

Tuesday Compline

with Canon Angela Tilby

Tuesday 26 March at Exeter Cathedral

Psalm 69

Save me, O God; for the waters are come in, even unto my soul.

I stick fast in the deep mire, where no ground is: I am come into deep waters, so that the floods run over me.

I am weary of my crying; my throat is dry: my sight faileth me for waiting so long upon my God.

They that hate me without cause are more than the hairs of my head: they that are mine enemies, and would destroy me guiltless, are mighty.

I paid them the things that I never took: God, thou knowest my simpleness, and my faults are not hid from thee.

Let not them that trust in thee, O Lord God of hosts, be ashamed for my cause: let not those that seek thee be confounded through me, O Lord God of Israel.

And why? for thy sake have I suffered reproof: shame hath covered my face.

I am become a stranger unto my brethren: even an alien unto my mother's children.

For the zeal of thine house hath even eaten me: and the rebukes of them that rebuked thee are fallen upon me.

I wept and chastened myself with fasting: and that was turned to me reproof.

Thy rebuke hath broken my heart; I am full of heaviness: I looked for some to have pity on me, but there was no man, neither found I any to comfort me.

They gave me gall to eat: and when I was thirsty they gave me vinegar to drink.

In 2011 I moved from Cambridge to Oxford and became a Canon of Christ Church Cathedral, which meant regular attendance at Choral Evensong through the week. I'd often been to Choral Evensong, in cathedrals and even some parish churches, but never before on a daily basis.

I loved getting to know the choral repertoire, the settings of the canticles, the slow measured reading of scripture. But it was the Psalms that got to me most, and sometimes in surprising ways.

One evening, I was sitting in my stall, just letting the Psalm we heard earlier wash over me, when suddenly I was overwhelmed by these words: 'I paid them the things that I never took, God thou knowest my simpleness, and my faults are not hid from thee'.

'I paid them the things that I never took', or in a more recent version, 'Must I now give back what I never stole?' I found myself in tears, quite suddenly overcome by the pathos of it. This poor person, accused, shamed, trying

to find solid ground, dry throated from crying, 'I paid them the things that I never took'.

It came with a vague recollection of childhood humiliations, of being isolated and excluded at school and of trying to buy my way back into a companionship I had never actually had. I couldn't recall any single event of humiliation, just an overwhelming sense of helplessness, and a sense of trying desperately to make things good, to pay some unspeakable debt which I had never actually incurred. Take that experience and multiply it in millions of playgrounds and schools and businesses and homes. 'I paid them the things that I never took'. 'Must I now give back what I never stole?'

We have the words for what is happening to the one whose voice is echoed here in this psalm: gaslighting, bullying, abuse. More recently and vividly the words, 'I paid them the things I never took', 'Must I now give back what I never stole' brings to mind the Post Office scandal and all those poor men and women, who, baffled by the wrong numbers flashing up on their computer screens, tried to make up the missing profits from their own resources, only to find themselves not only still in debt, but accused, persecuted, punished. I paid them the things that I never took. How human that is. And how tragic.

This psalm, Psalm 69, is one of those which seems particularly close to the Passion story as it is unfolded in the Gospels. The details are mirrored in the New Testament: 'Zeal of thine house hath even eaten me...' Think of the zeal of Jesus in the temple driving out the money changers. 'I looked for some to have pity on me, but there was no man'. Think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as the disciples slept. 'They gave me gall to eat: and when I was thirsty they gave me vinegar to drink'. John's Gospel speaks of Jesus on the cross saying, 'I thirst' and we hear of the sour wine being given to him 'in order', as John says, 'to fulfil the scripture'. Some recent Bible scholars think that this psalm and others guided the Gospel writers who used them to fill in the details of the passion as they composed their narrative. But whatever the relationship between the Psalms and the passion of Jesus, this psalm in particular speaks of the most terrible isolation and pain. The waters have come in, even unto my soul. My inmost self is inundated, drowning, turning to mush and chaos. This is a sufferer who has wept himself hoarse. And the root of it is that he is alone, falsely, bitterly accused, isolated, friendless, no one speaks for him or cares for him. Even his family have turned their faces away from him.

If the Psalm reminds us of what happens to Jesus in the stories of the passion, it also illustrates a universal theme. Groups of people, institutions, companies, families, nations have a tendency to look for scapegoats, to pick on a person or a group to carry the blame for whatever might be going wrong. 'The things I never took' are the failures of the group who have persuaded themselves that if only they can get rid of 'x' whoever 'x' is, everything will be well.

You have seen this scapegoating happen, I have seen it happen, in schools, in families, in parish churches and cathedral chapters, in offices and factories, in political parties and choirs and sports clubs and pubs. Wherever human beings are engaged with one another in pursuit of profit, business, or pleasure or even goodness. A slow tide of discontent or disquiet begins to focus on a particular person who does not seem to have the ability to fight back, and they begin to attract gossip, scorn, criticism and eventually rejection. Quietly, it begins to be murmured 'X must go'. And unconsciously the group begins to isolate 'x', talk about them, blame them, and manoeuvre their removal. It happens all the time. Awkward people, truth-tellers, whistle blowers, those of the wrong gender or the wrong colour or the wrong background, and those in the wrong role at the wrong time.

The sufferer in the Psalm is reaching the conclusion that even God has joined the opposition. 'Thy rebuke hath broken my heart'. The thread that links us to reality, to hope and to heaven is fraying and the sufferer is left, literally without a prayer.

This is one of the lenses through which we look this week at the sufferings of Christ. Remember, those who persecuted Jesus, who delivered him, judged him and abandoned him, were not simply wicked people. They were actually good people on the whole convinced that by getting rid of Jesus they were doing something

necessary, even virtuous, that they were acting in defence of God himself.

And this conviction, the certainty of the self-righteous persecutor, gets through to the victim. Christ experiences the sense of guilt that we human beings pile on the innocent in the hope of saving ourselves. He is drowned, overwhelmed with shame and isolation, and perhaps a terrible sense that his whole mission from God has been a mistake from the start. But even here there is a prayer,

‘Let not them that trust in thee, O Lord God of hosts, be ashamed for my cause: let no those that seek thee be confounded through me, O Lord God of Israel’.

To me it is very moving that in his shame the sufferer prays that his shame may not pollute others. Even in his isolation, he is capable of relationship and reaches out in solidarity, ‘Forgive them’, Jesus prays, ‘for they know not what they do’.

The passion of Christ moves us, year by year, not because it is about some unfortunate incident 2000 years ago, but because it echoes our human experience in the present tense. Yes, the waters do come in and flood our inmost souls through illness, depression, anxiety, grief and through the malevolent projections of others. Yes, we find ourselves horribly alone and estranged. Yes, we cry out to God and even feel blamed by God. And yet, and yet.

I think we can be in little doubt that there is a woundedness in humanity, a wound which runs through our relationships and our inner lives. It is in part about envy, we want what others have; in part it is about fear, we are afraid of what others might do to us; it is in part about violence, the rage that rises up within us when we feel threatened, in part about that deep loneliness which we seem unable to communicate to anyone, even God.

And this is the woundedness which God seeks to heal. God sends his Son into the world that the world through him might be saved. The point at which we are most conscious of pain, is that point when the wound is opened up and cauterised. Here is the hint that runs through the Holy Week story that it is only the victim who can save, only the rejected one who can gather us all in, only the one who is envied, victimised, excluded and destroyed who can return us to health and healing.

Prayer:

Thirsting on the cross,
your Son shared the reproach of the oppressed
and carried the sins of all
in him, O God, may the despairing find you,
the afflicted gain life
and the whole creation know its true king,
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.