

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 31:9-16, the portion of Psalm set for Palm Sunday.

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. This section of Psalm 31 (which is attributed to David) is no exception, for it in we read of deep stress and supreme crisis. Appropriately, these are both hallmarks of the events of Holy Week, as we move towards Good Friday on our journey with Jesus.

Psalm 31:9-16 – Stress and Stability

Quite a few psalms include deep cries addressed to God at times of crisis and stress. Psalm 71 is one such, and we can only guess at what David was faced with when he says to God, "Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel" (Psalm 71:4). If we read of the stories of David (in 1 Samuel 17 to 2 Kings 2 and 1 Chronicles 11-29), we come across many occasions where his life was in mortal danger. It is worth reflecting on the fact that Jesus would have known these Psalms, probably off by heart, and could quite conceivably been saying them under his breath or to himself as he headed towards his death. At times, the gospel writers record him speaking verses from the Psalms out loud, for example in the poignant words of verse 5 of Psalm 31, "Into your hand I commit my spirit", quoted from the cross in Luke 23:46. The Psalm takes us from anguish to assurance twice, verses 1-8 and then 9-24. Is this a renewed onslaught, or a deeper exploration of the experience?

Verses 9-13

The hatred endured by the Psalmist is murderous. It manifests physically – in the effect on his eyes. It has been well said that the eyes are a window into the soul and I am sure that you have often looked at someone's eyes and can see strain or sadness in them. The psalmist is suffering a severe form here. It reminded me of the physical impact on Jesus of the depths of his anguish when he sweated blood (Luke 22:44). The phrase to 'waste away' is rare in the Old Testament (Psalm 6:7 being another example) and has a sense of helpless grief. It is not caused by God's condemnation but by the scorn and derision of those around him. We see this in some other major figures of the Bible: Jeremiah the prophet is terrorised on every side (Jeremiah 6:25 and 20:3,10) and Paul the Apostle, like the Psalmist in verse 12, speaks powerfully of being a broken vessel (2 Corinthians 4), where it is other people who crush,

afflict and strike him down. One of the hardest things to endure is the impact on him of his former friends and acquaintances who now recoil to look at him (verse 11) to the extent that they try to expunge him from their very memories (verse 12). They now join with others to try and get rid of him (verse 13).

Down the centuries, many faithful Christians have also walked the way of the Psalmist in enduring suffering for Christ, to the extent that even family and friends have rejected them. Perhaps you've even endured a bit of that yourself?

Verses 14-16

A powerful prayer of faith follows. The Psalmist's enemies will not have the last word. As he turns towards God, he affirms that 'You are my God' – ie God has ultimate primacy. The earliest Christian creed was 'Jesus is Lord' – see Romans 10:9 and 1 Corinthians 12:3. It is much more than just a form of words, but the fruit of a life-transforming decision which allows God into the most intimate aspects of our lives, and places our dependence utterly upon him. It takes great faith truly to say that we will place our all into God's hands, especially in times of bewildering crisis – such as many are enduring at the present. If we can do that, though, then we can reasonably ask God to protect us, and shine his light upon us, keeping us safe in his steadfast love – enfolded in the stability of his unchanging nature and will (Isaiah 33:6). The invitation is to 'stay our minds' upon God – Isaiah 26:3. The Gifts of the Spirit are there for us to seek when we are 'on the front line' and at the sharp end of human experience. The gift of faith is one that Christians are encouraged to ask for when they are facing a particular challenge. Do you need to ask for that? Today?

Allowing God's face to shine upon us (verse 16) is part of the transformation. Moses' face shone in response to being in the very presence of God (Exodus 34:29). No doubt David would have had in mind the so-called Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6:24-26) as he penned this Psalm, words that he would have heard many times in the Temple:

"The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."

Might you find encouragement in familiar words from a hymn or a song when you are 'up against it'? Here is one that I find an inspiration to me, and especially as we head into Holy Week. You can probably think of others. It harks right back to that first Christian creed, "Jesus is Lord!"

Jesus is Lord! O'er sin the mighty conqueror,
from death He rose and all His foes shall own His name.

Jesus is Lord! God sends His Holy Spirit
to show by works of power that Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord!

Praise him with 'Hallelujahs', for Jesus is Lord!