

Looking at the difficult psalms (2)

Psalm 58

Introduction

If Psalm 22 encourages us to speak to God from our heart, with honesty, no punches pulled and no holds barred, Psalm 58 shows us how this can sound.

While some psalms are difficult because they are hard to understand, Psalm 58 is abundantly clear. It is difficult because of its content. It's entitled 'A Prayer for Vengeance' and so flags up what we might expect.

So welcome to session 2 looking at some of the difficult psalms.

Read Psalm 58 through slowly.

Try to imagine a video clip showing what is being asked for happening on camera.

Share any response with your group ... or with God

This psalm has the interesting superscription 'Do Not Destroy.'

This is one of four psalms to have this attached ahead of the psalm, (and one of many that are attributed in some way to David, King of Israel). Although it might be tempting to read this as a warning to future editors not to leave it out of the collection of psalms, the general consensus is that it was a reminder - to God?- that however broken, God would not destroy Israel because they were still God's people, chosen and blessed.

A bit of background

Before we leap into thinking about this psalm from a c21st and covid 19 world perspective, a word about the time and world for which it was written.

The first verse appears to address pagan gods and verses 2-5 describes them. As in Psalm 22, we have no precise details, here of wrongdoing, but injustice and violence are named. Then in verse 6 and to the end of the psalm we have the appeal to Israel's God to deal with them.

In the then Near Eastern worldview, the human world was thought of as being ruled by the supreme deity in concert with lesser gods, the latter having considerable power in the human world. (Look at Deuteronomy 32:8) These gods have not done as they should, so the appeal is to God, who has the greater power, to punish them.

Having said that, it was also true that human rulers were regarded as 'gods', appointed by God, so we can legitimately read this as an outpouring of rage and an anger-fuelled plea for vengeance on the corrupt human rulers, leaders and those in positions of power whose decisions and actions have wrought evil on the lives of others.

And lo! We know what the writer is talking about! We stand shoulder to shoulder with whoever it was! Surely this is THE psalm for today?

Can you recall hearing this psalm read out in a public church service?

If so, can you remember your response?

If not, why might this be?

Psalm 58 is known as an “imprecatory psalm”, in other words it’s a curse! It invokes judgement or disaster on an enemy. (There are many others – look at Psalm 109 – and imprecatory verses are also found in psalms that do not fall into this category, and in the books of the prophets. But Psalm 58 is the most violent.)

At various times in the history of the Christian church, it has been deemed unsuitable for public worship, banned from services, read only in part, and omitted from lectionaries (the lists of what scripture is to be read and when during the year). The 1928 revision of the Prayer Book bracketed it and the 1962 Canadian Book of Common Prayer left it out altogether!

If you had to make the call to read it or not in a service, what would you decide?

Should parts of scripture be censored?

Why?/ Why not?

What are some of the attendant issues here?

The complaint

A friend knew of someone working in a country in Africa who wrote that a state governor had made a show of donating a very large amount of money to help construct a church building. The clergy turned the money down, asking that instead it should pay teachers across the country, who had not received a salary for months. The governor took the money back... but the teachers remained unpaid.

If we cannot find a similarly blatant example of the type of behaviour that sparked Psalm 58 from our own context, we are certainly not free from leadership at every level motivated by a desire for power and marked by self-interest. We too have greedy and corrupt people in powerful positions within our society.

We are used to – and possibly even comfortable with? – talking about greed and corruption in our society in abstract terms but the psalmist here goes for the jugular. Greed and corruption are not disembodied concepts. They are words descriptive of actions done by real people. The governor who did not pay the teachers is the sort of person the psalmist is writing about here.

Does this stir you to any response?

And the psalmist wants God to take vengeance.

What are some of the vivid images he uses?

He calls, literally, for their blood.

What do we think or feel (or both!) about that?

I write this in the midst of the covid 19 pandemic, that, while nobody's "fault", has meant that across the world decisions have been made by a single leader or small group that have been a matter of life or death for millions of people.

Some decisions have been good, some the best in the circumstances and not all have been deliberately wicked. Nevertheless many have given rise to complaint and anger and in this country we now hear cries for public enquiries into government decisions.

(How) Does Psalm 58 affect our own view and response?

As a nation, broadly speaking, with exceptions, and arguably more than many democracies, we have a heritage of acceptance of the aspects of government that we dislike or with which we disagree. Given that this may be a matter of indifference or pragmatism – why get angry about things you cannot change? – Psalm 58 surely challenges us.

We cry to God for justice, we pray for good leaders ...

... Should we, like the psalmist, also call for vengeance?

If so, how might this look today?

How do we read Psalm 58 in the light of the New Testament? (Consider Jesus, look at Romans 13: 1-7 especially 3&4 and remember the importance of context!)

Reflect on what you are hearing from God through this psalm.

Ask God to show you how to pray and how to act