

Psalm 78, 40-72

40. *How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness
and grieved him in the desert!*
41. *Again and again they tempted God and provoked the Holy One of Israel.*
42. *They did not remember his power
in the day when he redeemed them from the enemy;*
43. *How he had wrought his signs in Egypt and his wonders in the field of Zoan.*
44. *He turned their rivers into blood, so that they could not drink of their streams.*
45. *He sent swarms of flies among them, which devoured them,
and frogs which brought them ruin.*
46. *He gave their produce to the caterpillar, the fruit of their toil to the locust.*
47. *He destroyed their vines with hailstones and their sycamore trees with the frost.*
48. *He delivered their cattle to hailstones and their flocks to thunderbolts.*
49. *He let loose on them his blazing anger: fury, displeasure and trouble,
a troop of destroying angels.*
50. *He made a way for his anger and spared not their souls from death,
but gave their lives over to the pestilence.*
51. *He smote the firstborn of Egypt,
the first fruits of their strength in the tents of Ham.*
52. *But he led out his people like sheep
and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.*
53. *He led them to safety and they were not afraid,
but the sea overwhelmed their enemies.*
54. *He brought them to his holy place,
the mountain which his right hand took in possession.*
55. *He drove out the nations before them and shared out to them their inheritance;
he settled the tribes of Israel in their tents.*
56. *Yet still they tested God Most High and rebelled against him,
and would not keep his commandments.*

57. *They turned back and fell away like their forebears,
starting aside like an unstrung bow.*
58. *They grieved him with their hill altars
and provoked him to displeasure with their idols.*
59. *God heard and was greatly angered, and utterly rejected Israel.*
60. *He forsook the tabernacle at Shiloh, the tent of his presence on earth.*
61. *He gave the ark of his strength into captivity,
his splendour into the adversary's hand.*
62. *He delivered his people to the sword and raged against his inheritance.*
63. *The fire consumed their young men; there was no one to lament their maidens.*
64. *Their priests fell by the sword, and their widows made no lamentation.*
65. *Then the Lord woke as out of sleep,
like a warrior who had been overcome with wine.*
66. *He struck his enemies from behind and put them to perpetual shame.*
67. *He rejected the tent of Joseph and chose not the tribe of Ephraim,*
68. *But he chose the tribe of Judah and the hill of Zion, which he loved.*
69. *And there he built his sanctuary like the heights of heaven,
like the earth which he founded for ever.*
70. *He chose David also, his servant, and took him away from the sheepfolds.*
71. *From following the ewes with their lambs he took him,
that he might shepherd Jacob his people and Israel his inheritance.*
72. *So he shepherded them with a devoted heart
and with skilful hands he guided them.*

Refrain

They remembered that God was their rock
and the Most High God their redeemer.

The next section, vv.40 -51, begins by reminding the Israelites how they disobeyed God and became rebellious. (v.40, 'How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert!') They are reminded of the various plagues, which afflicted the Egyptians, which were seen as being sent by God. (v.42, 'They did not remember his power in the day when he redeemed them from the enemy.')

Zoan (v.43) was a city in the delta region of Egypt, and is thought to have been the same city as Rameses.

According to Genesis, Egypt was descended from Noah's 3rd. son, Ham. (v. 51, the land of Ham)

These deeds of God, including the manna and quails, were treated with blasphemy and they tested God's faithfulness to his people. (v.41, 'Again and again they tempted God and provoked the Holy One of Israel.')

When they were punished, they pretended to repent, but were not loyal to the covenant, even though God was compassionate and forgave them!!

The next part (vv.52-64) refers to the Exodus and to the conquest of Canaan, and comes to a climax with the Israelites' worship of idols in Canaan. (v.58, 'They grieved him with their high altars and provoked him to displeasure with their idols.')

The shrine at Shiloh was destroyed. (v.60, 'He forsook the tabernacle at Shiloh, the tent of his presence on earth.')

The priests at Shiloh, Hophni and Phinehas, were killed. (v.64, 'Their priests fell by the sword, and their widows made no lamentation.')

The Israelites lost the ark, the symbol of God's presence, as it was captured by the Philistines. (v.61, 'He gave the ark of his strength into captivity, his splendour into the adversary's hand.')

This is recounted in 1 Samuel 4. What a mess!!

The last section, vv.65-72, shows God rising in power to sort it all out. (vv.65,66, 'Then the Lord woke as out of sleep, like a warrior who had been overcome with wine. He struck his enemies from behind and put them to perpetual shame.')

God rejected the northern tribe of Ephraim, as they had stirred up the revolt, and chose the tribe of Judah. He chose Mount Zion as his dwelling, rather than Shechem, the shrine of Ephraim. David was installed as king, and he was to be the shepherd of his people. Jesus later renewed all this and became the Good Shepherd.

In Psalm 78, the Israelites can be seen in their history over hundreds of years, going from slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness wandering after the Exodus to their permanent home in Jerusalem. The point of it all is, however, to show how they rejected the grace and love of God, became disobedient and did not appreciate his generosity. It is really a plea for trust in and faithfulness to God, and also criticism for forgetting their history.

Much of the Old Testament is not primarily a history book, but teaching through stories about God's relationship with his people over time.

The Israelites seem to have forgotten their history, and the psalmist sees the need to remind them of it, in order that they remain faithful to God and their nation.

We also have occasions when we remember events of the past. On Remembrance Sunday each year, we remember those, who gave their lives in war, a ceremony, which began at the end of the First World War, but which now invites us to think, not only of that war and of the Second World War, but also of those, who served in conflicts since those times. I had a pupil, who was injured during the Falklands war in 1982, having joined the Royal Marines after he left school. We remember, in order to

give thanks for those, who served their country, and for those among them, who gave everything for what they believed was right. Sometimes we need to remember to try to ensure that similar situations do not happen again. October is Black History Month, which gives us the opportunity to learn about other cultures and their importance for our society. We feel that it is important to try to learn the lessons of history, something, which the psalmist thinks that Israel failed to do.

Many of our ceremonies take place in church or in another religious context, not only Remembrance Sunday, but also some royal occasions. Prayers are said in Parliament and in council chambers. Many organisations, including the armed forces, employ chaplains. Can we see God as being involved in our lives? Are we able to recognise the presence of God, even in difficult situations? Jesus came to demonstrate that God is with us. Are we faithful and obedient? Or do we forget God when things are going well, and turn to him only when we have a problem?

Prayer

O Lord our God,
make us watchful and keep us faithful
as we await the coming of your Son our Lord;
that, when he shall appear,
he may not find us sleeping in sin
but active in his service
and joyful in his praise;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

(Post Communion Collect, Advent 1)