

Old Testament Poetry: An introduction to the Psalms – Part 2

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Note: This activity builds on Jennifer Callanan's article "Old Testament Poetry – An Introduction to the Psalms", *Echoing the Word*. 2010, Vol 9(1). It may be useful to refer to it while using these activities.



Teacher Background

Children are exposed to a range of literature in many forms. At one time or another most children have experienced awe and wonder as a story unfolds. Their imaginations are active and their capacity to engage with the characters, to become enthralled with the plot and to eagerly anticipate the resolution, is developed at an early age.

For some, having the story read to them is enough to activate their own imagination, but for others, the questioning of a skilled storyteller can stir further insights and reflections.

From an early age children are exposed to many styles of writing; various literary genres. Some of these include: narrative, poetry, song, adventure, fantasy, fiction, non-fiction, myth and fable. Students can readily recall titles they are familiar with that correspond with these categories.

As they grow in their experience and are exposed to these various genres children also grow in their capacity to relate to and use metaphors. Unconsciously they come to recognise that a range of words help us to understand important human concepts, so when we open up the bible to students as a library of books we build on their growing literary experience.

In his book, *Befriending the text: A beginner's guide to the bible*, Michael Trainor reminds us that the bible is a library and "contains all kinds of literature written over a long period of time... The earliest piece of literature in the bible was written over 3200 years ago and it was about 1300 years before the last writing in the bible was completed. The writings of the bible come from another time and culture so they seem very different from the kind of literature with which we are familiar." (1990, p. 1) He further reminds us that the bible is comprised of many literary forms.

Purpose

The following activity aims to:

- ▶ introduce the students to the location of the Psalms in the bible.
- ▶ lead the students to write their own psalms.

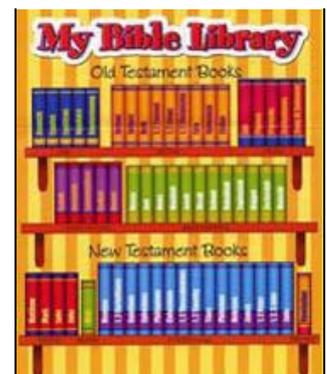
1. Preliminary Activity

This exercise aims to orientate the students and to provide some background before they write their own psalms.

Ask the students to name any parts of the bible that they know. They may recall stories, writers, gospels, etc.

Using the chart, assist the students to recognise the bible is made up of many books and various sections.

Tell the students that you are going to focus on the section of writing called the Psalms. (The psalms were written over many centuries, the latest psalm dating around 430BCE.)



Introduce or remind the students of the location of the book of Psalms in the bible. If they have their own bible, assist them to find the book of Psalms and browse through it.

Each psalm has a number and title. Lead students to notice that each psalm is numbered and has a title. Invite a couple of student to read out some of the psalm titles. For example:

Psalm 5	Trust in God for the deliverance from enemies
Psalm 82	A plea for justice
Psalm 111	Praise for God's wonderful works.

With each title, and without reading the psalms, ask the students to share what they think the psalm might be about. There will be a variety of answers.

Tell the students that these titles reflect life at the time they were written. The psalms were written in response to various events and issues and, using imagery and metaphor, come from the heart.

2. Leading the students to write their own psalms

Following on from the previous exercise ask the students to name some of the issues in the world at the moment. Those events and issues they may see or read about on the news that cause sadness, destruction or hurt for many people; situations people are concerned about and want changed. Some of their responses may include:

- ▶ the number of people who are homeless
- ▶ the effects of climate change
- ▶ war and the killing of innocent people
- ▶ reconciliation with our Indigenous Australians
- ▶ bullying at school
- ▶ floods and natural disasters
- ▶ the suffering of refugees

Invite the students to decide on an issue or concern and ask them to respond in writing to the following questions:

- a. What are some qualities and characteristics of God?
- b. What do you believe God desires for people?
- c. What is an issue or event that is currently causing sadness in the world?
- d. What do you want to change?
- e. What do you want God to know?
- f. What do you thank God for?

An example of responses to the above questions

What are some qualities and characteristics of God?

Loving, forgiving, generous, faithful, inclusive, creative, just...

What do you believe God desires for people?

God you want all people to be happy, to be treated fairly, not to suffer, to know they are loved, to care for the earth, to enjoy the diversity of creation, to accept each other's diversity, to have adequate food and shelter, to be respectful...

What is an issue or event that is currently causing sadness in the world?

People are not caring for the earth and their waste is causing devastation. People forget to stop and think that everything they have comes from you and they must care for it.

What do you want to change?

We want people to know that everything they do affects the earth either positively or negatively. We want people to wake up to the beauty of the world that you have given us and to care for the environment with love and respect.

What do you want God to know?

Generous God, we love our world and all that is in it and we want to wake others up to respond and care too.

What do you thank God for?

We thank you God for the gift of the earth – all the land and sea creatures, the colour and diversity of plants, the abundance of fruit and vegetables, the enormous mountains and low valleys. We thank you for all of creation.

Writing a psalm

Using the responses to the questions above, a framework is created for the students to write their own psalm. An example of writing a psalm using the responses from the above questions may look something like this.

Psalm

Wake Up! Our Earth is in need of Care.

Loving, generous, creative God,
You want all people to be happy, to be treated fairly, not to suffer,
to know they are loved, to care for the earth, to enjoy the diversity of creation,
to accept each other's diversity,
to have adequate food and shelter, to be respectful and kind.

We are sad.

People are not caring for the earth and their waste is causing
devastation to sea and land creatures.

People forget to stop and think that everything they have comes from you
and they must care for it.

We want people to know that everything they do affects the earth
either positively or negatively.

We want people to wake up to the beauty of the world that you have given us.

We want people to care for the environment with love and respect.

Generous God, we love our world and all that is in it
and we want to wake others up to respond with care.

We thank you God for the gift of the earth.

The land and sea creatures, the colour and diversity of plants,
the abundance of fruit and vegetables, the enormous mountains and low valleys.

We thank you God for the gift of the earth.

3. Creating a class collection of psalms

The above process can be used to create a class collection of psalms. These can be used during class prayers.

References:

BibleWise. (2011). *Writing Psalms (Instructions)*, viewed 14 March 2013.

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