

MODERN PSALMS

By JIM COTTER

THE HEBREW PSALTER REFLECTS centuries of experience, both personal and corporate. The New Testament reflects but three or four generations of experience, and contains but few psalm-like canticles and hymns, including what we know as the Magnificat and the Easter Anthems. Centuries later, in English, metrical psalms and hymns began to be written, some of them based on the Hebrew psalms, and thus the tradition was maintained and adapted, and described, interestingly, as the 'Momentum' in the title of George Guiver's book, *Faith in momentum*.¹ At first only the words of Scripture were used: think of 'The Lord's my shepherd' from the Scottish Psalter of 1650, usually sung to the tune *Crimond*, familiar to most of us from many a funeral: there are no further thoughts or variant images apart from those found in the original. But not long after that, Joseph Addison (1672–1719) did something rather different in his hymn 'The Lord my pasture shall prepare'. Reading it, you can easily imagine that he had just come back from a weekend at a friend's country house and had wandered in the park: 'verdant landscape', 'sultry glebes' (not a scene I associate with anywhere in the Middle East), 'dewy meads', 'streams shall murmur', and (with a smile) 'friendly crook'. He is not being untrue to the spirit of the original psalm, but he is quite clearly setting it in the country landscape of his day (while ignoring the conditions in which most people lived and worked in rural England at the end of the seventeenth century). Some hundred and fifty years later H. W. Baker (1821–77) wrote 'The King of love my shepherd is'. He does something different again, deliberately weaving the old text in and out of the language and associations of the New Testament. There is the phrase 'The King of love'; there is the image of the shepherd in the parable of the lost sheep, who 'on his shoulder gently laid, and home rejoicing brought me'; as well as the rod and staff, there is 'thy cross before to guide me'.

So there is precedent for new unfoldings of the old, and perhaps even permission both for new imagery and for reference to contemporary experience. After all, we have lost track of many of the original contexts of the psalms, the specifics of people and events. But it is clear that they were being, in their own fashion, contemporary, and to limit our own prayer to mere repetition has the danger either of our

becoming locked in the past or of our gliding gently but blandly over phrases and images that have worn so smooth as no longer to be able to be bearers of meaning.

Mind you, even to suggest a new association or two with a psalm so well known as Psalm 23 is to invite fraught cries of anguish and accusations of meddling. Nevertheless, I have dared to join the psalmic succession of Addison and Baker by writing a version with a refrain echoing the gospels: 'Dwell in me that I may dwell in you'. It includes a section that brings in reference to the host-cum-slave practice of Jesus at meal times:

You spread a banquet before me,
you anoint my head with oil,
you stoop to wash my feet,
you fill my cup to the brim.

There is also a 'collect' at the end of the psalm which picks up the imagery of water and food and makes explicit references to baptism and the eucharist:

Wise and loving Shepherd, you guide your people in ways of your truth, leading us through the waters of baptism and nourishing us with the food of eternal life: keep us in your mercy, and so guide us through the perils of evil and death, that we may know your joy at the heart of all things, both now and for ever.

That comes from *Through desert places* (Cairns Publications, 1989, p 50), one of three books of new unfoldings of the Psalms.

In her book *All desires known* Janet Morley has included a number of freshly wrought psalms, many of which bring the experience of womankind into clearer focus than is true of most of the Hebrew Psalter. Here is one of her psalms, 'In the midst of the company',² which speaks in the voice of Jesus when a woman approaches to anoint him (Mk 14:1-9):

In the midst of the company I sat alone,
and the hand of death took hold of me;
I was cold with secrecy,
and my God was far away.

For this fear did my mother conceive me,
and to seek this pain did I come forth?
Did her womb nourish me for the dust,

or her breasts, for me to drink bitterness?

O that my beloved would hold me
and gather me in her arms;
that the darkness of God might comfort me,
that this cup might pass me by.

I was desolate, and she came to me;
when there was neither hope nor help for pain
she was at my side;
in the shadow of the grave she has restored me.

My cup was spilling with betrayal,
but she has filled it with wine;
my face was wet with fear,
but she has anointed me with oil,
and my hair is damp with myrrh.
The scent of her love surrounds me;
it is more than I can bear.

She has touched me with authority;
in her hands I find strength.
For she acts on behalf of the broken,
and her silence is the voice of the unheard.
Though many murmur against her, I will praise her,
and in the name of the unremembered,
I will remember her.

The theme of creation runs through a number of the Psalms, not least Psalm 104. But we have begun to hear a history of the universe different from the one understood by our ancestors. I was encouraged by some work done by Angela Tilby when producing a television series called *Soul* a few years ago to try and capture some of the excitement of the scientist in a version of that psalm which I called 'Exuberant wonder'.³ The refrain for each of the sections of the psalm reads:

Marvellous and vigorous,
splendidly unfolding,
the wonders of creation
we contemplate with awe.

Praise be to the Creator:
fresh energy divine,
with passion and with tenderness
brings beauty new to birth.

Here is the first section:

Light from the dawn of the cosmos,
 reaching out over billions of years;
 the sun so familiar and steady,
 spun off from that ancient fireball:
 the primal explosion murmurs,
 we hear the hiss of the aeons,
 whispering insistent relic
 of the original moment of time.
 The beginning was all flame,
 and the flame was unfurled into time;
 all that has come into being
 began at the heart of the flame.
 Slowly the fire cooled,
 the storm of particles ceased,
 combed into structures of matter,
 clouds and clusters of galaxies.
 The cosmic dust was scattered –
 a heart bursting into stars:
 truly strange is our ancestor –
 we ride on its pulsing still.

The fourth section reflects the way in which we have a much more complete understanding of the world's geography than did the psalmists of old:

The eyes of the satellites roam,
 the soaring balloons hover,
 the gliders smoothly range,
 they see the mosaics of earth.
 There in the tangle of rain forests
 is the clicking of insects, the slither of snakes,
 the screech of parrots, the blanket of rain,
 and numberless species yet to be named.
 There jostle the shining mountains,
 lands of the long white clouds,
 eagles soaring to their eyries,
 snow leopards ruling the heights.
 There ripple the sands of the desert,
 where the barren flowers at the touch of rain,
 where the fennec fox watches and listens,
 through the deep silence that falls with the night.
 The lions of the savannahs roar,
 the cedars of Lebanon spread their branches,
 the cattle graze in the pastures,

the cats curl up in the sun.

The cats have their mention because it was a warm summer day when I wrote that and I had a feline companion by the back door. Those who know of New Zealand as Aotearoa will know that is a Maori word for 'land of the long white cloud', a country completely unknown to humankind in the centuries BCE.

Some of the psalms have a quieter, more domestic counterpoint to the givenness of the world and universe of which we are a part. They speak of homes and families and friends. Psalm 145:15-16 in the NRSV reads,

The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.

I have heard those verses used as part of a grace before meals in Anglican Franciscan friaries, and it became the starting point for a new unfolding of the psalm.⁴ I omit here the last line of each four-line section: 'we give thanks to our God'.

For the dawning of the light,
for the sun at midday,
for the shade of the evening,

For the rising of the moon,
for the guiding stars,
for the comets on cue,

For the breaking of the fast,
for noontide's refreshment,
for the meal round the table,

For the greening of the woodland,
for the grains of the harvest,
for the fruits in their season,

For the cry of the baby,
for the flowering of youth,
for the strength of maturity,

For laws that protect us,
for those on alert,
for the routines of safety,

For the fall of the autumn,

for the quiet of winter,
for the boundary of death,

For the trust of friends,
for the blessings of home,
for the covenants of love,

For the unfailingly generous,
for the wisdom of years,
for constant compassion,

For the hidden who serve us,
for the water and power,
for work taken for granted . . .

In the midst of the everyday stalks the horrific and the tragic, not least the violence and violation we do to creation and to one another. But the psalmists of course were no strangers to the evil in human beings. They cry out with bitter anger and loud thunderings of vengeance. Here is an unfolding of Psalm 140 that takes its passion seriously but is specific to our times.⁵ It is followed by a prayer whose last few words may incorporate an insight of the Gospels.

Those who defraud the poor of their pensions,
those who deprive the poor of their land,
those who grow wealthy on the backs of the poor:

God of justice and power,
restrain them, confine them, bring them to their knees.

Those who have no coins for the meter,
those who walk far for their fuel,
those whose backs are bent low,

God of compassion and power,
rescue them, liberate them, lift up their hearts.

Those who fly flags of convenience,
those who pollute the rivers and streams,
those who release acid to clouds,

God of justice and power,
restrain them, confine them, bring them to their knees.

Those who sweat in the engine rooms,
those whose health is damaged by their work,
dwellers in forests where the leaves shrivel,

God of compassion and power,
rescue them, liberate them, lift up their hearts.

Those who trade in drugs that destroy,
those who smuggle arms that recoil on their makers,
governments who cynically collude,

God of justice and power,
restrain them, confine them, bring them to their knees.

Those with poison in their veins,
those who will never walk again,
people deprived of their rights,

God of compassion and power,
rescue them, liberate them, lift up their hearts.

Those who with malice slander their neighbours,
those who twist words for the sake of a scandal,
those who use words to boost their esteem,

God of justice and power,
restrain them, confine them, bring them to their knees.

Those who are deprived of their name,
those without value or worth,
those who know not their own language,

God of compassion and power,
rescue them, liberate them, lift up their hearts.

Those who beat the young to submission,
those who torture and rape,
those who violate their children,

God of justice and power,
restrain them, confine them, bring them to their knees.

Children who cower in fear,
all who are wounded and scarred,
survivors who twist in the darkness,

God of compassion and power,
rescue them, liberate them, lift up their hearts.

With the psalmist our anger rises at the harm we human beings cause one another. We cry out for the oppressed and defenceless – Let the arrogant and mighty crumble under the weight of their own evil! Let them be plunged into the quaking mire! Let burning coals rain down on their heads! Let them be hunted to an exhausted and terror-struck end! Bring them to their knees at the last, restrained, confined, powerless to harm, at the mercy of those they have wronged.

The pandemic of AIDS and the genocide of Auschwitz face us with peculiar twists to human evil and suffering on such a scale that our poor hearts are vulnerable to breaking when we are faced with those who are dying in pain and indignity, and those who have survived, burdened with a strange guilt. Psalm 22 is a classic location for the complaint and lament of humanity, and it has often been linked with the crucifixion of Jesus. Here are three additions to that psalm, appropriate between verses 18 and 19.⁶

The tanks of the mighty encircle me,
barbed wire and machine guns surround me.
They have marked my arm with a number,
and never call me by name.
They have stripped me of clothes and of shoes,
and showered me with gas in the chamber of death.

I cry out for morphine but no one hears me.
Pinned down by straitjacket I scream the night through.
I suffocate through panic in the oxygen tent.
Sweating with fear, I await news of my doom.

No one comes near with an unmasked face,
no skin touches mine in a gesture of love.
They draw back in terror, speaking only
in whispers behind doors that are sealed.

Psalm 79 is a prayer for deliverance. It speaks of the ruins of Jerusalem and of corpses left unburied. It made me think of the earth, the bodies, the cities that today plead silently for deliverance from the ravages of human beings. We may be able to give voice to that silent plea. So here is a new psalm that took shape from that thought:⁷

We neglect, we ravage the body.
We rape the earth, your temple.
We pollute the rivers, the oceans.
We care not for the soil that sustains us.
And the earth cries out in pain.
The algae fills the creeks,
sucking down the unwary,
releasing its poisonous fumes.

We neglect, we ravage the body.
We take our pleasures with violence.
We forget the language of reverence.
We care not for the weak and the vulnerable.

And the people cry out in pain.
 Their anger rises in vengeance:
 they pass on the needles infected,
 they delight in spreading disease.

We neglect, we ravage the body.
 We flatten the beautiful cities.
 We ransack the places of prayer.
 We care not for beauty, for peace.
 And the land cries out in pain.
 The contorted ruins smoulder.
 The survivors stumble in shock,
 their children inherit their wounds.

We neglect, we ravage the body.
 Radiation drifts on the wind.
 Waste is dumped in the oceans.
 We care not for fish or for bird.
 And the trees cry out in pain,
 sprouting misshapen leaves.
 And earthquake in the depths of the seas
 splits open the canisters of doom.

O God, forgive our murderous deeds and blind, unthinking rage. Give us your spirit of compassionate anger, that we may live and work in harmony with you for the healing of the body of this planet, gasping for air, sores weeping on its skin. Make us a people of one earth, loved and cherished as bodies should.

If the hint of devastated rain forests and land deadened by erosion or radiation in the phrases in that prayer, 'gasping for air' and 'sores weeping on its skin', is the macrocosm of which the microcosm is the person infected with HIV, contracting the most common opportunistic diseases of lung complaints and skin cancer, I do not think the connection is coincidental.

Lest the reader think that either ancient psalmist or modern word-smith is all doom and gloom about the times in which they live, let me widen the vision with an encouraging psalm about a world of various faiths learning to try not to obliterate one another, the thoughts triggered by the cities mentioned in Psalm 87, the people of Jerusalem and their kinsfolk in Egypt and Babylon. This version is called 'Cities of pilgrimage'.⁸

Refrain: Lured by the God whose greatness is Love,
 we draw near to the gates of the City.

Egypt, the old enslaver,
 Babylon, the ancient foe,
 Philistines over the border,
 Phoenicians from the shores of the sea,
 Ethiopians from over the mountains,
 those who once were our enemies
 now worship God in Jerusalem.

The eye of faith looks to the dawn,
 to the day of peace universal,
 to a new age of the salvation of God,
 to an earth transfigured, made new.
 The dancers dance; the singers make melody;
 the fountains of God enliven the City.

The peoples are widely scattered
 over the earth and across the sea.
 A poet with vision broods
 as the pilgrims draw near to Jerusalem,
 to the God who draws them together
 to give praise on the holy mountain.

The peoples of another time,
 citizens of far-flung cities,
 the powerful of Washington,
 of Moscow and Beijing,
 the weak of Sao Paulo,
 of Soweto and Calcutta,
 all the peoples give you praise.

Pilgrims to Jerusalem,
 to Mecca and to Rome:
 Faithful of Canterbury,
 of Geneva and Byzantium:
 Gatherers to the rivers,
 to the Naranjara and the Ganges:
 Markers of the journey
 through the deserts and the mountains:
 they celebrate in gratitude,
 in wonder and rejoicing.

No room for the aloof and arrogant,
 for the divisive and superior spirit:
 God is greater than the idols of nations,
 deeper in mystery than any faith.
 Like a people of old, small, obscure,
 stretched beyond fear to a wider belief,

so are God's people today
 challenged by a love that is awesome,
 drawn to the gates of the city of God,
 whose name is yet to be known.

Living God, greater than the human heart, greater than all the peoples
 of the world, greater than the faiths that try to cage you, shatter the
 idols which we make to keep us safe, to claim you for ourselves, to
 portray you in superior ways. Humble us, living God, and draw us by
 the magnet of your Love into the glory of your Presence and the
 harmony of a new Jerusalem.

But faith itself is neither easy nor simple in our day – if ever it was.
 Its exploration leads us to dark and bewildering places, the dry deserts
 of inner cities and the parched inscape of our deeper selves. The
 psalmist typically brings the cry of longing together with that of hope,
 as in Psalm 63 and in this new unfolding:⁹

In the depths of my being you are my God,
 at the rising of the sun I seek your face.
 My heart thirsts for you, my flesh longs for you,
 in a barren and dry land where no water is.

I search for you in unexpected places,
 at the edges of the known, in the language of dreams,
 in the wilderness of the city streets,
 in the grim towers where the desperate dwell.

There may I look long and lovingly,
 there may I listen for the word beyond words,
 there may I wait for a glimpse of your glory,
 there may I utter strange songs of your praise.

For your love endures to the end,
 it is better even than life itself.
 So shall my lips praise you,
 and I shall lift up my hands in your name.

With food, shelter, and clothing we shall be content;
 with simple dignity we shall be rich in friends.
 The streets and squares of the city will be our meeting place,
 among the streets of the parks we shall breathe free and play.

With manna in my exile do you feed me,
 with water springing up from parched land.
 I am deeply satisfied with a sumptuous feast,
 my whole being resounds with murmurs of joy.

Courage have I found to face the creatures of the night,
 the terrible faces masking cries of abandonment,
 swords that glint in the darkness protecting the weak,
 jackals that swoop on those who dare near.

I am bewildered by mirrors distorting the truth,
 lost before hallucinations spun in the heat.
 Yet will I trust you through the blindness of light,
 through the delusions that threaten to destroy me.

I hear your voice. Do not be afraid.
 You sustain me in the watches of the night,
 your hovering wings give me shade on my journey.
 I stumble yet I trust you not to let go.

The faces of terror will prove my friends yet,
 guarding as they do my fragile soul-self,
 waiting the calm word of the approach of true love,
 waiting to be named as faithful and true.

So shall I emerge to the place of rejoicing,
 the child and the adult linked arm in arm.
 We shall see your face in all your creatures,
 we shall know the truth in our hearts.

Pioneer of the living way, give us courage to traverse the waste and
 barren places, trusting that we shall come at the last to our true home
 and to the city of our God.

The Psalter ends with a paean of praise, and so shall this glimpse of
 some of the possibilities of 'modern psalms'. Whether any of these
 efforts will provide some new tyres on which the 'Momentum' can
 move forward or will merely put spokes in the wheel, only use, critique
 and time will tell. And I do have to admit to self-indulgence in this
 unfolding of Psalm 150.¹⁰ I am particularly fond of the cello and the
 horn, but I can hardly object if you substitute two instruments of your
 own choice.

We praise you, O God, holy and beloved!
 We praise you for your glory and wisdom!
 We praise you for your creative power!
 We praise you for your deeds of deliverance!

We praise you in a glorious symphony!
 We praise you on the flute and harp!
 We praise you with the caress of the trumpet!
 We praise you with the solace of the cello!

We praise you on the quickening horn!
 We praise you on the strumming guitar!
 We praise you with the pipes of the clans!
 We praise you on the deep resounding drums!

We praise you in the unnoticed pauses
 that make music of disordered sounds!
 We praise you in the depths of the silence,
 in the music of the dance between eyes that love!

We praise you for all your gifts!
 We praise you for your mysterious being!
 We praise you for weaving us together!
 We praise you that we belong to the universe!

Let everything that breathes under the sun,
 let the voices of our ancestors of old,
 let worlds unknown, within and beyond,
 all on this glad day give you praise!

NOTES

¹ George Guiver, *Faith in momentum* (London: SPCK, 1990).

² Janet Morley, *All desires known* (London: SPCK, 1992), p 100.

³ Jim Cotter, *Towards the city* (Sheffield: Cairns Publications, 1993), pp 8–11. There are three books by Jim Cotter from which contemporary unfoldings of the Psalms are quoted: *Through desert places*, a version of Psalms 1–50; *By stony paths*, a version of Psalms 51–100; *Towards the city*, a version of Psalms 101–150. Copies can be obtained by writing to 47 Firth Park Avenue, Sheffield, S5 6HF.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 103–104.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 95–96.

⁶ Cotter, *Through desert places* (Sheffield: Cairns Publications, 1989), p 184.

⁷ Cotter, *By stony paths* (Sheffield: Cairns Publications, 1991).

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 79–80.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 25–26.

¹⁰ Cotter, *Towards the city*, p 114.