

13th August, 2023

The paper-version Service



To Begin: Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe, light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's Service.

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Song:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Save me from its guilt and power.

Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress,
Helpless, look to Thee for grace:
Foul, I to the fountain fly,
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

Not the labour of my hands
Can fulfil Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All could never sin erase,
Thou must save, and save by grace.

While I draw this fleeting breath,
When mine eyes shall close in death,
When I soar to worlds unknown,
See Thee on Thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.

The Sermon by Rob Hughes: God is Strength. Read Psalm 81, John 4:1-10

Today's psalm speaks to people - in this case Israel - who do not obey the Lord's Commandments - who turn from his ways and put their own wills first.

To call them 'disobedient' doesn't quite cover the message. The real concern is whether they are actually listening! (Remember the 'Shema', Deuteronomy 6:4, later recalled in Mark 12:29).

Psalm 81 is important *as well as* remarkable among the psalms. It's the middle psalm of the middle scroll of the psalms (there were five originally) which means it's at the centre of the Judaism's Song Book. Yet, if we had asked the Israelites which is the

middle psalm of all 150 of them, most would have said, like us, "Psalm 75". Its physical centrality, however, announces its huge spiritual significance.

Listening

At the heart of Psalm 81, in verse 8b, God says: 'O Israel, if you would only listen to me!' It's a sad expression of our failure to acknowledge God's providence in Creation, failure to recognise the One who does the giving; failure to accept that we have any reciprocal obligation. And it is this same God who sent a national into exile on account of these failings!

But was disobedience the reason? Isn't disobedience a symptom of something more profound? More likely at issue is whether the people even bothered to listen. Yes. God is addressing Israel; but we all know what it means to close our ears. We've all done it. Not everything said is agreeable.

When we caution our children against danger, it's frustrating when they will not listen! But we shouldn't be surprised. The standard advice they receive is: 'Be true to yourself!' 'Fulfill your potential'; dream big! (Not exactly God-centred counsel!)

However, notice how God reflects on the problem: Verse 11 - "But my people did *not listen to my voice*; Israel would *not submit to me*. [v12] So I gave them over to *their stubborn hearts*, to follow *their own counsels*. [v13] Oh, that Israel would walk in *my ways*!"

The issue is obviously not as simple as closed ears. Notice how the first and second parts of the verses build the argument:

- *Verse 11*: God says the people didn't listen to "*my voice*." And the next line connects that observation with, "Israel would *not submit to me*." It's saying they would not listen because they did not accept God's will.
- *Verse 12*: God gives them over "to their stubborn hearts," and connects that conclusion with their evident preference for "*their own counsels*." It's saying their stubbornness stemmed from their preference for *their own counsels*. *They put more trust in their own reasoning*.
- *Verse 13* - is the central verse and contains God's 'final' sigh, 'Oh', which serves to emphasise the sadness in his longing. The people won't "listen to me," which underlines why they didn't "walk in *my ways*." God's concludes that Israel was determined to carry on as they were.

Hearing

So the issue was never just *not* listening to God. It was preferring not to listen. Though we might accept this could be a problem for other church traditions, let's be honest, most here are thinking it's not an issue that applies to us.

But think on. Belief in God requires first that we trust in what we cannot see (Paul). That's difficult enough. But a lot gets in the way, too. Here in our reading from John's gospel this morning, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman who is not open to him. Her religious beliefs have made him hard to accept. Her encounter shows how easy it is to erect needless barriers, - how we can fill our faith with false certainties, lean upon our own comfortable misunderstandings and stop listening.

Samaritans were among the first Hebrew inhabitants of ancient Israel. They settled in what is currently known as the West Bank, around Mount Gerizim. Their ancestors were among the earliest followers of God and they doggedly defended faith in the form handed down to them. It was 'authentic' and beyond change. Barriers were not unique to Samaritans. Pharisees dedicated their whole lives to the study and practice of religion. Like today's lawyers, their scholarly understandings were based upon expert opinion, on precedent and keen argument. We may be more vulnerable than we might imagine to developing closed minds.

Who is to say Samaritans and Pharisees were not once wide open to God? Yet attempts to create our own models of perfect faith can bring us to a kind of 'deafness' - worshipping religion rather than God. For does it really matter to God whether Mount Gerizim or Mount Zion is acknowledged as the centre for worship, or how this or that ritual is performed? Faith, says Jesus, just needs 'good soil' (Matthew 13:1-23).

Jesus is not unkind to the Samaritan woman at the well, John 4:1-10;21-23: "Woman", he says, 'believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The lesson of psalm 81, then, isn't *merely* the need to "listen to God"; it is not to allow our ways, our counsels, our preferences and traditions to take precedence over God's ways. And it might be wise to take that advice, bearing in mind that the psalm was written during an enforced exile of the Jewish people, ordered by God as their punishment for going their own way!

As faithful people, do we believe in the scriptures, and we all do actually want to submit to God's ways 'in spirit and truth' (John 4:24) ? It's not easy. We have to be prepared for our settled views to be upset. We might wish to continue pleasing ourselves. But we know now what God asks - and we know it's importance. God's ways come first. So when God says, Matthew 23:13-22. " Oh, that they would but listen to me!" we should be ready to answer: 'Speak Lord, we await'.

Codicil: Although I stand by what I've said, I've not been entirely open: I, too, sometimes find it hard to want to hear, make insufficient space in my life to listen. I am impatient. I watch-on as the world cripples my dreams of faith - mourning for what could and ought to be. I cry out at the injustice. Yet, what are my dreams to God's scheme? The last prophetic verses of this psalm ring out in hope. They say to us: 'When at last you listen, the enemies of faith will be subdued, and together you will share the abundance of Creation' - and wasn't that God's wish from the very beginning! We pitch our tents on a plot of borrowed from God for a short season. It is 'good' soil, upon which God's justice must eventually prevail! In time to come, then, no one will wander homeless or go hungry. For God is good.

Is that it? Yes. But, to all those, like me, among the 'hard of hearing', Jesus says if you have decided to listen, you WILL hear. And to those who fear they will hear only

their imagination, I say: If you believe God lives IN you, then trust - listen - to 'your' inner teacher, His Spirit within you. Trust your IN tuition. God loves you.

Prayers: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* (Philippians 4:4-6)

- Pray for this day, and the coming week.
- Pray for justice, mercy, peace, and hope.
- Pray for individuals, neighbours, and for family & friends.
- Pray for the Church.

Collect: Tenth Sunday after Trinity: Let your merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of your humble servants; and that they may obtain their petitions make them to ask such things as shall please you; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.*

Blessing to be declared over yourselves, The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

The Notices: We are now holding services in the building on Sundays at 8am and 9.30am, and are live streaming the 9.30 service. This Paper Service will continue for the moment and is generally available the week after the service.

- Tea and Chat & Bowls: Wed.16th August at 2pm, Church Hall and Church.
- Coffee and Questions: 23rd August at 11am in Church Hall.
- Tea and Praise TBA.
- COGS Tots: 2nd Mondays.
- COGS Tinytots: Monday mornings.