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Lent 2C

Sermon notes on Psalm 27

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

Auburn and Kew UCA

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Relatively recently I've noticed myself noticing more of the daily news bulletins – and the bad news in particular. Whether it's the daily reports of suicide bombings in far away places, or of human road kill, or the occasional horrors such as was suffered by little Trinity Bates and her family in Queensland last week, I've seemed to be more attuned to that part of our society's common experience. Perhaps it's because I'm a parent now, or perhaps it's just because I'm getting that little bit older, or perhaps it's because society as a whole is becoming more aware of such recurring tragedies which always seem just far enough away that "I" don't have to worry about them, but at the same time just close enough that I do. To the omnipresence of such tragedy and our increasingly shrill response to it we might add the low, background hum of anxieties about such things as global warming, population growth, ethical conundrums around bioethics or refugees and the incessant chatter which constitutes our political debates. With all this we build up a picture of a world which is far from what we might call "heaven". Most of us don't live in fear from moment to moment because, on the one hand, most of it seems to happen to "other" people. But, on the other hand, at the same time we know that it must once have seemed like that to those who the news bulletins report have suffered these afflictions and tragedies.

In the psalm which features in our Lenten devotional resource, the poet begins with a description of what he feels like, with which many of us could identify in our own experience of what is going on around us:

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is
no water (Psalm 63.1 NRSV)*

Of course, in the thirst which arises from our deeper anxieties about our lives, not everyone thirsts for "God". But we know *that* we thirst, that we hunger, that there are unmet longings, even if perhaps unspoken or unclear. In this sense there enters into our lives a dryness and a weariness which is not always visible, but which looms over us as a threat to dry us out should we give it any heed. To borrow from our Psalm today, it is as if an "army enemy is camping against me ... breathing out violence" (27.3, 12) – the enemy not yet being *in* the city but at the edges, if only the city wall would keep him at bay.

And so we find ourselves in such a situation where there is much we know we must do – most of which amounts to keeping those walls in place. That response has to do with securing ourselves, whether physically or psychologically. Insurances and buying a safer car and keeping to well-lit streets go a long way towards giving us a sense that we've a better chance of enjoying tomorrow rather than suffering it. These physical and structural protections do go a long way towards settling our anxieties, but our psychological security is fed not only by such assurances, but by developing in ourselves the sense that *we* are not the problem; the problem is, rather, "out there".

This works for us in two ways. On the one hand it externalises the problem. The threat comes from outside, it is something over which I have no control and, above all, it is not *my* fault. And so I can rail against it – such as the poet does in Psalm 27 today: evildoers assail me to devour my flesh...breathing out violence.

On the other hand, externalising the problems give us a sense that it might be fixable, for I imagine that I can change you who are the problem, or at least keep you at bay. If you drive too fast, I can confiscate your car. If your community is too violent I can isolate it behind concrete walls or keep it at bay behind gates opened only via numerical keypads. If you insist on carrying knives I'll find ways of discovering them and taking them off you. Much of this is quite necessary, of course, giving the clear and present danger of some of these threats. But the question we must ask is whether this externalisation of the threats to us really gets to the heart of the matter because experience would suggest that, in the end, it doesn't really work: the bottles are not up to the task of containing the genies.

Yet in fact the problem is not with the bottles. The problem is that we keep making new genies. The enemy is not simply encamping *around* us, but camps within us and through us. We are in league with our enemies. We do not feel safe in our own streets, not least because we don't really know who lives in them. And we don't really know who lives in them because we don't *need* to know, for we maintain our relationships by telephone and internet and by car. Which is why we can't give up our cars, because then it might take two hours to get to church or to visit my friends, because church and friend don't need

to be nearby any more. (Once, of course, two hours to visit a friend was not such a big problem, but we don't have time for that today, despite all of our time-saving devices [or, we might eventually conclude, *because* of them]). Because we can't give up our cars we find ourselves in a bind because we wonder if the cars are contributing considerably to a heating of the atmosphere with all of the attendant threats that involves. While we might be willing to take on board a few handfuls of jolly Pacific Islanders, who around here wants to have to deal with 100 million Muslim Bangladeshis if the sea level rises? And cars, of course, require oil, which also involves us in the politics of far away places, which exposes us to the threats of terrorism in our cities, which increases racial and religious antagonism and anxieties in our local communities, and so on.

Similar scenarios of the inter-connectedness of our desires and our "enemies" could be constructed around most of the things we desire and fear. It's easy for tabloid journalism to moralise and externalise what is going wrong in our society, or for the broadsheets to analyse on the presumption that things are ultimately fixable. But the prayer of Psalm 27, with its uncomplicated claim to innocence, is not something which any of us can really pray honestly. For to pray such a prayer is to pray not only against our enemies but against ourselves.

In this season of Lent we focus particularly on the path which Jesus walks to the cross, and we seek better to understand how that path is one which we are called also to walk, following him. We have long heard that the way of the cross is one which involves suffering, and this scarcely makes it very appealing. But it is not simply a path of suffering, and certainly not a path of suffering for suffering's sake. The Christian life is, rather, one which seeks to understand and to live through the truth which the life of Jesus embodied, and can continue to embody through the church today. This truth is not a proposition to which we might say yes or no, but concerns us directly as we live and move and have our being. Discipleship is living eyes-open to the nature of the world, and to our share both in what goes right and what goes wrong. It is, then, a declaration that there is no fixing of the world, in any final sense, for we are caught in a bind between wanting things to be better and benefiting from the way the world dysfunctions for others.

But discipleship is also a call to live in such a way that we might give testimony to what happens when *God* re-orders us. God re-orders through forgiveness – for-give-ness – an intensified, intentional giving which exceeds what is rightly due or demanded. This for-giving is a handing

over of the stuff of life, towards an overcoming of death.

Christian living then, as a testimony to God's giving, is itself just such a giving up and giving over of the stuff of life, that others too might live. It will be imperfect in deed and in effect, but it will testify to the fact that what will heal us will not, in the end, be more walls and barriers to keep the enemy at bay. Healing will be found through the life of giving which began with Jesus himself and to which God calls us also.

It is in growing into such a life that, with Jesus, we might also grow into being able to pray such a prayer as Psalm 27, having understood what truly afflicts us and waiting patiently for the LORD to make good.

By the grace of God may all his people seek to know his forgiveness and to live it, to God's greater glory and our greater humanity. Amen.