

A sermon preached by Emma Hodge at Evensong on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2018 at the Church of St. Michael and All Angels, Sandhurst

I wonder what your thoughts on the psalms are? Varied? Musical? Never given them a thought? Don't like them? That part of the service where..... Source of guidance and inspiration whatever the circumstances? All are valid response but psalms are an integral to our worship in Morning Prayer and evensong psalms are said or sung and at most weeks at 9:30 there is a psalm in some format. And tonight I want to focus on just one of the psalms; Psalm 81 which was sung earlier, *Tonight's psalm is in 17 verses in the Book of Common prayer, however those eagle eyed among you may have noticed that the version in most bibles contain sixteen verses. When I refer to a verse tonight, it will be the verses in the Book of Common Prayer and they are on pages 515/516 of the red prayer books.*

Tonight's psalm was written by Asaph who was appointed by King David to be in charge of the liturgy to be used in public worship in Jerusalem. This psalm was set for use at a festival and different commentators argue for two different times, the first is Rosh Hashanah - the Jewish New Year and the second is Sukkot - the Feast of the Tabernacles. There are good cases for both, but not I am going to focus on either of these but instead on the message of the psalm. The psalm refers to other parts of the Old Testament, especially Exodus and Deuteronomy, which the Jewish people would have been very familiar with.

When you look at the psalm it appears to be in two parts, the first part is about praising God through music and reminding them how God was always with them and using the story of Joseph as an example. The psalm emphasises that all types of music both playing instruments and singing are to be used. Using music in worship is something we are familiar with, the majority of our services here at St. Michael's has music in one form or another (the exception being the 8am service each Sunday) and many of us will use music in our private worship. I was struck with the story that John Castle told this morning about how in a North Korean Prison Camp they were still using music to worship God, having to sing in whispers to prevent detection, which would have been almost certain death. Yet even there, they worshipped God through Music, just like the psalmist instructed them. There are several points that can be raised about worshipping God, but in order to keep this sermon short, I'm going to move onto the second part of the psalm.

In the second part of the psalm, the tone changes with clear instruction at verse 9 (8 in bible) the speaker, who is God, expresses his exasperation with the readers of the psalm that they had forgotten everything that God had done for them. He had freed them from slavery in Egypt, but they still complained, they were busy complaining and talking to God but they were not listening, trusting and obeying God.

We have an amazing God, who is always with us which is fairly easy to acknowledge and remember but that is just one point of the psalm, we need to trust God, to listen to him and to obey Him and those are definitely easier said than done. When we do trust and obey God only then will we have the courage to stand up and be

## Psalm 81

willing to take risks and to say that what we believe is different from what those around us believe. The psalmist warns of the dangers of following strange Gods, and this is a variation of one of the Ten Commandments and John Castle reminded us earlier that there are strange gods in our society today, those of ego and political correctness. Obeying our God, the true God is not easy and can be achieved by listening to God.

Listening to God is never easy and can be achieved through both reading and understanding the bible but also through prayer, and not just prayer which only lists our concerns (or complaining - like the Jewish people did) but by listening and trying to hear God's voice; something that is always hard as not only do we have to listen for his voice and what he wants us to do, but quite often doubts creep in and you doubt that you have heard God and you are just thinking that your own desires are what God wants (even if they are!).

Listening to God is only one part but we also need to obey God and obeying God is also trusting in God. Trust and Obeying God sometimes seems hard but if we submit to God's authority then it helps to develop our relationship with God. As the psalmist reminds us, God has done so much for us, when life gets on top of us and we struggle it can be easy to take it for granted. However in this country we are blessed with so much compared to other people in other countries.

The psalmist reminds us that if we realise everything that God has given to us, including the free will not to follow and obey him, then we want to worship God, which is the first part of the psalm.

The psalm uses other part of scripture to reinforce the message to God will never leave us and ensures that we have everything we need. The benefit of living by God's is illustrated in verse 17 (16 in bible) **“He Should have fed them also with the finest wheat flour and with honey out of the stony rock should I have satisfied thee”**.

In this example, the psalmist uses the need that the Jewish people who had been led out of Egypt had a need for, good quality food, food that they needed to survive but more than that not just food as fuel but good the finest possible. Food is not what we need, but God knows what we need and he wants to provide it to us if only we listen and obey God.

Amen