

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

PSALM 4

4th August 2013

Psalm 4

Mark 4:35-41

Are you the sort of person who never wonders if you will sleep when you go to bed at night, or do you know what it is like to have the occasional sleepless night? For many of us there are times in life when sleep is less certain of following bed-time than we might hope. They may be times of joy as well as times of despair. It can be that excitement at what is promised for tomorrow keeps us awake as much as excitement at what has happened today. And it can be that grief over what has not yet happened can have as strong an effect of wakefulness as grief at what has come to pass and can never be changed.

I have a book, given me by a friend who knew that I have not always been a stranger to night-time wakefulness, which is entitled "Prayers at 3 A.M.". It is a fairly eclectic anthology, from many different traditions, and not all the pieces in it are instantly recognisable as prayers. But prayer, whether formal talking with God, or internal communing with your own soul, is what many of those who are wakeful when they would rather be asleep find themselves doing.

David ends the Psalm we read today with the words: "I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety." Lying down in safety was sometimes a major concern to a man who lived part of his life on the run and part of his life in the battlefield. Lying down in safety is a real issue for many people who are homeless, or who are refugees, or who live in troubled places. For some who are elderly there may be a fear, maybe a fear not ever spoken aloud in case someone decides to do something about it, that in their sleep they might fall out of bed and be unable to rise. Sometimes it is the feeling of insecurity from whatever cause, that can keep people from sleeping.

It may be that this whole Psalmist written in a period of sleeplessness. Written when David has desperation in his heart - just see verse 1 - but also when he therefore has time to hear God answer his sleepless and ceaseless prayers. The Psalm is the dialogue between David and God. It takes some unexpected twists and turns, but that is what a real conversation does. You know how it is when there is something you want to say to someone, something important, you tend to say in your mind what you want to say, and then you imagine what the other person will answer. Usually something acknowledging that you are right. But when you actually come to have the conversation, things never go just how you had planned. So it is with this Psalm.

It begins with a demand: "Answer me when I call, my righteous God," or "O God of my right," which is what the Hebrew really says. David is summoning God, remembering that God is the standard-setter for right and wrong; remembering maybe that God is the one who makes us righteous in his eyes. "Give me relief from my distress." Or "You gave me room when I was in distress." A

lovely reminder that David knew about distress, and that very often what we need in such times is room, physical room where we can escape, and mental and emotional room, so that we can learn to deal with whatever is distressing us. God gives us the room we need, the relief we need. And because he remembers this he asks that once again God has mercy and hears his prayer.

Maybe David is now listening for God to speak words of comfort and gentle love to him. Maybe that is how in his head this conversation should go. He is in distress, so God should hear and speak. But what does God say?

"How long will my honour suffer shame?"

"How long will you love delusions and seek lies?"

Delusions and lies? But maybe David needs to check his heart before God. Maybe he needs to be sure in his own mind that he is sincere. In ancient Israel the temptation ever and again was to turn to the gods of the surrounding nations. It was to complement the worship of Yahweh with that of Baal or the Ashteroths. In our world it may be a temptation to put other things in God's place or alongside God as a guide in life: astrology, politics, materialism, science, or just what other people do or say or would think. It is not that God's child has to have nothing to do with politics, say, or science. But they should not be our guiding principles, far less what other people might think.

David cries out to God, the God who is right and makes him right, for comfort, and God asks him to consider if he is seeking God with undivided attention, with singleness of heart. This may not be the expected road to comfort and help. It may not be what is expected. But if God were to ask that of you, and he does, what would you answer?

David's response is to remember the holiness that God gives to those whom he calls his own. God has set apart the faithful for himself. In New Testament terms God knows who his saints are, and David know that he is one, one of God's chosen people in a general way, and one chosen by God for a particular task. Is that how you know yourself? When you are in distress can you remind yourself that you are one of God's chosen, made holy by your adoption into his family through faith in Jesus? It was Martin Luther who used to remind himself frequently that he was baptised. This was enough to reassure him that God was not only righteous in himself, but had given his righteousness to him, as to us, through Jesus. And so we can know that when we pray to God, he hears us, one of the most wonderful promises that there is.

And so we come back to the sleepless nights and the distress where we began. When you are upset, angry, so moved by emotion that you actually tremble, do not sin. Strong feeling of whatever kind is never in itself a justification for action, especially not for action that if we were not so moved we would know was wrong. Things are done in this world that are contrary to God's will, and that should anger and disturb us, but it is not right for us to react with spontaneous action or word. It is better that we use the sleeplessness of strong emotion to ponder on our beds, to search our hearts, even as God has already asked of us, and to learn in silence what is God's way forward. It is better to bring our upset into our worship and find there the wider perspective of God's presence. That doesn't mean that our strong feelings will go. Sometimes when we bring what troubles us to God we discover even more clearly what is wrong, and our need to do something to change things grows stronger. But if we make this discovery in the context of worship and of trusting God, we are more likely to find the right thing to do.

And so we come from "Answer me" to trusting in God, and it is because in trusting God there is peace that David, no longer upset, can bring to God the way that people are looking for God to bring them "good" or prosperity, who equate God's favour only with material wealth. That may be what has been annoying him. He has been vexed that many of the people among whom he lives see God,

the only God, the God whom he loves and worships, simply as a source of gain, or provision. If that is what has made him mad, denied him his rest, something has changed in his heart.

Now David wishes them well, when perhaps he did not before. He wishes them well because he knows that the joy God gives him, the joy of dialogue with God, of knowing God's presence, is far more than the passing joy of harvest feasts. And then, with that thought in his mind he is able to turn over on his side and drift off to sleep, now at peace in body and mind and soul.

Peace to sleep when the outward circumstances are unpropitious is a gift of God. Jesus knew it when he slept in the boat which was being so battered by the storm that there was danger of it breaking up. Jesus slept because he knew the power and grace of God, and knew how, as the Psalm says, to put his trust in the Lord.

Prayer which is more important than sleep is also a gift of God. Jesus knew that too when he habitually rose early to pray, and when he prayed at night in the Garden of Gethsemane, prayed with agony and distress, while his friends slept beside him. Jesus knew the need for prayer, and knew too what so many of us take so long to understand: that prayer changes things, and the first thing it changes is the person who prays.

This is what this Psalm also teaches us. David begins his prayer in anguish, but he ends it by turning over and going off to sleep. Nothing has changed. Nothing has had time to change, except David. He began his prayer as a man who needed to know he is in the right, he is seen as right by God. He began his prayer as a man who is knotted up inside with longing. But he has seen himself with God's eyes. He has been reminded that if he is true and faithful, not led astray by the lies and delusions of the people around him, then he will be counted as one of God's people, set apart by God, known to him by name, and known to the world by the name of God. And so, as he lies and thinks about how he is fervent for God's honour and has had hot feelings about those who can't see things his way, looking only for the bread and wine of ordinary life to be provided, he realises that he need not fret. God, who has asked him about his own motivation, can see the motivations of everyone. Some things can be trusted to God. If people look for God in the provision of bread and wine, well, God does provide bread and wine; he provides far more than that, but the bread and wine may be some people's way to encounter that more.

God provides bread and wine, and we, who meet with him around a table, with bread and wine as his gifts to us, know that the bread and wine are just the beginning of knowing all that God, who gave us Jesus, gives us every day. As we follow him with singleness of heart, we can relax into the rest he provides.