

Sunday May 2nd 2021 'The God who hears.'

Readings: Psalm 116:1-19; Mark 4:35-41

Last Sunday we celebrated Anzac Day with its message: 'lest we forget' and we retold some of the stories that have shaped us as a nation. As a faith community it's important that we keep reminding ourselves of our stories, stories from the Bible that tell us about the God we believe in, but also stories from our own experience of God working in our lives today.

Today we heard two stories that tell us how God responds when we call on him. One was about Jesus stilling the storm. The disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee which they would have done many times before, when a sudden storm hits them. This storm is so bad that they are in danger of sinking and they call out to Jesus who, amazingly, is still asleep in the stern of the boat. I wonder what they thought he would do? Not what he did do, that's for sure. But they knew him well enough and trusted him enough to believe that he would hear and act. They call out above the noise of the storm: "You do care for us, don't you; you don't want us to drown, do you?" And Jesus rebukes the wind and waves and restores the calm. The disciples ask one another: "Who is this?"

The obvious answer may be the one who has the power to control the wind and the waves, but tucked into the story is another important truth about Jesus, and as we shall see in Psalm 116, it is true of his Father also. That truth is that Jesus cares. The disciples had been with Jesus long enough to be sure of that. The very way the question is worded in Greek tells us that the expected answer was yes. Yes, Jesus cared about his followers and God cares about us his 21st century followers. As well as stories the Bible also has poems and songs that people like David wrote to try to put into words what they had come to know about God. Like poets and song-writers today they poured out their emotions – joy, thankfulness, and praise, but also grief and anger. The psalm we are going to look at this morning, Psalm 116, is a roller coaster ride of emotions, as we will see as we go through it. I suggest you look it up in your Bible or perhaps turn to p335 in NZPB.

John Goldingay's heading for this psalm is: 'How to give your testimony,' how to share your story so that it helps others and brings glory to God. It is a very personal psalm full of 'I, me, my' – the psalmist is writing from first-hand experience. "I know what it's like," he is saying, "I've been there – but this is how God came through for me." Maybe it began as a poem written by David – he certainly faced plenty of agonising and life threatening situations – and now he is sharing his experience of God's faithfulness to him.

Vv1-2 I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

I wonder if we fully realise what an amazing truth we find in these two verses. The Lord hears us. Do you remember the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. There was a confrontation to see which God would send fire to consume the sacrificial offering. The followers of Baal cried out for hours and even cut themselves with knives but: "there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention." (1Kgs 18:29). Elijah ups the ante by pouring water over everything; then prays a short prayer; - and fire falls. God heard and answered with no need for a big song and dance.

Our God is a God who hears. We don't have to be in a special place at a special time or follow a prescribed ritual. We can pray anytime, anywhere, and with

any words. In fact, the Bible tells us that even if we reach the point where we are so overwhelmed that words fail us, it's ok – for then the Spirit will step in and intercede for us, praying on our behalf. God doesn't have an answer phone, he picks up every time. Isn't that amazing – yet we almost take it for granted.

Also, unlike some religious traditions, we don't have to bring any sort of offering to persuade God to listen to us. Instead the Bible encourages us to “Come boldly to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us at the moment when we need it.” (Heb 4:16). And we can have that boldness or confidence because we enter God's presence through the shed blood of Jesus. (Heb 10:19).

And when we call out or pray, God hears us; he even bends his head and inclines his ear to hear us like we might do for a child or someone softly spoken. He doesn't want to miss a word of what we want to say. What an encouragement to pray and call on him as long as we live as the psalmist did.

So, how did the psalmist reach this place of confidence and trust ? Let's read his testimony: Vv3-4

³ The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish.

⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD: “O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!”

We don't know what situation the psalmist was facing, and that is good because it means we can identify with his emotional turmoil in whatever it is that is happening to us. It is as though Death was a hunter who has thrown ropes over his prey so that it is impossible for the psalmist to free himself. Sheol, the place of death, faces him; distress and anguish threaten to overwhelm him.

Some of us have been there; maybe facing the prospect of physical death; or maybe anguish so terrible that we are not sure we can carry on, or indeed if there is anything worth carrying on for.

Helpless and hopeless, what does the psalmist do? He calls on the name of the LORD. He is not just calling on any God – the capital letters tell us that he is using the name Yhwh – the name of Israel's God, and behind that name lies all that God has shown himself to be:

V5: ⁵ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous, faithful to his promises; our God is merciful and compassionate.

It is because he knows who God is and what he is like that the psalmist can have the confidence to call upon him. He has prayed: “God deliver me, save me; rescue me; find a way out.” And God does: “when I was brought low, he saved me,” he says in v6. I prayed; God heard; and acted to save me. That is his testimony. I feel we need to say something more here. Some of us have been watching a series of DVDs by Pete Greig as part of the Alpha Prayer Course. Pete has faced some difficult situations in his own life, as well as experiencing some amazing answers to prayer, and he devotes one session to what we might call unanswered prayer. We need to recognise this difficulty and there are no easy answers, but I think we must trust in the God who, when Christ returns, will bring ultimate healing and the righting of all wrongs; and we look forward to the age to come when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

For now, I am reminded of the story of Hagar. She was running away to escape Sarah's ill-treatment of her, when a messenger from God met her. He had a word for her from God – Go back! He told Hagar to go back into the very situation she was running away from - with no promises that things would change. Sometimes we just have to get through hard times. But through these experiences, Hagar came

to know God as El-roi – the One who sees me or the one who looks out for me; and when her son was born he was called Ishmael – God hears.

It is often during hard times that we are drawn closer to God as we are forced into an even greater dependence on Him. These experiences can help us to build a foundation of confidence and trust in the God who hears, answers and acts. I think that's how it was for the psalmist.

So, we don't know what situation the psalmist had been facing but his testimony is that he can now return to a place of rest. He has been delivered from death; he is no longer blinded by tears and he is no longer in danger of losing his footing and tumbling into disaster. Instead he can walk about freely in the presence of God in the land of the living. Perhaps he has found what we might call a new normal, not life as it was before but a new pattern or rhythm of life within God's shalom.

Many of us have found this last year particularly challenging. Our comfortable routines came to an abrupt halt during lockdown. We have had to adjust our expectations of what life might look like in the future. Everything seems a bit more uncertain. Maybe we are still working out what the new normal might look like for us. For now, we may have to live with that, but let us take heart from the psalmist's experience as we trust God to hear our cries and bring us to our own particular place of rest.

You might think that the psalm should end here with its 'happy ever after ending,'. But there's more. After the disaster – prayer – deliverance sequence, which Israel as a nation was all too familiar with, the psalmist begins to ask himself what his response should be; how should he now live?

“What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me,” he asks?

He recognises that like a good master who had an obligation to protect and provide for the servants of his household, God has fulfilled his promise to protect those who are his servants. God has spared his life and now he wants to do something to express his gratitude.

First, he takes the cup of salvation that has been offered to him; in other words he will make his own all the blessings God wants him to have – he will embrace the new chance at life that God has offered him.

I'm told that after a brush with death, many people re-evaluate their lives and their priorities. They want to focus on what really matters. And the psalmist does too: “I will fulfil my vows to the LORD,” he says – I will recommit myself to the promises I made to the LORD, in other words I will take my faith seriously.

And, he celebrates – he has a party!! You weren't expecting that, were you! He goes to the Temple to make a thanksgiving offering. After the portions for God and the priest are set aside, he uses the rest of the bread and meat to prepare a feast to share with his family and friends. It's good to celebrate God's goodness to us. Remember how we celebrated the opening of our new hall. How good are we at celebrating?

So, what has started out as a personal cry to God has become a very public occasion for praise and worship. The psalmist wants everyone to know what God has done for him; that he is indeed a God who hears and acts when we call upon him.

And the psalmist ends by calling on everyone to join him in praising the LORD.

So, Psalm 116, may have begun life as a very personal testimony to God's faithfulness as the one who hears and acts to deliver us, but it not only began to be used in public worship in the Temple, it also became one of the Hallel psalms. These were sung each year at Passover, the time when the Jewish people remember the way that God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Within each household this psalm would have been sung, as still happens today, and Jesus himself would have sung it as he shared the Last Supper with his disciples. It became a way of passing on the psalmist's testimony to God's faithfulness.

As we look back, I wonder where you are on the roller coaster of Psalm 116: struggling; calling out; hanging in there, or maybe coming through to a place of rest or celebration even!

You know, we used to sing or say the psalms much more than we do now, and they have been a great source of help and encouragement. But it's also good to share our own stories. We do that quite a lot in our house group and we have a few good laughs along the way! We hear each other tell of the many different ways in which our God has been faithful to who he is: the God who cares deeply for each one of us; the God who hears; the God who acts.

Let's be like God's faithful followers in Malachi 3:16: "Those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard."

I would also encourage you to be like the psalmist: to keep calling out to the God who hears, and in due time may we respond with thankfulness and praise.

May we be people of prayer so that we can be people of praise.

I'm going to read v1 again:

"I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.

Praise the Lord."