

Psalm 119.9-16

Mind change

- 9 How shall young people cleanse their way to keep themselves according to your word?
- 10 With my whole heart have I sought you;
O let me not go astray from your commandments.
- 11 Your words have I hidden within my heart,
that I should not sin against you.
- 12 Blessed are you, O Lord;
O teach me your statutes.
- 13 With my lips have I been telling
of all the judgements of your mouth.
- 14 I have taken greater delight in the way of your testimonies
than in all manner of riches.
- 15 I will meditate on your commandments
and contemplate your ways.

16 My delight shall be in your statutes
and I will not forget your word.

Reflection

Through every one of its 176 verses, Psalm 119 speaks of the psalmist's longing to enter into the presence of God through following the way of Torah, the teachings of the law. Such is the consistency of this theme that at first reading it seems that each verse can stand alone, and indeed that is very largely the case. However, within its eight-verse structure there are small sub-themes. Here is one of them.

Verse 9 tells us that this eight-verse section needs to be read with the issues of young people in mind. How young people can best be helped into the world of faith is a searching question for every age, not least our own, and we shall return to that in a moment. But let us first reflect on these words as they come to us from an ancient religious community.

These verses make sense by assuming that verse 9 is a personal question, and the following verses are personal statements. The Hebrew here can be translated as plural or singular, but it is actually singular, so is best translated: 'How can a young person cleanse his way?'

As we read these verses and imagine this young man, our initial reaction might be that he sounds very pious. We tend to think that part of the long process of a young person taking responsibility for their own life will include in adolescence some

testing of the values they have inherited and of the boundaries they have been given. For this young man there appears to have been no testing at all. He comes across as not very real.

But more may be hidden here than appears.

What is this young man actually asking? What is the burden of his concern? What weight might the verb in the question he asks, carry? 'How shall a young person *cleanse* his way so that he can keep himself...?'

Could it be that what we have here is not the testimony of a sanctimonious young man enjoying his own piety, but rather the words of someone surfacing after a terrible mess in their life who is now intent on making a new start? Could it be that here is someone who knows very well that following in the way of God is the only way to real happiness, but who has badly come off the rails, and now longs to find again the way of faithfulness to the law, and the intensity of his longing reveals just how fragile he is?

The prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke immediately comes to mind. These words could have been his. Here we can hear him – now back home – pouring out his love to his father, even as the memories of what he went through in that far country are still raw.

Imagined like this, the question at the beginning, 'How shall a young person cleanse his way?' becomes a question of personal forgiveness, of how this young man deals with himself. How do I cope with my sense of shame? How do I stop punishing myself and, as I have been forgiven, forgive myself? And how do I deal with the stuff in my head that I still carry, the memories of a past still present in my nightmares? This young man longs 'to keep

himself'. The verb suggests fragility, as though he knows how easily the threads of his mind that now bind him to life could unravel.

This whole eight-verse section can be re-imagined as words of repentance from the prodigal son to his father, whose words of welcome he has 'hidden in his heart', and in whose 'way' he takes 'greater delight' than in all the 'riches' he squandered in that far country.

Such interpretation makes sense in the context of an ancient Jewish world where the religious path was universally valued.

But what of our world?

How shall young people cleanse their way?

This question could come from any age, but in our time it carries a concern that is new. Today, it could perhaps be more accurately phrased: how shall young people navigate the multiple distractions and overwhelmings of the modern world so that they can live with integrity? Put like that the question takes us to the phenomenon that more than any other in the contemporary era has affected the way young people live in the world: the internet.

As the last millennium drew to a close, we entered the digital age. The phrase 'digital immigrant' has come to be used for those born before about 1985. We knew the world before the internet. The generation since then are 'digital natives'. They have never known anything else. This all-embracing context throws up challenges for both 'immigrants' and 'natives' that

have never had to be faced before, not least in how the brain is affected.

In her book *Mind Change*¹ the neuroscientist Susan Greenfield likens what the internet is doing to our brains to the impact of climate change on the earth, in four respects. Both phenomena are global, controversial, multi-faceted and, perhaps above all, unprecedented. Exploring what the constant connectedness to the internet and the never-ending inpouring of data is doing to the highly adaptable human brain ('plasticity' is the term used) is entering uncharted territory. Similarly, in the period of *Homo sapiens* we have never experienced what an earth warmed by climate change might mean. But in this comparison, there is a difference. At last the world may be waking up to climate change. With mind change we appear to be still asleep.

Greenfield is not alone in her concern. Other writers are exploring the same issue. Nicholas Carr (*The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*), Richard Watson (*Future Minds: How the Digital Age is Changing our Minds, Why this Matters and What we can do About it*), Sherry Turkle (*Alone Together: Why we Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*), Michael Harris (*The End of Absence: Reclaiming What We've Lost in a World of Constant Connection*) are just some of the many writers exploring from different perspectives the same phenomenon.² These books and other studies raise a host of questions about what it means to be human.

We can handle a lot of information very rapidly, but are we losing the ability to think deeply? What is happening to

memory? Is the ability to pay attention for sustained periods of time at risk? Is it a coincidence that the rapid rise in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has occurred at the same time as more and more use of the internet? If relationships are formed in a virtual screen world, how does that affect a young person's capacity to relate in the real world? And most disturbing of all: is the brain itself – in its plasticity, its capacity to adapt to huge amounts of data coming at it – literally being remade in the image of the computer, so that our 'capacity for contemplation', for 'meditative thinking' – those things that really make us human – are reduced? In what is otherwise a totally secular exploration, Nicholas Carr quotes Psalm 115 as he reflects on what the computer is doing to the brain: 'their idols are silver and gold the work of men's hands . . . those who make them shall become like them and so will all who put their trust in them' (Psalm 115.4–8). Carr's work raises the further question: amid the constant distractions of the 24/7 'connected' life – texts, twitter, facebook, emails etc., – can those qualities that are foundational for any authentic religious life – silence, stillness, waiting, attentiveness, not knowing – have any chance to develop?

How shall young people cleanse their way? How shall young people keep the mind clear and open to the mystery of God? How shall any of us, whatever our age?

In every age, whatever the context, the response will be the same. In the next verse the psalmist writes: 'With my *whole heart* have I sought you' (verse 10). With the entire undivided attention of my deepest self, I seek you.

The challenge for all religious institutions is how *in our time*, can we enable such seeking? In what kinds of disciplines and communities?

In September 2015 at Lambeth Palace the community of St Anselm was formed. It is a sign of hope. A community of young people living in a way the ancient monastics would recognize, drawing closer to God through a daily rhythm of silence, study and prayer, and, through those disciplines, engaging with the challenges of the global twenty-first century Church and world.

One small sign of hope. Perhaps you know of others?

How shall young people cleanse their way to keep themselves according to your word?

However young or old you are, spend some time reflecting on your own answer to this question.

At the end, quietly pray:

With my whole heart have I sought you;

O let me not go astray from your commandments.