

Psalms for all ages

The psalms speak deeply to people who have known them all their lives, but how can we enable children and young people to become familiar with this treasure trove of prayer? Rona Orme has some suggestions.

I first encountered psalms at my (non-church) secondary school. They were the portion of scripture used each Wednesday so that all the girls, including those who were Jewish, could assemble for Prayers. We read them from the Authorised Version and I was entranced by their poetry, their rhythm and strange content. When I came to faith I began to discover their spiritual insights. Indeed, I have found across the years, 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.' (Psalm 119:105).

Of course children and adults generally learn best through story. It is easy to remember the great stories of Abraham and Moses, of Peter and Paul, and supremely, of Jesus. Stories help us remember facts and they help us make sense of our own lives. Brief Bible stories that tell us of Lydia and Dorcas and Naaman's slave girl can lodge in our minds and prompt us to ponder.

And yet, it is most often the Psalms to which we turn when we are in need of comfort and encouragement. A friend who works in hospice chaplaincy finds that verses from a psalm are the best scripture to be offered and received at the end of life. It is not the time for stories, it seems. Many elderly people have long acquaintance with the psalms from childhood even if they have not attended church for decades. When the psalms are so rarely included in Sunday worship these days, or if children are gathered into their own separate activities, how will this generation of children and young people gain such a familiarity? Here are my suggestions.

In public worship we can point out when psalms make their appearance. Some of our best known hymns are based on psalms – for example, *All people that on earth do dwell* (Ps 100) and *O worship the King* (Ps 104). If we use the response, 'This is the day that the Lord has made, **let us rejoice and be glad in it**', we can sometimes add that the greeting comes from Psalm 118: 24. When a set psalm is to be read, use the



The Lord is my shepherd (Psalm 23)

refrain provided in *Common Worship* and rehearse it a couple of times first so that everyone, poor and non-reader alike of whatever age, can join in. Similarly a verse or part-verse can be taught and used as a response within the intercessions.

What psalms might we choose to introduce? It is helpful to build up a repertoire so that everyone has a selection with which they are familiar. The obvious starting point is probably Psalm 23 as it is referred to so often and has clearly stood the test of time. The clear visual images of a shepherd, of green pasture, death, still waters and an overflowing cup are powerful. Someone who can recite or sing this from memory has words of comfort and encouragement always to hand. It may be helpful to suggest a slight emphasis on *my, me* and *I* so the personal connection can be emphasised. Beyond this, our own favourites will colour our selection. An older child or young person facing bullying may draw comfort from Psalm 56. Families who take a particular delight in nature may enjoy exploring Psalms 19: 1–6 or 98. The more familiar we are with the whole collection, the better we will be able to make suggestions or introduce new favourites.

There are psalms that can be closely linked with the seasons of the Church.

Psalm 80:1-8, with its plea for restoration, links with Advent, and Psalm 8 would work well during Christmas. Psalm 72, especially verses 10–15, echoes the visit of the Magi and the theme of Epiphany. Psalm 51: 1–10 is an obvious choice for Lent, while Psalm 118: 14–24 would be good for Easter. Ascensiontide to Pentecost could be illustrated by Psalm 47, and Psalm 24: 1–6 fits well with All Saints' Day. A display could be developed for a corner of a church, home or church school using a different psalm as a basis to reflect on each season.

Older children, especially those who enjoy facts, may be interested to learn that there are different kinds of psalms composed for different occasions. For example, the *Psalms of ascent*, or pilgrimage songs (Psalms 120–134), were probably sung by worshippers as they made their way to Jerusalem for festivals. Psalm 78 provides a concise history of the Exodus. *Psalms of praise*, such as 145–150, are perhaps easier to share with younger children and those new to faith. Their exuberant and joyful outpourings are infectious. However, we also need to provide young people with scripture that helps them both express and process distress, hurt and anger. *Psalms of lament*, such as 80, 85 and 90, meet this need. We do youngsters a disservice if we do not provide them with a full vocabulary with which to address God. We must be honest with them and explain that some of the psalms are full of anger – and that is all right in God's sight.

We may have the opportunity to introduce psalms in our main worship, in church school collective worship, in young people and children's groups or at home with our children or grandchildren. At home there can be time to explore a psalm over a wider timeframe, to build up a visual display as new ideas occur, and find different ways to use the psalm for intercession, lament or praise. Here are some suggestions for exploring psalms in this

way. These are followed by some worked examples.

Practical ideas for exploring a psalm with a children's group, in an all-age service or at home

Read the chosen psalm until you are familiar with the theme and imagery. Check a commentary if some sections are unclear. Gather some items or pictures to create a **visual focus**. If the psalm is being explored at home



Building a cityscape to illustrate Psalm 122.

over the course of a week, the display can be developed as members of the family think of different items to add.

Introduce the theme, explaining that it is a psalm of comfort or one that would have been used by people going to worship God, for example.

Teach the refrain as given in *Common Worship* so everyone can join in at some point. You may need a hand signal to indicate when the refrain is to be said. Sometimes it may be possible to learn to sign the refrain in BSL, to develop a rhythm so it can chanted, or to use hand movements. **Read the psalm aloud slowly**. Do not be afraid to read only a few verses at the first reading especially if there will be opportunities to return to the psalm over the next few days or even weeks. **Ask what word(s)** caught their attention **or what picture** came into their head. People with different spiritual or learning styles will have noticed different things. **Ask where**

they are in the psalm (or in the visual display if they are younger). Discuss if there is some **social action** they can undertake together.

Pray in a way that links with the psalm

You may wish to close by reading a single verse or by re-reading the whole psalm. This is an outline framework that can be adapted according to situation.



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Psalm 122 – a planned example

This might be regarded as a psalm about joining in.

Introduction: explain that this is a psalm of ascent used when worshippers were travelling to Jerusalem.

Visual focus: provide pictures of Jerusalem (Christmas cards might be interesting here); invite them to make a cityscape out of Lego or similar afterwards.

Share the psalm as outlined above.

Talk about what makes people happy or excited about going to church. Re-read verses 1–2 and explain they describe delight at going to Jerusalem to join in a festival. Verses 3–5 indicate the significance of Jerusalem. It was the most holy place in the world. Finally point out that the last verses are an instruction to pray for Jerusalem. Discuss if it is important to pray for our own church as well as for Jerusalem.

Respond: invite people to take photos on their phone next time they are on their way to church. What will they notice on their journey?

Pray as the psalm instructs for the peace of Jerusalem.

Find out the current news of Jerusalem. Research the work of www.embrace.org, a Christian charity that supports people in the Holy Land.

Psalm 1 – a planned example

This short psalm could be about how to live well.

Introduction: this psalm gives a picture of someone who lives well by delighting in God, and another of people who choose not to live by God's rules

Visual focus: Provide a picture of a healthy tree growing beside a river or of a diagram that shows the extensive roots below ground under a tree. A parlour palm pot-plant would also work.

Share the psalm as outlined above.

Talk about the two different kinds of people described in the psalm. Discuss whether it is easy to do the right things or to be blown off course. Is the tree a helpful image for someone who is trying to live God's way? What will God do for those who do the right thing?

Respond: Scatter some cress seeds onto damp kitchen roll. Watch them sprout and grow over the next few days (but remember to keep them lightly watered).

Pray: Invite people to choose one of the positive words from the psalm. Ask God to help them reflect on the word they have selected. Then hold a time of silence to contemplate. Even the smallest child can manage at least a minute if the silence is well-maintained around them.

Find out how much water a tree draws up in a day.

Psalm 91 – a planned example

A psalm about the powerful protection of God.

Introduction: Explain that everyone feels fearful of something at some time. The writer of this psalm wants to encourage people to take their anxiety to God in prayer.

Visual focus: Provide pictures or small models of some of the images such as angels, snakes, lions, wings, stones etc.

Share the psalm as outlined above.

Talk about whether all of the psalm is directed to God. Discuss some of the things that make people scared and how God might respond to those fears. What would it feel like to be covered by God's wings?

Respond: Make a friendship bracelet to wear as a reminder of God's promise in verses 14–15.

Pray: Say together the prayer in verse 2 and then keep a few moments of silence.

Find out about the work of The Children's Society which supports vulnerable children and families www.childrensociety.org.uk.