

Text: Psalm 22 (NIV)

Tuesday 5th May 2020

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Once again in tonight's sermon, I'm going to draw upon the parts of the psalm left out from Sunday morning so as to help us see what else these contribute to the all age message which was shared. Because clearly the absence and action of God are core to this psalm, and so it wonderfully weaves together raw honesty with world-changing hope, and these ideas are still there in the other verses of our psalm.

Having now heard this prayer a second time, we might begin to feel quite familiar with the struggle David is facing. He feels forsaken, he feels that God is absent,...

and this just doesn't make sense to David, and so he cries out, "My God, my God, why..."

The specific occasion that raises this question for David is not revealed to us, yet we see in some of the later verses, the affliction he faces. There are enemies which treat him so badly that David says:

**'I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.'**

David feels reduced and degraded below the status of a human being by the taunts of his enemies; he is dehumanised by their attacks such that he sees himself in these early verses of lament as little more than a worm.

This fierce attack reduces David to fear and weakness. He describes these oppressors in the **imagery of animals. The lion and the ox represent the epitome of power; the dogs and pack of villains evoke a picture of helpless prey being surrounded. As such, his strength departs like water poured out on the ground so that his body feels awkward and out of control. Similarly, the psalmist's heart, his courage, melts away like wax before a fierce flame. He feels weakened by fear and unable to speak as death approaches. So desperate is his situation, that he speaks of his 'precious life' – his only life – now hanging in the balance.**

Yet what makes this even worse for David is that he feels that these vicious animals can only have come close because God is so far away, and that is a scenario...

he never expected, it boggles his mind and rends his soul, because he feels forsaken, he feels like no one is there to help, not even his God.

And that is a struggle for David because God has revealed Himself, and been praised by Israel, as ‘the Holy One’. To name God in this way is short-hand for affirming that God is set apart, unique, from human beings, as such God is seen as pure, righteous, and so should always be known and praised for His faithfulness to His promises. As one **commentator said:**

‘To say that God is holy in the midst of lament about unanswered prayer means that God is not indifferent or impotent like the pagan gods – He is different; He has power; and He has a history of answering prayer.’

(Goldingay, *Psalms*, page 327)

In the tension of who David knows God to be, and the experience of what he faces, the psalmist cries out: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

As we saw on Sunday, this prayer can be a model for us when we are in the midst of terrible times, moments when we face the apparent absence of God. We can, as the saints and people of God have done over the centuries, we can take these words to our lips, take this form of prayer, this very lament, and use it to echo the depths of anguish we may feel. The psalms give us permission, as does Jesus, to come with raw honesty before our God.

Yet, it’s also fitting to remember that these psalms were later compiled and used within the corporate worship...

of Israel, indeed, the later part of this psalm itself raises the very idea. So, this psalm, and the other laments we find in the Psalms, were not only for individuals but also to facilitate the corporate voice of Israel, the corporate voice of lament. And that raises two ideas for me.

Firstly, is not such a psalm fitting for our times, as a nation, as a world even, to give us all a voice, a form of words, a form of prayer, to echo the rending of our souls in these difficult times?

But secondly, to find such a psalm in the Scriptures, to know such a psalm was used in the corporate worship of Israel, and not cast aside, but allowed to remain and be seen as inspired by God such that it should form part of the Word of God – does this not maybe challenge us

about our corporate worship? Do we have space in our time, in our songs, in our prayers, for lament? Would we even know how to weave that in and facilitate it? And would we be willing, in an age which hungers for answer and ease and contentment, would we be willing for the raw, honest questions to be raised and even sometimes left hanging, unsure of how it will be answered?

Part of my faith journey has been learning to live with mystery, with questions unanswered. I have found that to be hard, frustrating, soul rending at times, rending not only once, but year on year, when an anniversary comes round or an event happens, and once again the mystery raises its ugly head and the pain returns. I wonder friends, if you are in that place, or know of that pain? And do you say with David, 'My God, my God, why...?'

But as I've also said, even in recent weeks, there are some things I cling to, and likewise, David had things he clung to as well. About the middle of the psalm, David finally, and only once, uses the covenant name of God: 'LORD' in the English, or 'Yahweh' in the Hebrew. By invoking that name of God, David can recall the very great promises given to him, and to his forefathers. We looked at this in detail in our autumn series on the kingdom of God. We saw there that God made this promise to **David in 2nd**

Samuel:

“The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you:...I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom....I will establish the throne of **his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son...Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me...”**

(2 Samuel 7:11-16)

David remembers this promise as he calls on the name of the Lord, but maybe he also remembers that far older, even greater, promise made to his **forefather Abraham:**

‘The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

**‘I will make you into a great nation,
and I **will bless you**;**

**I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing...**

**and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.’**

(Genesis 12:1-3)

Maybe David, by the Spirit of God, calls both promises to mind because from verse 19 the tone changes. Another way of translating **verse 19 is this:**

‘But you, O Lord, do not be far away!

O my help, come quickly to my aid’

In verse 11, David said there was ‘no one to help’, yet now, he remembers that the Lord is his help, for the Lord has made great promises to David and to his father Abraham. From verse 19 David grows in confidence, his hope returns, and eventually he is able to envisage a future where that great promise to Abraham comes to fruition, and all the nations remember and turn to the Lord, to Yahweh. In that future, the nations are drawn, as if by a magnet, to worship the Lord and to know His blessing. As they submit **to His power...**

‘the poor will eat and be satisfied...the rich of the earth will feast and worship’ (v26, 29) – there is a levelling of the rich and poor – and those who have gone ‘down to the dust...who [could not] keep themselves alive’ – they are there too and enjoying the reign of God.

All this David appears to hold on to as he calls upon Yahweh, the Lord, the one who has made covenant with him and with his forefathers. **I wonder, in the midst of our searching, our wrestling, what promises do we call to mind? Do we even call these promises to mind?**

I guess that will depend on what we make of these promises. Are they simply wishful thinking on the part of David and previous generations? Is this prayer just a poem, or a corporate worship song, rather than anything more?

So, this is where we need to **remember Jesus**. Yes, what I said on Sunday still stands – this prayer, said by Jesus, speaks of His identification with our suffering and our sense of abandonment. But equally, the psalm speaks of prophecy, speaks of God's will...being done.

As I highlighted a little in our service, much of this psalm can be seen in the life, and especially the crucifixion, of Jesus. Of course, we know that Jesus prays verse 1 Himself on the cross, but verses 6 to 8, and verses 12 to 15, remind us of the mockers who gathered **around Jesus** and said:

'He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him...' (Matthew 27:43)

Or the incident where Jesus' clothes are divided up by the casting of lots, which is written in verse 18 of our psalm and highlighted in John chapter 19, verses 23-24.

Then there's the verse which speaks of hands and feet being pierced, verse 16. **If you look at the various translations, you might notice that there is some variance in the words. The Good News says: 'they tear at my hands and feet.' The NRSV says, 'my hands and feet have shrivelled.'**

The issue here is largely due to how you translate one particular Hebrew word, but 'pierce' seems the best fit, not due to the crucifixion of Jesus, but because when the Hebrew version of Psalm 22 was translated into Greek around the 3rd century BC, the translators at that time

chose 'pierce'. This means, at least two hundred years before Jesus, the Jews thought that the word should be 'pierce'. **Two hundred years before Jesus**, was a prophecy, initially given at around 1000 years before Jesus, that someone was pierced in the hands and feet, that that person had their clothes divided by lot, that person would be surrounded by mockers, that person would suffer as an afflicted one, that person would lead to the conquering of death and the affirmation that God has done it, it is finished. To my mind, this all points to Jesus and indeed Psalm 22 has been seen as containing prophecy concerning Jesus since the early church.

So, if God could bring about the fulfilment of that part of the prophecy, **then God is able to** bring the rest of the psalm to fruition as well. God's will, will be done...

God is present and He is working out His good promises, including that day when we will see the nations return to Him and know His blessing. What God promises, He brings about; no if's, no buts – for there is a King, of the line of David, sitting now upon the divine throne, even if all evidence might cause some to mock and call into question the very existence of God, as the mockers did in David's day.

But holding on in faith to the promises of God is nothing new for God's people; indeed, the early church did that very thing, for as **Paul reminds us:**

'Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God

and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.’ (1 Cor. 1:22-25)

The wisdom of this world, or own human wisdom, might seek to either rubbish the Good News of Jesus, or even simply downplay it. **But in His wisdom,** God has chosen to act in the person of His Son, and that doesn’t answer all the questions; even with the coming, death and resurrection of Jesus we still face mystery. And yet, He also gives us ground for hope, a world-changing hope: that God is faithful to His promises, and one day, one day, the dead will rise, the old order of things will pass away, God’s blessing to extend to the nations, and we will all say, ‘He has done it.’

In the meantime, we have that call to share in the choice of the psalmist: 'I will declare Your name...' (v21) – yes, beginning with the people of God, but as the Great Commission of Jesus shows, we are called to 'go make disciples of all nations teaching them to obey...' the Lord (Matthew 28:19-20). It's quite hard to teach without making known, without declaring. You and I might have quite different roles in this, but we are all called to share our faith, to make known what God has done.

Now, what we read in verse 22 onwards is likely from a thanksgiving service where David fulfilled a vow (v25). David had prayed and then he was delivered, and the Old Testament Law encouraged those who had vowed some service to God, and found their prayer granted, well they were to fulfil that vow with a sacrifice,...

followed by a feast, which might last as long as two days. They were not to keep their happiness to themselves, but to invite servants and other needy folk to eat with them in celebration of God's faithfulness.

Strikingly, I came across a quote this week, which I've heard before, yet never knew where it came from. It is accredited to Indian missionary D.T. Niles, who once described **Christian mission as 'one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.' We are to share the feast with others; we are to invite them to the feast of God, that they too might 'proclaim His righteousness, declaring...He has done it.'**

So, how might we do that? It's interesting, I've had conversations even in the last week which have sown

ideas and encouragement. For example, I was talking with one member of our congregation and she was telling me about how she was inviting friends, family and even neighbours to come watch the church service online.

Or there was the discussion we had within the Discipleship Team last week about running the Alpha Course online from September, just as many people are doing, even now. The church where Alpha is based out of, were starting a weekly online course during the first month of the pandemic in the UK, such was the interest in an online course. We may very well go with the idea, but ultimately Alpha works by people being invited, and they'll only be invited if you are in their life and ready and willing to invite them. So, I'm just sowing the seed,

because sometime over the summer you might want to bring up the idea with them.

Or, how about sharing a summary of the Sunday message if it was helpful to you, or a prayer from our Facebook page or website, if those were helpful to you? There are lots of easy ways we might share our faith and help others to begin a journey of finding hope through Jesus.

Friends, brothers and sisters, in these days, may the words of Psalm 22 be an encouragement to come before the Lord with raw honesty, knowing that He has shared our experience of the absence of God. But equally, may Psalm 22 also encourage us to say with David, “I will declare Your name...” and then go on to fulfil our vow, one beggar to another. May it be so. Amen.