**Mission Council Bible Study Notes**

**Friday**

Pathway and refuge are the two dominant features in the metaphorical landscape of the book of Psalms.

My hope is that over the next few days we might pay attention to some of the rich imagery in the Hebrew Bible that can bring such metaphors to life again, so that they can speak afresh into our lives and into our communities.

“What has been written with imagination must be read with imagination.” Luis Alonso Schökel, writing about biblical poetry, points out how often we run right past pictures in the Bible, because they are so familiar, or because we’re thinking about something else – focussing on a person or a particular word, rather than the landscape that the words are creating.

Right at the beginning of the Psalter we are given images of different pathways chosen.

On your handout you will find the first few verses of Psalm 1. There are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers.

Where they choose to walk and where they choose to sit is governed by their delight in God’s word, the word that gives them life and enables them to flourish. They are rooted like trees, drinking deeply from the living water that is the Word of God.

The Psalm’s images call us to reflect on which path we’re currently on. Whose advice are we listening to when we make decisions? Where are we sitting in judgement over others, elevating ourselves and looking down on others?

Unlike the righteous who are like trees planted by streams of living water, flourishing and bearing fruit, the wicked will be like chaff, blown away by the wind. Ephemeral. Not rooted or grounded in anything secure.

We have to suspend our discomfort at the categories of the righteous and the wicked – these two groups are painted starkly in black and white in order to teach us. So that it’s clear which ones we should be identifying with. The righteous are those who trust in God. The righteous are those who worship the Lord alone. The righteous are those who do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

These are violent words, and unsettling images, and yet the choice is presented at the beginning of the book of praises. Either you choose to walk the way, listening to the word of God, or you choose to chase after what is not-God.

Psalm 1 is known as a teaching psalm, a didactic psalm. It’s designed to give you a black and white choice, because we are complicated and stubborn human beings, and sometimes we just need to have things painted clearly for us.

Do you want to be like a strong tree, or do want to be like dust in the wind?

Then in the very next psalm, psalm 2, we are confronted with nations and kings conspiring against the Lord’s anointed, a stern admonition to the rulers of the earth to have humility before the Lord or they will perish. Something that Donald Trump and Boris Johnson would do well to hear.

At the end of Psalm 2 the final verse gives us the counterpoint to the pathway picture: Happy are all who take refuge in him.

Those who trust in the Lord, those who seek the Lord’s presence as their destination and home, they will be blessed.

Humans are not designed to simply keep walking and walking – our muscles at some point just give way and we collapse. We have to take breaks for food, refreshment and rest.

But neither can we stay forever in a refuge-place. If you’ve ever run a distance race, or done a sponsored walk, you know that there is a strong temptation to stop and sit down along the way. But there is always the risk that if you stop, you will never have the energy or motivation to stand up again and keep walking.

On our faith journey, we need to keep walking, keep moving forward, seeking the God for whom our hearts are restless. But we also need to find places to stop and reflect, to rest. That’s why in the Psalms, the book of Praises, our imaginations are invited to be shaped by these two profound images of life with God. One dynamic and the other static. In one of the most famous psalms, 23 – the Lord is my shepherd – the images of being led like sheep, accompanied, protected and nourished, converge in worship, in the Lord’s house. Pathway and refuge. The psalmists help us to see life through the two lenses of being on the move, and seeking refuge and rest.

**SLIDE 2**

So let’s take a closer look at the first image, that of pathway.

We’re used to this image – Walking the Way might even have inured us to the power of metaphorical paths and walking and of journeys! So perhaps we need to breathe some life into them again, to re-imagine them.

William Brown writes, “Nothing is static about God’s commandments and one’s adherence to them”

We are moving. Faith in God isn’t something that sits still, but keeps moving. Faith propels us forwards.

Ps 119 is a reflection or meditation on the Torah, the word and way of life.

Listen to these images of commandments combined with verbs of motion all from Ps 119, a meditation on the Torah, the word and way of life:

I have walked in freedom for I have sought your precepts (v.45);

I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word; lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it (v.35);

It’s not just a simple equation of the commandments with pathways, the word is also something that provides a guide to that path: your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding (v.32). – the more we walk in God’s paths, the more we understand and know God. And there is light in us and around us.

If you have a look at the section of Psalm 119 on your handout you can see this constant overlap between pathways and commandments, decrees, statutes and precepts.

Commandments are like paths that we can stray from. We need to keep seeking after God so that we don’t stray off the path. Seeking after God involves treasuring God’s word in our hearts.

The motion within faith is that of seeking after God. Augustine’s oft-quoted line from the Confessions sums this up: *“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”*

Are we on the move, seeking after God? Or are we straying. Has something else caught our eye and distracted our attention? We need to take charge of our feet and take care that they don’t slip, and that they are facing in the right direction.

Verse 27, a bit later on in the psalm, equates God’s ways with his wondrous works:

Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works.

There is wonder unfolding as we walk according to God’s word.

The pathway in the Psalms also has a moral dimension to it: the pathway represents one’s conduct.

Lead me, Lord, in the paths of righteousness. – They are righteous paths, and they are paths that lead to righteousness. They represent both our conduct and our destination.

But the path is also a place where we can call on God for help, to guard us and guide us.

Ps 37 declares: Our steps are made firm by the Lord,  
   when he delights in our way; though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand.

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm and frequently called boring and repetitious. It has a lot of similarities with Psalm 1, and it’s possible that at some stage, these psalms were the beginning and end of the collection. As we are told in Psalm 1, keeping the law is the route to a fulfilled and fruitful life.

Psalm 119 is carefully crafted into an acrostic so that each mini section begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It contains a complete A to Z of everything to do with Torah piety – following the word of God. This psalm is often avoided by Christians – often because it is so long, or repetitive, or because it talks about laws all the time.

So how do we read this as Christians, with this focus on the law? The law which Christ comes not to abolish but to fulfil, the law which is summed up in the commands to love God and our neighbours as ourselves?

Let us not fall into the trap of contrasting Jewish legalism with Christian grace. The gift of God’s word sits within a covenant relationship with his people. It is God’s gift of life to his people because his word is about the life-giving alternative to the pursuit of doing things our own way, on our own, to fulfil our own needs, which we can never do and achieve life in its fulness. The whole of Scripture for us is God’s word. The faithfulness of God expressed in his Word in Scripture demands the response of our faithfulness to God, which lies at the centre of well-being, joy and freedom in Christ.

If we understand Christ as encompassing everything we need to know about the law, it is Christ’s path that we are being called to follow here. God’s word is the word of life. Life is a gift of God’s own self through his covenant, through his word made flesh, who came and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. In the Hebrew Bible, the law was never intended to be a set of rules to simply be obeyed. Torah obedience is a life of trust in the Lord, in covenant relationship with Him, which is lived out as faithfulness to his commandments – to the word that gives life. In contrast to this are false ways, selfish gain, vanity, disgrace, shame, arrogance and wickedness.

Through Psalm 119, we are called as Christians to be a community of life, rooted in faithfulness to Christ as Lord.

And such a way of life is a broad place, a place of freedom - Ps 119:45 and I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts.

The pathway of obedience is also the pathway of deliverance. Ps 116.8-10

8 For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.  
9 I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

But the reality of life is that the pathway can also be fraught with danger. The psalmists don’t shy away from lamenting, complaining, crying out to God from their path, from narrow paths, from dangerous paths, from dark and slippery paths. Enemies have dug pits and laid traps in their paths. They walk amidst distress, but are preserved by God’s outstretched hand. They find their feet slipping and cry out to be led on a level path. And yet the path is something that is taught, studied and revealed. It is both command and gift.

**SLIDE 3**

So let’s turn now to the images of refuge and how these interact with our images of pathways in the Psalms.

The Psalms are full of the complex of refuge images: God is our rock, our strong tower, our shield, our stronghold, our hiding-place. There is strength, security and protection in the rock. There is shelter from enemies and storms.

The image of a ‘rock’ in a word-picture allows the psalmist to say several things about his relationship with God and his experience of God’s actions. Blending the static image of a rock with a personal God creates some interesting conceptual ‘spaces’. It pictures God as a place painted with the colours of strength, stability, permanence, refuge and protection. For someone seeking protection from enemies in the mountains, the hiding-place is a source of hope and an object of trust. When the psalmist calls God ‘my rock’, he expresses his experience of relationship with God as a rock that he hopes in, the one in whom he trusts. Calling God ‘my rock’ expresses an intensely personal relationship. It is not just God is a rock, but God is my rock. Begging the question, who is your source of protection and safety?

Psalm 118 warns against some of the alternatives to trusting in YHWH for refuge –

Don’t put your trust in princes, or in mortals, in princes.

Jesus picks up this theme in his teaching about Building your house upon the rock! Mt 7.24-25 rather than on sinking sand.

Psalm 57: “Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me. For in you my soul takes refuge. In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge until the destroying storms pass by.

Under his wings we will find refuge. Remember the imagery of wings in the Jerusalem temple was not of small, soft fluffy chicken wings, but of 15 feet wide cherubim wings in the temple sanctuary. These are mighty and powerful wings!

It’s not just protection we receive in God’s presence, but the provision of all we need: You’ll find some verses from Psalm 36 on your handout.

“How precious is your faithful love O God. All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

They are well filled with the richness of your house, and from the river of your abundant provisions you give them drink.” Ps 36.

As well as the place of protection and provision, refuge is the place of divine deliverance.

It casts out all fear: “God is our refuge and strength, a proven help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains tremble at its swelling… The nations are in chaos, the kingdoms totter. His voice thunders. The earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our secure height.

What is fascinating though, is that those who trust in the Lord can become a refuge themselves, for others.

Psalm 125 Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, immovable and abiding forever. Refuge is embodied in a community of those who trust in the Lord, and that community can then become a refuge for those who need to seek protection, provision, safety and strength.

Unlike pathway, refuge is not something that can be taught or revealed, like the commandments, yet there is still an element of human choice in it – it is something that can be sought out by us.

Psalm 2 concludes: “Happy are those who seek refuge in him.”

Refuge is in God and with God, established by God, and choosing God to be your refuge involves a strong element of trust.

But there is an overlap here, as in Psalm 16: “You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.”

In the pilgrimage psalms, the journey is set towards the temple in Jerusalem, the dwelling place of the Lord.

Our final destination is to be in the presence of the Lord.

Pathway is directed towards refuge.