February 10, 2019: Choral Matins
The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
The Venerable Martin Gorick, The Archdeacon of Oxford
‘I Waited Patiently for the Lord’

I’ve been Canon in Residence this week. As well as going to the early morning services, which with the Chapter I would do anyway, this means leading prayers and reading at every evening service too. I’m usually out at work till about 5, and often have evening meetings from 7.30, so taking this time out here between 6 and 7 adds quite a bit of time pressure into my day. Usually I don’t do it. Usually it’s when I’m cooking or eating my dinner. But when I’m on duty I’m here of course. Stepping into that daily rhythm of Evensong that our choir know so well. Enjoying the rhythm of singing, reading and praying that make up that hour. Enjoying having the choir up in the Chancel with us for a change, and the amazing sound a richness that their voices bring to the worship.

One thing you can’t miss is how much time is given over to singing psalms. We say them in the morning, which is a little quicker, but in the evening, they are sung, and that section can easily take ten or fifteen minutes of time. They take concentration to sing and sing well. The congregation is forced to slow down, to wait, to wait patiently for the Lord.

Today’s Psalm, Psalm 40, begins with just those words.

‘I waited patiently for the Lord.’

That simple verse is so counter cultural today. I waited…. Most of us don’t like waiting. Waiting in shops, waiting for a bus, waiting on the phone, whatever it is we get impatient. If we have slow Wi-Fi, or have to wait for information we can get so annoyed, or start cursing or hooting at a car in front if they are a little slow off the mark at traffic lights.

But this Psalm begins: ‘I waited patiently.’ And not just waiting, patiently, but waiting patiently for the Lord. How counter-cultural is that?! Perhaps he had learnt that rushing around, trying to push God to show up, or answer our prayers now and fast just doesn’t
work. Perhaps the psalmist knew that God is always there. Not far away but within us and all around us. Most of the time we are too busy, too distracted, too impatient to notice. We need to find the quiet headspace, to wait patiently for the Lord, to allow time for that connection to make itself known, to become real for us.

And the Psalmist goes on, ‘and he inclined to me, and heard my calling.’ The Lord heard the cry of his heart, the longing of his soul, patiently presented with perseverance we imagine. ‘He inclined to me and heard my cry.’

The psalmist had been in a bad place, which he graphically describes, ‘He brought me out of the horrible or desolate pit, out of the mire and clay.’ Jeremiah the prophet was lowered into a horrible dark water tank, and his feet sank deep in the wet clay at the bottom. Perhaps the Psalmist is describing an actual experience as awful as that, or perhaps the isolation was spiritual, the anguish mental. All we know was that he was rescued, rescued, he felt, by God. ‘He brought me out and set my feet upon the rock.’ God placed him on solid ground, ‘and ordered my goings’ the psalm says, set him walking in a secure path.

The Psalmist has experienced salvation. He has longed for, waited and waited for God’s help and attention. And finally, it has come. He is secure. He is saved. He is free.

And so, he sings a new song. Not now one of lament and sadness, and of patient longing. But a song of joy.

‘He has put a new song in my mouth, a song of thanksgiving unto our God.’

The word Psalm means a Song of Praise. Morning and evening we bring these ancient Songs of Praise to God in our worship. The language and music may seem fine, but don’t be misled. The Hebrew underneath is earthy and direct. Psalms share faith, but they also share despair. Songs of joy are balanced by cries of lament and desolation. Some pray for peace, others cry for vengeance. The psalms were the prayer book of Jesus, as they are still ours today. They show us how to pray, bringing our whole selves to God, the Good, the Bad and the Ugly. Praying with honesty and openness to our heavenly Father, who already knows us better than we know ourselves.

But underneath all of this is the pull back to God. The turning of one’s heart morning and evening to the one true God. Whether in need or in plenty, whether in distress or from elation singing that song defiantly to God. For ‘he has put a new song in my mouth, even a song of thanksgiving unto our God.’
The Hebrew word for a ‘song of thanksgiving to God’ is one we know well. ‘Hallelu-jah’, or in Greek Alleluia, without the H. Literally ‘Praise God’. The Psalms share dark feelings like despair, grief and hatred, quite openly. A holy person shares these with God, they don’t push them down and away and pretend they don’t exist. But still the Praise of God defiantly comes through. Hallelujah.

There is a lovely section in the Orthodox liturgy for burial, when mourners express their sorrow at the graveside, as the soil crashes onto the lid of the coffin,

From Dust we are made and to dust we shall return, as weeping o’er the grave we make our song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

Whatever else is going on, however we are feeling, coming to God each day in prayer is at the heart of our faith. Dramatic religiosity is not required. In the psalmist’s day that meant sacrifices at the Temple, and offerings burnt on the altar. Long words and perfect feelings are not required. Psalm 40 is clear on this. Just bring yourself, warts and all. Jesus died for one like you. Peter and John healed one like you.

‘Burnt offerings and sacrifice for sin you have not required.’

God does not need that. He needs you.

‘Then said I,
Lo.
I come.’