

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

PSALM 6

18th August 2013

Psalm 6

Hebrews 10:19-25

Earlier this year I finally joined the on-line phenomenon that is Facebook. I have to confess that I did so mainly to see what my children were posting in the public domain, part of keeping them safe online. And having watched how my (very few) Facebook friends and their friends behave, I have come to the conclusion that one reason that this has become a phenomenon, has taken off so widely, is that it allows you to know or feel that you are not forgotten. People paste pictures or short statements about themselves or which they like and their friends, almost immediately sometimes, click to say that they "like" them or make brief comments. And so you can feel connected. You can feel that you are not forgotten, that you are heard and that you matter. These are things that are important.

The Psalm we read is one of the most shocking in the Psalter, and there are some very shocking psalms, including one which wants to dash the children of the enemy against rocks. But this one, which is not in that bloodthirsty category, is shocking because it is so true to life, so realistic and so honest. It expresses the utter loneliness and grief and longing and hopelessness of someone who is depressed. And a surprising number of us can resonate with every word of the first seven verses: or maybe it is not surprising, but most likely none of us are going to admit it. This is church and we come with our happy faces, and what goes on in the night watches is no one's business but ours.

And yet, you know, most of us have at one time or another done what the psalmist says. Most of us have flooded our bed with tears, drenched our pillows with weeping. The night is when we can be private and let go, and when pent up feelings of despair or failure, of grief or longing or hopelessness can, sometimes, absolutely demand that they must be expressed. We can wear the happy face by day, most of us, but in every life there are times when our weeping will not be stilled and we cry out to God in anguish.

The Psalmist is writing this at such a time. The anguish is so great that in the first verses he is almost incoherent. It feels as though God is angry is punishing, rebuking him for something. Maybe there is something on his conscience, or maybe he is just trying to make sense of why this awful grief and fear has come over him. The feelings of grief and fear are very similar. It was C.S. Lewis, writing after his wife died in one of the most searingly honest descriptions of the journey of grief who said "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing. At other times it feels like being mildly drunk or concussed. There is an invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments

when the house is empty.” (C.S. Lewis “A Grief Observed”) Later he asks the question “Meanwhile, where is God?” and this is the question that our psalmist also is asking. All these symptoms of grief and fear and inner anguish, “While you, O Lord – how long?” (V:3)

But it may be that this is not the understandable, though dreadful grief that comes from an identifiable cause, from bereavement or bad news. Maybe this is the scourge of depression. And again there are people here today who know what that is like, and most likely they don't want anyone to know which they are. Depression, after all, is a psychiatric illness. This society does not want to let anyone know if they are not “right in the head”, because we have a fear of that sort of illness, an illness without physical pain, without obvious swellings or spots or cause. Intelligent, informed people, who know in their heads that depression is an illness like any other, that there is no shame in it, that one in four people will at some point know some sort of mental health issue, such people still talk about depression in hushed tones, or keep it quiet. Parents who would tell the world that their child was in hospital with a broken leg or a burst appendix (and so would get support from friends) keep it quiet if their child is in a psychiatric unit being treated for depression. And they do so as much for the child's sake, and the sake of the friends who won't know what to say, as for their own sake.

But here is Psalm 6, written by someone in a dreadfully depressed state and placed in the Psalter to be sung in public worship. And that is where it ought to be. Unless we acknowledge that God is Lord of every part of our lives, including the negative parts, then we are not acknowledging the whole truth. And to do that means we have to acknowledge that there are negative sides to our lives, some of which are due to circumstance, some to our own faults, and some of which just seem to happen.

The Psalm changes in tone when, perhaps because of the very act of prayer and crying out, perhaps because someone has spoken helpful words to the psalmist, the realisation comes that “The Lord has heard the sound of my weeping. The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord accepts my prayer. He has been heard. He has been acknowledged. It makes all the difference. And so we are back to the phenomenal success of Facebook – where people can easily be given the assurance that they have been seen and heard and they matter.

All people need the assurance that they matter and are seen and that someone cares, and they need it most when life is not treating them well. This is why for centuries part of the business of the church, of the people of God, has been to visit those who are ill and who are bereaved and who are house-bound and lonely, and who are suffering in any way. Ministers do it. Elders do it. Christians looking out for friends and neighbours do it. One of the loveliest things I saw this week was a member of the church tidying the garden of someone who is not strong enough to do it for himself just now. Having the garden go a bit wild wouldn't have mattered in a life-or-death way, but having someone come to help keep it up, meant that his whole situation had been noticed and that it had brought out a loving, creative response.

“The Lord accepts my prayer” says the Psalmist, and maybe the evidence for this was that someone had come to spend time with him in his distress, saying nothing, maybe, but letting him know he is not forgotten. Whatever has happened, the perspective on life has completely changed. Where before the Psalmist was the one feeling fear and shame, now he realised that he need not feel that way. In fact if anyone thinks he should, then that expectation will rebound on them when they see that God has heard him. God accepts him. God will never ultimately let him down, no matter what happens in his external or internal life.

In the letter or treatise or whatever it is that we call the book of Hebrews, there are nine and half chapters of pretty closely-argued theology, and you may remember that a couple of years ago we read right through this book. And then at verse 19 of chapter 10 we get the word “therefore”. All this wonderful teaching about the redemptive work of Jesus, God's Son, and then the explanation of how this ought to affect our lives.

We should have confidence to come into God's presence. Whatever the Psalmist lacked, he never doubted that. Even in his tears and lamenting he did it before God.

We should know ourselves purified – not worry then about whether we are good enough to come before God, good enough for him to accept and love: we're not, but he has made us pure through Jesus, so we are.

We should hold fast to our hope without wavering. Hope is what everyone needs in the world, and in Jesus we are given a sure hope, one which will not disappoint us.

We should consider how to help each other live lives of love and good deeds. This is not a come down after all the exalted theology of the bulk of this letter. It is not a case of treading among the heavenly realms in glory for nine and a half chapters and then coming down to earth with a bang – so be good and be loving. It is because of God's love expressed through Jesus, which does make us worthy and able to gladly and confidently come into God's presence that we should live in a way that expresses that truth. And we should help each other do this, meeting together on purpose to be helpful.

One of the things that people who are depressed tend to do is to hide away. And one of the things that can feed low feelings is being out of contact with kindly folk. When we gather as a church on a Sunday our primary purpose is to worship God, but that doesn't mean that we should ignore each other. One of the ways in which we worship God is by doing what the writer to the Hebrews says and helping stir one another up to love and good deeds. That means encouraging each other. That means talking together about what is real in our lives.

In our churches there are some people who are good at doing this, and some who find it harder: there are some who value the time after formal worship to spend time with each other, and some who would rather head straight out the door. And I know that there are various reasons that some people do not want to linger – some of them practical and some of them to do with what feels right – that it doesn't feel right to go straight from the worship of God into more mundane conversation. I respect that. But if you are one of those who is not able or would rather not linger after worship, ask yourselves when in the week is your time for meeting with your fellow-Christians to share what is real and encourage each other? Some churches have home groups and Bible studies which give the opportunity for this. In St. Bride's we have a small prayer group which certainly helps fulfil this function for those who attend. But when do you meet with others to share what is real and encourage and be encouraged. When do you meet so that you know you are seen and heard, listened to and missed? And when do you do that for others?

God hears you and sees all your moods, good and bad, and God accepts you. There are days when that assurance is enough. But there are days when you need that assurance to come through the loving help of someone else, and days when someone else will need it to come through you. As now we sing this shocking psalm of need and longing, let us reflect on how we can be with those for whom its sentiments are only too true, and how we can allow each other to be with us when we are the one in need. Amen.