

## **Psalm 119<sup>1–8</sup>**

*Ballarat Cathedral*

*12<sup>th</sup> February 2023*

Have you a favourite psalm, and, if so, what is it? I'm sure many would pick Ps 23 (The Lord is my shepherd); some Ps 100 (which we sing as the hymn, All people that on earth do dwell sing to the Lord with cheerful voice); or perhaps Ps 51, that deeply intimate confession of sin: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your lovingkindness ..."

I doubt any would nominate Ps 119, the first stanza of which we have just heard. It is not a psalm many Christians enjoy.

For a start, it is enormously long—it is the longest chapter in the whole Bible—it is also very repetitive. This is because it was painstakingly constructed. The writer wrote a stanza for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet in turn. Within each stanza all verses begin with that letter. That rather limits the range of possibilities.

Here's a very rough and inadequate illustration. Imagine the psalmist was an English speaker. His first stanza would represent the letter A, and might go like this:

Amazing is the life of those whose way is blameless,  
anyone who walks in the law of the LORD.

Animated they are to keep his decrees,  
assiduously seeking him with their whole heart,

Also they do no wrong,  
and walk in his ways.

Authoritatively you have commanded us to keep  
your precepts.

Actually I long to keep my ways steadfast,

attending to your statutes ...

**\*\*Warning:** do not attempt this at home. It's hard enough with the letter A; imagine when you get to Q and X!

There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each stanza consists of 8 verses, making a total of 176 verses.

No wonder it's a bit of a slog to read the whole psalm.

On top of that, the topic of the psalm, repeated in almost every verse, is not one that appeals to our modern minds: God's law.

I am aware we have a few lawyers in the congregation, but for the rest of us, the idea of law isn't particularly exciting, is it? If we felt inspired to compose a song of celebration, how likely is it that the topic will be the law?

So why did I pick this long and uninteresting psalm to talk about this morning?

The reason is that, when we read it thoughtfully, this is a really engaging psalm. To our modern minds, the law is imposed from above. It is vast and minutely complicated, and lays down, usually in barely comprehensible terms, what we must and must not do. If we break any law, we'll bring down punishment on our heads. And in one way and another we feel sure we must be breaking it all the time, so we're plagued by guilt.

But this was not how the writer of this psalm and all faithful Jews saw it. God gave them his law so that they would

know how to live a happy life and have healthy hearts. This law was not—is not—an imposition, but an empowerment. It reveals the key of how to live in this complicated and often threatening world. When the Ten Commandments were given, God told the people to live by them, "... that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you". The emphasis is not on "do this; don't do that, or you'll be punished". Rather, it is a window on how this world that God has made works, and how we humans can relate to him within it. This is not cold, heartless legalism: this is a guidebook for the rewarding journey of life; a handbook on how to live happily day by day. Aha! We **can** join in this glad song of thankfulness.

We modern Christians are not alone in thinking about God's law as if it were a straightjacket. We know from the Bible record that from the earliest days in Israel's history the religious leaders so often got it wrong. Instead of encouraging the people to follow God's loving guidelines in order to experience a deep relationship with him and with their fellow-humans, they took pleasure in controlling them by laying heavier and heavier burdens upon them. The Old Testament prophets were led by God to help his people to understand that this was completely missing the point.

So what was the point? As always, Jesus gives us a clear answer. The gospels record the following wonderful insight into the heart of the law:

A lawyer asked Jesus, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with your whole being.' This is the first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall

love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

What a precious insight into the law as a guide to a relationship with God! We can straight away stop trying to earn that relationship by meticulously sticking to his rules and thus dodging his punishment. The law of life is to give ourselves in total, self-denying love to God and to our fellow human beings.

Now that **is** something to sing about, so let us join with the psalmist:

Happy are those who walk in the law of the LORD,  
those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their  
whole heart. O that my ways may be steadfast in  
keeping your statutes! I will praise you with an upright  
heart ...

Why not try the psalm as a joyful discipline for the forthcoming Lent? Don't read the whole thing in one sitting. You may like to do what the monks do in many monastic communities: read aloud (or, even better, sing) one stanza today, the next stanza tomorrow, and so on.

There are just enough days in Lent to get through the psalm twice—wouldn't that be something?