

Lent Address Wednesday 18 March 2020

It's strange sometimes how things which seem random or unconnected can suddenly take on a powerful significance. I'll give you three brief examples of what I mean. On Sunday evening, we held our youth service, which as it turned out was to be the last public act of worship before the suspension was announced yesterday. Each month we choose a theme with games, activities and readings to fit. At the start of the year we looked at the calendar and saw that the day before the youth service, the 6 Nations rugby tournament was due to finish. So, this was our theme. Of course, the tournament was abandoned due to coronavirus, but we went ahead anyway. Suddenly it seemed so appropriate to be thinking of Italy and France especially, along with Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. The second example is my all-night prayer vigil which is taking place from tomorrow night until Friday morning. Again, I planned to do this a while back as part of my Lenten discipline, but now it seems just the right thing to be doing. And the third thing is the psalm which was set for morning prayer. These are laid down in a scheme called a lectionary, on a yearly cycle. This morning it was Psalm 38, which contains these words: "I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. O Lord, all my longing is known to you; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart throbs, my strength fails me; as for the light of my eyes – it also has gone from me". I wonder how many people around the world at the moment could echo those sentiments?

As we have discussed over the past couple of weeks, the amazing thing about the psalms is that there is something within them for every occasion, every situation, and every human emotion. In our first session, we considered the psalms of joy and praise; last week it was the penitential psalms, in which the authors open to God with searing honesty about they feel they have screwed up. Today we turn to psalms of lament, where the authors cry out to God in pain and anguish as a result of terrible things which have happened to them. Again, how appropriate is that for the time we are living in at the moment?

The theme of honesty before God, which we considered last week, is also present in these psalms. Now, however, the focus switches. Rather than the authors' honesty being about their own failings, it's now about how they feel towards God himself. Often the psalms of lament accuse God of not caring, or being absent. Psalm 13, which I read just now, begins with the words: "How long will you forget me, O Lord; for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?". Psalm 77 asks: "Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Has God forgotten to be gracious?". Once again, we might ponder how many people are thinking thoughts such as these at the present time. Of course, it is not just coronavirus that might prompt such feelings. Any tragedy or difficult situation, whether of a global or personal nature, can make us think like this.

And as I said last week, this honesty from people of faith, articulated for us through the psalms, is actually a positive thing. It's not good for us to bottle up our feelings, or gloss over them. It is pointless for us to come to God in prayer and pretend everything is fine when it's not, or mumble naïve platitudes about disasters somehow being part of his plan. He knows our innermost feelings anyway. If we are angry with God, then we shouldn't be afraid to say so. I'm sure he's able to take it!

It's not just anger towards God for what has happened that is a feature of this honesty we find in the psalms. As I hinted just now, we also find this sense that God is absent, that he has gone missing when he is needed the most. Psalm 88 puts it like this: "But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?". This aspect is perhaps the more poignant: while being angry at God can be seen as a venting of our frustrations, crying out to a God who seems not to answer has a sense of forlornness, maybe even despair, about it.

The seeming absence of God can be a painful part of the spiritual life. It can make us feel like lesser Christians, compared to those who (so we think), always seem so sure in their faith, so joyful, and so close to God. And yet acknowledging when God seems far away is important, in the same way that acknowledging and expressing our anger towards him is important. The Christian life, if it is authentic, can never always be a bed of

roses. Although joy and praise is important, as we discussed in week 1, we can't be on a spiritual high all the time. That is neither healthy nor sustainable. The bleak times will come, and we must be prepared for that. I'm always encouraged by the life of St Theresa of Calcutta. Apparently, she experienced a prolonged period of spiritual dryness, of feeling distant from God, which occupied the final 40 years of her life. And yet she never gave up serving God and serving him through the poor. Although perhaps she felt distant from God, she held on to the belief that God was still there, and was still worth serving.

And that surely is the key to understanding these psalms of lament. Yes, the psalmists are angry at God, or they feel God is absent. But they still cry out to him all the same. When all is said and done, they still believe God is there, still believe God is sovereign, and still believe that somehow or the other, he will answer their cries. The psalms of lament don't try and explain away the problem of suffering in our world; rather they confront it head on and express the effects that it has on the individual and their relationship with God. This, surely, is just the kind of honesty we need at this time.

The end of Psalm 13 expresses this confidence that God is, after all, still there: "But I put my trust in your steadfast love; my heart will rejoice in your salvation." The thing about this kind of hope is that it is very authentic, because it is borne out of the suffering and the pain expressed

earlier in the psalm. If the psalmist breezily said “Ah don’t worry, everything will be fine”, then that would be glib, superficial, and not to be taken seriously. But here the psalmist has laid bare his or her feelings, worked through them, and then come to the conclusion that God can still be trusted.

I remember seeing a book once whose title was “In the end, God”. I never read it, and don’t know it was about, but I loved the title. For me it means that when all else fails, when all the chips are down, when we are at our lowest ebb, God is still there. Maybe sometimes distant, maybe sometimes seeming to be silent, but still there, the source of our hope. We are in difficult times as a nation and as a world. We will all face difficult times in our life, long after coronavirus has gone. It is in these times that we need to be honest before God. We need to turn to the psalms of lament and use them to express our pain when we cannot think of the words. And we need them to show us that in the end, God is still there, he is still with us, and that he will support us and carry us through.