

PSALM 130 WAITING

We are now at the eleventh Song of Ascents. The juxtaposition of the Pss 129 and 130 serves an important purpose. Lest the people of God be tempted to self-righteousness because of their suffering for God's sake, Ps 130 is an eloquent reminder that opposition to the reign of God is internal as well as external.

The Pss as a whole tell two stories. One is the suffering of Israel under her enemies. The other story is that of the persistent unfaithfulness and disobedience of Israel. Sometimes you will find both themes in the one psalm.

The people of God live by the grace of a God of steadfast love, who bears opposition from all sides, including Israel and the church. In other words we must also confront our iniquities. And another reminder of how intentional the Psalms are Ps 131 begins on the note of humility; "O lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high." (131.1)

Psalm 130 is both a lament and a cry for help. It is the sixth of what has become known in the church as the seven penitential Psalms; 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. From St Augustine to today they influence worship and Christian understanding of forgiveness, confession and repentance. They are used in Lent and Advent. Typical of the Psalms of Ascents and the laments the voices of individual and the community blend together and reinforce each other.

Luther called this Psalm "a proper doctor and master of Scripture" meaning it encapsulated the Gospel. John Wesley read this Psalm in worship on the afternoon before his transforming experience at

Aldersgate. The Psalm addresses the human predicament and its dependence on divine grace.

The human condition 1-2

The writer describes it as ‘depths’. The writer names the chaotic forces that confront human life with destruction devastation and death. And water, chaotic water is the symbol. Remember the stilling of the storm in Mk 4.35-41 and other stories. The power of water, the chaos of the deep is powerfully descriptive of what we cannot control and what may overwhelm us. See Ps 69.1-2, 14.

And it is interesting that water figures in one of our sacraments, baptism. We are plunged into the depths, only this time in these chaotic waters we find the depths of the mercy and salvation of God.

As the psalmist enters into chaos his first thought is mercy. That is all the poet can rely on. There is nothing else.

The human problem 3-4

The chaotic forces facing the psalmist are here traced in this instance to the poet’s own sin. We have no idea what it was but it was enough to create chaos, destruction, a sense of being sucked down into the bottomless waters.

But the one thing he hangs onto is the trust that “there is forgiveness with you.” This goes right back to the covenant with Moses and Israel (Exodus 34.6-7) which places which places mercy, graciousness, steadfast love, at forgiveness at the heart of God’s character.

It is only God’s willingness to forgive that makes the covenant possible and its renewal. To use a modern and a biblical term this is God’s awesome thing (Exodus 34.10). It is God’s desire not just to

make the covenant but, recognising that human nature is chaotic, to renew it again and again and again. His critical nature of forgiveness lies here. It is the point of renewal of the covenant and the human person.

That is why God is revered, praised, worthy of worship, trust and obedience. God does not mark iniquities. God does not have a plan for catching people out in the fine print. The principal way of God with people is not to watch for sin. God is not an owner, editor or employee of a tabloid newspaper or tabloid TV current affairs program. If this were true there would be no hope. No one could survive if that were God's way with us.

Waiting for the Lord 5-6

So now the Psalmist waits. Now this is not a word we like to hear. We like action. Get up and go. However, the primary spiritual activity is waiting.

In this psalm it is likely the poet is referring to waiting in the Temple, even overnight, to be assured of God's active presence.

Waiting is the persistent posture of God's servants based on the conviction that God is gracious and forgiving. More than that waiting assumes that God addresses us personally. Waiting is something personal. It is quiet attention the other. It quiet attention to listening to the other. There is no I'm forgiven let's go and get on with it whatever it is.

Waiting is allowing time for healing, restoration and renewal of the lost friendship. Then we might have the confidence and hope to get up and go in the right direction. Waiting is hard to learn but it is the place of hope according to the poet. Hope begins with a renewed relationship that will take us through the circumstances in our lives

that seem to deny God's reign in the world and in us. That is why we wait. For without waiting we cannot find hope.

Waiting finds hope in the promise of God, the Word of God. Waiting, promise, personal restoration and hope are the foundation of Christian spirituality and prayer as well as action.

Witness to the Lord 7-8

The poet turns from the personal and individual to the corporate. Having discovered hope in the chaos and destruction that accompanies sin, the poet witnesses to the whole of Israel. He uses his own experience of being rescued from death and destruction caused by sin but he also takes the reader back to the promises of the covenant in Exodus 34.6-7.

Israel's future does not depend on its own worthiness or ability to save itself but on God's faithful love and desire and ability to redeem.

No sin or setback will be of sufficient depth or chaos to separate God's people from God's amazing love and faithfulness.

Further reflections

The God in the depths is the God who goes to the cross in Jesus. This is the God we meet fully and wonderfully in Jesus.

Even though the Psalmist's problem is his/her own making God is found in the depths of that. Even in the psalmists own rejection of God's rule in his life God is there. God is not easily rejected. God's presence does not go away. It is even present on a cross. No place is beyond the presence.

God is responsive to us, moved by us, affected by our cries out of the depths. This God opens up himself to a relationship with sinful, wilful

and chaotic human beings. God's sovereignty has nothing to do with sheer force and coercion but the power of committed love, faithfulness and truthfulness.

For us we wait hoping in the Word of God, Taking courage from the certainty of what is yet to be we wait for a full redemption that at present we only experience in apart. For the moment waiting that final redemption means God's power is made perfect in our weakness (2Cor.12.9).

Question

How does this psalm correct the common view that God's principal way with human beings is to watch for iniquities?

What does it mean for you that there is no place or circumstance (even our own turning away or sin) beyond the redeeming, loving presence of God?