



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
Diocese of St Edmundsbury
and Ipswich

Living Faith in Suffolk



Living Honestly with the Psalms

Images

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Living Honestly is one of the Living Faith in Suffolk resources produced by the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and available on www.cofesuffolk.org

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Introduction

Historically psalms have been a central part of worship since Old Testament times. Now, however, the nature and frequency of their use varies between denominations, churches and individuals. But without familiarity with the psalms we lack much of the richness of the language provided to help us to articulate our relationship with God. *Living Honestly* is a Living Faith in Suffolk course intended as an opportunity to reflect on the range of human emotions found in the psalms. It is written under the following headings:

- Psalms of Praise (page 4)
- Psalms of Protest (page 7)
- Psalms of Lament (page 10)
- Psalms of Confession (page 13)
- Psalms of Wonderment (page 16)

It can be used by individuals or by groups; if you are using it in a group setting then please see the information below.

For facilitators

- The material provided here should be used flexibly to suit the needs of your group. The central element of each session is the Bible reading with the related questions underneath, enabling people to reflect on the passage and make decisions about its application. The surrounding material can be used as much or as little as is appropriate to your setting. It may provide useful background information for you as facilitator or further reading for those who wish to go deeper after each session. Some or all of it could be used to inform the discussion of the central questions or as additional discussion points. The important thing to remember is that there is no need to try to cover everything.
- The session opens by reading the Bible passage[s] given. When meeting as a group there are a number of different ways of reading a Bible passage:
 - read it more than once, from different versions of the Bible as used by different members of the group
 - allow everyone in the group to take a turn at reading, each reading just one sentence before the next person takes over
 - read slowly and meditatively
 - read imaginatively; that is, allowing people to enter into the passage in their imagination, to picture themselves present at the scene (either as themselves or by identifying with the psalmist)
 - read the passage and then allow a time of silence during which people can reflect, before reading the passage for a second time

Session 1

Psalms of Praise

Read: Psalm 33

➤ As you read this psalm, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?

- What facets of God's character are expressed or implied in this psalm? How does the psalmist respond to these? How does this compare with your response?
- Part of the psalmist's motivation to praise is his reflection on creation (verses 6-9). When have you found creation inspiring you to praise God? How could you more consciously reflect on creation as a prompt to praise? What else might prompt you to praise?
 - How do you express your praise? Given the current issues facing creation, such as climate change, what actions might appropriately follow from your reflection and praise? What actions might be inspired by the other topics in this psalm?
 - What steps could you take to make reflection leading to praise a greater part of your daily life? You could begin this now, as a group, and write your own praise psalm.

Psalm 33

This Psalm, by an unknown author, is one of many psalms of praise. It describes exuberant expression of trust in the God who exercises authority over creation, the nations and individuals. Drawing a contrast between human plans and God's, and between human and divine abilities, the psalmist expresses confidence in God. This is a psalm of orientation: that is, it is one which grounds people in a clear sense of God's presence and trustworthiness.

- What keeps you grounded, thinking clearly and assured of God's presence and love for you?

What are the Psalms?

The psalms are some of the musical poems, hymns, prayers and laments of ancient Israel. They date from the tenth to the third century BC and have a variety of authors, including court poets, prophets, priests and scribes. Some are headed 'A psalm of...!' however the 'of' does not always denote authorship but can indicate who the psalm was written for.

As literature, the psalms have a formal structure and each needs to be read as a whole in order to understand its pattern of development as ideas are presented, reflected upon and brought to a conclusion. In their original Hebrew they contain poetic features but some of these are lost in their translation.

The psalms are not intended to teach doctrine or morals. They arise out of the varieties of human experience, describe beliefs about God, reflect on God's ways and character and express people's faith and emotions, using a wide range of images. As such they include expressions of praise, lament, complaint, confession, wonderment, anguish, oppression and protest. They are intensely personal, using the language of relationship rather than objective, cognitive language.

- How important is it to express feelings to God?
- Which emotions is it difficult to express to God? Why is this? In what ways might the psalms provide a way forward?

Praise

The New Testament directs us to praise God:

- Hebrews 13:15
- James 5:14
- 1 Peter 2:9
- 1 Peter 4:16

The variety of circumstances in which praise is encouraged demonstrates it to be more than an expression of emotion in response to good circumstances. Praise – the expression of respect, gratitude and admiration, directed towards a known God – is also an act of trust in God's faithfulness, even when things are difficult.

- Look at each of the passages listed above; how much of a challenge is it to praise God in each of these circumstances? What might help you to do this?

Types of psalm

There are a number of different types of psalm and understanding these types can be helpful in order to make best use of them.

Many of the psalms are laments, expressing suffering or disappointment. Some psalms are thanksgiving psalms, either community psalms or expressing personal thanksgiving. Some psalms are hymns of praise, focusing on a wide range of God's characteristics. A few are salvation-history psalms, reflecting on the dealings of God with his people during history. Some are psalms of celebration and affirmation, dealing with renewal, the covenant and the monarchy (with psalms for particular royal occasions) and celebrating the importance of Jerusalem. A few are wisdom psalms, to be understood in the same way as the wisdom literature. Some include elements of prophetic oracle. Many centre on the trustworthiness of God.

- On what occasion[s] might each of these types of psalm be useful today?

Things to consider

Because there are so many different types of psalm, and because of their poetic imagery, there are some important things to consider when reading a psalm. What kind of psalm is it? What experience does it arise out of? How does this connect with similar experiences in today's world? What imagery is used and what is this saying about the psalm's setting (for example, culture)? How is God portrayed and what response to God is expressed? How do the ideas in this psalm link with other ideas in the Bible?

- To what extent is it necessary to understand the situation in which a psalm was written in order to use it today?

Session 2

Psalms of Protest

Read: Psalm 54

- As you read this psalm, what do you notice?
What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- What facets of God's character are expressed or implied in this psalm? How does the psalmist respond to these? How does this compare with your response?
- The psalmist's protest is prompted by, in addition to his situation, his beliefs about God's nature as one who will help him. On what occasions have you protested to God? What beliefs about God have motivated this protest? If you have not protested to God, what beliefs about him are behind this?
 - What does this psalm tell you about the relationship between protest and praise?
How do you respond to this?

Psalm 54

This is a psalm written to protest to God in the face of God's apparent failure to protect the psalmist from harm. The heading suggests that it is 'of' (so, by or for) David, at the betrayal of his hiding place when King Saul was searching for him to kill him (you can read the story in 1 Samuel 23 and 26). Demanding that God listen to him, the psalmist cries out to be saved from his attackers and, at the same time, expresses trust that God will help him, declaring how he will praise God when this happens.

- How do you think you might have responded in David's situation? What might you learn from David's response?

Protest

The prophets were clear in their condemnation of injustice: see, for example, Amos 5:21-24 and Amos 8:1-12. Modern-day prophets still speak out about such issues and urge us to take action, joining in their protests and acting for change. The campaigns around the climate change conference in December 2015 are an example of this: people all around the world are facing a variety of weather- and food-related issues as a result of climate change and we are asked to change our lifestyles in response to this. Reducing our use of fossil fuels, avoiding flying, limiting the amount we drive, saving water, campaigning against governmental policies that reduce research into renewable energy and checking that wood products and fish come from sustainable sources are all significant actions we can take. Living more as a community - sharing transport, buying locally and getting involved in caring for the local natural world - will help too.

- What are the injustices in the world about which you want to protest?
- How could you act to correct injustice?

Justice

To protest to God entails the holding of certain beliefs about God's nature as a just God, as demonstrated in Old Testament stories of God's punishment of the wicked and his liberation of his people. If God were unjust there would be no need to protest at the injustices of the world; it is his justness that provokes in us an appeal to act to correct situations.

- Protesting to God seems to imply that God has an obligation to act to correct injustices: what do you think about this?

Many thinkers have risen to the challenge of attempting to justify God in the face of evil, trying to explain why his apparent refusal to bring about justice does not have to lead to seeing God as somehow lacking in love, goodness or power.

- How would you explain this?

The Iona Community

The Iona Community (www.iona.org.uk) is committed to action for justice and peace. Many of the songs which come from the Iona Community are modern songs of protest: for example, John Bell's 'Inspired by love and anger'.

- Look at the words of this song (in the Iona Community's 'Love and Anger' songbook, or by searching for the lyrics online); to what extent does it resonate with what you want to say to God?

Uses of the psalms

Because the psalms cover such a wide range of human emotions, experiences and responses to God, from life at its best down to the depths of despair, they were and are a tremendously important tool for individuals and communities to express their faith and doubts, whatever the circumstances.

The psalms were intended both as personal expressions of faith and as having a function in corporate activities. After the return from exile in the 5th century BC and the rebuilding of the Temple, they were made into a formal collection as a 'temple hymnal'. They formed a part of temple worship; they were used at festivals, and in royal celebrations such as celebrating a king's accession, commemorating a victory in battle or lamenting a defeat.

- To what extent do the psalms form part of your church community's celebrations? In what ways could they become a better tool for integrating faith and life?
- How much do you use the psalms in your individual faith journey? What could encourage you to draw on them more widely? What steps could you take, in the coming month, to draw on the psalms and on the example of the psalmists to help you develop your relationship with God?

Session 3

Psalms of Lament

Read: Psalm 60

- As you read this psalm, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- What facets of God's character are expressed or implied in this psalm? How does the psalmist respond to these? How does this compare with your response?
- There are a number of emotions portrayed by the graphic language in this psalm; what are they? What other feelings might the psalmist be experiencing alongside these, in this situation? On what occasions have you experienced a similar mixture of reactions?
 - How easy is it to remember, and call out to, God in a time of crisis? What have been your experiences of the results of doing this?
 - Alongside his distress the psalmist expresses trust in God, enough that it is possible, in the face of such turmoil, to trust that he will be safe and victorious (verses 9-12). What kinds of experiences can lead to this level of trust? How far can you relate to this?

Psalms for specific occasions

Many of the psalms, like this one, were written for specific occasions. The same applies to hymns: for example, Graham Kendrick's 'Beauty for Brokenness' was written as a prayer around work of Tear Fund for the organisation's 25th anniversary.

- Look at the words of this song; how does it reflect the charity's work?
- In what situation[s] might it be useful for your community to write its own psalm/hymn? How could you do this? In what ways might it then be used?

Psalm 60

This is a psalm written to lament God's apparent abandonment of his people. The heading suggests that it is 'of' (so, by or for) King David, at the humiliation of his peaceful delegation to a neighbouring king (you can read the story in 2 Samuel 8-10). Writing out of the sensation that God is absent or uncaring, the psalmist expresses feelings of rejection and desperation, while at the same time declaring his trust in God to give victory.

The inclusion of such psalms in the Psalter (the book of Psalms) gives clear permission to express one's hurt to God, to pray from one's own experience, in one's own words. Faith is not limited to sanitised expectations, it is involved in real life.

- If you were to write a psalm today, what emotions, experiences and responses to God would you want to express? Have a go at doing this, either together now, or individually, perhaps for the next time that you meet, and then discuss: what has been the value of this experience?

The Psalter as a Prayer Book

As well as being used in temple worship since before the exile, the Psalter was the core prayer book of Jesus and his disciples, in family life and in the synagogue. As such it shaped the worship and prayer of the early church and continues to give us a language for prayer. Some of the psalms have been transcribed metrically in order to be used as hymns – for example, "God is our strength and refuge" (Richard Bewes' setting of Psalm 46), "O God, you search me and you know me" (Bernadette Farrell's setting of Psalm 139) or "All people that on earth do dwell" (William Kethe's setting of Psalm 100).

- To what extent do the psalms form a part of the corporate worship in your church? In what ways could they become a more effective part of worship?

Lament

Psalms of Lament (mourning, grief, anguish) are the commonest type of psalm in the Bible.

- What does this tell you about circumstances in which you can approach God?

The psalms include both individual laments (looking for rescue from a particular situation or for vengeance on enemies, and often ending with an expression of confidence that God will act) and communal laments. As a community, days were set aside for lamentation in the temple. People would fast, weep, wear sackcloth and ashes (as a sign of mourning) and tear their clothes.

- What place does lament have in your church community?

As well as disappointment, the Psalms of Lament include affirmation of God's love for his people (see for example Psalm 22:22-31). They often trace a journey from the expression of hurt through to praising God for his help, love and faithfulness, demonstrating the way in which attitudes can change as we pray.

- What difference does it make to have a faith that permits and even requires this kind of prayer?
- What are the consequences of not lamenting, of expressing only praise and thanks and not acknowledging the painful emotions?

Session 4

Psalms of Confession

Read: Psalm 51

- As you read this psalm, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- What facets of God's character are expressed or implied in this psalm? How does the psalmist respond to these? How does this compare with your response?
- The psalmist uses a range of imagery, particularly in verses 2, 7-12. How would you explain what the psalmist is describing here?
 - What do you think are the emotions underlying the psalmist's words? How do you respond when faced with a similar range of emotions? To what extent do you share the psalmist's confidence in God's forgiveness?
 - If the psalms provide us with a language for prayer, what does this psalm have to say to you about your prayers?

Psalm 51

This is a psalm written out of the sorrow that comes from a realisation of having fallen short of living in the way God desires (this is what 'sin' means). It includes personal lament at this falling short, a desire to be given the opportunity to start over, and a promise for when this has occurred. The heading suggests that it is 'of' (so, by or for) King David, after he has been confronted by God's prophet over his adultery and his engineering of the death of the woman's husband (you can read the story in 2 Samuel 11-12). The psalmist is clear about the consequences of his sin and about the need for real repentance (verse 17).

- If you read more widely around David's story you will discover that he had a close relationship with God both before and after these events, and in the New Testament the writer of Hebrews cites him as an example of a person of faith (Hebrews 11:32). How do you react to the knowledge that this key figure has such an event in his story?

Sin and confession

There is often confusion between the concepts of 'sin' (falling short of living in the way God desires) and 'wrong'/'bad' (a moral, or legal, or personal viewpoint which may or may not fit with God's viewpoint).

- What difference does it make to understand sin as 'falling short' rather than being about 'doing something bad'?
- David needed prompting in order to recognise his behaviour as sinful. In what ways might we be similarly prompted?
- Having recognised our sin, why might it be important to confess it rather than simply trying to put it behind us?

Repentance and forgiveness

The word 'repentance' means a turning around, turning back, changing direction. Turning away from something, towards something else. In the Old Testament God gave a system of sacrifices which could be used to express repentance for sin but over time these became misunderstood, as people performed the sacrifices without also changing inwardly (hence the psalmist's comment, in verse 17, of the need for a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart, rather than sacrifices). The truth of one's confession is demonstrated in one's repentance - that is, the way in which the person turns away from their previous actions/attitudes and makes a change.

Repentance then leads to forgiveness. Unlike some others (Psalm 130, for example), this psalm does not speak directly of 'forgiveness', but it is implied in the language of washing (vv.2, 7), cleansing (v.7), blotting out (vv.1, 9) and restoration (vv.10-12). The New Testament supports this belief in God's forgiveness and makes clear that this takes place because of Jesus (1 John 1:5-10).

- How easy is it to be sure of God's forgiveness? What might help you to be more convinced that this is for you, too?
- Jesus teaches that we should exercise the same forgiveness towards others. What are the challenges of this? What might help you to do this?

Confession in liturgy

Many church services have a specific point in the service set aside for confession, often with the use of a set text - for example:

Lord God, we have sinned against you;
we have done evil in your sight.
We are sorry and repent.
Have mercy on us according to your love.
Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us from our sin.
Renew a right spirit within us
and restore us to the joy of your salvation,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/psalter,-collects-and-other-resources/confessions.aspx>)

- Look closely at the text of this prayer. What is it saying, and what are your reactions to this?
- When using a formal confession text, or by it taking place at a predetermined time during a service, there is a danger that we can read the words without really engaging with them. How can we encourage our own confession to be genuine?

Corporate sin and confession

It is not only individuals who sin. Organisations, communities and groups can also be guilty of collectively living in ways which fall short of God's desire.

- What examples can you give of corporate sin?
- How could your church community be encouraged to reflect on whether it has any corporate sins to confess?

Session 5

Psalms of Wonderment

Read: Psalm 114

- As you read this psalm, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- What facets of God's character are expressed or implied in this psalm? How does the psalmist respond to these? How does this compare with your response?
- It is easy to take God's activity for granted, to fail to see him at work, or to fail to be amazed. Why do you think this is? How might the psalmist respond to this?
 - For the psalmist, God's actions lead to a sense of wonder and awe - fear and trembling: 'Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord' (verse 7). To what extent is this a feature of our worship today? What changes could you make, individually and as a faith community, to become people who tremble at the presence of the Lord?

Psalm 114

This psalm, by an unknown author, is written out of wonderment at God's actions when he saved his people from slavery in Egypt, bringing them through the Red Sea, providing them with water from a rock, and bringing them through the River Jordan (you can read the story in Exodus 12-14, Exodus 17 and Joshua 3). It is the defining story in the shaping of God's people into a distinct group with its own identity, living in reliance on God's love and faithfulness.

- What have been the defining moments and stories in your faith journey?

Wonderment

In his hymn 'Love divine, all loves excelling' Charles Wesley wrote of the future time, in heaven, when we will all be 'lost in wonder, love and praise'.

- What leads you to such a sense of wonderment?

While some see religion and science as being in opposition to each other, for many scientific discoveries can help us towards this sense of wonderment:

'Scientific discovery can lift the minds and hearts of believers to a deeper level of awe and reverence for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who is also Lord of all creation' (Dr Jennifer Wiseman, astronomer: https://biologos.org/uploads/projects/wiseman_white_paper.pdf).

Understanding more about the natural world, space, the human body - whether from a level of in-depth scientific knowledge or from watching nature programmes on television - can tell us more about God's creation and how amazing it is.

- What steps could you take to develop your sense of wonder at God's creation?

Telling our story

The story of God's interactions with his people is told, among other ways, in our cycle of festivals and rituals. Just as those of Jewish faith celebrate the above story at Passover, so we celebrate God's sending of his son at Christmas, Jesus' death and resurrection at Good Friday and Easter, God's sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, reconciliation with God at Holy Communion. We may also celebrate other elements of the story - the presentation of Jesus at the temple at Candlemas, Jesus' baptism and temptations during Lent, the conversion of St Paul, the stories of some of the saints. All of these help us to remember that this is more than a story, it is part of us and we are part of it. But what about telling our own story?

- Why is it useful to tell and retell our story? How could we do this more effectively?
- How much do you have a sense of your (individual) story as part of your church community's story, and that as part of our faith story? What might help you to understand this more fully?

Telling God's story

The Bible tells the story of the interactions of God with his creation, God's desire for a loving relationship with his creation and the lengths he goes to in order to make this possible (you can read more about this in the Living Faith in Suffolk course Living Word 2 - The Big Story). It is a story, among other things, of God's steadfast love in the face of rejection, his governing of his creation, bringing order and life out of chaos and death, and his interactions with that creation, such as in the story celebrated in this psalm. Many people have written psalms, hymns and poetry, produced great works of art, or composed great music in response to this.

- How do you respond to God's story?

Telling your story

Some hymn-writers wrote their own story into their hymns; for example, in the hymn 'Amazing Grace' John Newton expresses wonder at God's grace, telling the story of the change that took place in his life once he believed.

- Look at the words of the hymn 'Amazing Grace': what do you learn about God, and about Newton's relationship with God, from this hymn?
- What would you say, if you were writing about your own story?