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Reading Psalm 22 Through the Jungian Lenses of Intuition and Feeling:

Engaging Passiontide Liturgy with Imagination and with the Heart

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ABSTRACT

Psalm 22 occupied a central place in the minds of the Gospel writers as they shaped the Passion Narrative and continues to occupy a central place within the liturgies of Holy Week. Drawing on the SIFT reader-perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics, the present study explores the contemporary reading of this Psalm through the Jungian lenses of intuition and feeling by groups of Methodist ministers and Methodist local preachers a week before Holy Week. The conclusion is drawn that leaders of liturgy who prefer thinking need to be aware of the powerful impact of this Psalm on feeling types, for whom the unrelenting mood of darkness may be disturbing.

Keywords: empirical theology; biblical hermeneutics; psychological type theory; Passion Narrative

Introduction

Psalm 22 occupied a central place in the mind of the Gospel writers as they shaped the Passion Narrative and as they reflected on the theological significance of the crucifixion of

Jesus. The opening words of Psalm 22 (verse 1) ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ were placed in the mouth of the agonised and suffering Jesus by Mark (15: 34) and were retained by Matthew (27: 46). Mark also drew on verse 7 ‘All those who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads’, to describe the taunts of the bystanders waiting for Jesus to die (Mark 15: 29) and again this reference was retained by Matthew (27: 43). A third line from this Psalm (verse 18) ‘They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots’ was deployed by Mark to describe the actions of the crucifying soldiers. This description was picked up by both Matthew (27: 35) and by Luke (23: 34). This verse also appears in John’s Gospel (19: 24), raising questions about the connections between the Synoptic and Johannine Passion Narrative. John consolidates the power of this verse by adding ‘that the scripture might be fulfilled’.

The prominence of Psalm 22 in the Passion Narrative has been fully recognised by the incorporation of this Psalm within the liturgies of Holy Week. In the historic Roman Rite, Psalm 22 was sung at the Stripping of the Altar on Maundy Thursday, and it remains prominent in some contemporary Anglican liturgies. In the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, Psalm 22 was appointed for Mattins on Good Friday, and has been retained in Common Worship for the Liturgy of the Word on Good Friday.

Historical-critical analysis of Psalm 22 suggests that, as it currently stands, this Psalm belongs to three periods in Israel’s history. The original Psalm (verses 1-22/23) is generally located in the pre-exilic period, but with verses 4-6 inserted together with verses 22/23-27 in the post-exilic period. The concluding verses (28-32) are considered to date from the Hellenistic period with a move toward a universalistic perspective. In light of the prominence of Psalm 22 both in shaping the Gospel Passion Narrative and in shaping contemporary Passiontide liturgies, the ways in which the Psalm is currently interpreted and applied by lay and ordained church leaders are properly a matter of scholarly interest. The aim of the present

paper is to focus an empirical examination of ways of interpreting Psalm 22 through the lens of the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching.

Introducing the SIFT approach

The theory underpinning the SIFT (sensing, intuition, feeling, and thinking) method of biblical hermeneutics, as crystallised by Francis and Village (2008), has its roots in two theoretical frameworks: the reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics and Jungian-based psychological type theory. The reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics focuses on the context of the readers and what they bring from their own background into dialogue with the text. While the reader perspective approach was first grounded in the readers' sociological context, taking into account the effect of factors like sex (Schottroff & Wacker, 2012), race (Brown, 2004), and power (Botta & Andinach, 2009), more recently the readers' psychological context has been valued as shaping their reading of scripture. For the SIFT approach the readers' psychological context has been shaped by psychological type theory, as originally formulated by Jung (1971) and refined by a series of measures like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005; Francis, Laycock, & Brewster, 2017).

At its heart Jungian psychological type theory distinguishes between two cognitive processes: the perceiving process concerned with gathering data and the judging process concerned with evaluating data. The distinctive contribution of Jungian psychological type theory is that it identifies two contrasting functions through which each of these cognitive processes is implemented. The perceiving process is implemented by the sensing function and by the intuitive function. The judging process is implemented by the feeling function and by the thinking function. Jung recognises that individuals need access to all four functions, but he also observes that individuals tend to prefer one function within each process over the other. This preference means both that they use and develop the preferred function and that

the less preferred function remains less well developed. In Jungian theory it is these cognitive processes that give individuals their characteristic and recognised strengths, and that also shape their reading of situations and consequently their reading of texts.

Within the perceiving process, sensing types (S) tend to focus on specific details rather than on the overall picture and larger themes. Facts are more important to them than theories. They are concerned with practical matters rather than with theoretical matters. For sensing types particular details are more important than general patterns. Their inclination is to favour the traditional and conventional above the innovative and novel. By way of contrast, intuitive types (N) tend to focus on the specific details. Theories are more important to them than facts. They are concerned with theoretical matters rather than with practical matters. For intuitive types general patterns are more important than particular details. Their inclination is to favour the innovative and novel above the traditional and conventional.

Within the judging process, feeling types (F) tend to make judgements based on subjective personal value rather than an objective impersonal logic. They value compassion and mercy above truthfulness and fairness. They are more concerned to promote harmony and peace than to adhere to abstract principles. In facing difficult decisions they wish to take into account other people's feelings and values, trying to reach a compromise that satisfies everyone. By way of contrast, thinking types (T) tend to make judgements based on objective impersonal logic rather than on subjective personal values. They value truthfulness and fairness above compassion and mercy. They are more concerned with adhering to abstract principles than with promoting harmony and peace. In facing difficult decisions they work to analyse problems in search of an unbiased and reasonable solution irrespective of the personal impact on individuals.

In their original application of the SIFT approach to the principal Sunday Gospel readings proposed by the Revised Common Lectionary, Francis and Atkins (2000, 2001,

2002) suggested that the starting point was to address the same four questions to each passage. First, how does this passage feed the sense perceptions and establish contact with the reality of the situation? Second, how does this passage feed the imagination and spark off new ideas? Third, what does this passage say about human values and interpersonal relationships? Fourth, what does this passage do to stimulate the intellect and to shape and challenge the roots for faith?

Testing the SIFT approach

In three initial studies, Francis (2010, 2012a, 2012b) proposed a programme of research designed to test the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics. This approach rested on the assumption that, when individuals work together in groups constituted on the basis of type preference, the characteristics of specific type preferences are crystalised and clarified. For example, when a group of sensing types work together without the distraction of intuitive types, the distinctive characteristics of the sensing approach become more visible. When a group of intuitive types work together without the distraction of sensing types, the distinctive characteristics of the intuitive approach become less visible. This principle works also for feeling types and thinking types. In those three initial studies type-alike groups were formed among participants familiar with the interpretation and proclamation of scripture (including Anglican clergy, ministry training candidates, and lay preachers) and these groups were invited to explore specific passages of scripture. The initial studies focused primarily on passages from the four Gospels (for a overview see Francis & Ross, 2022).

More recently the SIFT approach has been tested on passages from the Book of Psalms, including studies of: Psalm 1 (Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked) by Francis, McKenna, and Sahin (2018) and Francis and Smith (2018); Psalm 73 (Truly God is good to the upright) by Francis, Jones, and Ross (2020) and Francis, McKenna, and Sahin (2020); Psalm 74 (O God, why do you cast us off forever?) by Francis,

Holdsworth, and Village (2025); Psalm 90 (Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations) by Francis and Village (2024); Psalm 93 (The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty) by Francis, Smith, and Evans (2021); and Psalm 139 (O Lord, you have searched me and known me) by Francis, Smith, and Corio (2018). The present study is located within this tradition.

Research question

Psalm 22 is a complex Psalm that engages in various ways the perceiving process and the judging process. It is also a long Psalm. Thus, for experimental purposes, two sets of verses were selected. The first set of verses (part 1) drew together verses rich in material to stimulate the perceiving process (verses 3-5, 9-13, and 21b-24). The second set of verses (part 2) drew together verses rich in material to stimulate the judging process (verses 1-2, 6-8, and 14-21a). The focus of the present study is on one of the perceiving functions (intuition) and one of the judging functions (feeling). The intuitive function is prioritised because this is the function that draws connections, forges links, and sees possibilities. The feeling function is prioritised because this is the function that touches the human heart and connects with the values and the experiences of others. The theory underpinning the SIFT approach suggests that when type alike groups work together the characteristics of that type are consolidated and clarified. For this reason the empirical investigation of this study is focused on two groups of participants: the group of intuitive types and the group of feeling types.

Method

The participants were Methodist ministers and Methodist local preachers who met for a training day a week before Holy Week. Prior to attending the event participants had completed Form G (Anglicised) of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) so that the convenors were able to assign them to type-alike groups. Following a

general introduction to the reader-response approach to biblical hermeneutics and to psychological type groups, participants were invited to take part two workshops.

For the first workshop, participants were divided into three groups: a group with a clear preference for sensing, a group with a clear preference for intuition, and a group without a clearly defined preference on the perceiving process. These groups were presented with verses 3-5, 9-13, and 21b-24, together with the following instruction: What do you see in this Psalm? What sparks your imagination in this Psalm? They were asked to read the Psalm slowly in their group and to appoint someone to feed back to the plenary session. The author joined the group of nine intuitive types to record the discussion.

For the second workshop, participants were divided into three groups: a group with a clear preference for feeling, a group with a clear preference for thinking, and a group without a clearly defined preference on the judging process. These groups were presented with verses 1-2, 6-8, and 14-21a, together with the instruction: What in this Psalm touches your heart? What in this Psalm stretches your mind? They were asked to read the Psalm slowly in their group and to appoint someone to feed back to the plenary session. The author joined the group of nine feeling types to record the discussion.

Results

Intuition

The nine members of the group of intuitive types (five women and four men) settled quickly to explore the passage. Douglas opened the discussion by offering to read the passage again, and did so slowly and with expression. As soon as the reading finished, ideas began to flow quickly. For Frances, the passage spoke of total dependency on God. For Geoff, the passage provided a very safe picture of God. For Sally, the passage spoke of the importance of memory, both personal memory and heritage memory. It is personal memory that stands out

as driving the passage, but heritage memory that gives meaning and depth to personal experience:

In you our ancestors trusted
they trusted and you delivered them.

For Elisabeth, the passage spoke of Christ glorified on the cross. Bob saw the passage as setting the scene for acknowledging the power of God. He was awestruck by seeing how irrelevant the dangers of life became against recognition of the power of God. For Bob the people who wrote the Psalm seemed to have a much stronger faith than we have today.

After a slight pause, Judith stepped in to reset the conversation. What stood out for her was the note of threat in the passage, and that evoked images of the conflict in Gaza and of the conflict in Ukraine. The question she raised was whether the people living through those conflicts were able to reach out to the Psalmist's image of the powerful God.

Jayne had seen in the passage, behind the note of threat, the note of fear. The Psalmist was full of fear that trouble is near and that there is no one to help. But God did not hide God's face; God heard when the Psalmist cried to him.

At this point, Elisabeth stepped in with a new line of thought. Her attention was caught by the image of bulls encircling the Psalmist. She connected this image with recollection of her young son's fascination with the bull in the neighbouring field, and how the situation suddenly changed when the friendly bull was replaced by a fearsome bull.

Sally recalled reading somewhere how intercessory prayer differs according to the social context. In contexts where the Church is not persecuted, the prayer is for things to get better. In contexts where the Church is persecuted, the prayer is for strength to face the conflict.

For Bob, the Psalmist's confidence in God reminded him of the footprints in the sand poem. Here the narrator cries out to God as to why at the lowest points in life there is only

one set of footprints. God replied, 'It was then that I carried you.' This recollection prompted Douglas to raise the question, 'I wonder how the Psalm would be read by someone going through an awful experience and who does not feel rescued?'. For Bob this raised additional questions regarding what rescue means. One person going through cancer may see remission as rescue, while for another person the sense of rescue may come in terms of strength to endure the suffering. Sally followed on with the adage, 'There is always healing, but not always cure.'

After a brief pause, Oliver took the conversation in a new direction by asking whether sometimes we can be too precise in what we ask for in prayer. Frances responded with the story of a girl whose dog had died and who prayed for a new dog. Within days a neighbour offered her a puppy. Looking at the puppy the girl was disappointed. She had wanted a black and white dog. Her mother responded that she had not specified that in her prayer.

Overall, there is a great deal in this Psalm to spark the imagination of intuitive types. Many different links were made and many different streams of thought were stimulated. On the other hand, this group gave little attention to the issues raised by details in the narrative, or by the problems of interpretation raised.

Feeling

The group of nine feeling types (five women and four men) jumped directly into the conversation. As soon as the group settled, Philip announced that what touched his heart was that he sees his Jesus in this Psalm. Attempting to slow things down, Bob suggested that it would be helpful to read the passage before further conversation, and consequently Bob was asked to do so. After listening to Bob's careful reading, Grace came into the conversation saying that for her the passage is very dark, and that it brings back memories of a time when she was in a very dark place. At that time it seemed to her that there was no way out. Sally

affirmed that for her, too, it spoke of total darkness, where light was missing and there was no light at the end of the tunnel.

Geoff came into the conversation saying that his heart had been touched by the expression, 'I am a worm and not human.' There had been times in his life when he felt like that, felt that he was worth absolutely nothing, and he suspected that many people today feel like that too. Grace picked up the theme and lamented the effect of social media on undermining some people's sense of self-worth. Her heart went out to young people who are being bullied online. Years ago when she went to school, she was bullied, but at least she could get away from the bullying after school closed. But now young people are bullied by social media 24/7. Now postings on the internet can be out there for ever, and you can never escape from them.

Frances had found the passage overwhelmingly powerful, with very little that offered hope. She was so glad that the previous session had introduced more positive threads from the Psalm. Listening to part two, her heart had really gone out to the person who had crafted these verses.

Jayne commented that, while part one had blended personal memory and heritage memory, part two was much more personal. Here she felt very raw emotion, but it is now raw emotion that has been distilled and reflected through the lens of poetry. It is this poetic and liturgical form that helps to distance the author from the raw emotion. But even then she could not but feel the pain and share the darkness.

Douglas reflected on how the raw emotion of this Psalm could be helpful to others. Reading over the shoulder of those who crafted this Psalm, we enter into their pain and join their journey in conversation with the God in whom they trusted. It was this Psalm that helped Jesus in his agony on the cross.

Reading this Psalm and participating in the conversation had opened Frances' heart to speak from her own personal experience. She had suffered many years of depression. This Psalm captures just how she had felt. She can remember just how desperate she had been. Then she was not being bullied from the outside, but she was being bullied from the inside, from within her own head. In the darkness of depression, darkness can overcome light.

Listening to Frances' heartfelt narrative, Grace suggested that after reading part two, we needed to read part one again. That is why we need to stitch the two parts of Psalm 22 together again.

Ellen's heart also went out to the person who wrote this Psalm. Ellen's personal experience of depression has shown her that when you were totally depressed you cannot write clearly like the Psalmist. That kind of writing suggests that the person writing was on the road to recovery.

Taking a different line, what had touched Geoff's heart was the line 'My mouth is dried up like potsherd.' He has been in fear-inducing situations when people's mouths had literally dried up. This says something about Jesus' agony on the cross when he cried out, 'I thirst.'

What had touched Grace's heart was the line, 'They divided my clothes among themselves.' At this stage, Jesus had reached the point of no return. He would not need his clothes again. He was already as good as dead. This observation prompted Douglas to recall a sentiment he attributed to Bonhoffer: When they take everything from you, you are absolutely free, since they have nothing more than they can take from you.

Overall, there is a great deal in this Psalm that had touched the hearts of the group of feeling types, and it had left them exhausted and subdued. On the other hand, there was little evidence that the material had stretched their minds to grapple with the theological problems underpinning this text.

Conclusion

Drawing on the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics, the present study explored during the week before Holy Week the contemporary reading of Psalm 22 through the Jungian lenses of intuition and feeling. Data were provided by Methodist ministers and Methodist local preachers who were discussing excerpts from Psalm 22 in type-alike groups: nine in the group of intuitive types and nine in the group of feeling types.

The group of nine intuitive types was invited to engage their preferred perceiving function to address two questions to verses 3-5, 9-13, and 21b-24: What do you see in this Psalm? What sparks your imagination in this Psalm? True to form, the intuitive function went straight to the wider themes and to the bigger picture that characterises the distinctive lens of intuition. To the group of intuitive types this Psalm spoke of total dependency on God, and of both personal memory and heritage memory. This Psalm evoked images of the conflict in Gaza and the conflict in Ukraine. This Psalm connected with the big themes of intercessory prayer, the well-known poem about footprints in the sand, and remission of cancer. For this group of intuitive types there was very little appetite for engaging with the literal detail in the Psalm.

The group of nine feeling types was invited to engage their preferred judging function to address two questions to verses 1-2, 6-8, and 14-21a: What in this Psalm touches your heart? What in this Psalm stretches your mind? True to form, the feeling function went straight to the themes that engaged their hearts in ways that characterise the distinctive lens of feeling. For the group of feeling types, this Psalm quickly stirred the human heart. It took them to a very dark place, into total darkness where there was no light at the end of the tunnel. This Psalm was overwhelmingly powerful, full of raw emotion. It brought back personal memories of dark moments of personal depression. It evoked Jesus' agony on the cross. It connected with the plight of the oppressed and the bullied in today's society. For this

group of feeling types there was very little appetite for engaging with the abstract and theological issue raised by this Psalm.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from these data, the first more general and the second more specific. The more general conclusion concerns providing further evidence to support the validity of the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics as applied to the Psalm, augmenting the evidence provided by earlier studies that had focused on Psalms 1, 73, 90, 93, and 139 (reviewed in the introduction to this paper). Together these studies demonstrate how hermeneutical communities formed on the basis of type-alike groups of participants can enrich the interpretation of Psalms. Further research could strengthen this body of evidence by extending the range of Psalms explored by this method and by analysing and documenting the new data thus generated.

The more specific conclusion concerns the application of the findings from this study for those liturgical occasions when Psalm 22 is employed, particularly during Holy Week and in the context of the Passion Narrative. In particular it may be important for leaders of liturgy who themselves prefer the lens of thinking to be aware of the powerful impact of this Psalm on feeling types, for whom the unrelenting mood of darkness may be disturbing. The clear limitation with the present study is that it gave voice only to the intuitive function and the feeling function. Further research applying the SIFT approach of biblical hermeneutics to Psalm 22 is needed now to give voice also to the contrasting perceiving function (sensing) and the contrasting judging function (thinking).

Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval from the School of Humanities, York St John University (Ethical approval code: HUM-RS-AV-08-21-01).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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