

Actress Jenny Agutter's parents lost two babies to cystic fibrosis. The person her mother turned to for comfort and counsel was her Catholic priest, who told her: 'You know God will never give you a burden that you can't carry.'

The psalmists are not like Greek tragedians who portray a no-exit situation of fate or necessity; rather, they raise a cry out of the depths in the confidence that God has the power to lift a person out of the 'miry bog' and to set one's feet upon a rock (Psalm 40.1-3).

*Bernhard W Anderson,
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Those who make us believe that anything's possible and fire our imagination over the long haul, are often the ones who have survived the bleakest of circumstances.

Paul Rogat Loeb, writer

Missionary Allen Gardiner kept a diary in 1850 when he and his six companions were slowly dying of starvation in inhospitable Tierra del Fuego. He wrote: 'Poor and weak as we are, our boat is a very Bethel to our souls, for we feel and know that God is here. Asleep or awake, I am, beyond the power of expression, happy.'

His words inspired Victorian England – including Charles Darwin, who celebrated the later success of the mission with the following words in a letter to the South American Missionary Society in 1870: 'The success of the Tierra del Fuego Mission is most wonderful, and charms me ... It is a grand success. I shall feel proud if your committee think fit to elect me an honorary member of your society.'

in the field, no sheep in the pen – still responds: *'I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation'* (Habakkuk 3.17-18). The prophet looks forward to the ultimate victory and restoration that God promises.

And Jesus himself prays for those who nail him to the cross. He reaches out to those who are condemned with him and places his trust in God. His anguished cry, *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'* demonstrates his complete association with the sorrows and privations of the world. Yet Psalm 22, from which he quotes, doesn't just give voice to deep sorrow; it ends with jubilant praise expressing confidence in God:

*'Praise the Lord, you that fear him ...
He has saved my life for himself ...
this shall be told of the Lord for generations to come.
They shall come and make known his salvation ...'*

Casting our cares on God

It is exceedingly difficult to have faith in God when life is hard, and this must be acknowledged. Yet the experience of many Christians – and many Jews over the ages – is that at times of sorrow and despair it is possible to put your trust in God. It is possible to bring *everything*, even your lack of faith, to God.

The psalms encourage us to do this. They give us words when we don't have any of our own. This instinct for praise, even from the depths of desolation, is also a form of resistance. We will not let despair overtake us. We will not let misery and oppression have the last word. We will go on believing in the light, even when we are plunged into utter darkness.

We see this in Jesus. We see it in many other heroes of our faith: the martyrs who went to their death praising God.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUPS

BIBLE READING: PSALM 13 – see p. 12

Please see the suggestion in the box at the bottom of p. 5 about reading the Psalm together.

1. Tough times for the psalmist. On track 19 of the CD/transcript Timothy says, 'I think it's very important that we pray for each other. And even sometimes with each other. That helps to keep us going in the tough moments.' Do you ever pray with your Christian friends – or anyone else – outside of church? When might you do this – or offer to do this? What holds you back, if you don't?
2. **Read Acts 16.9-10.** The Bible suggests that God speaks to us in many different ways: through dreams, prayer, a voice, a friend, a coincidence, a Bible verse ... The psalmist laments, because he has waited on the Lord and cried out to God 'from the depths' but God seems to remain silent: 'the dark night of the soul'. Do you expect God to 'speak' to you? How does God do this – and how do you cope if he seems distant or absent?
3. **Read 1 Peter 5.7 and Job 19.25.** In tough times Fr Timothy hangs on to the 'beautiful' word 'abide' (track 18). What sees you through your dark times? Share any words of encouragement for those who might be feeling like that right now?
4. **Re-read Psalm 13.5-6** which expresses wonderful positive sentiments. Do the final verses of this psalm capture your own day-to-day experience? What do the key words 'trust' and 'salvation' mean to you? Can you say with the psalmist, 'I will sing to the Lord, for he has dealt so bountifully with me.?' (Rose does, on track 20!)
5. On track 23 of the CD John Bell, commenting on his mother's death after a cruel illness, observes that 'the life we are given is not a life that comes with guarantees.' Imagine your life without

Some groups will address all the questions. That's fine. Others may prefer to select just a few and spend longer on each. That's fine, too. Horses for (York) Courses!

- your faith. How would you cope? Who do you thank for your gift of faith?
6. This psalm swings between despair, hope and joy. Bishop Stephen loves the psalms because they appear to speak to every situation. Yet one Christian couple have given up using a psalm in their daily devotions, because there's too much whingeing and 'poor me'. Yet for centuries the Church has incorporated the psalms in its daily worship. (Four times a day Fr Timothy says a psalm or two.) Are the psalms a staple of your own devotional life?
 7. Psalm 13 begins in despair and ends with trust and hope. Can you recall a time in your own life (or someone else's) when troubles gave way to new beginnings and hope? How big a part did your personal faith play in this?
 8. **Read Romans 5.3-5 and Canon John Holmes' words in the box on p. 13.** The psalmist is open and honest about his mood swings! So we don't have to feel guilty when we struggle to be optimistic. Sometimes it can be a great act of faith simply to admit, 'It's not working' – in church life, family life, at work or elsewhere. That admission can open us to new possibilities, which are hidden as long as we pretend all is going well. Have you ever experienced, or heard of, such 'new dawns'?
 9. Reflect on difficult times in your own life: what and/or who helped you most? What did you learn that has helped you to help others?
 10. **10. Read James 1.2-4 and the box about Jenny Agutter's family on p. 14.** A terrible experience for the bereaved parents – and a very tough assignment for the Catholic priest. What do you make of the priest's words? What might you say to bring comfort at such a time?