



Palm Sunday

with Canon Angela Tilby

Sunday 24 March | The Liturgy of Palms and Procession at Exeter Cathedral

Psalm 31. 10-18

Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am in trouble: and mine eye is consumed for very heaviness; yea, my soul and my body.

For my life is waxen old with heaviness: and my years with mourning.

My strength faileth me, because of mine iniquity: and my bones are consumed.

I became a reproof among all my enemies, but especially among my neighbours: and they of mine acquaintance were afraid of me; and they that did see me without conveyed themselves from me.

I am clean forgotten, as a dead man out of mind: I am become like a broken vessel.

For I have heard of the blasphemy of the multitude: and fear is on every side, while they conspire together against me, and take their counsel to take away my life.

But my hope hath been in thee, O Lord: I have said, Thou art my God.

My time is in thy hand; deliver me from the hand of mine enemies: and from them that persecute me.

Shew thy servant the light of thy countenance: and save me for thy mercy's sake.

“I have said, ‘Thou art my God’. My time is in thy hand; deliver me from the hand of mine enemies.”

We have just listened to St Mark's account of the Passion. This is the very familiar story of triumph and tragedy of Holy Week, the from the anointing of Jesus to his crucifixion.

This week I've chosen to preach about the Psalms because so many of the themes of our Lord's passion seem to be anticipated in the Psalms. That may seem odd, as the Psalms were written long before the New Testament. But it begins to make sense when we realise, as some Biblical scholars suggest that the Gospel narratives of the Lord's passion, may have actually been shaped and coloured in the literary form that we have them today by the Psalms.

The Psalms are often quoted in the Gospels as prophecies and comments on the life of Jesus. Jesus himself would have known the Psalms. According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus dies with the words from a psalm on his lips.

The hundred and fifty psalms in our Bibles have played an important part in the worship of the Christian Church. At the Reformation we Anglicans kept the tradition of praying the Psalms in our daily and weekly worship. We have Miles Coverdale who made the translations to thank for that and Thomas Cranmer who ensured they were part of the liturgy and also the great Richard Hooker, whose statue stands on the Cathedral Green. Hooker helped keep our worship in tune with the ancient practices of the Church, which means that the Psalms are not simply *read* as other scriptures are read in church, but recited or chanted or sung by a choir or led by one voice and responded to by others. In today's liturgy, as we prepared to enter the Cathedral the choir sang words from the 24th Psalm: 'Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in'.

The Psalms are traditionally attributed to King David, but some of them are probably much older, and it is hard to believe that they had a single author, more that they represent a style of worship which many contributed to over time. So, the voices, the 'I' of the Psalms, is an anonymous 'I'. And perhaps it is because of that anonymous 'I' that the Psalms have a universal quality. Generations of Christians have found that they mysteriously speak for everyone at some stage in their lives. Who has not called on the Lord in trouble, who has not felt a burst of praise and thankfulness at the sudden beauty of the world, who has not mourned or felt their energy sapping away in sickness or danger, who has not felt isolated and persecuted and forgotten and terrified and even paranoid?

Psalms 31 is the Psalm set for this Palm Sunday, the day when we think of Christ entering Jerusalem in triumph, a day of decision and acclamation. Two particular phrases from today's psalm come to mind. "I have said, 'Thou art my God'" and, 'My time is in thy hand, deliver me from my enemies'. The first phrase, 'Thou art my God' is an affirmation of faith. Christ's faith in God, our faith in God. And then as we think of Jesus entering the Holy City, this critical moment which will lead to the cross, the second phrase 'My time is in thy hand, deliver me from the hand of my enemies'.

Augustine, the fourth century Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote in his commentary on the book of Psalms: *Jesus Christ, who on earth prayed the Psalms, now prays them with his members. He won these members by his life and death on the cross. With us, therefore, as we pray the psalms, he offers to the Father praise, gratitude, sorrow for our sins, petitions for grace.*

And our own Richard Hooker writes that, 'The Psalms are the very heart and soul of devotion as they teach us how to pray and how to lift up our hearts to God'. So when we pray the Psalms we can think of ourselves praying with Christ and to Christ and in Christ. He is here. He is among us, sharing our joys, bearing our sorrows, and today at the beginning Holy Week, we are sharing his.

So it seems to me that there is nothing strange in recognising in the 'I' of the Psalms as the voice of the one the Gospels describe as the Son of Man. This is Christ as the child and heir of all humanity, the one who gathers up all that it means to live and die and suffer and triumph as a human being. Those two phrases, 'Thou art my God' and 'My time is in thy hand' can be our prayers too.

The first phrase is an affirmation of faith: "I have said, 'Thou art my God'". This is faith, begun, restored, renewed, new every morning. This is the choice to believe and trust in the invisible God, who is the source and meaning of all things. Just trust. I trust in you, you are my God. And then, 'My time is in thy hand, deliver me from my enemies'. Time is the key here, the reality we cannot escape. It is etched into our bodies: our faces, our

posture, our joints. Time composes our memories, our past and our looking to the future.

Yet we cannot revisit the past or have a preview of the future. The only reality of time is the present moment. Whatever went before and whatever will come after, 'My time is in thy hand' is about now. This time is in God's hand. So: 'Thou art my God', 'My time is in thy hand'. This was true for Jesus as he entered Jerusalem with all the horrors of Good Friday yet to come. It is true for us, whatever we are facing today and this week and onwards.

God holds us in this moment, and the next moment, and the moment after that, with the promise of final deliverance. Two such simple affirmations and yet in a way they sum up the whole of the Christian life, from the moment of our baptism to the moment of death and beyond. Thou art my God. My time is in thy hand. And as we pray or say these two such simple prayers, we are following in the way of Christ, walking with him the way of the cross and looking to his triumph, which is our salvation.