

“SING A NEW SONG”

Psalm 40:1-3

In the mornings, when I'm doing my bit on the exercise bike first thing, I stave off the boredom of such exercise by listening to music on my little MP3 player. It's on "Shuffle Play", so churns out a random selection of songs from the collection I've put on the player. When the battery starts to run down, though, as has been happening recently, it often goes back to one song more frequently than any other. I've no idea why that happens, but no doubt someone will tell me over coffee. The song that it seems to keep going back to recently is *40* by U2. *40* is a version of part of the Psalm we've just read – *Psalm 40*. As you're probably aware, U2 have a strong Christian faith and that has influenced not only the songs of *War*, the album from which *40* was taken, but an awful lot of the songs they've put out over the past 40-odd years.

And this 40th Psalm is, as are so many of the songs in this collection we have in our Bibles, great poetry. It's great poetry because it deals with the timeless themes of the human condition, with which we can all identify, and expresses it in ways that are a beautiful use of language, even in translation. [As an aside, and if you're interested, there's a great discussion on YouTube between Bono, the lead singer and songwriter of U2, and Eugene Peterson, the scholar and preacher who translated the Bible in *The Message* version. Bono clearly loves that version, for which he wrote an endorsement on the cover, and respects Peterson greatly, but Eugene Peterson (now in his 80s) has no idea who Bono is!]

Anyway, as with so many of the Psalms – indeed, as with so much of the Bible – this poem does deal with the human condition, with the struggles of life and the difficulties we encounter, but also tells a story of transformation. Transformation is what the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, is all about – transforming lives, attitudes, behaviour, situations. As we've said many times before, that message of Christianity can be summed up as: God loves you so much that he accepts and welcomes you just as you are, but he loves you too much to leave you that way. He really does want you to get the best out of the life he's given you.

So here we have a poem, a song, a Psalm that speaks of the reality of David's situation, a recognition that life is not always a bed of roses – and, indeed, never really becomes one. If you read to the end of the Psalm, you'll see that David is already having to pray for help again. He, like all of us, lives in a world that is profoundly affected by the presence of evil, and things go wrong, stuff happens, even for those who want to follow God's ways. But following God's ways means you can call on him when times get tough. Which is just what David has done here.

He's been in the pits, in the mire, up to his neck in trouble. The image he uses is of a "*slimy pit*". He has slid into this situation and now can't get himself out of it. This kind of image has always haunted me. When we were kids we didn't have a television in our house so the only time we saw it was at friends' houses or when we visited other members of the family. I vividly remember being at my Auntie Jean's house and watching an adaptation of, I think, *Lorna Doone* in which someone is sucked down into a bog. It was horrible and the images of his outstretched hand disappearing into the mud stuck with me for ages. Not long after that, back at home in Winchester, we went for a walk in the water meadows near St Cross with another family – and me and Andrew Burke ran off the path across what looked like grassy meadow, but was, in fact, a huge area of marsh, a boggy patch in which our little five year old legs were soon stuck fast and I could feel myself sinking, with images of *Lorna Doone* flitting across my mind. Somehow our mums got us out and I'm here to tell the tale. But that's how David feels here – sucked down helplessly into a situation that looks really desperate.

So he prays. He waits on God. The way it's translated here gives an air of serene patience, but it's actually quite a desperate wait. Some translations have "*waited and waited*", which has that slightly more desperate feel to it. The Hebrew in which David originally wrote it has a kind of double strengthening of the verb, which literally comes across as "*I waited waitingly*". David is at the end of his tether and he is crying out to God for help. The ground has been taken from under him. It may even be that he is close to death, because the pit and the sliminess are often used as images of the underworld. Time is running out. David does not know where else to turn.

But God turns towards him. He hears his prayer. And he reaches down to pull David from the pit, to pick him up and "*set his feet on a rock*", giving him a firm place to stand. The crisis is over. David is saved. He has been in a situation where he could not do anything to help himself, but God is there. The situation is transformed. David is transformed, because he tells us that he now sings a new song – a song of relief, of joy, of praise. The cry of terror, the plea for help has now become a shout of worship – "*a hymn of praise to our God*".

What's more, this transformation is something that is obvious to all. Others are able to see what's happened and they recognise that it is attributable only to God. There has been divine intervention that causes other people to start trusting in God themselves. If David had managed to extricate himself, then it may have passed unnoticed, but the change has been so dramatic that other people can see that God is at work in his life.

As I said just now, the whole Bible is full of this kind of stuff. Here is humanity – you and I – struggling to live in a world that, though created perfect and just as God wanted it to be, has been infected by the

presence of evil. Things do not go as we would like them to. We have to deal with sickness and disease, with inequality and injustice, with uncertainty and unpredictability, with a loss of hope and a sense, often, of despair. It's the human condition. More often than not, it seems, all that kind of thing happens to us. Other people mess up our lives by their words and actions; circumstances seem to conspire against us; things don't go as we planned or as we would like. That's because we live in this broken, distorted, messed up world where evil is still at large.

But sometimes it's stuff that we do ourselves that causes the problem. Our lack of love for others, our determination to do things our way with no consideration for others or for the ways of God, our apparently inherent selfishness. The Bible calls that "sin" and it affects all of us in some way or other, however much we may protest that we're "good" people. So we feel ourselves slipping down into the "*slimy pit*" – sometimes sucked in by things beyond our control, sometimes because (like me and Andrew Burke in the water meadows) we've decided to wander off the path, away from what God wants.

The good news is, though, that God has turned towards us. We may have turned away from him, but he loves us so much that he turns to us. And he reaches down to us. He reaches into our situation. That's what he did in Jesus. Jesus, Son of God, part of God, great God from all eternity, came down into our broken world and shared our human condition as he lived and taught and healed and offered hope to those in the pits. He ended up on the cross to show us how much he wanted to help. Well, I say "ended up", but that wasn't the end, was it? God raised him up from the grave where his human body had been put to rest, and with him, raised up all humanity. God was giving us a place to stand, a firm place for our feet so that we wouldn't get sucked back into the pit. Now that is – in the very proper sense of the word – awesome. God reached into the mess and muck of our lives and hauled us out to stand with him.

And he's still doing that, by the way. This very morning, God can help you. However deep you may feel you've slipped into the mire, however difficult your situation, however much you regret your own contribution to the weight of the world's sin, God can rescue you. And he can change your shrieks of anguish, your cries of pain, your groans of frustration into a new song, a song of praise and gratitude and relief and commitment to God. Do you want that? Do you want other people to see that life is now different for you? Do you want to have that assurance that God is with you and has sorted out not just your circumstances here and now, but your eternal future?

The next line in this song – and that's where we're going to stop (I know there are another 14 verses, but we're not going to go through those this morning, you'll be pleased to learn) – the next line says "*Blessed is the one who makes the LORD his trust.*" That word "*blessed*" contains a whole thesaurus full of good things, but basically it means that if you are prepared to put your trust in God, he will give you a life that

you may never have thought possible, a life that is full to the brim of new songs, a life that is lived with God's help now and God's presence for all eternity. Reach out and take God's hand this morning.

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Questions for discussion

If you have time and the facility to show it, you could watch the interview mentioned in the sermon: it lasts about 21 minutes and can be accessed at – <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/bono-eugene-peterson-psalms/>

- 1) Why do you think the Psalms still speak to us so clearly today?
- 2) Have you ever had the kind of experience David describes here? How was it resolved for you?

- 3) What is "*the firm place to stand*"?
- 4) Can we really expect people to put their trust in God because of what they see happening to others?
- 5) Read the whole of the Psalm. Do you find it uplifting or depressing? Why?