

22 August 2010

Sunday 21C

Sermon notes:

Psalm 71

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

The prayer of the poet in our psalm this morning might seem to be one which is contradictory of what it actually prays for. The psalmist asks for protection, that God be a "rock of refuge, a strong fortress"; yet we might imagine that if God is able to *become* such a fortress, and the psalmist has been a person who has faithfully clung to God all his life, then the psalmist might not have had a problem in the first place, had God kept up his end of the deal. For we have heard that the psalmist has "leaned" on God since he was born; God has been his hope and trust since the days of his youth (vv6f). And perhaps it's even a bit worse that this, when we note what kind of suffering it is that the poet is experiencing. For it is not what we might call "general" suffering – illness or infirmity, poverty, a broken heart, or any such thing which even his persecutors might suffer. His suffering is specifically that which arises from the life lived according to the call of God. It would seem to be his own very faithfulness which has seen these hard times visited upon him. Later in the psalm (v20), he in fact "blames" God for what has happened, addressing God as, "you *who have made* me see many troubles and calamities" The prayer we hear in this psalm, then, contradicts the simplistic notion that the faithful will always have a good time of it.

Taking seriously the things the psalm sets alongside each other, there emerges what is, perhaps, an unexpected account of what it means to live faithfully, and to pray. If we take the psalmist's account seriously, faith cannot be cast as some kind of protection from the ills of the world – a kind of vaccine which we take in order to ward off evil. Quite to the contrary, the prayer of the psalmist suggests that faith might actually be the thing which *causes* suffering for the believer – at least the kind of suffering that this fellow is experiencing. For the "troubles and calamities" he experiences would seem to be those which arise from his being a person of faith, and being persecuted *for* that faith. His faith has marked him in the eyes of others – marked him as different in what he will and will not do, will and will not say, what he looks to as a measure of truth. And this brings conflict in a world where the things of God are rejected.

I don't want to unpack this kind of conflict this morning, nor to suggest that one "must" be suffering in some way or another in order to be a "true" Christian – although faith will bring us to points of conflict at specifically ethical levels, and not simply at the question of believing itself. Rather, I want to focus on what it means to say simply that the psalmist "believes". The character of this belief is shown in the effect it has on his life –and not the other way around. His belief is not a response to what he thinks is happening in his life, whether good or bad; what happens in his life is a matter determined by his belief. Faith has been his life-long experience.

And yet faith has also been the source of heartache for him, as it has become a focus for mockery (vv13,11). This mockery, however, is not for the poet a sign of the *absence* of God, for it is the very *presence* of God in the poet's life which has caused the problem in the first place. And so there is in fact no contradiction when the poet calls out to God for help. It is not that God first wandered into, and then out of, and now again (hopefully) back into the psalmist's life, so that faith knows the presence, and the absence of God – proving faith then to be unreliable or even a delusion. God is the source of the problem, and so also its cure.

And so the psalmist's faith is constant whether things are going well, or not. And this is the case not only when faith *seems* to be the cause of the problem but *particularly* when it is. We will be following the preaching of the prophet Jeremiah over the next five or six weeks – a man who might have written such a prayer as today's psalm, for it was his experience also that believing God set him off over against his fellow Israelites, a very unhappy and uncomfortable situation for him, and yet an unavoidable one, as he could not but believe and respond to the God who called him. It was God who placed him in the uncomfortable place, and only God could carry him through it.

Faith, then, turns to God not simply because something has gone wrong, but because it has first known the "going right" which relationship to God has brought before. Faith begins with God's presence in our lives – not his absence – and looks for the fulfilment of promise heard in that presence. So often faith is caricatured as a grasping after something when all else has failed, and so as a *negative* thing which reflects the absence of God. Yet such a "faith" – so-called – does not know the God it longs for; it longs really only for a change of circumstances. Our psalmist longs also, of course, for a change of circumstances; such a longing we all have in common. But what distinguishes the *hopeful* longing of faith from the simply *wish* for relief is the thing which will mark its arrival. For those who simply wish for change long only for a

change of *circumstance*; if it comes it is really only a matter of fortune. It brings about *in them* no real change but the relief itself. And that is the end of the matter, until the next crisis arises.

But for faith which *hopes* for change – and so looks to a God it *already* knows as the agent of change – the outcome is marked not only by the relief but by true praise and thanksgiving which reflects a renewed experience of God's faithfulness. And so the psalmist is able to finish his prayer in the surprising way he does – not actually praising God – *yet* – but *looking forward* to the time of praising God:

- ²² I will also praise you with the harp
for your faithfulness, O my God;
I will sing praises to you with the lyre,
O Holy One of Israel.
- ²³ My lips will shout for joy
when I sing praises to you;
my soul also, which you have rescued.

The psalmist looks forward not only to his deliverance, but to the praise which will spring from his lips. For this deliverance will be something which marks a constancy in his life – a constancy which is God himself. The psalmist's life is structured not by the ups and downs, the ins and outs of human existence, but by God's company along the way. His life is not simply a story of what happened to him, but a story *within* the story of God – a story within the call to trust God who is faithful. In the bright times, and in the dark ones – which are those parts of our stories which tend to catch most of our attention – God's love and faithfulness is the frame which guides the psalmist in his experience. And so he does not simply suffer or celebrate according to the circumstances; he finds the call of God to be the way of understanding where he is, and what he is to be. In the good times, then, and in the bad, he continues to be learning what it is to be a creature of this God, trusting in God's promise to set him and his circumstances right.

And this is our calling also: not to be silent or stoic in the face of suffering, whether suffering for our faith or the "natural" suffering which life delivers to us, but to cry out to God *in confidence*, trusting that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.