It is another of my favourites. It is quite often used at funerals. The sense is of the greatness of God and our home in Him. He is more wonderful than all the wonderful things He has made and He is also our refuge. He orders our lives for us and everything is to be seen in the perspective of His eternal love. Our sin pushes Him away, but His love cleanses us from sin and draws us back closer to Him. Our flesh is frail; our time is limited. But God is forever and He holds us in His eternal hands. We depend on God for wisdom, wisdom to recognise our frailty, wisdom to recognise our dependence on Him, wisdom to recognise that His Law is the path of life. We depend on God's love and power if we are to do our work on earth and in order to come to our heavenly home.

We depend completely on God. Not a bad note to finish on.