

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71

Luke 4:21-30

You will revive me again...

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”. This much seems straightforward; those in need reach out, and God is often such a resort. And yet we might imagine that if God were able to *become* such a fortress, and if – as he testifies – God has been the poet’s hope and trust since the days of his youth (vv6f), then why is there a problem in the first place? Has God failed to keep up what would seem to be his end of the deal?

There is at least a tension here, and perhaps it’s even worse than this. The poet isn’t in the throes of 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. His 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 even “blames” God for what has happened, addressing God as, “you *who have made* me see many troubles and calamities.”

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. The psalm contradicts the simplistic notion that the faithful always have a good time of it. The faith of the poet here cannot be cast as a last resort for some kind of protection from the ills of the world, a kind of vaccine 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 seem to be persecutions *for* what he believes in the first place. What he believes marks him somehow in the eyes of others. His faith marks him as different in what he will and will not do, in what he will and will not say, in 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.

It’s common these days – within the church almost as much as without – to caricature Christian faith and prayer as a *response* to an experience of secular life. Believing is here something we do *in order that* our situation might be changed: we believe as a means to an end.

But, for the psalmist, it is what he already believes which has become the source of heartache for him, as it has become a focus for mockery (vv13,11). But this mockery is not for the poet a sign of God’s *absence*, but rather arises from the very *presence* of God in the poet’s life. And so, despite first appearances, there is no contradiction when the poet calls out to God for help. It is not that faith knows the presence and the absence of God, coming and going. It is that God’s presence is as much a problem as a solution.

And so the *faith* of the psalmist doesn’t come and go according to the circumstance. Faith is steady. It 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. And so faith is no grasping at straws when all else has failed. Such a “faith” – so-called – does not know the God it longs for; it longs only for a change of circumstances and “hopes” that there might be a God who can bring this about.

But what distinguishes the psalmist’s *hopeful* 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*. 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 relief but by *praise and thanksgiving* which reflects a renewed experience of God’s faithfulness.

And so the poet finishes the psalm in a surprising way – 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 Godself. 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. God’s love and faithfulness frame the psalmist’s experience in the bright times and in the dark ones. 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 in the meantime, the poet gets on with the next thing which will be required if he is to remain faithful: the next word, or act, or prayer.

And this is God’s promise also to us. 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. With poet, we too will give thanks and praise, that this is indeed the case.

And, in the meantime, we too will get on with the next thing which faithfulness to a God like this requires: the next necessary word, or deed, or prayer.

Based on Epiphany 4C 2016
