



## On your marks

The Psalms are full of songs of praise that have inspired countless hymns and songs down the ages. They have shaped our liturgies and provided words for prayer for Christians of all traditions. They give expression to both the highs and the lows of our spiritual lives and are acknowledged examples of some of world's finest poetry. Here is a way of working with some of them - using simple movement and easily learned music.

## Get set

In preparation read through the set of psalms from number 120 to 134 - they are all fairly short and belong together. Some simple percussion instruments to accompany these marching 'pilgrim' songs would be useful.

## Go!

1. This collection of psalms has, in the authorised version, the title *Psalms of Ascent*. They are pilgrim psalms sung by those travelling on their way up to Jerusalem for a special festival. They are marching psalms and could easily form the basis for a session with children or perhaps become the outline for an all-age service of worship.

2. Begin by using the following simple versions of Psalm 122 and 125 to familiar tunes:  
e.g. Psalm 122 to the tune of 'she'll be coming round the mountain, when she comes':

*We'll all worship in Jerusalem, when it comes*  
*We'll all worship in Jerusalem, when it comes*  
*We'll be standing in God's temple*  
*We'll be standing in God's temple*  
*We'll all worship in Jerusalem, when it comes.*

*Singing Glory Halleluiah, Praise the Lord*  
*Singing Glory Halleluiah, Praise the Lord*  
*Singing Glory Halleluiah*  
*Glory Halleluiah*  
*Singing Glory Halleluiah, Praise the Lord*

and Psalm 125 to a football chant:

*We're on our way to Zion*  
*We shall not be moved*  
*We're on our way to Zion*  
*We shall not be moved*  
*Just like the hills that stand around Jerusalem*

*We shall not be moved*

Why not create some more verses for each chorus, based around the other thoughts and images in these two Psalms? (e.g. peace; thanksgiving; goodness and longing for an end to what is evil)

3. These pilgrim psalms cover a number of important themes about living God's way and each has some strong visual imagery that you could develop with the children, such as:

*trust* - this is likened to a young child being held by its mother in Psalm 131. Why not create a psalm sculpture of this using a baby doll to accompany a spoken or sung version?

*blessing* - this is compared to the joy of bringing in a good harvest - in Psalm 126

*patient prayer* - this is linked to the building and watching over a city - in Psalm 127

*family life* - which uses images of a vine, olives and even a quiver full of arrows - in Psalms 127 and 128

*unity* - which is like oil and mountain dew! - in Psalm 133

There is plenty of scope for the visual and tactile here - and even smells!

4. These pilgrim Psalms also include number 134, which is the 'amen' to the whole collection and is really an all-night praise meeting! How about turning this into a round to the tune of 'London's Burning'? This way, as the psalm suggests, it could go on an on for a long time!

*Bless the Lord now, bless the Lord now  
All his servants, all his servants  
Stand and praise; all night long  
The Lord bless you; the Lord bless you*

5. If you are using this collection as the framework for all-age worship, then Psalm 130 could be used as the confession and absolution, including the hope of redemption in the last line, which Christians can experience through Jesus.

To help children into the imagery, give each child an A5 piece of white paper. As you read verses 1 and 2, ask them to draw a deep pit (in cross-section) with a pin-person representing them at the bottom. This is where we end up without God - in a hole that we can't escape from by ourselves.

Now write in the pit (to further block escape) the numbers 1 to 10, as you read verse 3. These represent God's laws that we so easily forget and break. But...

Now draw a cross, with its foot in the bottom of the pit but its top part (including the cross-beam) well above the surface, as you read verse 4.

Next, as you read verses 5 and 6, draw a rising sun next to the top of the cross on the surface at the

top of the pit. The resurrection of Jesus is our hope of starting again.

Finally draw a second pin-person standing on the surface between the cross and the risen sun, as you read verse 7 and 8.

**6.** Psalm 132 in the collection is linked to the story of how David found the ark outside Jerusalem and had it brought into the city that he had built. This is the time that he danced before the Lord and his wife looked on disapprovingly from the window - see 2 Samuel 6. Perhaps this could become a story centre to your session with these psalms and of course an opportunity both for some drama and to sing *When the Spirit of the Lord is within my heart, I will dance as David danced*. It is also a moment to explore the thought that true worship is from the heart and should be a response to God's love, not something done to impress others!

**7.** Psalm 121 is a favourite of many Christians and there are a number of musical versions of these words. It is also a psalm that suggests some simple actions to help it be learned: e.g.

shading your eyes with one hand, as if looking out into the distance (verse 1)

making the shape of the world with both hands (verse 2)

stamping down one foot firmly and then opening both eyes wide (verse 3 and 4)

locking hands close together as if holding firmly onto something (verse 5a) and then shading your self to the right and to the left (verse 5b and 6)

holding out an open palm as if stopping any danger coming near (verse 7)

walking forward and then turning and walking back to where you started (verse 8)

rolling one hand over the other several times (= for evermore, also in verse 8)

**8.** Finally Psalm 124 is a testimony about answered prayer and Psalm 123 is a prayer for those in trouble. You could make these the basis for your prayers together: a time for 'thank-you' and 'please help'. A key picture for the answered prayer is a bird escaping from a cage; a key picture for the petition is of eyes looking up in expectation. Find some appropriate clip art for these images and then place them in the centre of your circle of children or somewhere visible to the whole congregation. Use these as a focus for your prayers. As a response use the verse from the end of Psalm 124: *Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*