

Sermon: Psalm 44 (Second Sunday in Lent)

During Lent we are going to be following a short series of sermons on the Book of Psalms. Jenny is going to preach next week on the theme of the Psalms and Orientation, and the Vicar the following week on the Psalms and Re-orientation.

I don't know what those are about either - I look forward to finding out. All I know is I somehow have ended up batting first on the sticky wicket of "The Psalms and Disorientation" or perhaps better, Psalms and Lament.

So this should be fun: if you want to leave now, because you feel a sudden need to have a Costa at Five Ways, I quite understand. If you stay, it's your own fault.

In actual fact the word "psalm" means "praise". Many of the one hundred and fifty do consist of praise. Psalm 100, the basis for the famous hymn "All people that on earth do dwell" comes to mind as an example and was the subject of the Lent groups that met last week.

However, many of the psalms are laments that apply to both the circumstances of individual's and the community.

A notable one is Ps 44 (on sheet). It is important because it confronts us with a harsh issue that we need to acknowledge if our personal spirituality is to be wholesome. In turn there are implications for our understanding of suffering as a community of Christians.

See, I told you it would be fun!

Ps 44 opens brightly: God is a reliable God who has been with the people and been a blessing to them.

v1 - We have heard it with our ears, O God; our ancestors have told us what you did in their days ...

This pattern is one that continues.

v8 - In God we make our boast all day long, and now we will praise your name forever.

There is a continuity of faith in God over the generations - as they then, so we now.

However a switch then occurs. Instead of God as they've believed and known, there is now only the bitter experience of defeat and humiliation at the hands of their foes for Israel.

v9-10 - But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies.

You made us retreat before the enemy, and our adversaries have plundered us.

How has this come to be?

- Israel is as faithful as ever. More, Israel has been wronged by God's abandonment.

v17 - All this came upon us, though we had not forgotten you; we had not been false to your covenant.

Indeed, it because of Israel's loyalty that they've been so badly abused. Israel's faith has been a true one, yet it has led to disaster.

God, in other words, is the problem. So what is to be done?

The answer of the Psalm is to appeal to God. This is done in an extraordinary manner that is reminiscent of Elijah's treatment of the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. (Outline)
→ It is all very well to mock the prophets of Baal, because their god is no true god. But what if that is how God now appears? If He sleeps and needs to awake, how is He better than Baal?

v23-24 - Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.

²⁴ Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?

It is in facing the experience of abandonment by God - to the extent of questioning God's very existence - that makes this psalm so exceptional.

The psalm differs from regular laments in that it is explicitly designed not only to pose a problem that is both theological and existential but also to leave it without resolution. It articulates the conflict between creed and experience.

It is a psalm therefore that focuses superbly and painfully on a matter that confronts believers. To many people, most people, belief in God seems an absurd notion.

Where is God in a world in which there is so much trouble?

The only resolution is to appeal afresh to God's known character as a faithful God at the close of the Psalm.

v26 - Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love.

For some Christians the starkness of this psalm can be a problem: perhaps you're aware of the approach to difficulties in unresolved prayer that insists that if we pray harder, just have a little more trust, then things will be fine.

However, such attempts to lessen the force of Ps 44 should be resisted. There can be an unreality that refuses to face up to circumstances. It is a psalm that insists that belief involves living with unresolved conflict and difficulty.

Perhaps this is not as strange an aspect of Christian living as we might feel is the case.

Our understanding of God is shaped by Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus did not surrender to be crucified without unimaginable inner struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane. This struggle is represented by the cup that Jesus asks the Father to take from him (Matthew 26.42). This is usually associated with a passage in Jeremiah 25.10 known as the Cup of God's Wrath

¹⁵This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. →

The commentator I've relied on to assist me in this sermon writes that the central happenings of Jesus' ministry direct us to issues of "suffering and perplexity, and to a resolution that is glorious but mysterious, for Jesus does not linger to explain all that his death and resurrection entail, nor does he, when risen, confront those who crucified him with the error of their ways."

As Christians we can face the perplexity and suffering that arises when God seems powerless to do anything.

In Rom 8.35-39, Paul actually cites Ps 44.22

³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Christian faith may indeed bring suffering - but the death and resurrection of Jesus provides us with an understanding to cope such challenges.

Psalm 44 is a troubling and upsetting part of Scripture. It provokes us to face the question of whether belief in God is absurd. What is it that might render belief unviable?

The Psalm itself gives no answer as such. Instead it propels us to consider that sometimes the faith inspires us and will vindicate us also leads us as well to endure the consequences of the life of faith.