



On your marks

They make up the Bible's longest book. Some of them contain the most quoted verses in the New Testament. Jesus used them as his prayer book and quoted from them in his teaching. He met temptation with them, sang from them at the Last Supper and died with one of them on his lips. They are of course the Psalms. All this would suggest that we definitely should be sharing this precious resource with our children but the truth is that this book of praises, poems and prayers is perhaps one of the least explored parts of the Bible in our Sunday and midweek programmes. So where could we start? The following are some brief suggestions to get you thinking. (NB Some of these ideas first appeared in an issue of *Roots* magazine published by CHP and written by the same author).

Get set

Collect together some different Bible versions of the Psalms, including paraphrases such as *The Message*; alongside these dig out an old copy of *Psalm Praise* (published many years ago now (by Falcon for CPAS, 1973) - ask around older members of the church!) and also check in the back of a book like *Songs of Fellowship*, which connects up which songs and choruses in its collection are based on Psalms.

Also look at other ideas on the Psalms using the keyword.

Go!

In many churches the use of a psalm as a regular part of Sunday worship has often gone by the board, at least as far as the children are concerned. Of course many well-known songs and hymns do put psalms to music and this is one important way they can seep into our souls but why not make a more deliberate and planned effort to introduce this Bible songbook to children and young people from time to time? Here are a few ideas you may like to try.

1. Include the 'psalm of the day' (in church liturgies there is a set psalm or psalms) or else a psalm appropriate to the theme of the service while the children and young people are still present. Look for an easy-to-read version such as the *Contemporary English Version* and divide up the verses so that one half of the congregation speak the words in dialogue with the other. The poetry of the psalms lies in what has been called their 'parallelism'. This means that the sentiment of each line or group of lines is repeated, using different words but saying basically the same thing - almost as a commentary on itself. This gives the reader or singer the chance to reflect on what has been said. Reading it in church as a dialogue can have a similar effect.
2. A number of the psalms, such as Psalm 136 and Psalm 107, have deliberately repeated phrases that could be chorused by a small group within the congregation as it is read. This is more helpful for younger children who will quickly pick up a repeated phrase that doesn't have to be read.

3. Why not add sound and visual effects to your congregational reading of the psalms? For example, use a 'sounds of the sea' CD as you read together Psalm 93 or show pictures from the book 'The earth from the air' as you read out loud Psalm 104 or Psalm 8?
4. Many of the psalms are rich in visual images that express for the psalmists their trust in the Lord. The psalms written by David come of course from within the rather violent culture of the Iron Age and so it is not surprising that many military images appear. With a little preparation before the service, children and adults could collect images or create drawings or find examples of the sorts of things mentioned in the psalm and these could be displayed during the reading. For example:

in Psalm 18 there is a rock, shield, ropes, fortress and an image of a vast enemy army – a picture from Lord the Rings might be very appropriate here.

in Psalms 20 and 21 there are images of banners, chariots, horses and a crown of gold.

in Psalm 1 there is a tree, a stream, fruit, leaves and chaff.

in Psalm 23 there is of course the green meadow, the still water, the paths, the valleys, the staff, the rod, the cup and the banqueting table.

5. A number of the psalms are in fact word puzzles, where a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet is taken for each set of verses. These psalms clearly came out of a well-planned rabbinical literacy hour! Psalm 119 is the most well known in this group as it plays with an alphabet of ways to describe how great the Bible is. It uses many different words to describe the scriptures – as ordinance, testimony, precept, commandment, statute etc. After exploring some of this psalm together, why not set out as a group of children or children and adults together to write your own psalm of praise about the Bible – expressing ways in which it has been a special book for you. You could use the alphabet idea or write your poem based around letters of **B I B L E** or **G O D'S W O R D S**. All this could then become a marvellous introduction to a reading of parts of Psalm 119 in worship.
6. Everyone has a favourite psalm. Sometimes these are linked to a particular personal experience of answered prayer but very often they are psalms that have been learnt through the frequent hearing of them being used in church – psalms heard first by people when they were very young. Why not ask around your congregation to discover some of these favourites so that the children can produce some illustrated versions of verses from them, which later old and young in partnership could share as part of an all-age service on the theme of worship with the psalms?

A final footnote!

Luther called the psalms 'the Bible in miniature' and St. Augustine wrote this: *'Oh, in what accents I spoke unto Thee, my God, when I read the psalms of David – those faithful songs and sounds of devotion. Oh, how was I by them kindled toward Thee'*.