

Epiphany 4
31/1/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71

Luke 4:21-30

Looking forward to praising God

Does the prayer of our psalmist this morning make any sense?

It is a prayer for protection, that God be a “rock of refuge, a strong fortress”. Yet we might imagine that if God were able to *become* such a fortress, and if the psalmist has “leaned” on God since he was born and God has been his hope and trust since the days of his youth (vv6f), then the psalmist might not have had a problem in the first place, had God kept up what would seem to be his end of the deal.

And perhaps it’s even a bit worse than this, when we note what kind of suffering it is that the poet is experiencing. For it is not what we might call “general” suffering – illness or infirmity, poverty, a broken heart, or any such thing which even his persecutors might suffer at times. The psalmist’s suffering is specifically that which arises from the life lived according to the call of God. It would seem to be his own very faithfulness which has seen these hard times visited upon him. Later in the psalm (v20), he in fact “blames” God for what has happened, addressing God as, “you *who have made* me see many troubles and calamities” The prayer we hear in this psalm, then, contradicts the simplistic notion that the faithful always have a good time of it.

Taking seriously the things the psalm sets alongside each other, there emerges what is, perhaps, an unexpected account of what it means to live faithfully, and to pray. Faith here cannot be cast as some kind of protection from the ills of the world – a kind of vaccine which we take in order to ward off evil. Quite to the contrary, the prayer of the psalmist suggests that faith might actually be the thing which *causes* suffering for the believer – at least the kind of suffering that the poet experiences. For the “troubles and calamities” he experiences would seem to be those which arise from his being a person of faith, and being persecuted *for* that faith. His faith has marked him in the eyes of others – marked him as different in what he will and will not do, will and will not say, what he looks to as a measure of truth. And this brings conflict in a world where the things of this particular God are rejected.

Belief is often caricatured as a response to a life situation: believing *in order that* this or that thing might be changed, or a particular outcome might be effected. But for the psalmist belief is shown in the effect it has on his life and not the other way around. His belief is not a response to what he thinks is happening in his life, whether good or bad. Rather, what happens in his life is a matter determined by his belief. His faith comes before his experience.

And so faith has also been a source of heartache for him, as it has become a focus for mockery (vv13,11). This mockery is not for the poet a sign of the *absence* of God, for it is the very *presence* of God in the poet’s life which has caused the problem. And so there is in fact no contradiction when the poet calls out to God for help. It is not that faith knows the presence, and the absence of God. It is that God’s presence is as much a problem as a solution.

And so the psalmist's faith is constant whether things are going well, or not. We have heard also this morning the call of the prophet Jeremiah, another whose faith caused him great suffering. It was Jeremiah's experience also that believing God set him off over against his fellow Israelites, a very unhappy and uncomfortable situation for him, and yet an unavoidable one, as he could not but believe and respond to the God who called him. It was God who placed him in the uncomfortable place, and only God could carry him through it.

Faith, then, turns to God not simply because something has gone wrong, but because it has first known the "going right" which relationship to God has brought before. Faith begins with God's presence in our lives – not his absence – and looks for the fulfilment of promise heard in that presence. Faith, then, is not the caricatured grasping after something when all else has failed: a *negative* thing which reflects a sense of the absence of God. Such a "faith" – so-called – does not know the God it longs for; it longs really only for a change of circumstances and hopes that there might be a God who can bring this about.

Our psalmist longs also, of course, for a change of circumstances; such a longing we all have in common. But what distinguishes the *hopeful* longing of faith from the simple *wish* for relief is the thing which will mark its arrival. Those who simply wish for change long only for a change of *circumstance*; if it comes it is really only a matter of fortune. It brings about *in them* no real change but the relief itself. And that is the end of the matter, until the next crisis arises.

But for faith which *hopes* for change – and so looks to a God it *already* knows as the agent of change – the outcome is marked not only by the relief but by praise and thanksgiving which reflects a renewed experience of God's faithfulness.

And so the psalmist is able to finish his prayer in the surprising way he does – not actually praising God – *yet* – but *looking forward* to the time of praising God:

²² I *will* also praise you with the harp
for your faithfulness, O my God;
I *will* sing praises to you with the lyre,
O Holy One of Israel.

²³ My lips *will* shout for joy
when I sing praises to you;
my soul also, which you have rescued.

The psalmist looks forward not only to his deliverance, but to the praise which will spring from his lips. For this deliverance will be something which marks a constancy in his life – a constancy which is God himself. The psalmist's life is structured not by the ups and downs, the ins and outs of human existence, but by God's company along the way. His life is not simply a story of what happened to him, but a story *within* the story of God – a story within the call to trust God who is faithful. In the bright times, and in the dark ones – which are those parts of our stories which tend to catch most of our attention – God's love and faithfulness frames the psalmist's experience.

And so he does not simply suffer or celebrate according to the circumstances; he finds the call of God to be the way of understanding where he is, and what he is to be. In the good times, then, and in the bad, he continues to learn what it is to be a creature of this God, trusting in God's promise to make peace of him and his circumstances.

And this is God's promise also to us: that though our experience of the world can feel harder because we believe, our faith itself is that God, and not anything other thing in the world, is finally to be trusted. And so we pray in confidence, trusting that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And we give thanks and praise, that this is indeed the case.
