

Our Old Testament Reading

Our first Bible reading is a Psalm of David.

David was the greatest King in the history of Israel.

Their national emblem is the Star of David.

Before being anointed king, he was a shepherd, a warrior, and a singer-songwriter.

He had a hard passage to the throne because King Saul was jealous of David, and felt threatened by him.

Saul's life quest was to hunt David down and kill him.

So David was also a refugee.

When he writes of God who 'redeems your life from the pit' he knew what he was talking about.

Out of his experience, of hardship and suffering, David writes "Praise the Lord, my Soul."

For David, as for us, the true path through hardship is reliance on God's promises, and praise for his name.

Celeste will now read an abridged version of Psalm 103.

Our New Testament Reading

Our second Bible reading is very succinct and in the crisp style of St Mark.

It records a surprising moment in Jesus life.

He was incredibly popular in the region of Galilee – somewhat north of today's West Bank.

News of his amazing healing ability had spread like wild-fire, and people crowded in from the local villages.

But it wasn't fame that Jesus sought.

His healing powers were supposed to point people towards God, and to authenticate Jesus as The Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Instead the miracles became the focus of the people's adulation.

So early the next morning, Jesus retreated to an isolated spot, prayed to his Father, and reset his priorities.

Celeste will now read from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1, beginning at verse 35.

We now have a brief reflection on our Bible readings:

If we really want to understand what God is laying on our hearts,
a good place to start is to follow Jesus example and pray.

Let's pray.

Father God, our world, our church, our community have been turned upside down.
Help us now to understand your will, and your calling for us in these uncertain times. Amen.

I just love David's perspective on life.

The lyrics of this ancient song are simply amazing.

Even as the most powerful ruler of his time, David sees the frailty of our human condition:

We are formed of dust, life is brief – it flourishes like a flower, the wind blows over it and it is gone.

How resonant is that of what we are learning today.

All our military might, all our political power, cannot stop the Corona Virus.

Sadly, we're told the death toll will be very significant, but with everybody's help we might be able to avoid many deaths.

Even so there will be many grieving families, and the emotional toll will also be great.

Like the refugee David, our lives are being turned upside down in ways we cannot imagine.

How then should we pray?

David does not look down into the pit of gloom, nor should we.

He looks up – not to the stars – but to their creator, to the Lord of Heaven and Earth – to our creator.

He looks up not to some remote deity who does not care, but to the Lord whom he knows as 'A father who has compassion on his children'.

Jesus too taught us to look up to God as a loving Father, as Abba - Daddy. That's how we should approach God in prayer ... Daddy!

He has compassion because 'he knows how we are formed' – after all he did the forming!

He knows our frailty, our vulnerability, our fears, our suffering.

He knows and he cares.

It is he who 'forgives all your sins, and heals all your diseases, who redeems you from the pit, and crowns you with love and compassion'.

This is Abba, the Father to whom we pray.

For David, even in the most difficult of circumstances, he puts his trust in God.

In Psalm after Psalm, time after time, his prayer emerges in full-on praise.

"Praise the Lord, O my soul!" is the beginning and the ending, and constant refrain of this Psalm.

David begins with praise of thanksgiving for all the blessings God has poured out on us;
and he ends with praise of worship for the very character of who God is.

It was his relationship with the Father, his sense of perspective, his heart of thanksgiving and praise,
that gave shape to David's life;

even when he was in the darkest of places.

Jesus also found clarity and fortitude in prayer to his loving Father.

From his early morning time of solitary prayer, Jesus set out in a new direction: "Let us go somewhere else so I can preach there also.

That is why I have come."

This is the last of our Lent series on prayer based on John Pritchard's book "How to Pray".

This final part begins with 'How to Pray in Bad Times', a title very apt for the present situation.

In the bad times, like these, we too can put our trust in our loving Father.

I think the message running through this part of the book is that this kind of prayer is a marathon, not a quick fix.

It requires training and persistence, it takes us through the pain barriers and the exhaustion, but if we persist, it also leads us on to the finish line.

You may remember that spectacular moment in the Rio 2016 Olympics when Alistair Brownlee gave up certain gold, to help his brother Jonny cross the line for triathlon silver.

We too need to be a people who support each other, not just in practical ways, but also in prayer.

When our own resources are spent, when we struggle even in prayer – just as Jesus himself did in Gethsemane – we too should follow Jesus example and ask others to pray with us.

In our prayer, we share God's heart of compassion for a suffering world; expressed poignantly in the words of Timothy Rees.

"God is love, and he enfoldeth all the world in one embrace;

with unfailing love he holdeth every child of every race.

And when human hearts are breaking under sorrow's iron rod,

then they find that self-same aching deep within the heart of God."

Amen.