

Lent Study 2018

Introduction to Lent

Lent is the period beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending at Easter, during which Christians have traditionally fasted and devoted themselves to prayer in anticipation of Christ's death and resurrection. Just as Jesus fasted and prayed in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights (Matthew 4:1-11), so too do Christians fast and pray for the same forty days and nights.¹ In the same way that Jesus' time of fasting prepared him for his ministry - a ministry which led him to the cross - so we use it as a time to prepare ourselves, to be tested, and to walk with Jesus to the cross.

Fasting is, of course, not very popular these days. We don't like to deny ourselves anything, which is perhaps why it's especially good for us to fast. Traditionally fasting literally meant abstaining from food for some period (or skipping a meal or certain foods). Among other things, this kind of fasting makes us aware that we are creatures who need our daily bread to survive, and it presents an opportunity to pray. Our hunger can be redirected to God.

Fasting from food is not the only possibility and today many decide to give up something (like alcohol, television, Facebook, etc.) which also creates both the space and the reminder to pray and to remember our need for God. In this spirit, many also decide to *add* something during Lent, like a spiritual discipline (i.e., praying every morning) or an act of service.

Whatever we decide to give up - or add - it should be a real sacrifice, even if a small one. It is ok - even good - for us to "suffer" a little, not least because it focuses our thoughts on Christ's own suffering. But just as Christ's own suffering on Good Friday makes Easter possible, so too do we trust that, during Lent, our own sacrifices, through Christ, will lead to new life. And if these Lenten practices bear fruit, they can certainly be continued after Easter! So I encourage you to consider what you might do for Lent this year.

In this year's Lent study, we're going to look at several Psalms, part of each of which will be read on Sundays during Lent at the Call to Worship. In a sense, these seven psalms will be our guide on the journey to the cross. The words of several psalms were found on Jesus' lips during his passion, for they not only give content and shape to his mission but - probably more importantly - they are expressive. Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks, and Jesus' heart was full of the psalms. The psalms apparently were crucial in his struggle to remain faithful in the midst of suffering, and the psalms can do the same for us.

¹ There are, however, forty-six days during Lent because the Sundays do not count as its considered improper to fast on the Lord's Day (at least by Protestants and Catholics - the Orthodox Church celebrates Lent over forty days). This means that, if you fast during Lent, you're allowed - even encouraged - to break your fast during the six Sundays because these are all like "little Easters".

Week 1 / Psalm 25:1-10

- 1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
- 2 O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
- 3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

- 4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
- 5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

- 6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
- 7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

- 8 Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
- 9 He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
- 10 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Although the Psalms were written by different people at different time and for different purposes, they are still several themes that emerge repeatedly throughout the collection. One of the most prominent of these themes is the desire for deliverance from enemies. Here in vv1-3 we hear the Psalmist lifting up his soul to God, imploring God not let his enemies triumph over him, that they be put to shame instead of him. And in many other psalms it is not merely shame that enemies threaten to inflict; it is death itself from which the psalmist needs deliverance. The psalms cry out not just for protection, but for justice for evildoers.

We have many concerns, but we are probably not so preoccupied with our “enemies”. Even the worst boss, colleague, or family member rarely threatens the kind of suffering and shame which seems to be a constant danger in the Psalms. Should we learn to express our comparatively minor struggles in the terms the Psalms employ? Or are (most of) our lives blessedly far removed from the kind of danger known thousands of years ago? (And how might this Psalms speak differently to modern people who really have known such danger?).

We should indeed be thankful that here in Luxembourg we enjoy prosperity and comfort that the Psalmist could not possibly have imagined. But this also means that we can easily be easily lulled into a false sense of security, as if there is nothing to worry about - as if we're not going to die.

During Lent we remember that we are mortal, that we are creatures who came from the dust and will return to it. We too are in need of deliverance from the enemy of death, even if it now typically takes longer to claim us than it once did. But the situation is fundamentally unchanged. And though we should not be overly preoccupied with the reality of our eventual death, it is also healthy to live in the awareness that our days on earth are not forever, that the end will come, that we cannot save ourselves. And living with that awareness can and should, like the Psalmist, cause us to turn to God for our salvation (vv4-5). It is easy for us to live as if we don't need God and never will exactly because our lives seem so far removed from death, from reality. During Lent we deliberately make ourselves a bit uncomfortable exactly so that we can remember or need for God's salvation.

We need to be reminded that we are indeed sinners in need of deliverance. The Good News is that God's mercy never ceases. God chooses "not to remember" our sins; God makes them of no account; God remembers only his steadfast love. God is faithful to forgive the humble and lead them in paths of righteousness.

- 1. Do you ever feel like you are under threat from enemies? Or do you feel like your enemies don't really compare to the enemies threatening the Psalmist?**
- 2. What does it mean to lift up your soul to God?**
- 3. How does our comfort and security insulate us from God? In your experience, do you tend to turn to God more when you feel in danger/threatened? Do the poor tend to be more aware of their need for God?**
- 4. Is it possible that we're too comfortable? If our lives were more precarious would we also be more aware of our need for God?**
- 5. What does it mean for God not to remember our sins?**
- 6. Verse 4 asks God to make known the path we should walk; how does God make this known to us? How do we know we're on the right path? Do we ever tell ourselves we're on the right path only to discover that we were wrong?**
- 7. Does God only lead the humble (v9)? Is humility necessary? Or, put differently, do we have to be humble to acknowledge our need for God?**

Week 2 / Psalm 22:23-31

23 You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

24 For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.

25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!

27 All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
28 For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.

29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
30 Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

Psalm 22 is strongly associated with Jesus' passion. It begins with the words he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" From this bleak beginning the psalm becomes more hopeful; the initial cry of abandonment ultimately gives way to a statement of trust in God.

If Jesus had never spoken the first words of Psalm 22 from the cross, Christians would still have heard his life echoed in it (and the Gospel writers cite several verses from the psalm in the passion narrative). The portion of the psalm above has turned to praise of the Lord - a Lord who,
"...did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him."

We hear here at least a couple of things. Because Jesus has spoken the first words of this psalm from the cross, it's not difficult to imagine him speaking this portion as well. Although Jesus does not continue quoting the psalm out loud, there's good reason to think he has the rest of it in mind.² If so, by invoking this Psalm Jesus is declaring that despite his affliction - and despite the way Jesus might feel in that moment - God has not hidden his face but hears when Jesus cries.³ Jesus trusts that even though he, like all people, will "go down to the dust" (that is, die), still, "I will live for him". We hear here a promise of the resurrection to come. This is the thing "a people yet unborn" will say that God "has done". But as Jesus hangs on the cross, this remains a future hope - a hope he clings to.

² Many scholars argue that when Jesus quotes part of a psalm he is in effect quoting the entire psalm - especially when it's the first verse. Because people knew the psalms very well, citing just a fragment of it would lead the hearer to supply the rest. This is something like if someone mentions to you the first line of a familiar song or hymn and immediately the rest comes to mind and you hear the tune.

³ Despite what we sing in "How Deep the Father's Love for Us", there's good reason for us to believe that God does not "turn his face away" from Jesus but rather does just the opposite.

But we can also hear these words as being *about* Jesus. He is the one who did not despise our affliction and did not turn his face away; indeed he became human, lived amongst us, and took upon himself our afflictions. This Jesus is the Lord, the one worthy of praise. Dominion belongs to him and “he rules over the nations.”

It is not hard to imagine these words as applying to Jesus:

29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.

30 Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,

31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

In this reading, the thing Jesus “has done” is to remain faithful, even to the point of death. We hear an echo of the cross, as when Jesus declares in John from the cross, “It is finished.” It is Jesus’ faithfulness that ultimately delivers us.

- 1. Does this portion of Psalm 22 sound more like something Jesus would speak (even as he hangs from the cross)? Or does it sound more like something said about Jesus?**
- 2. If we read the words of the psalm in the mouth of Jesus, what do they teach us about him? About his relationship with the Father?**
- 3. If we read the words of the psalm as being about Jesus, what do they tell us about him?**
- 4. Is one of these two readings “better” than the other? Or can they both be good at the same time? What does this psalm teach us about interpreting Scripture?**
- 5. Do you think that the Father hide his face while Jesus is on the cross? Or does God not hide his face? How does our answer affect how we understand God?**

Week 3 / Psalm 19

1 The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

2 Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

3 There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

7 The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
8 the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
9 the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
10 More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

11 Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
12 But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.

14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

This psalm begins with a meditation on creation. Whereas many psalms start with human experience and earthly concerns, this one begins by considering the heavens. The camera lens, as it were, is not zoomed in, but at as wide an angle as possible. We are invited not to look in, but as far out as we can. There we see the wonderful things that God has made, lightyears in the distance, proclaiming the glory of God. They speak without saying a word, and everyone anywhere can hear it.

In verse 7-10 the Psalm turns to a meditation on the goodness of the law. This might seem an abrupt change of direction, but the idea is that the same God who has created the cosmos and established the laws of physics, etc. has also established laws for his creatures. The creator knows best how the creatures fit within creation! We should desire to know - to really *know* - God's laws, for then we not only live in a way that pleases God, but also in a way that draws us closer to the lawgiver and creator. Protestants especially have been schooled to think of the law as an obstacle to be overcome, but God is the one who gave the law in the first place. It wasn't a mistake.

In verse 12 the psalm turns to the question of keeping the law, asking, "But who can detect their errors? Clear me from my hidden faults". These faults are hidden - not from the view of others -

but from the person who commits them; they are even undetectable. Although we typically think of the law as a list of rules a person must obey (and it is indeed that), here the emphasis is more upon the law as an idea, as not just something written on paper but also something written into nature, into the way things are. We look out into the vastness of space and marvel at the immensity, the complexity of it all. We are so small and there's so much we don't know; how can we mere creatures find our place in the world? We are not like the stars and planets set into motion; we have freedom to stray off course, to choose our own way. What an amazing (and terrifying!) reality, that God created the world such that we can violate his law.

How can we ever manage to do the right thing? A good start is to avoid "the insolent" - that is bad, corrupting company. But finally we can only hope that our words and - more difficult - the meditations of our hearts will be acceptable to God, who is both our rock, our anchor, in the universe, but who also redeems us despite our failings.

In the context of Lent, this Psalm reminds us that we are not - despite how we often act - the centre of the universe. In fact, each of us is quite small and, in a sense, inconsequential. Space and time existed long before we did and will likely long after we're gone. We are just here for a moment, for we are mortal - which is exactly why we are in need of redemption.

- 1. What do you think/feel when you gaze into the heavens?**
- 2. What do the heavens declare the Glory of God? How do they speak? What do they say? (Might we look upon them but draw the wrong conclusions?)**
- 3. Do you experience the things this psalm describes (revival, rejoicing, enlightenment, etc.) when you consider God's law? Or do you experience something different?**
- 4. What does the law teach us about God?**
- 5. Verse 12 suggests that some faults and errors we commit unknowingly. Are there parts of God's "law" that hard to know? Do we ever know completely what we should and shouldn't do?**
- 6. What are we asking when we say, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."? Is it a request for God to help us say and think what is good? Or are we asking God to accept our words and thoughts despite their inadequacy.**

Week 4 / Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

- 1 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- 2 Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
- 3 and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.
- 17 Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
- 18 they loathed any kind of food,

and they drew near to the gates of death.
19 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;
20 he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.
21 Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
22 And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Week 5 / Psalm 51:1-12

1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

6 You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Week 6 / Psalm 31:9-16

9 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.

10 For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,[a]
and my bones waste away.

11 I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror[b] to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.

12 I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.

13 For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

14 But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, "You are my God."

15 My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

16 Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.

Week 7 / Psalm 118:14-24

14 The Lord is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

15 There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:

"The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;
16 the right hand of the Lord is exalted;
the right hand of the Lord does valiantly."

17 I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the Lord.

18 The Lord has punished me severely,
but he did not give me over to death.

19 Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.

20 This is the gate of the Lord;

the righteous shall enter through it.

21 I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

22 The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

23 This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

24 This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it