

November 2016.

The Power of the Psalms. Some thoughts from Father Charles:

The Orthodox Jewish Woman of Safad

This may seem an unusual place to start for a reflection on the 'Power of the Psalms'. However, it is a place which allows pause for thought.

In 2006 the war in the Lebanon, between Hezbollah and the Israeli military, was coming to a peak. Understandably, the people in the conflict zones fled, as is demonstrated now in so many other regions of the Middle East. However, a group of Israeli women in the northern Israeli town of Safed stayed put. Despite being powerless and subject to imminent death or injury, their orthodox faith made it impossible for them to leave.

By coincidence, at that time, a small team of academics (social anthropologists; Halliman, 2014) were working within this particular population of women. One of their observations was, that, in the face of the threat of becoming victims, the women increased their ritualistic reading of the psalms. Interestingly this appeared to provide the women with a sense of greater strength and protection.

As active researchers (and drawn to a more quantitative than qualitative method of research) they applied a 'Mood Disorder Scale'. The conclusion they reached was that the ritual recitation of the psalms significantly lowered levels of anxiety and provide a coping strategy in a situational context in which the women had no control.

This may be so. However, the thrust of their reasoning serves to take God out of the equation, and provides an overly simplistic perspective on a very complex and intertwined set of human behaviours, attitudes and beliefs. Even if this group of researchers had used a qualitative method (which would have been a great deal richer) it would have led to more questions than answers, and the age old comment 'more research needed'.

Psalms in prayer and devotion

Since the researchers' observation was accurate, the women were finding comfort, strength and protection within their reading of the psalms, it leads us to reflect on the purpose and use of the psalms themselves.

The Book of Psalms (the Psalter) has been, and continues to be, a part of scripture with a central place in private prayer and collective worship for both Jews and Christians. The reason for this is not hard to recognise.

The book of psalms is a collection of Hebrew poetry that spans a thousand years and was put together by an 'editor', in about 400BC, for a particular purpose. This purpose was to provide God's Chosen People with a book of instruction for the 'righteous'; those who God loves and those who love God. When we read the psalms we discover that they *proclaim* the good news that God saves, they *publish* the glorious deeds of the all-powerful God, they *tell* us about the amazing things that God does.

Since the psalms are Hebrew poetry they use a poetic form of expression that enables great truths to be simply said, but also requiring interpretation and understanding to receive the full benefit.

Consequently, the combination of purpose, content and poetic style provides excellent source material for prayer and meditation; and for praise and worship. Together, and in part, the psalms provide us all, through the ages, with a 'living' account of the experience of God's chosen people, with God Himself.

In times of trouble

The psalms are particularly useful for meditation and prayer in times of trouble. And this makes sense, when we remind ourselves that the point at which the psalms were edited, and given structure and purpose, was after the exile of the Jewish people to Assyria (in about 733BC) and to Babylon (in about 597BC).

Consequently, the editor of the psalms (working in about 400BC) had to confront the issue of God's chosen people who have been in exile; a people who worship the God, Yahweh, who is more powerful than anything in creation or beyond creation. He is the God of absolute power, who brought the Jewish people to the Promised Land and who has now, it seems, turned his back on them.

The 'living' experience of God's chosen people suggests that God has distanced himself from his people. In the psalms we read poetry asking God why he is so far from his people? The poets go on to describe their troubles and experiences, and to ask God to re-establish his relationship with his people and rescue them from their troubles. In response the psalmist comes back with a clear message. A message which states that God's relationship with his people remains constant, and that this is true through all time (from generation to generation), and is regardless of the frequency in which the people fall from grace. All they need to do, the psalmist instructs, is to return to God and follow the path of righteousness.

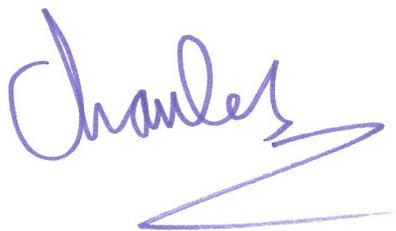
'Psalms Central'

At the moment we are enjoying a Bible Study programme, entitled 'Psalms Central', in which we working to understand the Hebrew poetry style, its imagery and structure. We have also explored the purpose of the whole book of psalms, how it's divided into separate collections (five books), what the key messages are and how the psalms themselves should be interpreted by us as Christians.

One of our learnings is that 'what is true for the Jewish women of Safad', is also true for us as Christians. The poems within the Book of Psalms have the power to bring confidence and comfort; they seem to speak to all aspects of life and accurately describe our own relationships with God.

It is not surprising that the psalms, in private prayer and public worship, provide a centre from which we hear the whispering of God's redemption of his chosen people through his son, Christ Jesus.

With blessings and prayers to you and our brothers and sisters in Syria,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Charles". The signature is stylized with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Church Crawl Autumn 2016

On a bright Saturday morning in October a group of intrepid explorers set out from All Saints' on a journey to another country. It was the autumn church crawl, and it took us to South Wales.

The first place we visited was Port Talbot, and the church of St. Theodore. Built during the 1890's with architecture in the Early English style, it is quite plain, but has a superb and colourful reredos which draws the eye at once. We were privileged to see their beautiful vestments, decorated with magnificent embroidery, and afterwards Garfield played a rousing Welsh hymn on the organ. Speakers of the Language joined in heartily!

From there it was a short drive to Margam Abbey, its ruins set in a large park, with part of the original church now used by the present parish. Here, again, we admired vestments, and were shown the seal of a papal bull dating from the thirteenth century. It had been lost for centuries, and found by chance in the 1950s.

We ate our picnics in the park, then set off to Ewenny. Although a small village, it has a fortified house with high walls around it, a gate-house and a tower. The priory church is Romanesque in style, with its original stone altar slab showing five consecration crosses. The south transept was particularly interesting, being the least altered part of the building.

By this time, the weather decided it had been fortunate long enough and heavy rain began. How lucky, therefore, that the main reason for visiting our fourth church, Llancarfan, was to view its wall paintings, rather than its exterior! These medieval decorations had been rediscovered only in 2013, and were very unusual survivors from that era.

The last highlight of our journey was a cream tea, at a pleasant old pub, conveniently next door to the church. The whole party fell upon scones, jam and cream, and deliciously rich cake, a perfect finale to our day out.

Very many thanks to Garfield for arranging such a wonderful tour. We greatly enjoyed seeing the variety of fascinating places he had chosen for us.

Chris Ostler

IN THIS MONTH....NOVEMBER 1920

An excerpt from the Vicar's (Canon Gillson's) Notes.

It was a real misfortune that torrents of rain kept so many people from coming to hear the Bishop of Northern Rhodesia in the Parish Hall. In point of fact just about 300 people were prevented; at least the hall would have held that number more. The Bishop was more than kind and gave us of his very best. He warned us of the great evil that threatens Central Africa through the British Government establishing "forced labour". Early in the [World] War [1] the government took the Bishop of Zanzibar's pamphlet, re-named it "The black slaves of Prussia" and scattered it broadcast without charge. Now they are themselves promoting forced labour, which the Bishop assured us is sometimes worse than slavery. Strong representations are being made to the Government and the Bishop of Zanzibar has published another pamphlet exposing the evil, which we ought to get and study. The Bishop went on to tell us of the native's great desire for education and his special joy in mathematics; he hails the approach of the missionary because he hopes he will establish schools, not because he has any interest in, or desire for, the Christian religion. He told us that the situation for the native tribes at the present moment is fraught with the greatest danger; owing to the mere presence of the white man the native is changing rapidly, and nothing can prevent it. The old institutions and foundations of the native life are breaking up, and unless we give them the sure foundation of the Catholic faith the natives will suffer in all ways by the white man's coming. The bishop described the methods of the work and some of its great difficulties: the size of the Diocese, as large as Germany before the war. The number of languages; the smallness of villages, sometimes only six huts; the difficulty of travelling owing to the want of roads. We broke up with the sense of having gained new material and openings for our prayers; a more urgent need for our work; and certain that a wet walk was but a small inconvenience for the privilege of having listened to one who is such a noble example of a Catholic in deed as well as in word; we get rather tired of the latter.

Julian of Norwich

By Ruth Baker

In July this year, there was a fascinating programme on BBC4 entitled "The search for the lost manuscript – Julian of Norwich". It was presented by Dr Janina Ramirez and told the story of Revelations of Divine Love, written by Julian of Norwich in 1373, and hidden for centuries. It was apparently the first known book written in English by a woman – the name Julian would appear to come from the church of St Julian, and we don't know her real name.

It is considered to be one of the first great masterpieces of English prose, and according to former archbishop Dr Rowan Williams, she is seen as the first serious woman writer and a very radical theologian, who was blazing a trail. Her vision is of an unconditionally loving

God, and this contrasted sharply with Church thinking at the time, which focussed more on eternal damnation.

In those days most woman were confined to the domestic sphere, and very few were educated. Intellectual thought was the domain of the church, expressed in Latin, and by men. Her writings were kept secret and treasured by women through the centuries, and expressed an optimistic theology which can be summed up by her phrase “all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

She wrote this despite the grim aspects of life at the time. People had suffered the Black Death, there were public executions and the 100 years’ war raged.

Little is known about her life. She was born in Norwich, the second city of England at the time. It was safer than coastal towns as it was up-river. Many languages would have been spoken there, as it was a prosperous merchant town, though probably only 20% of men could read, and far fewer women. We are told that the Bishop at the time, Henry Despenser, violently suppressed the Peasants’ Revolt, and in fact led the army against the peasants. Julian may well have heard him preach in the Cathedral, and his sermons are unlikely to have been about love and forgiveness!

In those days, most girls were married by the age of fifteen. Maybe she married and had children, and she may have lost her family – when she was nineteen, plague struck the city again. At the age of thirty, she was seriously ill and nearly died. The last rites were performed, but as the priest held the crucifix in front of her, she writes that it came alive, and she entered a visionary state in which God spoke to her directly. She had a total of 16 visions in 24 hours, and subsequently recovered her health and took the decision to become an ‘ anchoress’, a female hermit living the rest of her life (thirty years in all) in one room. It is impossible for us today to imagine not only isolating ourselves in that way, but never going out, never seeing the sky and the natural world. Her cell was attached to St Julian’s church in Norwich, and has been rebuilt following its destruction in the 2nd World War. She had three windows – one to observe the Mass, one on the street so that she could give counsel to people, and one for the person who brought her food and presumably emptied her chamber pot and brought her soap and water.

She had to learn to read and write, and she developed her own theology in which she described her ‘cosmic journey’. Her God was like a mother with her children, and could not be angry. God was loving, and the Eucharist was like a mother feeding her child. This view was totally at odds with the conventional view – after all, heretics were burned at the stake for reading the Bible in English, so she was treading on dangerous ground.

She died around 1416, and the manuscript disappeared. However, Margery Kempe, a contemporary Christian mystic, visited her and Julian may have given her the manuscript.

Over a century later, Henry VIII ordered the dissolution of the monasteries, described by Dr Ramirez as “the biggest land grab in history”. Thousands of manuscripts were destroyed or sold, and personal visionary experiences of God were denounced. But somehow, Julian’s manuscript escaped and was hidden, and in 1623 a group of nine English women left for France, taking a copy with them and establishing a convent there.

The original manuscript is lost, but the nuns made copies, though much later they were to lose their entire library during the French Revolution, which regarded the church as an oppressive institution, and in 1793 gave them just 15 minutes to pack their bags and leave. Somehow, a 17th century copy of the original found its way to the huge collection of Hans Sloane, who bequeathed his library to found the British Museum.

In 1901, a woman called Grace Warrack, who was brought up a Presbyterian, decided to search for a copy of the original and translate it into modern English. She found this 17th century copy, MS 2499, listed under "magic and witchcraft"! Her translation became very popular, and Julian's work has been translated into many languages. And who knows? Maybe the original manuscript is still hiding somewhere.

If you would like to see the original programme, it is available to download for £1.89 from the BBC Video store – well worth the price.

PARISH RETREAT 2017

Friday 3 – Sunday 5 February

**Conductor: The Rt Revd John Armes,
Bishop of Edinburgh**

The Retreat would start from 5pm on Friday 3 February and would finish with tea at 4pm on Sunday 5 February. This will give us time for reflection after lunch on Sunday. Silence would start at 8pm on Friday and finish after lunch on Sunday.

There is also the availability for some of us to arrive on the Thursday evening and stay until 10am on the Monday. This would have to be paid for separately and if anyone is interested I will get forms for you to fill in.

This is advance notice and later I will put a notice up in the porch for people to sign, when I have more details.

Liz Badman

BISHOP MIKE LEADS OUR ARMISTICE DAY ACT OF REMEMBRANCE

The Bishop of Bristol, the Rt Rev **Mike Hill**, will lead this year's Annual Act of Remembrance at the St John's war memorial on the junction of Apsley Road and Whiteladies Road on Armistice Day.

Taking place just a week before the hundredth anniversary of the end of the Battle of the Somme on November 18, the short service and wreath-laying on November 11 at 10.50 am will mark the tenth anniversary of the first of the present-day Annual Acts of Remembrance at the 96-year-old Grade II Listed stone memorial.

They were instituted by Fr Richard Hoyal in 2006 when he was priest-in-charge of the church of All Saints with St John in whose parish the memorial stands.

On Armistice Day that year, Fr Hoyal with a handful of parishioners and a few passing shoppers who stopped to join them, conducted a short Act of Remembrance and it was subsequently agreed that this should become an annual event.

Subsequently pupils and teachers from a growing number of local schools and other organisations took part so that, in recent years, the event has been attended by an estimated 400 people.

They include children from St John's Church of England Primary School who have taken a keen interest in the memorial as most of the names on it are those of former pupils of their school who died in the *First World War*.

In October more than 40 of the children attended a Service of Rededication conducted by Fr Charles to mark completion of a £4,800 contract to restore and clean the stonework.

In addition to singing *Wherever You Are* – the song first performed by Gareth Malone's Military Wives choir – individual children recited verses of the poem *For the Fallen* written by Robert Laurence Binyon a few weeks after the outbreak of the *First World War*.

Restoration of the memorial was organised by retired Lt Col *Steen Clarke*, a former pupil of St John's Primary School who *has undertaken extensive research into* the fate of those named on it. Many of them died fighting in *Belgium, the Somme area and Northern France*.

At this year's short Armistice Day service Bishop Mike will be assisted by Fr Charles Sutton and other clergy from *Churches Together in Clifton, Cotham and Redland*.

Prior to two-minutes silence at 11 am, *The Last Post* will be sounded by bugler Sergeant Major Martin Dove of the Bristol Army Cadet Force's Corps of Drums.

For the first time this year, the silence will end as lone piper Sandy Kemlo from the City of Bristol Pipes and Drums plays a lament.

Wreaths will be laid by representatives of local residents, businesses in Whiteladies Road, Avon and Somerset Constabulary and local schools.

Brass players from Redland High School will accompany the singing of the hymn *I vow to thee, my country* and the *National Anthem*.

The north face of the memorial is inscribed with these words:

TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND IN GRATEFUL MEMORY OF THOSE CONNECTED WITH THIS
CHURCH AND PARISH WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES IN THE GREAT WAR 1914-1918

R.I.P.

THEY WERE A WALL UNTO US BOTH BY NIGHT AND DAY

The last line is taken from 1 Samuel 25:16 in the King James Bible.

Tim Stanley