

Volume setting

Planning

Lectionary Bible readings

RCL Proper 25 Year B
Jeremiah 31.7-9, **Psalm 126**,
Hebrews 7.23-28, Mark 10.46-52

Lectionary variation The Bible Society's resources for Bible Sunday are at www.biblesociety.org.uk.

Theme Words for prayer

Four weeks in which we draw upon the psalms to help us deepen our prayer. An article that provides an overview of the theme can be found on page 1 and on the [WEB](#).

Week 4 of 4

Volume setting Psalm 126

Our consideration of Psalm 126 this week deepens our exploration of those words that can help and support our prayer, with the opportunity to sing and shout for joy.

This week provides an opportunity to:

- recognise God in action in the world
- respond to God with shouts of joy.

A Bible study worksheet on this reading, suitable for midweek groups, is available on the [WEB](#).

ROOTS www.rootsontheweb.com

Week by week

Bible notes
Prayers
PostScript: up-to-the-minute comment
Bible study worksheet
Children's Sheet
Further resources
Drama sketches
Sermon notes on a different Bible reading
Links to other materials for this week's readings



Gather

Prepare the space

For this, you will need to do the following in advance: take a photo of your congregation, and make a jigsaw of it on a computer. As the congregation gathers, play the 'scrambling' of the pieces and their 'restoration' on a loop. On the fully restored slide, superimpose the words, 'When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion...'

You might like to listen to Psalm 126 sung in Hebrew, the language in which it was composed. There are two links to recordings on the [WEB](#).

Gathering words

In those special moments when we know that God is close to us, it is as though everything comes together in a dream. Today in Psalm 126 we encounter the attempt of the psalmist to express those moments of awareness, when everything seems right.

Open the Word

Bible notes

Psalm 126

Commentators are divided about the meaning of the tenses in this psalm. Is it about a past event, perhaps still to be completed; or is it about an imagined future? If it is about a past event accomplished, it may be about the return from exile in Babylon (538 BC) and would contrast with Psalm 137 ('By the waters of Babylon...we sat down and wept, remembering Zion'). But then how do we deal with the imperative 'restore' of verse 4 and the following prayer? Commentators such as Robert Alter see it as a dream of the future: 'When the Lord restores Zion's fortunes, we should be like dreamers.' So the psalm could be dated shortly after the Return or, alternatively, during the Exile but looking to the future.

The Negeb is a desert in southern Israel that occasionally gets hit by heavy rain. Some have read these last lines about sowing and reaping literally and have related them to a harvest festival, but it is easier and more rewarding to read them poetically, taking the language as metaphors for sorrow and joy. So verses 4-6 contrast aridity with wetness; tears with joy; and weeping with singing for joy. Some of the language can be related to other books: verse 2 with Job 8.21; verses 5-6 with Isaiah 35.10 and Jeremiah 31.16; and verse 6 with Luke 6.21 (the Beatitudes). The whole psalm is held together by the Hebrew *rinah*, shouts of joy (or Alter's 'glad song') in verses 2 and 6. The psalm looks at how God's promises are fulfilled, whether in the past or the near future.

Gospel Mark 10.46-52

Jesus cured blind men on two other occasions: the blind man at Bethsaida in Mark 8.22-26 and the young man born blind in John 9.1ff. Here the man is a beggar, obviously made destitute by his inability to work. If he is to cease to be poor, he needs to get his sight back so he can work. The man's cloak, his one possession, might be seen as a symbol of his worldly security, meagre as that might be, and he throws it off. Jesus makes it clear that it is his faith that has saved him. This faith has, at this stage, nothing to do with a confession of belief. The Greek *pistis* here means trust: trust that Jesus will have compassion/mercy and can indeed make him well ('save' him). In showing unconditional trust that Jesus can save him physically and spiritually, this man is a model for all disciples.

In the context of the Jewish culture of the time, in which sickness and misfortune were seen as a sign of God's punishment for sin, such a healing would have been seen as a sign of God's forgiveness, with Jesus as the agent of that forgiveness. However, the healing in John 9 shows the first sign of Jesus rethinking that tradition: 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'

Volume setting

Words for prayer Week 4

Our psalm readings have moved from praise (Psalm 8), to pleading (90), to reassurance (91) and finally with Psalm 126 to *fulfilment*, whether as something already accomplished, or something achieved but not yet completed, or even something eagerly awaited. Praising God starts us off on an interaction with God that leads us to pour out our soul, trust to his faithfulness and hope that our desires will be fulfilled, finally bringing some transformation to our lives.

The Gospel gives an example of an impoverished man – one to whom the kingdom is promised – whose needs are met. And the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah 31.7-9 binds the readings together, where the prophet tells ‘the remnant of Israel’, the weeping and the blind, to ‘sing aloud with gladness’ for God will save them.

Q Our life in this world can never be finally fulfilled, but reflect on your needs or desires that have been fulfilled (sometimes in ordinary ways, sometimes in unexpected ways) and on your desires yet to be fulfilled.

Q Are we really joyful?

Sermon ideas

- For up-to-the-minute comment, see PostScript on the [WEB](#).
- Recently we have seen many military homecomings. The cortèges passing through Royal Wootton Bassett have marked a succession of terrible tragedies, the deaths of young people cut down in their prime. But there have been many other returns – of units and regiments restored to their families – marked by great joy, both personal and communal. There have been no winners in the wars fought by the service personnel, but there have been great achievements. We might consider that such celebrations, which, in the 1940s might have marked triumph, today rather mark a kind of fulfilment.
- Every great achievement is an accumulation of smaller achievements. In restoring an old car, for example, or a house, the worker has many small triumphs, sometimes arrived at with great patience, before the whole job, which may take months or even years, is fulfilled. Psalm 126 embraces both



the past and the future. The psalmist recalls the Lord’s activity, confident that it will be experienced again.

- How can we define joy? In what he called his ‘spiritual autobiography’, CS Lewis describes being *Surprised by joy*.¹ In his critical summary of the book, Bruce Edwards² suggests that by ‘joy’, Lewis meant not mere pleasure but the sublime experience of the transcendent, the glimpse of the eternal that is only fleetingly available in earthly loves and aesthetics’.
- What will be discovered by the government’s ‘happiness agenda’, and its attempts to measure how happy Britain is? One opposition politician suggests there is a ‘danger of promoting “middle-class” materialistic aspirations and ignoring the urgent need to help people cope with life’s peaks and troughs’³. Might a ‘joy agenda’ be a better aspiration?
- Total fulfilment can be only a future event, of which the present will sometimes offer glimpses, often drawn from past experience. Psalm 126 captures this, rooting it in the experience of exile and return and an ongoing journey. The event recalled here, and the memories we have of fulfilment and restoration in our lives, all lead us to consider what Jesus would describe as a concern for the kingdom, the overarching concern of the lectionary gospel readings for November, as we approach the end of the year.

All ages together

See p.41 for an idea to engage very young children during worship.

Present the reading

You could read this all together from a shared set of Bibles, prayer books or service sheets or by projecting the words so that people read with their heads up. Offer a little preparation, explaining that ‘Zion’ refers to Jerusalem, the holy city, but by extension to the Hebrew people. The ‘Negeb’ is a desert. ‘Sheaves’ represent the harvested wheat. Allow people a few moments to look through the passage and then read together.

Explore the reading

Explore together the idea of being ‘restored’. You might watch a YouTube clip of scenes of a British regiment returning from service in Iraq to be restored to their families (hyperlink on the [WEB](#)).

Then make the rest of the psalm your own. Think of your congregational and community circumstances, and mould the psalm to fit your needs and what is going on at the present time: ‘Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the Clyde down by the docks; may those who sell poppies for Remembrance be blessed with success...’

Prayers

The text of these prayers is on the [WEB](#).

Call to worship

You, Lord, have done great things for us!
**You have done great things for us,
 and we rejoice!**

Gathering prayer

As we gather before you, Lord,
 help us to remember
 the things you have restored in our lives.
 We bring before you all situations when
 circumstances, fortunes and relationships have been restored,
 and we praise you.

Amen.

A prayer of approach

We praise you, Lord, because you attend to matters great and small.

We come before you with differing needs,
 some major, some minor;

Whatever they may be, we have faith that you will listen,
 and restore the fortunes of your servants.

Amen.

A prayer of confession

Forgive us, Lord, for forgetting so easily:
 we forget that you have worked in our lives in the past;
 we forget to be thankful for these things;
 We forget that these events show your love for us,
 and should give us cause to hope.
 Forgive us for forgetting to hope;
 for allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by despair,
 and forgetting our faith in you.

Forgive us, Lord, for forgetting so easily.

Amen.

A prayer of thanksgiving

We thank you, Lord, for times of restoration:
 for the dawning of morning light after the night;
 for the coming of spring after winter;
 for light in our lives after spells of darkness;
 for rejuvenation when we were weary.
 We thank you for restoration to health after illness;
 to renewed relationships after brokenness;
 to employment after joblessness;
 and we thank you for restoring hope
 when all seemed hopeless.

We thank you, Lord, for harvests of joy,
 after life has been arid and dry.

Amen.

A personal prayer

Lord, I am amazed when I look back
 and see how you have worked in my life.
 I recall the times when I felt so low
 that I was almost eating the dust;
 but you raised me up, filled me with hope,
 turned my night into morning.
 You changed my dirge of despair into a song of joy,
 and I praise you, Lord,
 for the great things you have done for me.
Amen.

A way into prayer

Look at old photographs and think about the stories behind them, not just the moments they capture. Perhaps some of those scenes of joy came after major difficulties, or a long, hard slog. Thank God that you made it.

Prayers of intercession

We pray today for all in need of restoration:
 for those whose relationships are going through a bad patch:

restore them, O Lord;

for those who suffer in body, mind or soul:

restore them, O Lord;

for those exhausted by responsibility;

restore them, O Lord;

for those who have lost their jobs:

restore them, O Lord;

for those who have lost loved ones, and grieve;

restore them, O Lord.

for those who have lost their joy in living;

restore them, O Lord;

O Lord, restore our fortunes,

like the watercourses in the Negeb.

May those who sow in tears,

reap with shouts of joy.

Amen.

A prayer for all ages together

Lord, the desert is a dry, difficult place,

but you send streams to flow there.

(make flowing motion with arm)

Sometimes, our lives seem dry and difficult,

but your love flows right into them.

(make flowing motion with arm)

Thank you for flooding us with love!

You have done great things for us,

and we are filled with joy!

(make flowing motion with arm)

Amen.

Respond to the Word

Ideas to suit different interests, ages and learning preferences.
The Children's Sheet [WEB](#) offers activities to do in worship & at home.

A harvest of joy

Invite people to write or draw on slips of paper the things that make them joyful. Gather these in baskets like a 'harvest of joy' then share your own 'shouts of joy'. If you have a variety of languages among the congregation, find out about joyful expressions from around the world. For example, 'Jai Ho!' is a joyful shout from India.

Restoration dreams

Play at being the 'secret millionaire'. In small groups, discuss things that you would like to see restored if you had a lot of money: 'If I were the Secret Millionaire, I would...' Then think about the things that you might genuinely try to restore: 'I would love to restore...'

Dance for joy

The focus on joy in this psalm might prompt us to find out about the way Jewish communities sometimes express their joy. Follow the hyperlinks on the [WEB](#) to YouTube clips of Jewish dance.

A simple worship activity for all ages

Sing the song 'Hallelu, hallelu, hallelu, halleluia, praise ye the Lord' (see *Hymns and songs* for sources) This is often enlivened by standing up and sitting down. Divide the congregation into two groups (male/female, left/right, etc.). Group 1 stands and sing the 'Hallelus' then sits while groups 2 stands and sings 'praise ye the Lord'. It becomes great fun if you get faster and faster once you have tried it out.

When very young children are present

Today's activity offers a chance to play with things that help us to discover restoration and joy.

You will need: building bricks e.g. Lego™, Duplo™, wooden bricks.

You might use this simple paraphrase and actions. God helps us to rebuild and make new (*make building action with fists*). Alleluia (*wave arms*). Shout for joy (*shout 'hurray' if possible*).

Show the children a tumbling pile of bricks and invite them to rebuild a beautiful building. Invite them to shout (or wave their arms) with joy when it is completed.

Using today's psalm

Psalm 126

While some of the psalms we have seen over the past weeks have been very personal, today we have a song of a group of people who have been through hardship together, and have come through, hence their song of joy. What do the communities we belong to have to sing about? Some of the suggested settings are positively rumbustious – what do we receive from God that we want to raise the roof about?

Singing together Go to 'Music support' on the left-hand menu of the [WEB](#) for how to use the psalms.

Response line Between verses, everyone says or sings: The Lord has done great things for us [and we are glad]. There is a response action on the [WEB](#).

Versions of Psalm 126 include a bluesy responsorial version by Alan Smith in PS1 that worship groups might like to discover; another by Graham Kendrick (GK, TS1); others in PRA, MCW1.

Hymns and songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.
A key to abbreviations is on the [WEB](#).

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me (MP, TS)
Bread is blessed and broken (LFB, WGWG)

Colours of day

Hallelu, hallelu, hallelu (CHY,C&P, JP, RSJ)

He came down that we might have love

I will sing, I will sing

Jesus put this song into our hearts

Jesus, restore to us again (MP, TS)

Now thank we all our God

Praise him, praise him, praise him in the morning

The Lord restored us we were freed (PRA)

Through the night of doubt and sorrow

To God be the glory

To thee, O Lord, our hearts we raise

When the Lord brought us back

When Zion's fortunes God restored

Send out

Live in faith

Think about things that you have in your power to restore, for example, a broken gate, or, more importantly, a broken relationship. Set about doing what you can to restore these things to wholeness.

Pray

To be said together

Fill our mouths with laughter, Lord,
and our tongues with songs of joy;
and we will say among the nations
that the Lord has done great things,
and we rejoice!
Amen.