The dialogue of worship

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Sermon for Pentecost + 23 – Psalm 34

You're at a gathering and someone approaches you – you know their face so well, but what *is* their name?! What do you do in the few seconds thinking time you have? I start running through the alphabet. The alphabet's a wonderful thing for jogging memories from their hiding places. You have the certainty of something familiar to work from – something you know by heart – and it's amazing how often it works to help re-establish your relationship with someone's name.

That's one of the hidden delights of today's Psalm. Psalm 34 is called an acrostic Psalm. It uses this same principle of alphabetical sequence to help the memory, and renew acquaintance. The first word of each of the 22 original verses of this psalm begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, following the alphabetic sequence from aleph to taw. It helps the reciter / listener to remember the whole Psalm accurately.

Psalm 34 happens to be my vestry prayer. Whenever time permits, as our servers and lay readers will tell you, we read out this first part of Ps 34 as the prayer which focuses us on our number one priority, the worship of God. And although only one of us reads it out, it engages us all in a dialogue. Let me try to describe that.

Like most of the Psalms, Ps 34's verses are each shaped into two balanced halves. As we look at it in translation, we see that the verse halves reinforce each other – there's often repetition. A Psalm as a whole may traverse a bewildering range of moods and subjects, but each verse is a unit. This comes to life in one of the common ways Psalms are recited in worship – when we say / sing them antiphonally by half verses. You hear *your*self say *I will bless the Lord continually* and

then you hear the answering call – *his praise shall be always in my mouth*.

We hear ourselves in dialogue with each other, and at special moments, we can also hear ourselves in dialogue with the countless people of faith for whom this has been a prayer over three millennia. We may or may not agree with them, but that doesn't seem to matter. This dialogue between us is not a time for agreement of ideas, but a moment of community with each other, and with our ancestors in the faith.

We don't necessarily need to recite Psalms communally, either, to get this effect. In verse two, I say the first verse half, *Let my soul boast of the Lord,* then I wait, and after a few moments, I say the second half – *the humble shall hear it and rejoice.*

The humble shall hear *my soul* rejoice! The Psalm reminds us of scripture's constant witness to God's preferential option for the poor – the people for whom God has such a great passion. Say or sing a Psalm and immediately you're in a dialogue with an invisible community of saints – God's Kingdom of the humble. We cry *O Praise the Lord with us*, and *their* answer gathers *us* in: *Let us exalt his name together*.

To this point, the Psalm has been a hymn of praise, and we've felt ourselves join a vast choir spanning continents and centuries, simply by singing / saying it. Now the Psalm moves into something more like testimony, but it's still a dialogue. *For I sought the Lord's help and he answered* – the Psalmist doesn't say when, or what happened. That's something we'll be able to remember from our own lives. The answer – *and he freed me from all my fears* – tells us we're heard, we're not alone.

Our worship services keep step with this Psalm. We began today with a hymn of praise. In the scriptures, we hear the testimony of other people of faith – testimony to the fact that God walks our road with us, and most closely of all, in

our times of weakness and suffering. Soon, we will share the Eucharist together, and this too echoes the Psalm – *taste and see that the Lord is good.* In a sense, that's what praying the Psalms is – trying out a little of the way God has walked side by side with humanity down the ages, and discovering that this is the road we walk too.

Often, the language of the Psalms is a little bit alien to us; this Psalm is particularly directed towards the people who suffer want and hunger, and that's not as common an experience in our society as it was for the Psalmist; though I'm beginning to wonder. But I just wanted to raise the idea above the surface again that there's a dialogue going on all the time in our faith journeys. It's a conversation, but we're hardly aware of it without wonderful gifts like the Psalms to remind us. They call us together into a vast community of faith. For every cry, there is an answer. We see it at work in our gospel Mk 10 today about Bartimaeus, the blind beggar of Jericho:

*47 When Bartimaeus heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth passing by, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49 Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "**Take heart; get up, he is calling you**."* What's our answer? Amen.