

Lent 3  
28/2/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalm 63

Luke 13:1-9

### God at home with us

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“Soul” is a word which doesn’t quite fit in our modern world. It is familiar enough in the church, even if even here we might struggle to give an adequate definition of what we mean by the word. Beyond the church we might speak happily of “soul music”, or occasionally of the number of “souls” lost in the sinking of a ship or the crash of a plane but, for the most part, it is a somewhat homeless word in a culture which wants to be past its former religious heritage but can’t quite shake the language.

In our psalm this morning it is the poet’s “soul” which thirsts, by which the poet (said to be David) implies that he himself – the “him” which is at his heart – experiences an emptiness like what being thirsty and faint with hunger is for the body.

David slakes that thirst by “gazing on God in the sanctuary” (v.2). The notion is probably of David entering the Tabernacle – the “tent” which was God’s specified dwelling prior to the building of the Temple by Solomon. In fact the translation is not easy here, and it could be either that he *has* looked upon God, or he *will be* looking on God. This makes it a bit harder to work out what is happening and in what order, particularly given that he is said to be in the wilderness when the prayer is written.

Yet, whatever precisely David means here, his experience is different what from ours can be. In the first place, the sanctity of the Tabernacle or the Temple is different from that of what we might consider our holy places – perhaps our churches. There was a singularity about the Tabernacle and the Temple which doesn’t apply to churches (the Muslim sense for Mecca would be closer to the Israelite’s sense for the Temple). The Tabernacle and the Temple stood for the presence of God in a unique way, such that an approach to the Temple necessarily gave a sense of being “closer” to God, not least because it was “the” place at which to encounter God.

But, in the second place, *we here* must read a text like this as Christians, for whom the idea and location of the “holy place” of God has undergone a radical and irreversible change. With respect to the Temple, this is most clearly put in John’s gospel. In the first two chapters of John there are two explicit statements that *Jesus* now becomes the Temple. The first is in John’s great prologue. There we read: “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us”. A more literal translation would be “the Word became flesh, and pitched his tent among us”. This “tent-pitching” resonates with the Old Testament experience of the God who travels with his people, dwelling in a tent (Tabernacle) as they do. The second reference to Jesus as the Temple occurs in John’s version of the clearing of the Temple in which Jesus challenges the religious leaders to “tear down this Temple”, saying that he would build it up again in three days. John interprets this for us: the “temple” to which Jesus referred was his own body, his own person.

This cannot mean, however, that whereas the David or the Jews had the Tabernacle or the Temple, we now have Jesus. Jesus does not simply take over the role of the Temple. If this were the case, then those who had no use for the Temple would have no use for Jesus, either. It is precisely this kind of thinking which has seen faith marginalised in

the minds of believers and unbelievers alike: the understanding that temples and messiahs have to do with religious concerns and such concerns, not being shared by all, thereby do not finally matter. It is this kind of thinking which allows David's Tabernacle or a Christian's Jesus simply to be a "crutch" in hard times, a place to which we run to escape the "real" world.

This is not, however, the faith of the church. If there is a holy place where God might be seen, it must necessarily be a place which is also *our* place – the place of all of us, the world as we experience it in common. The holy place is not just a place outside of us we can visit if we need to. It will be deeply rooted in what we are, what we need and what we suffer if it is to be *our* place, our home. David's thirsty soul is a homeless soul – literally, perhaps, in the sense that he is being chased around the Judean wilderness – but also metaphorically, in that it seeks again to orient itself towards "home": God in God's sanctuary, God's home.

The question is, Where is God's home? For Christian reflection the home of God, and God's own experience of homelessness, are central to the story of Jesus. Jesus, at what appears to be his highest and what appears to be his lowest, is God's "sanctuary" – God's *sanctifying* of the world as God's home both as it embraces him *and* as it rejects him.

For our purposes in thinking through the psalm it is perhaps in the negative – in the rejecting of Jesus – that the idea of the sanctification in Jesus' work is most important. Here what seems to be godlessness in its extreme – the crucifixion of a condemned man – is given as the assurance of God's presence in whatever circumstances we might find ourselves. To look upon God in this sanctuary – *the cross* – becomes the affirmation that God is never far from where we are, wherever that may be. For God's holy place is *with us*.

This may not seem much comfort; perhaps we would prefer that God's presence were proven in God's power to shift us from a literal thirst and hunger to satisfaction of those needs. For David, this doesn't happen: he is still running from Saul or Absalom in the wilderness. Yet, he is moved to a series of affirmations:

*My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,  
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips...  
...for you have been my help,  
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.  
My soul clings to you;  
your right hand upholds me (vv.5-8).*

This sense of being upheld does not spring from being freed from the suffering and persecution afflicting him, but from a *freedom from fear*. This is a subtle shift, but an immensely important one.

Human life is filled with difficulties, disappointments and pain. The difference which David's affirmation of faith makes is not that these things now magically go away, but that they might be faced without fear. Illness, death, poverty, persecution do not go away; but neither are they to be feared as ultimately oppressive. They are among the kinds of things which "happen" in the world. What is then to "happen" in response to these threats is the revelation of the children of God (Romans 8.19). Faithfulness is the manifestation of a different sense of who we are: the rising up of the resistance of the soul, the heart, to everything which denies us our patrimony, our inheritance, as God's children. This inheritance is our sense of being gathered under God's wings, just as

Jesus longed to do for God's people in last week's gospel reading. Whatever is happening to us, this identity is not threatened and cannot be taken away, for in Christ we are "upheld", kept close.

There will still be suffering and hardship and grief. There will still be difficult decisions and hard roads to tread. But there need be no fear. Only this one – whom David addresses and whom we might too – only this one is to be "feared", and there is nothing to fear with him.

Let us, then, cling to him whose right hand upholds us.

Let us seek shelter in the wings of the one for whom no experience in the world is strange or foreign or overwhelming, not even death itself: the one who remains as "Father" to his children, at home with us wherever we may be, whatever we may be subject to, whatever we fear.

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