

## **Faith and Society Files: Real Life Worship Files - Psalms**

Does what happens at Sunday worship connect with life in the real world? For many people the answer to that question is often 'no'. This leaflet introduces a series of worship files published by our Union to help churches relate their worship to the realities of contemporary living. In this file we look at our use of Psalms in worship.

## **Facing Reality**

The Reverend Smith was shaking people's hands at the door, smiling and nodding as the congregation filed past: 'Thank you so much', 'Lovely sermon today'. The Reverend Smith resisted the urge to engage: with another hundred or so hands to shake, this really wasn't the time or place. Another hundred or so brief pastoral encounters. 'You were really in touch with the Lord this morning.' said one elderly lady. 'Oh, if only you knew', the Reverend Smith thought, for her mind was already on how to resolve the family argument that happened just before leaving home that morning. She looked over to her husband and children all keeping up the image of Happy Families.

And so the members of the congregation smiled their way out of worship with the rousing tune of the final chorus still ringing in their ears. They got into their cars, and set off back to their lives and all the trials, stresses, and strains which they had forgotten about during the service.

Suddenly it dawned on the Reverend Smith that through the whole time not one person in the church had demonstrated the slightest degree of honesty. If the answers to her often repeated 'How are you today?' were to be believed, one hundred people were fine, not grumbling, and doing okay, thank you for asking. Even she was forcing the pastoral smile while wanting to curl up and die from guilt at the things she had said only a few hours earlier.

She did remember that John *had* indicated that he had a problem, but there had been so many people queuing behind him that there had been no time to talk or pray. Or even to find out what the nature of his problem was. Yet everyone else had rousingly sung the songs. The volume of the singing had been up to its usual standard if not slightly louder! The 'Amens' to the prayers had been resounding and the 'Hallelujahs' during the sermon had been very inspiring.

'Well', thought the Reverend Smith, 'is it likely that *all* those people were *really* able to worship happily today? Is it likely that they wanted to sing the happy songs? The songs which told God how much they loved him? Is it likely that they managed to mean every word?' Somehow she thought it unlikely. 'What if a hundred people had come together to meet with each other and with God and had spent the whole time deceiving each other, and God, and themselves? Had they just switched off the anger, pain, confusion or fear, so they could join in with a semblance of integrity?' And so she wondered... 'What does the Bible say to people who have had it up to here with happy songs? Or to those who feel that they never want to sing another happy song again?'

## **Words of Emotion**

The words we use are crucial to our attempts at communication; they help us to describe and understand our world and to form and express our opinions and emotions. In communal worship we use words to make the Word of God audible and visible in our midst through the retelling and re-enactment of the story of the community of faith.

Yet words are not neutral. They can allow us to express our feelings to God and others, but they can also be wielded to control and restrict. The words of those crying out for mercy can be ignored and the oratory of a powerful leader can manipulate.

It is in congregational worship that our identity is shaped as disciples of Jesus living in a fast changing world. It is here that we find others like us – people who share our faith and who encourage us to deepen our relationship with God. But those of us who gather to worship are complex beings and live in challenging contexts: rare is the congregation filled with 100% happy people all experiencing the same things in the same way!

- **Reflect on the range of emotions you feel as you gather with others before the start of a service.**
- **What experiences can you remember that have helped or hindered you in expressing such feelings to God and others during the course of worship? How has this made you feel?**
- **Does it matter that so much emotion is so often suppressed?**

### **The Range of Human Emotion**

The Psalms give voice to the whole range of human emotion and experience. There are glad shouts of praise, grateful recitations of thanks, and expressions of wonder at God's loving kindness. But there are also cries of pain at injustice, at personal injury, and at God's very absence. The psalmists hold back neither in their praise nor their lament.

Yet the Christian church has tended to neglect the expression of more negative feelings in its corporate worship. Perhaps we are embarrassed or feel it is inappropriate to address God in this way. The range of emotions expressed in scripture can, however, provide a template for catering for the diversity represented when we gather together in our congregations, and can help avoid the risk of damaging those who might otherwise internalise their experience of life for the fear that 'Christians just don't talk about the difficult things'.

- **How do you feel about using the full range of the biblical testimony to human experience and emotion as you lead worship?**
- **What place do the Psalms have in the worship you experience week by week?**
- **What songs can you think of that might reflect such a range?**

### **Using the Psalms**

The story of the Reverend Smith is the introduction to a sermon on Psalm 137. The psalm concludes with the terrible lines:

*'O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you  
back what you have done to us!  
Happy shall they be who take your  
little ones and dash them against the  
rock!'*

It is not a passage often quoted in church! Yet in challenging the congregation to own before God, themselves and each other, the sadness, anger and disappointment which we often carry, at least one member was moved to action. Suddenly it felt safe to admit that he was physically abusing his child. Through the preaching of a problematically violent text, permission had been given for the uttering of difficult truths, and so he spoke to one of the pastors, who could bring help and healing to his life and that of his family through prayer, counselling and social service provision.

On another occasion, Psalm 13 was used to explore how we deal with the times when God seems hidden in a world of poverty, unemployment and suffering. Several congregation members were moved to speak with the preacher about how helpful it was to know that they were not alone in struggling when this was not acknowledged in church. The previously unspeakable had been spoken.

We cannot and should not force people to speak of such things. Nor would we want congregational worship to lose the voice that tells of Christian hope and faith in a God who is good and faithful. Yet neither must our worship require us to leave the real world at the door, putting it aside so we can get on with the business of singing 'happy songs'. For we worship a God who came to the messy-ness of the world in Jesus; God-with-us in our rejoicing as well as our pain, confusion and loneliness; a God who brought new life out of frailty and turned mourning into joy.

## Some practical ideas to take us forwards...

Why not consider using the psalms to help shape a prayer? This is particularly helpful if lament is not regularly part of worship: it uses biblical words to help us say the things we might want to say to God. You may want to intersperse your own specific situation amongst the verses.

Open times of prayer lend themselves well to the expression of our feelings. Encourage folk not to feel inhibited by leading by example. One minister remembers the powerful effect on a congregation as a colleague shouted to God of the sense of injustice and pain felt by them all as a little girl from Sunday School prepared to undergo surgery with only a 50% chance of survival.

On the Sunday following 9/11, one church was enabled to express their grief and their solidarity with those still working in the rubble at 'Ground Zero' through taking unwashed stones from the front of the church to build a cairn of remembrance for those who died. They were also encouraged to commit themselves to working towards peace and prayers of assurance and commitment were offered.

If it doesn't feel right to sing in anger or confusion, consider using 'happy songs' as protest songs. Just as slaves sang spirituals about liberty and hope, we can sing of God's faithfulness and justice when life is tough – as long as we frame our singing with words that own our feelings of confusion or distress. The world around us may lead some to suspect that God has abandoned the world and its people, *but* we know it to be otherwise and look forward to a world without crying or mourning or pain. This is precisely the move made by the psalmists, who conclude their laments with words of hope and trust in God.

Singing can be hard at difficult times, and yet it helps us to express some of our deepest emotions. When a church gathered on Sunday morning to hear that one of their deacons had died during the night, the service commenced not only with prayer but a lament sung as a solo. The community was given time to offer to God their shock and grief before the service continued.

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