

A series of reflections on the Psalms

This week, apart from Wild Church on Wednesday, I will be reflecting on a some of the Psalms. The theme for the week is taken from Psalm 34 v6, which we will finish with on Saturday. “This poor soul cried, and the Lord heard me and saved me from all my troubles.”

Hymn: As the deer pants for the water...

Why do we pray the Psalms? The Psalms take us through the highs and lows of life, they are our companions through periods of change and times of confusion as well as giving us the words to celebrate joyfully in our reaching for God. In the Psalms we can see the expressions of our relationship with God, putting to words the things that oftentimes we are not able to articulate for ourselves, particularly in times of hardship. There is a great joy and perhaps even a little relief when we can identify with the words of the Psalmist – when we can hear our own cries echoed in the petitions of the songs.

Psalms help us to pray, to reach for God, to be honest with our emotions, and we often find the poetry reflecting back to us just “where we are at”.

So together, this week, we will look prayerfully at each of the Psalms in this particular series with the theme of Psalm 34 v6 in mind: “This poor soul cried, and the Lord heard me and saved me from all my troubles.”

We begin today Monday 4th May with just two lines from **Psalm 42**.

- 1 As the deer longs for the water brooks, •
so longs my soul for you, O God.
- 2 My soul is athirst for God, even for the living God; •
when shall I come before the presence of God?

Today as I was thinking about this Psalm I was thinking about how this particular Psalm isn't quite as lovely an image as the hymn we have just sung together that is based on it, would have us believe. For me, it seems like it is describing a beautiful and almost English countryside image of a strong animal drinking beside a rich flowing river – very picturesque, very romantic. The reality of the Psalmist's words is that they are words of desolation and is rather the image of the deer desperate and thirsty, exhausted and needing to find rest.

Yesterday as I was thinking about this Psalm and writing this reflection, I was disturbed by a crashing about in my back garden. Imagine my surprise when I went out to see what was going on (thinking my cats had probably knocked something over) to come face to face with a deer on the deck – apparently a few of them from the herd that live on the open land behind the quiet estate where I live had been wandering round.

Somehow one of them had managed to get into our back garden and at the sight of me and one of my dogs beside me, the frightened creature dived into the 8ft high

and 6ft wide laurel hedge that separates our garden from our neighbour's. I quickly brought my animals inside, and my neighbour and myself left our garden gates open and my neighbour put out water as the deer was now on his side. The young animal remained there for some time, breathing heavily and visibly anxious and I couldn't help but think how the plight of this creature was somehow a reflection of what we are going through – separated from our community, unsure what to do, scared and isolated – in a somewhat alien environment.

I read an article in the Observer yesterday that had been posted to Facebook, talking about how this crisis appears to be leading to a resurgence of faith in young people. The article stated that according to a new survey commissioned by the Christian Aid Agency Tearfund, that since lockdown began a quarter of adults have watched or listened to a religious service and one fifth are now praying. The age group with the widest engagement was the 18-34 age bracket, with one third of those canvassed saying they had tuned in to virtually attend. This could of course be that by offering a variety of worship and prayer options online, as we are doing at St. Mary's, we are making church more accessible to those who would never have thought of coming into the building, or these services can be accessed at a time that suits the listener – particularly useful for those with young families. And we have certainly seen that happening with the services we have been streaming and sharing over the net.

But it is more than that. The Church of England stated that 6000 people phoned a prayer hotline in the first 48hrs of its operation. People are thirsty. People are asking questions. People are seeking succour. In this time of trial people are looking to God, some for the very first time.

So, as I woefully watched that little deer hiding in the hedge, alone and afraid I realised that we are all that deer panting for the water – we are all thirsty. As individuals and as a collective, we are thirsty for something we can't name, we just know that we can't slake it. That is our call toward Christ. It is our invitation to stop and to drink from the living well.

Part of the little deer's anxiety, no doubt, was its separation from its herd, or parcel is another other collective noun for a group of deer. They usually live in familial groups and so to be isolated from the others added to the animal's distress. So it is with us, we are separated from our loved ones, our friends and our church family but as Bishop Stephen Cottrell says in his new book "On Priesthood"* church is a community, and we are "a body of men and women centred on Christ."

So unlike the deer, (who did eventually come out of its hiding place and wander off, hopefully to find its herd), despite being separated from what and who we know, we are still "centred on Christ". Our faith and our love of God is still held by Christ at the very heart and so we are not as isolated as it would first appear. I am not in any way negating the ongoing difficulties that people are having to endure during this crisis, nor the trauma and distress as people in our community and beyond lose their loved ones. We are surrounded by adversity and yet we as Christians can still centre ourselves, we can still come down to the water's edge and drink knowing that our families and friends are doing the same, we are just not standing side by side.

My prayer for these times is that those of us who may have been seekers of Christ for a long time, may join with those who have only just started to pray, and those who have perhaps returned to prayer after a time of distance. The first two lines of the Psalm today remind us that we are all thirsty, that a soul longing for God is at our deepest being – we call out to God when we are in despair, reaching for something: connection, meaning, love, belonging.

I encourage you to spend some time with the whole Psalm today. Read it though in its entirety. You will find the NIV version at the end of this sheet. Find the places where you recognise your deepest emotion calling to God, those places in your heart where you feel that real unslakable thirst. Let the words of the Psalmist resonate with you where you are now, and pray with the Psalm this day – for yourself, for your loved ones, for our community, for those who are making those first steps towards the water ready to drink. Pray that all may find comfort and solace in the love of God this day.

We know that yes we can drink from the living well when we are on our own, but just as the deer is part of a familial group, so we are part of the body of Christ, a community of believers who come together as a family in faith. So, I encourage you also to pray for the church that we may find new pathways forward as and when the restrictions are relaxed, so that we can continue to be present for those who have been crying out to God, perhaps for the first time during this crisis, so that they may know and we may be reminded that he hears our prayers.

Psalm 42 (New International Version)

- 1 As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.
- 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?
- 3 My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”
- 4 These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.
- 5 Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.
- 6 My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.
- 7 Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.
- 8 By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me— a prayer to the God of my life.
- 9 I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?”
- 10 My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?”
- 11 Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.

On Priesthood: Servants, Shepherds, Messengers, Sentinels and Stewards
Bishop Stephen Cotterell
Hodder and Stoughton, 2020

Below is an image of the deer in my hedge on Sunday. It's little bit like "Where's Wally?" but she is there, looking out into next door's garden.

