

PSALM 123 GRACIOUSNESS

Introduction

So the pilgrims have arrived in Jerusalem. The next four psalms describe some of the things they do when they arrive. They petition for four needs; mercy, rescue, security and restoration.

What is their first action? That is described in Psalm 123, the fourth of the Songs of Ascents. And it is the petition for mercy.

They lift their eyes 1-2

The poet declares his trust in the Lord. The first words of the psalm even in English (NRSV) as in Hebrew are “To you...” The eyes might have been deflected elsewhere, the city or their problems or those left at home. But the first act is the lifting of the eyes.

It is an act of acknowledging that they live under the sovereignty of the Lord. God rules heaven and earth. This is the key fundamental understanding of the Psalter.

The pilgrim is like a servant who comes before their master and looks to them for sustenance and help. This is a beautiful picture of our dependence on the love and faithfulness of God. In worship, as in life, this is critical for finding the refreshing we often need when we are travelling the pilgrim way. And notice the beautiful and striking feminine imagery used of God (Isaiah 66.13, Hosea 11.4 Ps 131).

And the only petition is for mercy. They do not come in arrogance and self-assertion. The lifting of the eyes is not a demand for rights between equals. The pilgrim recognises that he or she only comes under the sovereign care of God by grace. The presence cannot be demanded. The Lord comes only in response to trust.

And they will not let God go until they find mercy. We are about to find out what mercy they require from God in the next few verses. They trust the Lord because the Lord is trustworthy even when they cannot figure it all out.

They pour out their souls 3-4

So now they pour out their souls; they long for God to show them graciousness. They repeat the plea for mercy, surrounding God with their prayers. The word for mercy is a word for “be gracious.” So the petition is a bit wider and more inclusive than forgiveness. We need forgiveness of course but we need more. Once the mercy of forgiveness comes we need mercy to live out changed lives that reflect the glory of God.

The pilgrims ask for the mercy of God to be with them. They depend on God for life itself and they cry out for God to be on their side, to give them life, to make life possible. They remember that the Lord is gracious (Exodus 34:6-9). They long for His presence to make life liveable, to make life possible and hopeful. That is the mercy they seek for. That is the daily prayer for mercy we all need to pray.

The ancient church taught people to use a prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This was a prayer for every moment of the day because we need mercy all the time. The psalmist needed mercy to live out life at the bottom of the pile and still be a worshipper of the God of covenant love and faithfulness.

They are sick to death of the contempt and scorn of those among they live. We do not know what particular event lies behind this but that does not matter. This is poetry and it picks up the feeling of the event rather than the particular event itself. Psalm 44 and 79 are

similar. They are feeling the impact, social and psychological, of the events after 587. They long to stand tall among the nations.

Because that is what their lives are not. They are at the bottom of the social pile. The proud and the arrogant deride them and they are in pain and fed up. What is the way out of this for the pilgrim?

Further reflection

Psalms 123 can be the prayer of the people of God in every generation. It makes sense in the generation of the post-exilic era. But it makes sense in ours too. Wherever the church finds itself in trouble, treated with contempt and ridicule or worse, then this psalm speaks.

Australian Christians have rarely experienced the contempt of the powerful. We are so much part of the social furniture that we rarely create a problem. True, we can feel the contempt of the intellectual elites from time to time but a bit of verbal abuse from them makes little difference.

But we do know that the closer we embody the radical good news that God loves the world and intends that it be rightly ordered so that all may have life and peace the closer we come to trouble. That is what happened to Jesus. His call to his church to live in humble servanthood, reflecting his own life, is a life lived humbly in utter dependence on God who rules heaven and earth.

Questions

What do you need mercy for each day? How can we live humbly before our crucified God? Reflect on any experience of contempt and derision you have had? How did it affect you? Did you pray for mercy?

Some one has described this psalm as a “primer on prayer”. The psalmist “lifts his or her eyes to heaven, symbolically foreswearing every other means of support” and thus “embraces the status of servant and waits, eyes fixed upon the Lord.” Does this describe your coming to and participation in worship and prayer whatever your circumstances? Reflect on your answer.