

A Light in Galilee

It is not surprising that some people think that Psalm 27 may originally have been two psalms which have been bolted together. There are good reasons for seeing it as one psalm, but if we listen carefully there certainly seem to be two voices in dialogue with one another, and two very different experiences being expressed.

The psalm begins on a note of great confidence and assurance: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life.' Here we find very positive images: light, salvation, stronghold. Here is someone whose faith is robust and who is experiencing all the things that we might expect from God. Just listen to some of the verses that we didn't actually read:

'When evildoers assail me, to devour my flesh –
my adversaries and foes – they shall stumble and fall.'

In other words, don't mess with me, because I have God on my side. I'm protected!' And note too that at the heart of this up-beat and buoyant faith is what we might call the experience of God's presence for which this person yearns.

'One thing I asked of the Lord', says the writer,
'that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord
and to inquire in his temple.'

Here the psalmist dwells in God's presence, dazzled by the beauty of the Lord. Indeed what is expressed here is a longing that appears on a number of occasions in the psalms, the longing to be with God in God's dwelling place, the temple in Jerusalem, for the temple is a refuge where there is safety from our foes. So verse 5 is confident, looking to the temple as a sanctuary:

'For he will hide me in his shelter;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.'

And all that is great, but then comes the second part of the psalm. And if the first part is all light and presence and reassurance, then in the second part a different note is struck, a different voice heard. Just listen to the desperation, the pleading in the psalmist's voice in verses 7-9:

'Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
Be gracious to me and answer me...
do not hide your face from me,
do not cast me off, do not forsake me
O God of my salvation.'

Clearly faith here is being tested. The reality of God's presence seems now to be in jeopardy and the psalmist doesn't feel so confident. Suddenly all the old certainties seem a lot less firm and the psalmist is left crying out for some reassurance from God.

You could say, in fact, that what we have in this psalm is a tension between two different genres – between praise and lament -and that tension is to found throughout the whole book of psalms. There we find expressions of the highest praise and trust and thanksgiving for a God who is real and alive and present in the world - and yet also this persistent voice of lament, of hurt, of uncertainty, and yearning for a God who seems to be absent or asleep. And the praise and the certainty are associated with the temple and with worship, for it is in worship that the convictions of the faith are proclaimed and reinforced. It is in worship that we speak of God the way we know we are supposed to speak of God, and the old truths are brought out week after week and dusted down and repeated one more time. And even when we express lament in worship, and even when we find scope to articulate our pain, it is praise that must always have the last word. In liturgy, praise will prevail! But then we leave the temple, the house of God, with its beauty and its tokens of divine

presence, and suddenly we are back in the old familiar world where so much of what is said and proclaimed in worship is contested. And here faith finds itself at its limits, its extremes. Here praise is threatened by lament and does not so easily override it.

So, in worship we resolve that God is light – but then we leave and hit the darkness. In the house of God we proclaim the beauty of the Lord and in our liturgy we try to reflect something of that beauty – but then we leave and we're mugged by the distressing ugliness of life. And in our liturgy we are invited into God's presence, but then we leave and sometimes it seems that is a step into the void – into God's absence. It's the tension that runs between worship and life.

I wonder if that is how it is for you. Maybe not. Maybe you never feel the tension, the strain between what we say and proclaim in our faith – and the reality of life experience. And if that's your story then truly you are blessed. But it is not thus for everyone and there are some who know only too well that tension and who either lose faith, or else hang on, forever feeling the strain. And is there a word for them?

Well, I don't know whose bright idea it was to pair this psalm with our Gospel reading, but I think it fits well and we'll see why. Let's turn to our reading from Matthew which quotes from a passage from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus is fresh from his baptism and his time of testing in the wilderness, and now he hears bad news, distressing news. He hears that John the Baptist, his messenger, has been arrested. So what does he do? Well we are told in verse 12 that he withdraws to Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, in the district of Zebulun and Naphtali, the land across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. Jesus, in his grief and his shock and his disquiet, withdraws to Galilee. Now, it is interesting that the word here for 'withdraw' can be translated as 'took refuge'. Jesus 'took refuge' in Galilee and here is one link to our Psalm 27. The psalmist took refuge from his enemies in the safety and serenity of the temple – Jesus takes refuge in Galilee. And what we have to understand is that Galilee was no desirable residence for a Jew in Jesus' day. It was not a sought-after post-code. It was a cosmopolitan place where a number of trading routes crossed and therefore it wasn't even pure Jewish turf and it was a region that had a troubled history of conquest and subjugation. It was a place associated with mixed races and pagan populations and hence that title, 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. It was at the very farthest extremes of Israel, right at Israel's outer limits, and that meant it was about as far from Jerusalem as you could get. And, more importantly, it was about as far from the temple as you could get. Only the distance from Galilee to the temple was not just geographical - it was spiritual as well. Here in Galilee of the Gentiles was another world, remote from the temple with its liturgy and its beauty and its divine presence. And for Matthew this was a place of darkness, where people 'sat in the region and shadow of death', to quote Isaiah's description of the region. Yet it is here that Jesus finds refuge, in the harsh surroundings of Galilee. In other words Jesus is not a temple person, as we discover in his ministry. He makes his home far from the temple. He withdraws to precisely where the darkness encroaches and the shadows are cast, to where faith's certainties are contested, to where the beauty of the Lord is obscured by the ugliness of life. And he is a light, shining there: 'The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light'.

So, to return to Psalm 27, those of you who identify with the second part of the psalm – those who struggle with faith, those whose faith is at its limits, those who cry for reassurance, those who lament, those whose habitat is that harsh world outside the temple, across the Jordan, where faith is squeezed – know that Christ is nearer to you than you think. This is Jesus territory that you are on. Where you feel that you are withdrawing into darkness he withdraws to find you, to be with you, to be a light to you. And just note the way this psalm ends. Having begun with confidence and assurance, and having expressed lament and anguish, the psalm ends with a simple promise. 'I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord...' I know that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living – not in the temple, not in the rarefied atmosphere of worship, not in the beauty of liturgy, but in the land of the living which is also often the land of death's dark shadow. So wait for the Lord. Wait, and watch for God's goodness. Look out for grace! In time you will see it, in time it will strike you - and may God give you eyes to recognise it.

One last point. In that place where people sat in darkness Jesus withdrew, took refuge and was a light. But he was a light by resisting the darkness, challenging it. So we are told that he called fishermen to come and catch people. And he went through the region proclaiming good news that God's rule was pressing in, and if we had read on we would have found him healing and blessing people. Reading that I thought of the familiar saying, 'better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.' After all, the loss of his fore-runner John could easily have prompted Jesus to curse the darkness. But instead he withdrew into the darkness and there struck a light. So too for us. In all kinds of ways we might feel this morning that we are sitting in the darkness. It may be the darkness of personal struggles and losses. It may be the wider political events taking place around us. Yesterday saw protests and demonstrations all over the world at events taking place in the USA. And protest and demonstration are a necessary part of democracy – but they are also a prompt to do something, to light candles, to do something small but life-enhancing.

On Friday, with the inauguration of the new President and all the protests and denunciations I was reminded of the wonderful benediction pronounced by Revd Ed Lowery, a veteran civil rights campaigner, at President Obama's first inauguration in 2009. Lowery concluded the ceremony with the words:

'And now, Lord, in the complex arena of human relations, help us to make choices on the side of love, not hate; on the side of inclusion, not exclusion; tolerance, not intolerance.' That would have been a fitting benediction to Friday's ceremony too: a summons to light candles by our choices.

The Lord is my light and my salvation. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Amen.