

'Everybody can Pray', Psalm 107, Sunday 14th March 2021, Fourth Sunday of Lent.

Also Ephesians 2:10 and John 3:14-21.

God of every blessing. I invite you now to shape my soul with your words in the psalms and inspire my life with your works. Teach me to walk with you in your ways and teach me how to pray. Amen.

Through Lent, we continue our preaching upon the psalms.

Nahum Sarna, Jewish theologian and scholar said: "In the Law and Prophets, God reaches out to man. The initiative is His. The message is His. He communicates, we receive. Our God given free will allows us to be receptive, to be accepting, to turn a deaf ear, to reject.

In the Psalms, human beings reach out to God. The initiative is human. The language is human. We make an effort to communicate. He receives. He chooses to respond or not, according to His inscrutable wisdom. He gives his assent or He withholds it." (Nahum Sarna, On the Book of Psalms, p.3)

Psalm 107. Human reaching out. God responding.

As we read it aloud a couple of times, we see soak into the psalm.

There are the repeated disruption of threatening circumstances.

Yet

The repeated turning to prayer.

The repeated answers to prayer.

The repeated calls to be thankful for the answers, which demonstrate God's steadfast love.

The human reaching out, It begins with **thanksgiving**.

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good and his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say this... those he gathered from the lands, from east, west, north and the sea.

What is this love? It is a committed, unchanging, loving determination of the Lord who will never give up those he has chosen for himself.

As a Christian Children writer Sally Lloyd Jones put it: God would love with a never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.

And this love is shown in redemption. The whole community had been redeemed. God had acted like the human redeemer in the OT – he had taken the need of others, he had bore their burdens, he rescued from their dangers.

The community exist due to the hand of the LORD. The duty of those present –as they hear the psalm – to give thanks and praise.

Nicky Gumbel shares a story of a prison in Lusaka, Zambia. It had been built in the 1950s for 250 men. By 2015, it held over 1300. The cells were built for 50; each home to 150. The prisoners locked in cells from 8pm at night until 8am in the morning. Not enough room for all of them to lie down at the same time. They have to take it in turns. If prisoners did not have AIDS or tuberculosis when they entered they prison, they would most likely be soon infected.

The cells surrounded a courtyard – which is at the centre of the prison. Nicky held a service there. It was led by a man – a Christian pastor – who had been waiting 4 years for trial. He was accused of some minor offence, which in the Netherlands would mean only a small fine if he was convicted. Though he was probably innocent, he had been waiting in prison for 4 years – unconvicted, without trial, not knowing when he would be released if ever.

Nicky says: I will never forget his opening words, as he began to lead the service: "God is good, all the time." Here was a man who had absolute confidence in the goodness of God, not because of his circumstances but in spite of them. He knew and had experienced the goodness of God in the midst of great suffering. As a result, even though he found himself in the appalling conditions of this prison, he followed Jesus example and went around doing good."

Give thanks to the LORD for he is good. Give thanks – not because of the circumstances, but in spite of them. And the word redeemed catches our eyes. We are the redeemed. We are the ones whose needs have been taken care of, whose burdens have been born, who have been rescued. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.' Paul reminds the churches at Ephesus: You were dead spiritually – dead in your transgressions... like the rest we were objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when dead in transgressions..." We are the redeemed. This psalm grabs us, 'give thanks to the LORD for his good, his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say this..."

Human deliverance is now described. God's grace is magnified. 4 experiences shared – of being lost, of being imprisoned, of illness due to sin, of dangers and traumas connected to work. 4 situations. Which calls for praise to and testimony of God's divine care and power.

Lost.

Braving a return overland.

Travelers out in the wild. Hopelessly lost. Far from civilization. It reminds me when we visited Oslo and learned about the Antarctic expeditions by Scott and Amundsen. Here it is not explorers racing to the South Pole. It is probably a caravan of merchants. Their supply of food and drink run out. They were at their end...

Human resources empty.

But they could pray.

Then, they set off – there is no word of an angel or something – they set off again, they did not sit and wait – they set off in faith and they were led to safety. They prayed. They assumed God heard and would answer. As if you can imagine: Lord, guide us, or whatever they phrased it and how long it was ... thank you! And off they went!

There is a story about Columba. The great Celtic Christian missionary and church planter. At Iona, he once awoke the monks saying he was aware, that he believed one of their number at that moment, was in danger on the sea. They gathered. He led them in a long prayer for deliverance. Then he said 'Okay you can go back to bed now, the Lord has answered our prayer.' They had asked, they acted.

The travelers set off and they were led to safety, the psalm shares. As the psalm says – and repeats after each event – “Then they cried out to the Lord and he delivered them from their distress.”

God could work in their circumstances in such a providential way – able to meet the needs of those who called out in faith.

And we hear – as will be repeated after each event:

“Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for people, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.”

This psalm is often said to have been written after the return from Exile. Israel had seen – for example in the stories of Ezra – of how the Lord had guided them safely home across the wilderness, as he had done with the original exodus from Egypt.

Prison.

Freedom from the prison of exile.

They were in prison. They had committed crimes. Broke the laws, disobeyed what God had commanded for a nation's life and the life of his people. They were dispirited. Humanely speaking. Helpless. Waiting. Helpless in a culture where prisoners were 'liable to be forgotten'.

But they could pray. And they found themselves free. They saw it, a divine answer to their prayers, Yahweh had forgiven them and set them free. Exile. The rebellion of the Jews had sent them into exile – the land where they had served their sentence.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he saved them in their distress... he brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom.”

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love, and his wonderful deeds for people... he breaks down gates of bronze.”

Freedom. The preciousness of it. When you have been imprisoned. A book I have just finished reading this week, shares about the first liberators of the Dachua concentration camp. I share this example, I do not suggest the Jewish people suffering in the camps due to their sins. No.

I share this example, to illustrate the preciousness of freedom...

Dachua – not far from Munich. First of Hitler’s concentration camps. On 29th April, a French resistance worker, Robert Antelme, weak, looked at his barrack, full of dying and terribly malnourished men. The German guards were gone when he woke up that day. There was no roll call. “Time has stopped dead. No orders. No forecasts. Not free. Everything is ripe: ripe for dying, ripe for freeing, ripe for the end.” Antelme was in a barrack which was desined for 250 and held more than 1000. The American division – known as the Thunderbirds – 45th Division – had arrived. The prisoners looked out the windows as they heard some gunfire. “They are here” someone cried. Antelme found his strength to sit up. He saw an American soldier, green helmet, walking by. The Americans did not know what Dachua was. He listen to his fellow prisoners. They figured out what was happening. It was soon filled with mad voices. A man screamed. Another held his head. “Don’t you understand? We are free. We are free!” Over and over the man clutching his head, shouted they were free. Antelme had an elderly man beside him. He was determined this man could glimpse freedom – an American helmet – before he died. He shook the guy. The old man had to see

freedom. The man managed to turn and move his head – but it was too late, the men had passed by. Antelme fell back on his bunk. He knew he was dying. He had no strength. He was too weak to sing like the others. He couldn't even crawl to his liberators. 'But at least he had seen it, he had seen freedom, he had glimpsed the green helmets of the 45th.'" (Quoted by Alex Kershaw, *The Liberator*).

Sick.

Healed from the punishment for sin.

Recovery is described from illness – in this case, illness that had come from an unwise, even sinful, way of life.

No one to blame but themselves.

But they could pray.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble and he saved them from their distress...

He sent forth his word...

The sick received a word – from a prophet or a priest – of their healing to come. As Hezekiah did.

Soon they knew the joy of God given health.

The healing came. Such words remind us of Jesus healing of the 10 lepers. They cried out for mercy. They were beyond all human help. All 10 were healed. But only one returned to give thanks to Jesus. "Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for people. Let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy." The thanksgiving for the works God does in lives, for the answer of prayers, for the works of grace...

On reflection rabbis could see how the exile had been like a sickness. Something that ground them down. Yet God's liberating, healing word of prophecy came with the assurance of forgiveness and restoration.

Work.

Braving a return by sea. Challenges and traumas that come in work.

Sea farers experience the forces of nature. Their skills are no match for it. It is beyond them – beyond their experience and resources. This is a real threat. "They were at their wit's end."

It reminds us of Jonah and the ship's crew. And naturally of the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee.

But they could pray.

"Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He still the storm to a whisper."

The storm miraculously subsided. Yahweh could still the stormy waves.

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for people. Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people..."

For those who had been in exile, how they had safely travelled home via sea...

The Psalm concludes.

God is in control it ends with.

The one who can cause difficulties in the land. He can turn the rivers into a desert.

But he is the one who can bring blessings and change. Desert into pools of water. Bountiful harvests. Numbers increasing. The One who lifts the needy.

And so the writer – it is anonymous this writer ends with:

Whoever is wise, let him heed these things. And consider the great love of the LORD."

CONCLUSIONS.

To give thanks for deliverance of God in our lives, in the lives of a community.

It celebrates the renewal of life and liberation that comes by the forgiveness of sins.

God is praised for the positive answers to prayer and for the fulfillment of promises (in terms of the exile, he brought them back safely as he said he would).

Be wise the psalm cries. This is how to live and act towards God. He rules in human life and works wonders of love and power.

But as NT people, as we suggested. We see an added dimension. How we take this on our lips. We celebrate divine deliverance as Christians – a deliverance focused upon and through Jesus Christ. In God's name, Jesus declared and showed an era of liberation foretold by the prophets – the kingdom of God.

He performed acts of healing, he sought the lost, to set the captives free, he stilled the storm.

He took the need of others, he bore our burdens, he rescued from danger.

"Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say this..."

Prayer : O God.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

And your faithfulness from generation to generation.

Heal, free and Rescue your people from our distress

Make quiet the storms of our self-will

And bring us to the haven you have prepared for us.

In Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.