**Psalm 5 Wholehearted prayer: Notes for small groups by Paul Thaxter**

I have produced an amended version of my sermon on Sunday February 26th 2023. I thought it may be better if I provided the notes along with the questions in bold at the end of each point. I have also attached the powerpoint too as the image can be added to each point if you need a visual as well.

Each of these points can be discussed in separate sessions or several in one session together. It will probably be too much to do all 7 points in one session if you want to have meaningful conversation around these points. However, that is for you to judge.

People can also bring Christian songbooks, prayer-books or poetry to share or play inspirational items from their phones. People may also have recommendations to offer your group.

Note: It is easier to talk about prayer than to pray so why not seek to pray the substance of at least one of the points in your session together – you can do this liturgically or extempore. People can write their prayers, bring them with them, quote them or pray spontaneously. Some may pray in tongues if appropriate. May your prayer together and separately be enriched and lead to renewal.

Best wishes Paul

**Perspective on Psalms:**

1. **Wholehearted prayer is reality remembered.**

The book of Psalms has been described as the prayer and songbook of the 2nd temple but of course poetic song and prayers are part of the human psyche. They are found in the earliest parts of the bible written such as the Song of the Sea – Ex 15;1-18. A defining moment for God’s chosen people depicting the Exodus from Egypt. These songs continue to be used in synagogues daily today and in Christian worship too. There are other psalms too that are not in the book of psalms such as the Song of the Ark - Numbs 10:35-36, the oracles of Balaam Numb 23-24 and the song of Moses Deut 32…but also think of the song of Deborah in Judges 5 and the Song of Hannah 1 Sam 2:1-10 reframed in Mary’s song, the Magnificat in Luke’s gospel.

Out of deep suffering and liberation there flows an articulation of the soul. Lament and praise are ingredients for powerful songs and poetry. Look at the old gospel spirituals by black slaves in the US – or some modern US hip hop covering similar themes in the so- called land of the free. Many protest movements have songs e.g. “We shall overcome”

The biblical songs emerged out of historical events but were also liturgically framed so that the people of God became those who remember corporately, we become those who are connected to the past, those who relive history…those who believe in God saving his people in the past and present.

Remembering is an act of discipleship captured in both oral memory and community ritual. Many remember songs or a poetic phrase or idiom than a wordy sermon.

1. **Can you name any psalms, songs or prayers or poems that have been memorable for your life and share why?**
2. **In what ways do you engage with the book of Psalms?**
3. **What do you think is the difference between a live and dead tradition?**
4. **What sort of balance between liturgical and extempore prayers would you find helpful?**
5. **Share your favourite favourite Christian prayerbook, songbook or poetry book.**
6. **Relationship between God and us is essential for whole-hearted prayer.**

Ps 5:1-2

Listen to my words, Lord,
    consider my lament.
**2**Hear my cry for help,
    my King and my God,
    for to you I pray.

This is a prayer that God would listen to words, murmurings and even the sound of the psalmist…”for it is to **you** that I pray”. When we pray we may be articulate but also inarticulate – stuttering ill-formed words and thoughts- and also the sounds of our plea tone - our sighs are also offered to God. The tone of our prayer so often reveals our inner state. It reveals the emotions of heart. Whole-hearted prayer encompasses all these aspects of our attempts to pray. God is attentive to us. He reads our total body language since he offers a personal relationship with each of us. God picks up on our breathings for all sounds are made with breath. God is close by his Spirit, his Ruach.

When you are close to someone it is possible to breath in harmony …what a wonderful thought – that our breath and God’s breath flow together …God is truly the ultimate intimate. Many mystical traditions claim to encounter God as they seek the Ultimate. In the Koran QAF Sura 50:16

**١٦ وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَـٰنَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِۦ نَفْسُهُۥ ۖ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ ٱلْوَرِيدِ**

says when translated into English “Indeed, ˹it is˺ We ˹Who˺ created humankind and ˹fully˺ know what their souls whisper to them, and We are closer to them than ˹their˺ jugular vein.” In the New Testament John’s gospel speaks of God abiding in us, in fact, he makes his home within us. God’s Spirit and our spirit join together and we discover God as Abba Father.

1. **What encouragement do you receive from Psalm 1:1-2?**
2. **How would you describe your current relationship with God?**
3. **Raw emotions expressed are a part of whole-hearted prayer.**

**In Ps 5:2 the psalmist prays to “my King and my God. ”** It is not just any kind of relationship but a covenant one – a committed one from God.God has an agreement with his chosen people. God’s covenant people can pour out their lives to him. This may be why the psalms begin with Psalm 1 : God’s law/Torah/guidance/covenant being celebrated

\*When we are secure loving relationship we so often show our best and worst sides – it is like that with God too. A leading US evangelical leader attended a Jewish Chever Torah class where he was shocked at the plain speaking of the Jewish community and their audacious questioning and complaining of God…he realised that they could do that because they were secure in a covenant relationship with God.

Ps 5 is a lament – a cry from the heart – “consider my lament”.

The Book of Psalms is mostly where humans are addressing God. Yet just because psalms are expressed does not mean that all the thoughts in the psalms are sanctified; yet they are real and human reactions. They reveal the inner life of a believer or community. As I have often said psalms are the raw belly of faith. Praying and worshipping like this is visceral, alive, profound and raw. ”Dare we share**”** what we often feel? Dare we lament? Wail and complain?

God loves an honest heart, a contrite heart. Jacob wrestled with God at Bethel, Abraham bargained with God at the oaks of Mamre, Moses argued with God at Mount Sinai so perhaps God loves an honest questioner

Whole-hearted prayer must have something to do with being in a real relationship not religiously correct! \* My first prayer aloud in church.

1. **Whole hearted prayer is about a relationship between God and you and God and us - dare we share personally and corporately the journey we are on?**
2. **What inhibits us? What prohibits us?**

**PS to this point**

Just a word of warning though…expressed thoughts are not necessarily sanctified thoughts. Just because words are in the psalms does not mean they should always be viewed as doctrine- i.e. accepted teaching of the church. e.g. Psalm 137:8-9

 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
    happy is the one who repays you
    according to what you have done to us.
**9** Happy is the one who seizes your infants
    and dashes them against the rocks.

The Babylonians entered Jerusalem and threw the Jewish babies over the wall onto the rock below in the valley. The psalmist wanted eye-for-eye justice. It is very easy to identify with the sentiment – look at what many Ukrainians Christians are feeling or saying at the moment. But these verses are not something to make a doctrine of. There are many other such examples

Being able to be in a real relationship where life is raw is the key point here, not the legitimising of every thought. If every thought would need to be doctrinally correct we would never pray!

*But we do need to be aware of the content of our songs and prayers. Often there can be different theological perspectives, errors or misunderstandings popularly sung or prayed.* There are times when I do not sing lines of verses in songs and when I do not say amen to some prayers and when I do not recite verses in the psalms. I pray with my mind as well as with my heart.

Whole-hearted does not mean empty-headed. We are called to pray with our minds too, with discernment.

1. **What sorts of prayers, verses of the bible or songs do you find hard to participate in?**
2. **Romance – is a passionate component of whole-hearted prayer**

The psalmist says *7But I, by your great love, can come into your house;*

In worship there are of course wonderful mystical moments when we are all caught up in love and praise and mystical union with our Lord, where we flow in the Spirit. This should not lead to non-sense but a pre-sense that the Lord has come amongst us.

I loved Paul Lambert’s example in a previous sermon when he quoted Michelangelo who sculpted the beautiful marble statue of David. Michelangelo said the statue was already in the block of marble and all he had to do was to chisel away at the block to reveal it. Paul Lambert said we all have the capacity to be whole hearted – to see the David within the block. Rather than think we need to pray more and longer maybe we need to fall in love with God again. The Sacred Romance is a book that changed Rob Medley’s prayer life. Rob was a former member of our church who has passed away but was married to Gill Medley. He said this book, the Sacred Romance, changed his tired relationship with God and restored love and adoration for God into his life again. Maybe Lent will be a time when you fall in love with God again. When you are in love ….you get to pray…you hang around ….you dream….you get caught up…in divine love…’alone with the alone’ as the mystics says. The apostle Paul describes how he was caught up in the Spirit, the Apostle John was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day and Elizabeth and Mary sing their revolutionary songs of hope and the people, angels and creatures of heaven adore God as they surround his throne in the book of Revelation.

1. **Why not play Keith Green’s song “Make My Life A Prayer To You” and then reflect together on this theme of sacred romance. How can you fall in love again – rekindle a holy passion? Lent is about Our Lord’s Passion, His great love for us.**
2. **Rhythm is getting into the swing of whole-hearted prayer**

Ps 5 v4 says “**3** In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly. O lord in the morning hear my voice”

This psalm is likely to have been used in morning worship. Note that Ps 3 was used in morning prayer, Ps 4 evening prayer and then Ps 5 followed in another morning prayer.

I am glad of morning and evening prayers. Some people are larks others are owls and a few small birds eat at midday! I remember a Billy Graham trainer telling me he was an atheist before he had 2 cups of coffee. Some cannot start their day without prayer/bible reading and others cannot start their day full stop!

But whole hearted prayer leads to a rhythm that fits our bio-rhythm. We need to develop a way of relating meaningfully that suits our own disposition and bio-chemistry.

1. **What is your preferred rhythm of prayer?**
2. **Do you need to experiment with different approaches?**
3. **Reflection and repentance is a vital contritional aspect of whole-hearted prayer.**

***8 Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness
 because of my enemies***

 ***make your way straight before me.***

The Psalmist reflects on the character of the person who can enter God’s presence and also on the character of God. It may seem like someone being very judgemental in this psalm but you could also consider it as a portrayal of a God who is not evil, not bloodthirsty, not unjust but who is good and generous and loving. Notice the psalmist says he can only come into God’s presence because of God covenant love, Gods loving kindness, God’s undeserved favour and gift. There is a sense that not only does the psalmist want to be good but also does not want to be evil – there is a reflection going on here. Lent for us is a time for reflection and for us to repent of those things that are evil such as greediness, lewdness, drunkenness, deceit, conceit, selfishness etc.

1. **What does the verse “*8 Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness” mean for you this Lent?***
2. **Do you need to have a more rigorous self-examination this Lent?**
3. **2 phrases resonate with me personally this Lent - dissolute living or resolute discipleship? aesthetic indulgence or ascetic diet? What resonates with you this Lent?**
4. **“Dust and Glory” prayer booklet and book both offer an opportunity for us to become more real about ourselves, our failures and our life of faith. Are you going to use “Dust and Glory” this Lent? and if so, in what ways can you share insights and prayers together?**
5. **Renewal is the ensuing joy of whole-hearted prayer**

**11** But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
    let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
    that those who love your name may rejoice in you.

**12** Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous;
    you surround them with your favour as with a shield.

This is not a smug self-righteous conclusion but the psalmist has a renewed sense of a God who will listen to our laments, our complaints, our yearnings, a renewal in God who will bring justice to the earth, in a God in whom we can find ultimate protection, and place our utmost confidence and joy – that is the flow of this liturgical prayer and the aim of worship.

1. **In what ways does worship and prayer - liturgical or extempore (including the gift and interpretation of tongues) lead to personal or corporate joy? Can you share any experience in your life where this has been so.**
2. **Can you be in a regular state of joy?**
3. **For further reflection and exploration on this theme contrast Psalm 5 with the prayer of Jesus in John 17.**