

PSALM 120 PEACE

Introduction

On a first reading of 120 it may seem a strange and unlikely way to start a collection of psalms of pilgrimage, a strange and difficult little psalm. But its theme is peace, "I am for peace" (7) and this gives us the clue to its place and meaning, for it is repeated again and again in different ways in the other Songs of Ascents.

Another clue is the reference to Meshech and Kedar. The pilgrim lives outside Jerusalem in situation of hostility and alienation. These two little clues set us up for understanding what is to follow in this group of psalms and the nature of the pilgrim journey.

Psalm 120 is a prayer for help. The Psalter is full of such and Psalm 118 is perhaps one of the most significant examples.

Each Psalm has a pattern and we will try and discern that pattern in each as we go because that will help us see the movement of pilgrimage.

The beginning in prayer and faith (1-2)

The psalmist remembers how God has acted in the past. He has called and God has answered (118:5). It is a common pattern for expressing faith, trust in YHWH. This becomes especially important when the writer encounters a new distressing situation. Prayer is the first move of pilgrimage. The distress can only be overcome in dependence on the Lord.

In this case it is "lying lips" and "deceitful tongues". Lies, deceit are often cited in the Pss as a powerful weapon of social hostility. "Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with destruction. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongue they speak deceit." (5:9) Lies subvert life; deceit undermines it; the soul is left insecure and damaged. Lies and deceit are much more socially and spiritually damaging than sexual deviance etc. Lies undermine confidence in justice, governance, church, God.

The movement to hope (3-4)

The lying lips have declared war on the psalmist and his only hope is that God will turn that war back on his detractors. They have shown that they are for war and violence and the psalmist is in no position to respond so he longs for God's justice. He believes that God will act on behalf of those who have no power, for the weak and the vulnerable, to set the record straight.

The longing for peace and not violence (5-7)

The pilgrim finally states who he is and why he is a pilgrim, why he comes to worship the Lord and why he prays. "I am for peace."

These verses describe his distress in sojourning among people who hate peace and love war. He feels like an alien from Mars. Every time he speaks of peace they want violence. It is like

living in the proverbially violent places of Meshech and Kedar. North or South, wherever he goes, everything is settled with violence.

What he looks for is shalom/peace. Shalom is living a life of hopefulness and wholesomeness in dependence on the Lord and in wholesome relationship with others and the creation.

The pilgrim's distress comes from having to live without shalom. Every time he seeks it he is met with hostility. This is why the pilgrim comes to Jerusalem; he is committed to shalom and he seeks shalom. Now he must renew his trust in the God of shalom. This is the quest of the journey.

Further Reflections

This psalm hovers between the 'now' of hostility and violence and the 'not-yet' of shalom. The Christian believer understands this. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God coming in his own person as real now. It is something we can experience. God rules in and through Jesus.

But that rule experiences persistent opposition as Jesus himself was to experience in the cross. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" is immediately followed by "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' (justice) sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God" (Matt. 5.9-10).

The Christian reader may be a little alarmed at the psalmist's desire that the violent meet a violent end. But the Christian reader knows something that the psalmist did not. In the cross God meets the violent end. Jesus is killed. Violent people have their say on his words of peace. Peace will not reign. What they do not know is that God takes that violence into himself and by doing so says 'Peace will reign.'

The people of God always lead an uncomfortable alien existence amidst the reign of violence and injustice. So Peter (2:11-12) writes dear friends, I urge as aliens and strangers in the world to abstain from sinful desires that war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deed and glorify God on the day he visits us."

So this is the beginning of our journey; a pilgrim alienated from his contemporaries in his desire for shalom, for an integrated life with God with others and his material world. He rejects violence and deceit but receives it in return.

His only resource is to turn to YHWH. That turning is the rest of the journey.

Questions

How powerful are words? How can we use them for good? How can we use them for ill?

How has God been faithful to you when you felt overwhelmed with falsehood and deceit?

What happens to a society or church when mutual respect and truthfulness have disappeared?