

Encountering the Psalms **'Breakfast and the Bible' during Lent**

During Lent, we are studying the set Psalm for each of the Sundays: Psalms: 32, 121, 95, 23, 130 and 31. Below are some notes for Psalm 130, the Psalm set for Passion Sunday, the Fifth Sunday of Lent.

The Psalms have such a lot to say to us about our humanity before God, and especially in a time of crisis. They contain peons of praise and devotion but there are many occasions where the Psalmist has a frank and impassioned outburst of frustration or bewilderment which is directed at God. To him, it appears that the Almighty is silent or not doing anything about the situation. That might echo with our feelings right now.

I have long associated the Psalms with Lent, and found them particularly helpful for my devotions. From the penitential prayer of David in Psalm 51 on Ash Wednesday ("The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise") to the cry of dereliction from Jesus on the cross on Good Friday, quoting Psalm 22 ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"), all life is here, from the very depths, to the very heights of human love and experience. Psalm 130 is no exception.

Psalm 130 – Waiting and Watching

Psalm 130 is the sixth of the seven so-called 'penitential' Psalms. Its subtitle 'A Song of Ascents', possibly indicates that it was amongst a suite of songs chanted by pilgrims heading up to Jerusalem and to the Temple. This would be especially for the three great Jewish Festivals each year.

It starts dramatically in the depths ('Out of the depths I cry to you') but then charts a steady climb towards an assurance of God's presence and power, even in the darkest places of human experience. It offers an encouragement for God's people which is freely given from the experience and compassion of the Lord.

Verses 1 and 2

The phrase 'the depths' is a figure of near despair; Psalm 69:1-3 and 14-15 expresses a similar sentiment, using the 'deeps' or the mire as pictures of hopelessness in the face of impending destruction. John Bunyan picked up on this in the 'Slough of Despond' in Pilgrim's Progress. There's a strong sense of helplessness and of nowhere to find a foothold in order to stop the downward descent. His floundering around seems futile, and he is terrified. Self-help or even pity are of no use here. Remarkably, the Psalmist still believes that God is there - 'hear my voice!' he cries out, somehow believing that God's attention can be arrested and that he is capable of doing something about it. There are echoes here of the prayer of Jonah all alone in the belly of the great fish (Jonah 2).

However, from this side of the cross, we know that God himself, in Jesus, entered the very depths and cried out to God of being forsaken when on the cross (quoting Psalm 22:1), in order that he might lift us, with him, to the heights of perfect fellowship with God at his resurrection. St. Paul explains this in 1 Corinthians 15:20-23. Corrie ten Boom, whose book and film 'The Hiding Place' dramatically tell of her experience in the Nazi death camps of World War 2, famously said, "There is no pit so deep, that God's love is not deeper still." That is a powerful thing for anyone to say, not least someone who has gone through the utter horror of living amongst genocide, and seeing her nearest and dearest taken by the savagery of others.

Verses 3 and 4

The themes of forgiveness and reverence, which we encountered in Psalm 32 and Psalm 95 respectively, are a feature of verses 3 and 4. We need to be patient and hopeful as we wait for God's presence in all its fullness.

The Psalmist's trouble is guilt and not illness or persecution. His quest for forgiveness is one common to many and, of course, this side of the cross, we know that it is only Christ who can make a full and final atonement. And yet, there is a sense of God's forgiveness having traction in the present experience; 'there *is* forgiveness' he affirms. If that were true for him, under God's 'Old Covenant', how much more is there forgiveness for us now. Over the years of being a priest (nearly a quarter of a century I shudder to admit) I have noticed that, time and time again, I encounter people who are racked with guilt and even self-loathing. They hear the words of God's forgiveness in scripture and pronounced in services, but they somehow don't believe that God's forgiveness can really apply to them. Admittedly, we often have to live with the human consequences of the things we have done in error, but God wants us to be free of the eternal consequences. If that is you, then why not pause to read and re-read verses 3 and 4? They are as much for you today as they were for the Psalmist all those years ago!

Verses 5 and 6

The Psalmist longs not just for God's forgiveness but also his very presence; the repetition helps us get the point! He is looking for the dawn and the daylight, when he can see clearly the way ahead. These words will only finally be fulfilled when Jesus comes at the end of time as the 'Morning Star' – see Revelation 22:5 and 16.

It is a powerful metaphor. I remember that, as a student at Leeds University, a load of us bundled into a clapped out minibus after the exams had finished and headed out around midnight to drive to Flamborough Head, on the East Yorkshire coast. We arrived in pitch darkness on the cliffs, save for the beam of the lighthouse, which eerily picked out the seagulls flying around. It was fun at first, but then boredom and tiredness set in – and it was pretty chilly, even

though it was near to the longest day. Our eyes strained out to the eastern horizon, looking for any sign of the sky lightening. It was an amazing relief, and then excitement, eventually to see the dark sky start to change to a lighter blue, then pinky orange and then yellow. And, when the sun finally started to emerge into view, there was a cheer from everyone around me. We were elated! Finally, the dawn had come.

Verses 7 and 8

The psalm ends with the Psalmist released from the depths of despair into the heights of hope – from a place of bondage into one of liberation, from the crisis of the now to the glory of the future. He is released into praise, because of God's 'plenteous redemption', as it is translated in the older versions. God's grace ultimately abounds. On the cross, Christ took all the world's iniquities upon himself, as Isaiah powerfully reminds us in Isaiah 53:6.

Psalm 130 certainly speaks to me powerfully in the current situation, where we seem to be heading into a very deep and unknown pit. Understandably, we are consumed by concern for the present. It is reassuring to know that this feeling has been encountered before in human experience, and the Bible, especially the Psalms, acknowledge that. Maybe the great hymn-writer Charles Wesley knew this in his own life, as the hymn 'Christ, whose glory fills the skies' could well have been inspired by Psalm 130. Why not play it on your computer, if you have the capability, and sing along, or quietly echo the words in your heart as you read them?

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ, the true, the only Light,
Sun of Righteousness, arise,
triumph o'er the shades of night;
Dayspring from on high, be near;
Daystar, in my heart appear.

Dark and cheerless is the morn
Unaccompanied by Thee;
Joyless is the day's return,
Till Thy mercy's beams I see,
Till Thou inward light impart,
Glad my eyes, and warm my heart.

Visit then this soul of mine,
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
Fill me, Radiance divine,
Scatter all my unbelief;
More and more Thyself display,
Shining to the perfect day.

