

Sermon Sunday 5th July.

Psalms: Lamenting. Psalm 13

So, we are continuing our series of the Psalms, and this week we are looking at Psalm 13. Very different from the last two we focused on. You may remember that at the beginning I said we would find ourselves on a journey of human emotions, from rapturous praise and wonderment at Gods creation, to the pit of abject despair and then to the joy of knowing we are children of God, who are held securely in his hands.

Psalm 13 is a wallowing in despair and hopelessness. Again, written by David but in a very different time of his life. You may remember a sermon I preached pre-lockdown, when Jan Alexander had to read about King Saul going into a cave “to relieve himself”? Don’t worry if you do not remember, the story is actually featured in a cartoon style in the July/August edition of the Parish magazine or can be found in 1 Samuel chapter 24. Psalm 13 is set at this time. David is no longer the people’s hero, he is chased out of town by Saul’s men, because the king is suffering from bouts of paranoia and is convinced that David wants him dead. The Philistine troops have not forgiven David for humiliating them by “taking down” their strong man Goliath, so they are pursuing him as well, and when he reaches the desert wilderness of Adullah, known for its many cave systems, David resorts to hiding; fearful and disillusioned, exhausted and depressed.

Little wonder then that this psalm was created, wrung out of the extremity of his soul, David feels that he cannot go on any longer.

“How long Oh Lord? How long?” has become a lament for so many people. During lockdown, whilst people have felt fearful for their lives, or wanting to protect vulnerable family members, who hasn’t found themselves sighing “how much longer?”

The murder of George Floyd in American, has given birth to a worldwide race of people, who have been singled out and treated differently for ever. With the launch of the Black Lives Matter campaign, our black sisters and brothers have rightly cried “how long oh Lord, how long”? I have written in the July/august newsletter a little more about this sin of racism, suffice to say today, that as a white middle class man, I have no idea what it is like to be arrested and cross-examined, or to have my young teenage sons arrested, because we fit the description of someone suspected of possibly committing a crime. How long oh Lord, how long will we go on judging people because they look different to me and my family? Because of the colour of their skin...How long?

Back in his cave, David had done nothing wrong, yet he finds himself hiding for fear of his life, and it is here, at the point of emotional and physical exhaustion that he makes a remarkable discovery. At the points of our furthest extremities we discover Gods opportunity for change. When we feel we have lost our way completely, it is often there that we find God at work.

Four times David cries out “How long”, as he falls under the strain of four terrible burdens.

He feels and believes that God has forgotten him.

He feels and believes that he is cut off and outside of God’s favour.

He is experiencing the deepest and most desperate sense of depression.

He can no longer bear the humiliation of finding himself on the “wrong side”.

How long, oh Lord, how long? The mood of the psalm is of tedious frustration, and strained patience. It is only in appealing to God out of this desperation that God stimulates hope in David, so that the psalm ends with a joyous appreciation of God's work and salvation, of his purpose and call for David.

On those occasions when we have no idea what to do next, perhaps the only option is prayer. Even those who have never prayed before, find themselves crying out in prayer. "If you are there God, please, now is the time to help, send me a sign". The problem is that often we don't interpret the sign when we get one. I remember once being told "the day that your ship comes in, you will be waiting at the airport"! To experience an answer to a heart felt prayer we need to be open to the possibility that God will hear and will respond.

It is a spiritual journey that often we must face alone, from tears to truth, from truth to triumph. When reading the whole of this psalm it is remarkable that David swings so quickly from gloom to gladness, but I think the secret is hidden in the middle section of the psalm where David suddenly fixes his eyes on the Lord his God. After all that he has been through, he is able to say "my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation, I will sing to the Lord because He has dealt bountifully with me".

David's circumstances haven't changed, Saul has called off his hit-squad, Saul isn't dead, David hasn't found a cargo of new weaponry hidden in the caves, nothing has changed, but David can sing because God hasn't changed, David's despondency has changed to confidence as his faith grasps four amazing truths :

God's love is steadfast.

He never abandons us to despair.

His readiness to respond when we call out to Him.

And His abounding love for those of us who at times have doubted that love.

The final thing is something about the way in which God acts in our life. Whilst we are lost and despairing often God has already acted, so David says, "He has dealt bountifully with me". It is the past tense, it has already happened, so no wonder David ends up singing.

When our soul cries out "how long oh Lord how long" often our answer is there waiting. We know what we are to do, we just need to get on and do it, right the wrong, reach out and meet the need, hand over our stubborn pride, and rejoice.

I will sing the Lord's praise, for He has been good to me.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.