



Wednesday Compline

with Canon Angela Tilby

Wednesday 27 March at Exeter Cathedral

Psalm 6

Lord, rebuke me not in thine indignation: neither chasten me in thy displeasure.

Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am weak: O Lord heal me, for my bones are vexed.

My soul also is sore troubled: but, Lord, how long wilt thou punish me?

Turn thee, O Lord, and deliver my soul: O save me for thy mercy's sake.

For in death no man remembereth thee: and who will give thee thanks in the pit?

I am weary of my groaning; every night wash I my bed: and water my couch with my tears.

My beauty is gone for very trouble: and worn away because of all mine enemies.

Away from me, all ye that work vanity: for the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping.

The Lord hath heard my petition; the Lord will receive my prayer.

All my enemies shall be confounded, and sore vexed: they shall be turned back, and put to shame suddenly.

'Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled'

- Luke 24.44

These are the words of Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection, when he appears to them and eats a piece of grilled fish in their presence, showing them that he is himself alive, body and spirit.

Today's psalm speaks of death and the fear of death. The scope of suffering is widened to include mortality itself, the fact that we all must die and leave this world, no matter what we have done or left undone, no matter what we have managed to achieve or destroy during our short lifetimes. The voice in this psalm is that of a sufferer who has wept all night, his body aches, her bones are vexed, his face is drawn with pain. No longer the trusting confidence of, 'My time, Lord, is in thy hand', but, 'How long, Lord, wilt thou punish me?'

And, though there are persecuting enemies in this psalm, the main complaint that the Psalmist has is with God. "Lord, rebuke me not in thine indignation, neither chasten me in thy displeasure." This is the voice of one who has not given up on God, but is deeply bewildered and estranged, so that God has become his deepest source of grief. In spite of all his pleas and his cries, he cannot get through to God. And this brings him up against the fundamental wound, the fact of death, whether that death is imminent or delayed, quick or long drawn out.

'For in death no man remembereth thee: and who will give thee thanks in the Pit'.

An intolerable distance, a schism, a rift in reality has opened up between the suffering voice and the living God, because death here is the ending our relationship with God. We will not remember God when we die, and the implication is that God may not remember us because death is sheer negation, the absence of being, the loss even of being remembered.

I have often wondered whether our main problem with God is that, even if we no longer believe in God, we envy what he stands for. Infinite life, abundance, immortality. We know all too well that we don't have any of that. 'Life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat', as the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald said.

Remember the Garden of Eden and the little dialogue between the serpent and Eve? The serpent's first words are intended to sow doubt in the goodness of God. 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?" Did he say that? Which tree did he have in mind?' Eve explains that God was referring only to the tree in the middle of the garden because, she tells him, if they eat of it they will die.

'You shall not die', responds the serpent, 'but when you eat of it you will be like God; knowing good and evil'. Clever serpent – see how he redescribes the human potential for envy of God's immortality as God's jealous guarding of his privilege.

It's all there in the garden: innocence, corruption, denial, desire, disobedience, disaster. And we are all in this garden, all in this story, edged on by wanting to have what God has, wanting to be God, or at least, not wanting to die, to put it off as long as possible, or if we can't put it off, at least to control the time and circumstances of our dying.

The serpent has not gone away. We are still fascinated with God's attributes: power, abundance, immortality. We so want control. Tech entrepreneurs like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos still struggle like ancient alchemists to extend our lives as though for ever, to produce the elixir of everlasting life.

But in this psalm there is no hope of such elixir. Only the terrible realisation that while God remains God, we are no more than a bag of bones, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. There is no heaven, no future, no final vindication.

And yet, our poor bodies, our feeble minds, even our ashes, continue to speak to us of relationship, belonging. Funerals, as Richard Hooker wrote, are where we show our love, our affection, for the deceased. He was trying to defend funerals from those who thought it best to bury the dead at night with no prayer or ceremony for fear we might be thought to be trying to interfere with God's judgment on the deceased.

Yet, we need to connect to the dead, to honour them, to say the things we could not always say when they were alive. It's why those poor bereaved people in Hull are so devastated by the loss of the cremated remains of loved ones, those precious ashes. I know there are super spiritual people who briskly believe that none of this matters – the deceased are with Jesus or in the sky or wherever, but many of us crave the links of touch and sight and memory. Even our pets, our dogs and cats, as they grow old and die evoke in us this deep sadness of all mortal things. Humans have always been sensitive to the fragility and impermanence of the natural world, our forebears felt it long before it became the crisis of climate change and the loss of habitats and species. Yet, no permanence is promised in scripture. Nature changes, decays, runs out on us. Only God is eternal.

For the Psalmist, God is God, and from his point of view it is because God is God that there is no hope for humans of any life beyond this life. God does not share his immortality – cannot share his immortality, for then he would have shared his divinity and no longer be God. So, we just have to have accept that no one will ultimately remember us when we go down into the grave, and once we are unremembered we cease to exist.

Yet even before the start of the Christian era there were those in the Jewish world who rebelled against this apparently common sense conviction. 'Who will give thee thanks in the Pit?' asks the Psalmist. Well, there were tantalising examples of those who did, indeed, give thanks in the pit. Daniel thrown into the pit of the

Lion's Den, is found the next morning, safe and well; the Three Holy Children, condemned to be burnt to death, walk around in the flames, blessing God for all creation. And the Psalmist himself seems to move mysteriously from despair to hope: He goes from: 'For in death no man remembereth thee:' to 'Away from me, all ye that work vanity: for the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping. The Lord hath heard my petition; the Lord will receive my prayer'.

This is not the confidence of one who believes we produce our own immortality, not the despair of one who believes we have destroyed ourselves and our planet without any hope of renewal, but the confidence of one who has encountered the living God, and put their trust in the living God. The one who, like the Psalmist, hopes against hope that God, simply because God is God, cherishes his human creation and endows humanity not only with the knowledge of death but with the hope of glory. For in the end, the serpent was both right and wrong. God did say we cannot grasp immortality for ourselves, but, yes, the death and resurrection of Christ brings the promise that our destiny is to be 'like' God, astonishingly, because God simply wants it to be so. One of the earliest Christian paradoxes, repeated by a number of the early Christian fathers, is that in Christ, 'God became human so that we might become divine'.

It is very hard sometimes to believe in all this, or any of this. It is hard to believe in eternal life, it is hard to accept the triumph of good over evil and life over death. More often we drown in tears, feeling the impermanence of things in our bodies, feeling the dread of things in our dreams and fantasies and idle thoughts.

And that is the time, I think, when our prayers must be protests, arguments with the God of life to show himself, to act to prove his presence. This week that proof and that presence is found on the way of the cross, in the suffering of Jesus with us and for us. "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom". The prayer of the dying thief on the cross is a moment of breakthrough, the fulfilment of the Psalmist's hope, for in response to his cry to be remembered, he hears from the cross the words "Today, you will be with me, in Paradise". These words are still spoken into our despair, our guilt, our knowledge of death and our fear of obliteration. The end is in the beginning and the beginning is way beyond the end.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ,
may the tears shed in your earthly life
be balm for all who weep,
and may the prayers of your pilgrimage
give strength to all who suffer,
for your mercy's sake.

