

PSALM 132 ETERNAL PRESENCE

This thirteenth Song of ascents is the longest of this group of Psalms and the importance of this song is that we come to the central meaning of the pilgrimage; Zion is God's chosen place of presence and it is the seat of the righteous ruler who epitomises God's justice, David (see 2Sam 5; 6.1-19 and 2 Sam 7).

One of the great problems of the exile was the fact that the dynasty of David was no more and that fact drove a wedge of hopelessness into the hearts of the exiled people. God had rejected David; God has rejected us (Ps 89). We are lost.

However, Ps 132 is placed following 130.7 and 131.3 both of which articulate hope. The people live side by side with people who deride them and oppress them. They are aware of their own iniquity. Their only hope is in the Lord and his king of the house of David. Thus the Psalm is read messianically, looking to a future for God's people in the midst of utter despair. This Psalm is a response of hope to Ps 89

A prayer to remember David 1-10

The prayer begins with David's hardships, humiliations and difficulties that occurred as he sought to fulfil a promise he had made to find God a dwelling place (1-5). This may refer to the Ark or to the Temple as noted above. It does not really matter. David humbled himself in order to find God a dwelling place. This may seem curious to us but here it is a sign of his unwavering commitment to ensure that God would rule from Zion. It was his way of ensuring the foundation of the kingdom of God in Israel at the founding of the kingdom of David.

Now the people say why they are here, in Zion (6-7). They are here to find the presence of God and to worship in the presence. This is a

critical verse for understanding worship. It is always in the presence; it is always before God. They have heard the story of the Ark and the building of the temple, now they want to find God there. Presence and worship belong together.

Now they pick up the story of the Ark and its journey and in poetic prayer join themselves to it (8-10). They are also asking God to join them on the journey so that they may meet him with joy in the celebration in the Temple. They want God's protection for themselves and for Jerusalem. They want his presence.

They pray their priests will be bearers of righteousness, the character of God to them, bearing God promise of justice and his will to put things to rights among his people. This is a profound prayer for the leaders who will, in worship and in the absence of a king, be wearers of God's clothes of justice. They are to be like fashion models who display the character of God. Then the faithful can shout for joy. While the presence of God is the ultimate source of joy in worship, faithful priesthood models that character.

But most of all they want God's promise to David fulfilled. They do not want to be a people rejected. Their rejoicing would be complete if God would restore David.

God's response to the prayer of the people 11-18

David's oath to God is matched by God's promise to David (11-12). The promise is clear. God will rule his people once again through a Davidic king.

The condition of the promise is keeping covenant. That is they are required to exercise God's rule in God's way, in justice, in steadfast love, in peace and righteousness. Those are God's decrees.

The problem is that they did not do that so the exile comes upon them. The monarchy as they knew it before is gone.

Some things have been recovered. They are making a pilgrimage to Zion, the seat of the Presence. They have a restored priesthood to enable worship. But the concrete rule of God in the presence of the king is missing.

Nonetheless they must be assured that God, not David, has chosen Zion and it is the place of his Presence. They can be assured as pilgrims that they will meet the true and living God even if there is no king. And they can be assured that this God will provide for them materially. The poor will find bread from this God. The kingdom of God is theirs (Mt 5.3).

And they can be assured that their priests will be bearers of salvation, bearers of the word of peace and restoration and reconciliation. And that means worship can proceed with great joy. There is no need to be glum even in oppression, even without the restoration of the monarchy. God will pursue that promise and will do what the monarchy could or would not. Even without the Davidic king the pilgrimage into the Presence is one salvation and overwhelming joy.

But God will keep his promise. There is a horn of oil for anointing and lamp and a gleaming crown for God's anointed. This is an open ended promise and some understood it as a literal restoration of the Davidic monarchy. Still later the early Christians would take this theology and claim to see in Jesus of Nazareth the fulfilment of the Davidic hope and the hope of Zion, the dwelling place of God

Further reflection

Israel believed that God's rule was manifested concretely in the world of space, time and people. God's rule was manifest in history and politics, in geography and in culture and society. It was very concrete. It is all too easy to forget this and when we do our discipleship suffers. It becomes 'spiritual' and not related to everyday, concrete, living out of the rule of God. God rules in creation and history (Ps 33) and that means the concrete activities of daily life are grist for Christian discipleship. We believe in resurrection and renewal of the material order as the true goal of all things. Our reality is embodied in culture reality: It is an embodied-in-culture-in-creation reality.

Those of us who follow the liturgical year would have read this Psalm on the last Sunday before the Advent: Christ the King. You can probably see why. The scandalous particularity of this psalm; God works through a people and a king and a piece of land has not been forgotten in Christianity. Jesus is proclaimed as the royal Son who embodies God's justice, peace righteousness and love. Jesus is the incarnate presence of God, the new Temple where God dwells, a point the NT authors make regularly. He is the earthly locus of God's presence and power. In him the rule of God, the kingdom of God, has come near (Mk 1.14-15).

Psalm 132.1 has the words "all the hardships". The Jewish Translation Society has "his great self-denial." That is very suggestive and reminds us of one who took the form of a servant in Phil. 2.1-11. He has become God with us and for us, the presence and the power of the kingdom of God. The need for a Messiah who keeps the covenant and promise of horn and lamp for David to appear in Zion are fulfilled in him.

Question

Read vs 11-18 in the light of Jesus the Messiah. What do you learn?
How does it give substance to hope?