

As you reflect on this most joyous of Psalms, make these words your own as you give thanks for yourself, and your pilgrim journey into God – and into your own integrity.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

Bless God for others with whom you live, who also are his 'dwelling place'.

## Psalm 133

### Oil running down

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- 1 Behold how good and pleasant it is to dwell together in unity.
- 2 It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard,
- 3 Even on Aaron's beard, running down upon the collar of his clothing.
- 4 It is like the dew of Hermon running down upon the hills of Zion.
- 5 For there the Lord has promised his blessing: even life for evermore.

## Reflection

At first glance, it would be easy to see this quaint little Psalm as a heart-warming addition to the psalter, but hardly one of its main texts. Such a view would be a mistake. In its own idiosyncratic way it touches on one of our deepest needs, and illuminates one of the contemporary world's most profound crises.

But what of its origins? The Psalm is one of the 'Psalms of ascent' associated with the practice of pilgrimage to Jerusalem at festival time. Perhaps it originated through the sight of thousands of worshippers thronging the courts of the Temple united in pilgrimage. The opening verse may have originally come from the practice of brothers living together in the patriarchal home (Deuteronomy 25.5) and the psalmist has applied this to the huge gathering of pilgrims united as 'a brotherhood'.

Large gatherings of people united in worship make a profound impact. The Gospel of Luke tells us that the pilgrimage up to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover made by his family together with many other friends and relatives, was a significant moment in the maturing life of the young Jesus of Nazareth. Today, any who have sat in silent meditation in the huge tent at Taizé among thousands of others from across the world, will know how powerful this experience of 'dwelling together in unity' can be.

The first word in this Psalm is a summons to *look* – 'Behold, how good and pleasant it is . . .' writes the psalmist. Perhaps that

is what he himself was doing – *watching*, and in this brief poem sharing something of his delight in what he sees, a huge milling throng of diverse people who are at one. As he gazes at the colourful crowd of thousands of worshippers filling the Temple courts, and as his sharp eye takes in all the detail – old friends embracing, women laughing together, children from different families playing games, elderly and frail people being helped along by strangers – as he notices all this being played out before him under the shadow of the vast Temple which is the goal and purpose of these pilgrims, he is profoundly moved: 'how good and pleasant it is to dwell together in unity!'

To convey his delight and the significance of this 'dwelling together', he uses the ancient account of Aaron the brother of Moses and Priest of the Lord being anointed with oil. As he describes the oil of anointing being poured on the head, 'running down' on the beard and 'running down' over the collar of the robe (there are three 'running downs'), it sounds like first-hand reporting. Perhaps he has himself witnessed an anointing ceremony and the extravagance and excess of the oil being poured out and cascading down. And the moment of anointing was the high point which focused the sense of people being *at one* with each other as they celebrated the love of the extravagant God who embraced them.

In a diocese the ordination of priests is the moment when the whole community of the Church in the diocese comes together as one. At the centre of the ordination ceremony is the moment when the new priests are anointed for their priestly task of bringing Christ's unity to people.

As the poet struggles to describe how wonderful it is when barriers dissolve and people who may previously have been at odds come together, the sheer abundance of the anointing ceremony comes to his mind.

In the Exodus account of the anointing of Aaron the richness of the recipe for the 'precious oil' is striking. It was made up of olive oil, liquid myrrh, sweet-smelling cinnamon, aromatic cane and cassia, which must be 'blended as by the perfumer'! (Exodus 30.22-5). The aroma of large quantities of this exquisite mixture being poured over the head, combined with the aroma of clouds of equally extravagant incense – also 'blended by the perfumer' – would have made an ordination ceremony a wonderfully sensual occasion. *That, says the psalmist, is how beautiful unity is!*

In the New Testament, the dining room of the house of Simon the Pharisee was also filled with the fragrance of oil being poured out, as a despised woman of the streets expressed her gratitude to a man who had welcomed her back, had enabled her to belong again in the community of human beings.

But the fragrant oil of anointing is not enough. Something more is needed. So the poet searches for a further metaphor to say what belonging together means. His imagination takes him to the mountains at the head of the Jordan valley (verse 4) where he remembers the heavy dew which settles in the early mornings and then flows in rivulets down the parched hillsides. This, he says, is how *healing* it is, how *nourishing* it is, how *life-restoring* it is – when people dwell together in unity!

This Psalm may be from a distant time, but it addresses one of our most pressing needs.

A paradox of the digital age is that while there have never been more ways of staying 'connected', never has there been such loneliness.

In a report published in February 2015 following a survey of nearly two thousand clergy, the Church of England found that loneliness and isolation are the most widespread social problems affecting English communities regardless of income or social class.<sup>1</sup> It is not just an issue affecting elderly people though that is where it is most obvious. In the age of the internet and social media young people increasingly inhabit 'virtual' worlds. Hours spent in front of screens will be hours not spent in face-to-face relationships. Look at those walking along any city street: the vast majority will be engaged with their mobile phones – either talking or texting – rather than with those around them. But it is face-to-face relationships that our humanity, if we are to flourish, needs. This is what we are losing.

There are many reasons for this loneliness, not just the illusions of the internet. Perhaps a more fundamental reason is the way we have been taught to understand ourselves – as self-contained 'individuals'. This is indeed an illusion. The African concept of 'Ubuntu' meaning 'I am what I am because of who we all are', which emphasizes not individuality but *interdependence*, is far nearer the truth of us, helping us understand what creates and fosters true identity. This is the emphasis of both Old and New Testaments. We are most fully human when we *belong* – when we 'dwell together in unity'. This is 'good and pleasant'.

And, because it improves our mental and physical health, it leads to long life.

In her book *The Village Effect: Why Face-to-Face Contact Matters*, Susan Pinker assembles a huge range of research to show that interdependent belonging in *real* communities not only promotes happiness, but also extends life. Part of her research was undertaken in the mountains of Sardinia, one of the rare places in the developed world where men live as long as women and both live well into their 90s and beyond. Face-to-face belonging together is central to Sardinian village life in a way that in the rest of the developed world we appear to have forgotten. In Pinker's argument she brings to bear research conducted by neuro-scientists which indicates that 'social integration – the feeling of being part of a cohesive group – fosters immunity and resilience. How accepted and supported we feel affects the biological pathways that skew the genetic expression of a disease, while feeling isolated "leaves a loneliness imprint" on every cell.<sup>2</sup> It seems we are literally 'hard-wired' for community.

'Behold how good and pleasant it is to dwell together in unity!' It is like precious oil pouring down, it is like the life-giving dew of the mountains.

The psalter offers us many insights into what it means to live a more fully human life. This quirky little Psalm is among its most important offerings.

What might this Psalm be saying to you, in your community, in your neighbourhood? How might the belonging together that this Psalm speaks of, be nurtured?

# Psalm

# Deer

1 As the deer  
so longs

2 My soul  
when she

3 My tears  
while all

4 Now when  
how I we  
and led t

5 With the  
among t

6 Why are  
and why