

29 November 2009

Advent 1C

Sermon notes on Psalm 25.1-10

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One of the things about little kids is that they tend not to pull their punches. You don't have a lot of trouble knowing when a small child is happy or sad, for they've not yet learned to fake it – in some way or other to filter or to misrepresent themselves to the world around them. They are no respecters of persons or places – how they feel is how they feel, and it's written all over their face and fills the air with either the music of giggling or something rather more shrill. When Jesus spoke of the kingdom belonging to such as little children (Matthew 19.14), it is not least this simplicity of character which is the reason. Little ones have a personal integrity which the rest of us have left behind us. And, for the most part, we admit that we more mature souls mourn that loss of childlike openness to self. For it is rare for us, particularly in our culture, to be open about how we feel – or perhaps even to *know* just what it is that we feel.

Yet when we read from the Psalms we find ourselves, in a sense, transported back to an emotional space something like that of childhood. It's not that the poets who we read there are *childish*; rather, there is an honesty and an openness about what is going on for them. They don't hesitate to speak the truth of their response to their circumstances, whether it's ringing celebration and praise, or the expression of quite shocking lament and hatred for enemies. Perhaps part of the reason that the Psalms has been such a treasured part of the Scriptures is simply that it does reflect that childlike awareness of need and fulfilment. We may not necessarily be able to lift ourselves to the heights of jubilation we find in the Psalms, or we might shrink with horror at the more ghastly things the psalmists sometimes pray for, but there's no missing that those who pray on those pages know what it happening to them and what they desire.

Our psalm this morning is one filled with longing –

...do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.

*...Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.*

*Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long...*

*...Do not remember the sins of my youth
or my transgressions;*

*according to your steadfast love
remember me...*

We don't have to share in his longing to recognise that this is just what is, and also its depth. Here the poet speaks from within of the things which matter most: security, integrity and wholeness. In this way or that, we all share in such longing, however aware of it (or not) we might now be. It manifests itself most clearly in those things which unexpectedly cause us to smile or, with the same unexpectedness, bring us to anger. We might not be conscious, like the psalmist, of "waiting all day long" for the things we desire, but one way or another we experience that sense of incompleteness, and it affects all that we do and experience.

But it's worth looking at what it is that the psalmist bases his prayer *on*: *why* it is that he chooses God as the one to turn to, and not something or someone else. The reason is given in that seventh verse where we read, "according to your steadfast love remember me, *for your goodness' sake*, O LORD!"

It's that little argument the psalmist makes – "for your goodness' sake" – which is the important bit. We're likely to miss it, but this type of expression appears again and in the psalms:

"he leads me in right paths for his name's sake" (Ps 23.3);

"you are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and
guide me" (Psalm 31.3);

But you, O LORD my Lord,
act on my behalf for your name's sake;
because your steadfast love is good,
deliver me" (Psalm 109.21);

We know well enough the expressions "for God's sake", or "for Christ's sake", or the more moderate "for pity's sake", but their meaning is, for the most part, lost on us these days. They are sayings which have shifted deep into our consciousness, to be blurted out when the occasion triggers them. But to make an appeal "for the sake of" something is in fact to imply that there is a common ground I have with you, something to which you and I can point and both agree that this requires that we act differently. Once upon a time, when everyone had a common idea of God and what God might require, to exclaim "for God's sake..." would imply very clearly *why* a change was necessary: this is not what God has ordained or commanded, or

whatever; for God's sake, do something (or stop doing it).

These days the best we seem to have in place of God is a not-quite-yet realised Bill of Rights, or something similar. We will probably never say "for the sake of the Bill of Rights" – but this is what we'll mean whenever we argue a case of law that the rights enshrined in Bill must be observed. (Although, perhaps as an aside, it's noteworthy that we actually speak of such rights as being "enshrined" in such legislation; the gods are never very far away!)

The question which really matters is what we think we have in common with each other, which might then become the basis for us moving to greater security and integrity and wholeness for ourselves. For the sake of *what* can I appeal, that I might be freed for fuller life? When it is not going right, what is the reliable thing, the true thing, the thing which we all have in common, to which I can point and say, "for that sake of that thing, *help me*".

I suspect that the lack of just such a common reality and reference point is the fundamental malaise of our existence. The strife which divides political parties or which causes temperatures to rise in heavy traffic or sees people sit sadly and alone in otherwise empty houses has to do with our being unable to declare, with any real effect, "for *whatever's* sake..., let it be otherwise" We may be sure that, whatever good it might do, a Bill of rights or any other attempt to establish a common ground between us will not really give us what we long for because, as any child knows, the world is broken in such a way that it just *can't* always be fixed.

But in our psalmist's cry "for *your goodness'* sake" there is something different. He casts his hopes not upon what he and others can agree is true, but upon the truth, or faithfulness, of the one he addresses. As a child might turn to its mother for comfort, the poet turns to a God whose *character* he believes is to be true, faithful. And the faithfulness of God concerns his promise that his people will know life in all its fullness. For God's goodness' sake – for the sake of his being proven faithful to what he has said he will do – the psalmist appeals to him.

When, as we do today (KEW), we baptise a person – whether a child or an adult – we make a declaration as to what is indeed the common ground we have as human beings; indeed, we therefore declare what it means to be human. This common ground affects our relationship with each other but, perhaps more importantly for us to hear to today, it affects our relationship with God. To be baptised is to take onto our lips the expression, "For *Christ's* sake...", addressed to

each other and, just as importantly, addressed to *God*. We say to God, "for Christ's sake, let us know life in its fullness." That is, we say, "Do not let all he did and knew among your people become something which is lost forever in the dust of time, but make it real for us *as ours* today. To baptise is to tell a story which is not quite yet our story, but which we claim as our own. Baptised into *Christ's* humanity, we now employ him as our argument for life before God: "For Christ's sake, heal us and bring us home in him." The baptism doesn't of itself *make* this story ours; baptism, as such, is not even necessary for the story to become ours. Nevertheless it remains an important sign and discipline with the church, for it reveals God's character, and the character of our own lives.

With the psalmist, it may well be "the whole day long" that we wait for our salvation, our healing, our life. So be it. There is actually nothing else in the world which delivers what we finally need any faster than this anyway. It's just better, in the end, to be waiting for cake than for bread, to be waiting for a fullness of life like that of Christ's, than one's pale shadow of humanity. This any little child also knows, at least, once they get used to the idea of "wait".

May God make of us, then, such little ones, knowing what it is we lack, and who might be able to provide it. Just so, might we look forward with anticipation to see what God will do with us and for us, for Christ's sake. Amen.