

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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Psalm 3

28th July 2013

Psalm 3

Luke 18:1-8

If you have ever been in a black gospel church you will know that things are done a little differently to how we do them here! To us it may seem more chaotic, but those who are regulars and those who are in charge of the worship know what is happening when and how, and there are indications which regulars soon pick up which indicate what is expected of them at different points.

One of these things is when people should say "Amen". You know that in such services "Amen" is frequently called out from the congregation, during prayers and readings and the preaching of the word. There are other things that might be said, maybe repeating a word or phrase that the preacher uses, or calling out encouragement, "You preach it, brother!" (it is usually brother).

I am not asking you to do likewise. There are all sorts of cultures for Christian worship, and that is not ours. But the reason I mention it is because in the psalm which has been read this morning, as in several other psalms, at times in the text there is the small word "Selah". Most translations put it to the side of the text and in italics, but it is there. It is there, and untranslated, because no one knows just what it means, just what it is saying. However most scholars think it is a mark which indicates that when the psalm was read, sung or chanted, something happened at that point. Maybe the trumpets sounded, or the cymbals crashed. Maybe the people echoed the previous line, or made some other sort of spoken refrain. But it is thought that when you see "Selah" you should understand that the previous line or verse is being highlighted, possibly by congregational participation.

In this psalm, a psalm of David, we should pay attention to the Selahs. This psalm was possibly written when David was in conflict with his son Absalom, but these headings to the Psalms of David, ascribing them to individual incidents in his life are a later addition, and I think that this psalm is in the psalter not to remind us of one incident in one person's life, but because it speaks of things that we can all identify with. We should pay attention to the Selahs, since we have them, because maybe they highlight what most of us can relate to in this psalm.

The first Selah comes after the psalmist has sung that he is beset by foes, by people rising against him and that they are knocking and belittling his faith. They say "There is no help for him in God." Crash go the cymbals, Ta-ra go the trumpets and the people cry out "Oh yes!" or "Amen!"

If we have ever allowed anyone to catch a glimpse of our faith, and I hope you have, then most of us know what it is like to have it belittled or mocked. And if you have had that experience,

you know how much it can hurt. It can hurt when people who have no faith, but who seem untroubled by negative events in life mock our faith. “Why do you bother to pray, it can't make a difference, you know.” We live in a culture which, unlike that of David the psalmist, finds prayer a strange reaction to life. We live in the wake of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, whose premises are so much with us that we don't even notice them.

The Enlightenment was a rejection of what was thought of as the forces of un-reason. A lot of good came from it, but these were losses as well. One of the end points of Enlightenment thought is to question the power of or need for prayer. If there is a God, shouldn't he already be stopping such bad things, difficult circumstances from occurring, without us asking? Isn't that his job? So asks the Enlightened thinker. And it is a reasonable question. But it is framed to expect a yes or no answer (and expects yes), when in fact the person who is steeped in prayer knows that this is not what prayer is about at all, so that is not the relevant question. God gives us freedom in life, so he doesn't control us, but part of this wonderful freedom is the freedom to develop a relationship with him. It is the freedom to pray and involve God in our lives, and, far more wonderfully, for us to be involved in his.

There is point in prayer and the rest of this psalm is going to tell a lot of it.

The other way in which we can hear that mocking statement “There is no help for him (or you) in God” is perhaps the way which David heard it. David lived in a culture of people who prayed, and who measured the success of their prayer by the way that it was answered and by how they got what they wanted. So also quite like the twenty-first century. Whatever David's circumstances when he wrote this, and it might be that he was being driven out of the royal palace and losing the support of half his people, while his family is divided and his son takes up arms to unseat him from his throne. Or it might not be that. But whatever his circumstance, people are looking at him and saying, “You are in a sorry state. God is obviously not on your side. God has abandoned you.” Or maybe his inner tormentors – which we all have – are saying it, and if so, no one else needs to, because our inner tormentors are by far the most effective.

We all have inner tormentors, but we also need to be careful that we do not become external tormentors who undermine someone else's faith. Not all faith is expressed in the same way, or using the same language, and there are those who manage, probably without knowing it, to exude an aura of spiritual superiority, and by just a raised eyebrow, or an eloquent silence can convey to you that they don't think much of your faith, or that you must acknowledge that their faith is superior. I have known people damaged for a long time because of very subtle undermining, by those who were possibly unaware that they were doing it.

So when the psalmist mentions that his foes say “There is no help for him in God” we cry out Amen – we've been there. We know that doubt and undermining. But that is just the beginning of the song.

The next Selah comes when the psalmist stops looking at his own situation and starts looking at God. He remembers that God is his shield, his glory, and the one who “lifts his head”, gives him a position a rank. It is the position we have in God's regard, as his child, his beloved, which is worth more than any worldly position or lack of it. Perhaps we should remember that in a week when the world seems to have gone mad over one small baby. And having remembered what God is to him and what God does for him, the Psalmist also remembers that in the past he has cried aloud to God, and God has answered. God has answered – and the cymbals crash, the trumpets blare and the people shout “Amen!”

It is a wonderful thing to know that God has heard and has answered our prayers. It is a thing we do not celebrate nearly enough, when all of us, individually and together can look back on prayers we have uttered and then can look around at the way God has done what we asked and far more, far better. Sometimes we can look around and see that God has not done what we ask, because what he has done is far more and far better.

If the first Selah is about recalling what it is like when you are given the impression that God is not on your side, the second Selah celebrates the fact that that's the wrong way to look at it. It was Abraham Lincoln who, when in the midst of the American Civil War a woman said to him "Mr President, I think that God is on our side, said "Madam what matters more is whether or not we are on God's side."

Prayer is not about us getting God to give us what we want. It is far more profound and subtle and fulfilling than that. Prayer is when we are involved with God's plans for the world, plans which will bring in wholeness and healing and change the world for the better, as his Kingdom comes in and spreads. Because of this, we are to be persistent in prayer, like the widow in Jesus' parable, like the psalmist, who is going to go on to ask more of God, because he has remembered that God hears him. Persistence in prayer is not nagging God, it is saying that although I don't understand why you are not doing this, I am going to keep talking to you about it, until I learn to see it with your eyes, or to understand your timing in acting.

And persistence in prayer is helped and fuelled by the remembrance of all the times when in the past we have called out to God and he has answered even us. Selah!

There may be foes, external or internal, there may be forces that try to undermine your faith, but once you have recalled God's faithfulness and love and the wonder of being held by him in protection and honour, then the perspective changes. Now the worry goes and you can lie down and sleep in peace, no matter what; now you can know that when you wake the Lord will be sustaining you. Now you can face even ten thousand enemies, because with God you still have a majority. (Remember Elisha's servant Gehazi, who could not see the angelic forces surrounding the city when they were besieged: but Elisha knew that they were there. We too can be sure that they are with us.)

And so the Psalm ends with a prayer, asking God to rise up. "Rise up, O Lord" was the prayer Moses and the people prayed each day when they were wandering in the wilderness, asking God to go before them in their daily journey. So the psalmist asks God to go before him, to show the way by which he will save and deliver him. He trust God to strike the enemies on the cheek in contemptuous dismissal of anything that purports to be stronger than God; and to break the teeth, remove the bite, from what needs to be tamed within him. Deliverance belongs to the Lord, he declares, and so it does. Deliverance, salvation is God's and God's alone to give us, and so no one else can bless God's people. There is no blessing unless it comes from God.

And the cymbals crash, the trumpets blare and the people shout – Amen!