

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

PSALM 124

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Sunday 20th February 2011

Acts 16:16-26

How do you react to a Psalm which begins by asserting that God is on our side? Psalm 124 begins by saying that if God had not been on our side then.... And that more than implies that David is declaring that God has been on his side and the side of those he associates himself with. How do you react to that?

It was easy in Old Testament times to say that, wasn't it? Then each nation had their own ideas of God, their own names for God. Then when nations went out to do battle it was seen as much as a contest between opposing gods as between opposing armies. God, your God, was obviously on your side, and you trusted that he was going to prove himself the stronger deity.

But how does it sit with you now? Don't you immediately think of the anomalies which we have seen down the centuries in European war and conflict when both sides were praying to the same God, and claiming that that same God was on their side. And how can that be? How can we say God is on our side? Isn't that a bit presumptuous? We'll come back to the presumption later.

The other common reaction when we claim that God is on our side, is for people to object: Not on mine, He isn't. The Psalm concludes with claiming that our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth (v:8), and that's a statement which for many is like a red rag to a bull.

How can you say God is on your side, that God is your help, they say. Don't you know what has been happening in my life? And they will list the bereavement, the illness, the accidents, the wayward children and straining marriage. Or they will ask how you can claim that God cares and helps when you look at the state of the world, and go on to list the starving children, the medical pandemics, the acts of war and atrocity which are perpetrated. Or they will look to the natural disasters, the earthquakes, the hurricanes, the floods - we see these on a regular basis in our own homes, through the media. How can you say that our help is in the name of the Lord? How can you say God is on our side? Just look at these poor people and change your tune - that's the challenge.

Some of us find it hard to believe that God is on our side. After all what do we mean when we say someone is on your side? It could mean that God is sitting in the home stands at the football match of our lives, cheering for us and groaning when we do badly. After all, that's one instance of being on side that we know in life. But God is doing far more than that, lending us more than moral or verbal support: God is on our side, and that means that he is giving us escape and release when all seemed lost.

You see, this is not a psalm sung by pilgrims who have their heads in the clouds, who are on a high from some intangible spiritual experience, and who are unaware or uncaring about the lives of others. It is not a song sung by those who know disaster only from a distance, by report. This is a song which celebrates God's aid, God's caring because it knows it from first hand. This is the song of the pilgrim who has been almost swept up by enemies, almost swept away by floods. This is the song sung by those for whom what they most dreaded has in fact come to pass. This is the song of someone who has had their head in the dragon's mouth: the place of evil and danger such as you cannot imagine. Life has seemed impossible. Escape has seemed impossible. But look! The impossible has happened!

This is not a Psalm which is going to give a philosophical answer to the question: How can you say that God is on your side? It is a psalm of wonder and rejoicing because however unlikely it may seem, God has proved his care, his love, his help. And it is sung by pilgrims who have been there, in the place of their worst nightmare, and yet retained, and even grown in their faith. They have been there in bereavement, in loss of people, of home, of health, of purpose. They have been there in illness - their own or the dreadful place of

watching those they love best, a spouse or a child suffer. They have been there in the ravages of war, in the terror of natural disaster. They have been there when one way or another, dramatically or slowly and remorsefully, what is stable in their lives, what is best, what gives their lives meaning has been torn away, changed beyond recognition.

The Pilgrims have been there, and many of us have been there as well - each of you knows your own private mouth of the dragon, which you hoped and hoped would not come, and didn't know how you would cope if it did come, which you prayed might not come - but it came.

This is the psalm for those who have seen the disaster come and yet have found that they were not abandoned by God, after all. It is a psalm very like the later song of the prophet Habakkuk, who said:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength! (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

For David, when the disaster happened - and we are not told which disaster in his life he is referring to - it felt like being in a snare. You have seen, I'm sure, as I have, the vast and terrible snares and traps which used to be used in the fields and woods to trap marauding animals and people, with their heavy jaws and sharp, sharp teeth designed to crush the bone, not just hold the marauder still. They are museum pieces now, and snares are supposed to be more humane. But to David when the disaster came it felt like being held in one of these man-traps. It was painful, it was a place of no escape. But then, despite everything, he found that there was an escape! God, whose thoughts are not our thoughts nor his ways our ways, found a way that David could never have foreseen to restore hope and meaning to his life, to get him out of the trap and the pain and confusion it had caused him. The rescue is a miracle, a surprise, but it has happened.

It reminds me of the story we read in Acts 16 when Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi. They had been dragged before the magistrates, they had been verbally abused, stripped and flogged, then locked up to await their real punishment in the morning. Later in the story it turns out that they could have run from this imprisonment by claiming their rights as Roman citizens, but they do not shy away from the unpleasantness, trusting God to help them. Their heads were in the dragon's mouth all right. But Paul and Silas pass the painful night by singing praise to God. Maybe they even sang this Psalm! And the trap was sprung for them, and they were released.

Christian pilgrims are those who, like Paul and Silas, like Habakkuk, like David, sing songs of praise in all sorts of circumstances. To those who do not share our faith this can promote an assumption that Christians are naive or protected from the realities of life, but this is the opposite of the truth: Christians know more about the deep struggles of life than others - because they do not run from them - they know more about the ugliness of sin because they do not try to shy away from it, but face it head on. As Christians we know that we speak and sing our words of praise in a world that is hellish. We sing our songs of victory where things get messy.

One of the things that often amazes people from the West when they visit Christian communities in Malawi, in Zambia, in Zimbabwe, in all sorts of places where life is hard, people have nothing and disease and uncertainty are constant factors in life, is that they find themselves among a faith and joy like nothing they have met before. And it is not naiveté, and not a denial of the harsh realities of life: it is because they find that they are among people who live out this Psalm, recognising God's help when things have got worse than is bearable, praising and trusting that God who has been on our side will be so again. Christian pilgrims know that it is the help that we experience, not the difficulties and hazards that confront us which shapes who we are.

So is it presumptuous to say that God is on your side? If it were just your word against someone else's it might be. If you were trying to make a claim to prove a point in an argument it might be. If you thought it made you rather more special than anyone else, it certainly would be.

But God is on your side, on my side, on our side, not because of who we are, but because of who he is. He showed that when Jesus died at Calvary. God is love, and faithful pilgrims are those who can look back on their pilgrimage and point out instances of times when God's love has been shown them, beyond hope or expectation, beyond deserving or imagination. Think of your life, look back on the years behind you: has God not sprung the trap for you time and again? Has the impossible trouble or problem which has surrounded and held you, from which you could find no way out not changed or gone? And so can we not also face the challenges of today and the fears for tomorrow with faith and singing?

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made earth and heaven.

Amen