

PSALM 78
READING THE SCRIPT

You've been asked to write your life-story. The BBC has come to you and said that they want to show your life story on television and are going to give you a substantial amount of money to do it. The programme will be an hour long, so it can't show everything; you have to choose. What bits will you tell? There are some bits that will be obvious: the events of your life, the highlights that have happened to you and only you know what these will be, but your wedding day, the birth of your children – there are some obvious bits and these might be the first things you write down, the stories you have to tell. But it's not just stories the BBC wants; they want people to see what kind of person you are, so you need to tell us something of your qualities, what kind of character you are; perhaps that is harder to do than stories, because we are not always the best judge of our own character. What about the story of your faith? How would you tell people what faith means to you? How would you tell your own story?

The greatest temptation, I would imagine is to tell only the good bits. We pick out the highlights and the best days of our lives and we want the world to see how good these days were; it is the same with our character, we want to show people how splendid we are, the best person ever. Actually, the challenge would be for us to be honest: as well as great events, there will have been bad days, days that we prefer to forget, days that when we remember them we shudder and turn cold. There are character flaws that we all have; would we tell the world about these too? We'd rather not, because then people will not think so highly of us, and will know what we're really like. That is far harder. In the story of our faith, would we also tell of days when that faith was weak and when we turned away? I've been reading Julie Walter's autobiography when on holiday and there are some really funny bits, but there are also some pieces that reveal her to be flawed, places where she talks openly about her weaknesses and insecurities; that takes courage, but then we see the real person.

Here's another challenge: how would we tell story of our Church? Again, imagine that the BBC has come along and asked us to make a programme telling the story of Juniper green Parish Church. We have the same kinds of challenges: there would be events that we'd want to tell people about because these were momentous days in the life of the congregation, things that happened in the past, events that we might consider as the glory days of the congregation? Perhaps the glory days are yet to come. We'd want to tell people about ways in which God has blessed His church and built up His Church in the past and ways in which God is still building His Church and paint the Church in a really positive light. But would we also be prepared to tell the stories of our faults and failings, of times when the congregation was in severe difficulty, of days when we rebelled against the ways of God, or ignored God?

That's what Psalm 78 is all about. Asaph was the choir master of worship when David was king. It is said of Asaph that "*he prophesied...*" (1 Chronicles 25:2) and his sons followed him as singers in worship. Asaph wrote Psalm 78, not to sing, but to tell stories. Here is the story of Israel as God's people, written so that the next generation can know these stories and understand their meaning and importance. Families do this - children learn about their parents and grandparents by the stories of the past; churches do it – people new to the Church begin to learn something of the history of the Church by listening to the stories of past successes and failures. Asaph wants his children and grandchildren to know these stories: "*We will...*" (v4) That's great! Telling people what God has done from the days of Moses to David, there is 500 years of history here, so that new generations will praise God and trust

Him. But Asaph has done something else: he has painted another picture, a picture of rebellion, of a forgetful people, a people who kept getting things wrong; a real picture of Israel, that says 'this is what we are really like; these are our faults and mistakes.'

Someone has described this as a ramble with landmarks thru' Israel's history. It is not a history book, with precise dates and a well-ordered story. It goes round in circles a bit; it pauses over some stories and misses others out, or bypasses them very quickly. But this is not just story-telling: this is about people knowing their history so that they can live life well now, so that they can avoid the mistakes of the past and be better, more faithful people; the next generation should know these stories so that they learn to put their trust in God, obey His commands and know His endless love for them; that's what the Psalm is all about.

We read only one small part of Psalm 78, and the piece we read is one of the most famous of all Old Testament stories, a story that became part of Israel's very foundation – the escape from Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea. "*He divided...*" (v13f) Here we are in the days of Moses, the book of Exodus, chapter 14. The people are slaves in Egypt, desperate for salvation and God hears their prayers, and sends Moses and through his leadership they escape from slavery to Pharaoh; their escape is confirmed as God leads them through the water, the sea parted in front of them and Moses led them through the water and God saved them. It was a great day; they rejoiced that God was their Saviour; He had done great things for them; this event that would stand as the defining moment in their life and history. God went on blessing His people, providing for them in the desert, leading, guiding, giving them food and water and blessing them with everything they could possibly need. How great is our God; we celebrate God's goodness, power and love. This is repeated in other stories, in other great events, in other ways in which God has blessed us; we pass on these stories to children and grandchildren, that they might know how great is our God.

The pattern of Psalm 78 leads us in another direction as well. "*But they...*" (v17) and that too goes on and on. They ate 'the bread of angels' but then rebelled against God, or put Him to test, they spoke against Him, made demands of God; then later they replaced Him in their affections with gods that were more biddable, gods that wouldn't answer back, statues made of stone or wood and brought these statues gifts and offerings and chose not to remember the living God who had blessed them. Theirs is the story of God's great deeds, but it is the also a story of a people's lack of faith, active disobedience and wilful neglect of God. So there are times when God says 'you don't want me, then you shall not have me' and His glory disappears and every sign of His presence is removed.

How does the story end? Well, this part of the story ends with God still loving His people. He can't let them go completely; His love for Isr goes on and on, despite what they have been like and so at end Asaph is still able to write about God loving His people and caring for them like shepherd. God has not abandoned His people, but His love goes on; God's people have neglected Him, but He has not neglected them. So the next generation is not only to be told stories of God's great power, is not only to be told about their forefathers' faults, but they are also to be told of the enduring love of God that lasts forever. The story would go on and on; it would go on into the days of Jesus and the great love of God for the world in the gift of His Son; it would go on into the days of the Church when the gospel came to the whole world and not just Israel, when the love of God expanded its boundaries in spectacular fashion. It is a story that goes on yet, it is not finished and God is still at work blessing the world; He still loves us, we still fail, but His love goes on.

Showstoppers is all about stories; over the next week, we will be telling the children five of the Must-know stories from the Bible: the story of creation, of David and Goliath, Daniel, Christmas and Easter; some of children will have heard some of these already; some might even know all of them; some will have heard none of them, perhaps. We do this to pass on to our children the stories of what God has done so that they may know, so that they may understand something of what God is like. That is something we should all be doing; we should be telling our children or our grandchildren the stories of the Bible; we should be passing on to others, when we have opportunity, something of the great works of God. In Romans 10, Paul reflects on the process by which people come to faith in Jesus: "*How can...*" (*Rom 10:14b*) We are telling the stories of God so that people can believe God; we are telling Bible stories, or telling our story – it's for passing on so that others know something of God to believe.

Quite rightly does Michael Wilcock say that "We should meditate on Psalm 78 with humility, shame and penitence. It is a powerful picture of our own sinfulness." We have been like that! We have rebelled; we have neglected God; we have disobeyed; we have carped and complained; we have ignored God; we have gone our own way regardless of God's ways; we have not loved God as well as we should; we have fallen out with other people more often than we should. We have complained: "Why has God not done this? Why should I serve Him?" No matter how much we would like to sweep these attitudes under the carpet, they are there; they are part of our story and yet we try to find excuses and blame someone else, rather than face up to the reality that we have made mistakes. Now is time to face up to these mistakes, faults; we can't hide them from God, He already knows them; but wants us to realise and recognise who and what we are. So we remember mistakes: "those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it." (Geo Santayana) So we learn to live God with an undying love, to be faithful and loyal, to serve Him and follow Jesus more closely!

Here is the end of the story: for all that has gone before, the love of God goes on! It is not just the Bible story that we tell; it is not just our own story that we tell; ultimately, we tell God's story and the story of God's endless love. The script ends with God still loving us. No matter what has gone before, God's love is endless. We have seen God's love in quite special ways, especially in Jesus; we may have tasted that love in some wonderful ways in our personal experience; we have may have ignored that love or complained against God in some ways that now make us ashamed and full of regrets. But one thing stands and will stand for ever: God's love never ends. He keeps loving us on and on and on; He keeps loving His Church, despite our flaws, despite the mess we get ourselves into; He keeps loving the world, despite the world trying to throw God away. The story has not ended; we are still writing the story; but through the whole story, the thread continues of the endless, faithful, patient, forgiving love that God has for us. Jesus has loved the world and has given His life; that same love is new every day for every one of us. Let us learn to love God, to trust Him, to follow Jesus; and to tell others. It's no less than God deserves.