

Monday Compline

with Canon Angela Tilby

Monday 25 March at Exeter Cathedral

Psalm 130

Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice.

O let thine ears consider well: the voice of my complaint.

If thou, O Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss: O Lord, who may abide it?

For there is mercy with thee: therefore thou shalt be feared.

I look to the Lord: my soul doth wait for him: in his word is my trust.

My soul fleeth unto the Lord: before the morning watch, I say, before the morning watch.

O Israel, trust in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy: and with him is plenteous redemption.

And he shall redeem Israel from all his sins.

This psalm is a cry from the depths: *De Profundis*. It is a psalm of sorrow, often said at the time of death or at a funeral, a psalm of repentance. The one saying this psalm has been taken ambush by circumstances and does not have any confidence in their own goodness or worthiness. He or she knows that there is indeed much that is 'done amiss'. Much that is wrong with the world and the self. With you and with me. The world we live in is disordered in ways beyond our attempts to put it right. We do our best, and it is all we can do, but we know it is never enough. 'If thou, O Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss: O Lord, who may abide it?' Or as a more recent translation puts it, 'If you, Lord, were to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who could stand?' The answer is none of us. None of us can stand before the Lord. The natural posture is to bow, or to kneel. Humility before God is the only sane place we can start in prayer, in discipleship, in life. But humility runs against the culture of our time.

This is probably why few people bother to pray these days, as it means abandoning our sense of our own dignity and self-worth, our mirrors of self-approval and turning to the one who sees us as we are. And most of the time, let's admit it, we are simply not as good as we crack ourselves up to be. Certainly not as good as we present ourselves on a CV or on a *Tik-Tok* or *Facebook* account. Even if we present ourselves to ourselves as victims, even if we are victims of others' malice or neglect, we can be tempted to use even our victimhood as a defence against further self-scrutiny. So much in our culture teaches us concealment. We know how to make ourselves up, body and soul. Make-up, concealer, cosmetics. Don't worry, I'm not attacking *Boots No 7*, just noting the language we use to persuade others we are a little more beautiful than perhaps we really are. If thou Lord *shouldst* be extreme to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who may abide it?

The Psalm offers us a prayer not of confidence but of loss, a plunge into a dizzying deep where there are no

flattering mirrors to reassure us.

Then, as we read through the Psalm, comes the most extraordinary phrase: 'For there is mercy with thee, therefore thou shalt be feared', or in a more recent version. 'But there is forgiveness with you, so that you shall be feared'. This does not say what we expect it to say. We might expect it to say, there is mercy, forgiveness with you, so thank you very much for helping us to feel better about ourselves.

But it doesn't say this. It says, there is mercy with thee, *therefore* thou shalt be feared. Mercy, forgiveness, it seems is *fearsome*.

The Jews believe that only God can truly forgive. They see mercy and forgiveness primarily as divine attributes. In extreme situations when enormous wrong is done to us or to others, the best we can do is to be silent, and leave any forgiveness to God. Christians, brought up on the Lord's Prayer and on Jesus's teaching on forgiveness, may think that we have the superior teaching, but the truth is that we Christians often trivialise forgiveness, take it for granted, claim we have forgiven all but then find we haven't, or beat ourselves up for years because we discover it to be true that we simply cannot forgive. We take it all too casually, in much the same way as we sometimes trip along to church thinking it is rather a compliment to God that we turn up at all, assuming God is pleased to see us because he rather likes us and will do anything to get us here.

But God is God not a human being like us, and God's judgments are often more fearful than we expect.

The fearsomeness of mercy is, at first sight, strange. Yet look at the *Book of Jonah* where the prophet runs away from God precisely because he can't bear to be the instrument of God's forgiveness. He doesn't mind pronouncing judgment on God's enemies, the people of Nineveh who have displeased God, but supposing they actually repent? What is he going to do then? And, of course, they do repent and Jonah is left stranded, deeply disappointed, feeling God has made a fool of him. Jonah's mistake is to think that the Lord is simply soft on sin and soft on the causes of sin, that his mercy is a sign of weakness, even of sentimentality.

The reality is rather different. In the *Book of Jonah* God's forgiveness is a terrifying sign of God's freedom. You even get the impression that the Ninevites to whom Jonah preached are more frightened of God when he has forgiven them than they were before, and Jonah certainly is. And this is why, for all that we Christians go on about the importance of forgiveness, we should never trivialise it or take it for granted. 'I look to the Lord: my soul doth wait for him: in his word is my trust'.

'My soul fleeth unto the Lord: before the morning watch, I say, before the morning watch'.

Or, in a more recent version, 'I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope... more than watchmen for the morning', and the plaintive repeat, 'more than watchmen for the morning'. To find forgiveness difficult or even impossible is not to be unfaithful. It is because forgiveness is impossible that the requirement to do so is so frightening. We cannot in fact forgive. Yet we still have to. And we can't. But God does.

And I think that is why the cross is such a double-edged sign for us, showing us at the same time both our incapacity to forgive each other (and ourselves) and God's holiness, the way God takes the pain and guilt and shame on himself. All this shows that we are truly defeated, even in our sin. The reality is that there is infinitely more mercy coming from God than there is sin coming from us. And that God's capacity for mercy is both endless and utterly terrifying. To want to forgive, to try to forgive, to fail at forgiveness and to try again is how we come close to God and to one another.

And always, always, the cross is the shadow that falls on our efforts. There is forgiveness with you so that you shall be feared. There is mercy with thee, therefore thou shalt be feared.

At the end of this week, as we come to Good Friday, we are left with darkness and a question. We simply don't know where we are with a God so great that he allows his Son to be crucified, so merciful that he forgives us,

so demanding that he insists we follow him in the way of forgiveness, so mysterious that he allows us to bury him, out of sight and out of mind and so much everything that he locks us up in silence and doubt and fear and prayer and wonder and penitence and adoration, until the third day, the third day when he rose again from the dead.

Prayer:

Father, we commend to your faithful love

those who are crying from the depths;

help them to watch and pray

through their time of darkness,

in sure hope of the dawn of your forgiveness and redemption;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.