

Psalm 107 - Mother's Day/Mothering Sunday

Good morning! My name is Ceri and I am a first-year ordinand at Trinity College. I am looking forward to getting to know you all better when we can meet in person! Honestly, I am a little nervous this morning, and not entirely sure why I agreed to preach on Mother's Day. This is a day of great celebration, especially in its modern popular form as a way of saying thank you to our mothers, but it can also be a difficult day for many who maybe have troubled relationships with their mothers, or who want to be mothers but for whatever reason that has not been possible. For many of us, this mother's day may be harder if we are unable to spend time with our families or have lost loved ones in the past year. Whether you are celebrating or mourning today, take it to God. That is the central theme of this sermon today.

There's another reason why this mother's day feels difficult for me. If you count Monday as the start of a week, this week began with International Women's Day and has ended with mother's day - two days designed to celebrate women and all their manifold contributions to our world and our society. Yet in the middle of the week, we heard the news that the body of a young woman had been found, Sara Everard, who had gone missing while walking home at night. The man who was arrested in connection with her murder was a police officer, a man she should have been able to trust to protect her. On the same day, a man was arrested in South Wales for the death of Wenjing Lin - a sixteen-year-old girl who was stabbed while working in her parents' takeaway restaurant. I also came across a statistic that said in a recent survey, 97% of women who responded said that they had experienced some form of sexual harassment in their lifetimes - from microaggressions such as inappropriate jokes, through to the big scary stuff. These stories left me feeling heartbroken that in the year of our Lord 2021 women are still living in fear, are being marginalised or unappreciated. And this is not just a problem in society in general - it happens in church too. You may have heard stories of high-profile Christian leaders accused of sexual misconduct, or maybe you have heard about it happening in other churches.

I'm not saying any of this to condemn men in general or make you feel uncomfortable. Sometimes it is important to acknowledge the difficult situations in the world and how they make us feel. The news this week has weighed heavily on my soul, I wonder how you are feeling at this time? This last year has been hard on us all, with everyone experiencing so much loss and pain and hardship. We have seen the most vulnerable in our society being disproportionately affected by the pandemic, we have seen people marginalised for the colour of their skin or their gender, we have seen injustice in the world apparently going unchecked. There are so many things in the present time that can cause us sadness or anxiety.

A few weeks ago, I heard about a scientist who had developed a new method for testing for Covid, an alternative to the nose and throat swab, which required the participant to step into a specially set up room on their own and scream as a way to collect their sample. I think for many people, screaming seems like a very appropriate reaction to everything that is going on in the world right now. What can we do? How can we process all these emotions and difficult situations we may be experiencing?

And so, we come to the Psalms. This term I have been greatly appreciating a module in which we are studying the psalms. Often when we think of the psalms, we think of them as prayers of praise and worship - certainly the bits that get quoted most often in our modern songs and hymns are the more joyful, hopeful verses. Most of the ones that we can remember when we quote our favourite Bibles are the positive ones too - 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want'; 'Taste and see that the Lord is good, oh the joy of those who take refuge in him'; 'Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart'; 'He is my light and my salvation, whom have I to fear' (these have all been verses that I have quoted as favourites).

Yet scholars who have categorised the psalms have found that much more common are the psalms of lament, or complaint. The ones that cry out to God about injustice, from a place of pain and fear. One of the significant things about these psalms is that they were all regularly used in

temple worship - many of them are subtitled with the instructions for the service leader or what we think are musical directions. I think the ancient Israelites knew something about corporate lament that could be very useful to us in the present.

Many of these psalms of lament move from expressions of despair to those of trust and hope. Sometimes the psalm starts in pain and sorrow, but moves to faith in God by the end. Sometimes the hope is fleeting in the midst of despair, but it is there (apart from Psalm 88, which stays in the dark place all the way through, but that is necessary too, sometimes).

This structure of movement between hope and despair is reflected in the structure of the book of psalms as a whole - the majority of the lament psalms are in the first part of the book, with a gradual movement to more and more songs of praise. The psalter is subdivided into five books, and the last book (which begins with psalm 107) is predominantly made up of songs of praise and worship, of acknowledging the unfailing love of God and his goodness to his people.

To me this movement of despair to hope is so significant. So many times I have come to God in a place of despair and pain, and as I pray and pour out my soul I find some form of peace in my struggles as my perspective is brought into line with his. This is what we see in individual psalms and in the book of psalms as a whole.

That is why I chose psalm 107 as our reading today. It talks of the people of God turning to him in their distress and God rescuing and restoring them. When I read this psalm this week it helped to restore my hope. God is faithful, he has brought us through so many things in each of our lives and will continue to do so.

We didn't hear the whole psalm (it's quite long!) but if you go back and read it through later, you will notice that one verse is repeated several times throughout the text: 'Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind'. The Israelites recognised that God had redeemed them so many times from their enemies, from their troubles and suffering, even when they had not always been faithful to him. Even though we are living in dark and difficult days, we can look back on our lives and see and remember the many ways God has shown his love for us, and use that as fuel for our faith that he will once again bring us through even this.

The psalms are helping me to relearn that whatever I am feeling - happy or sad, despair or hope, joy or grief - God can deal with it. He is unchanging, and he loves us with an unfailing love. Whatever you are feeling at this time, take all your emotions to God. And if you are not sure what to pray, try praying through one of the psalms. All of human experience is in those pages, and they can help you find the words to express what you are feeling.

If you don't take anything else away from all that I have said today, remember this - The LORD is good, and his steadfast love endures forever.