

Reflections on Morning Prayer

Week beginning:

Monday 30th March 2020

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One of the Psalms set for Morning Prayer today is the very familiar Psalm 121:

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills;
from where is my help to come?
- 2 My help comes from the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not suffer your foot to stumble;
he who watches over you will not sleep.
- 4 Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel
shall neither slumber nor sleep.
- 5 The Lord himself watches over you;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand,
- 6 So that the sun shall not strike you by day,
neither the moon by night.
- 7 The Lord shall keep you from all evil;
it is he who shall keep your soul.
- 8 The Lord shall keep watch over your going
out and your coming in,
from this time forth for evermore.

Reflection

This Psalm opens with a cry about the source of help in troubled times. How appropriate for the current situation, that we reflect upon the source of our help. Given the current restrictions in place, I am sure that many isolated and vulnerable people will be asking that very same question, 'From where should I seek help?'

Watching the news today, it is heartening to see the many, many examples of help coming from the most unlikely of places. Who would have thought that the Mercedes Formula One team would have designed, within seven days, a new breathing system and can manufacture 1000 a day? Who would have thought that EasyJet cabin crew would be volunteering to work in the new hospital created from the Excel exhibition centre? I give thanks to God for giving so many people the skill and desire to think laterally and look for innovative ways to help others.

Whilst it is very heartening to see help coming from so many directions, but we should not ignore the Psalmist's second line, 'My help comes from the Lord'. As well as practical help, we, as a church, need to offer spiritual help as well. As we

explore what it means to be church without a building, we are reassured that, as a spiritual body, we are all connected in Jesus Christ. We may not be able to worship next to someone but know that all our prayers and worship join with all the prayers and worship of everyone else. So pray for those in need. Call someone to reassure them. Sing a favourite hymn or song or join us in Morning Prayer at 9am each day. If our help truly comes from the Lord, let us make every effort to continue our prayer, praise and worship. In this way we will be made strong in our God, who is faithful at all times.

The Psalm ends with such encouragement. This line seemed even more poignant as we consider all those critical workers who leave for their jobs each day. Let us pray for all those who are going out and coming in on our behalf. Let us pray for their safety and give thanks for them. Let us also pray for ourselves, unable to come and go as we would like, asking for the Holy Spirit's guidance as to the best ways we can use this time.

I conclude with a prayer which is on the Southwark Cathedral website:

A prayer in lockdown

The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked. (John 20.19)

Ever present God,
be with us in our isolation,
be close to us in our distancing,
be healing in our sickness,
be joy in our sadness,
be light in our darkness,
be wisdom in our confusion,
be all that is familiar when all is unfamiliar,
that when the doors reopen
we may with the zeal of Pentecost
inhabit our communities
and speak of your goodness
to an emerging world.
For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Tuesday 31st March

Psalm 123

- ¹ To you I lift up my eyes,
to you that are enthroned in the heavens.
- ² As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their
master, or the eyes of a maid to the hand of her
mistress,
- ³ So our eyes wait upon the Lord our God,
until he have mercy upon us.
- ⁴ Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon
us, for we have had more than enough of
contempt.
- ⁵ Our soul has had more than enough of the
scorn of the arrogant, and of the contempt of the
proud.

Reflection

Like yesterday, it is the second Psalm of morning prayer which spoke to me loud and clear. It is verses 4 and 5 which set the scene of the Psalmist in distress and pain. The central verse suggests that mercy is required on either the writer or most likely, the nation. Either way, there is a sense that things are wrong, and God can put it right.

What is interesting to note is the attention that the writer places on the eyes. In verse one, the writer's eyes are lifted up to the heavens. This is followed by an analogy of the servant looking to a master or a maid to her mistress. The Psalmist clearly knew that God was in control of all matters and this shows righteousness on behalf of the writer. We, too, need to acknowledge, possibly more than we do, that God is, indeed, in control despite what we might see happening in the world around us. I know that this statement requires much faith but it is the case. 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it', as we read in another Psalm.

It could be argued that many of the world's troubles might have been averted if more people were to see themselves in relation to an all-loving and all-powerful God, rather than promoting the self to a demi-god status.

It is the reaction of the Psalmist to God which is such a wonderful example for us to follow. Where things were wrong, there was humility, not defensiveness. Where matters needed to be addressed, it was to God he looked rather than to his own skill or wisdom. Here we have a massive lesson: where life becomes messy or ugly, we can follow the example set in verse 3, 'So our eyes wait upon the Lord our God'. It is this verse which can give us a clearer insight into how to act in our current crisis. In prayer, Bible reading and personal acts of worship, we can lift our eyes to the Lord our God and wait; placing all things in his hands. As Peter encourages us, 'Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.' (1 Peter 5:7). To do this successfully, we need to lift our eyes up to God, rather than to the situation, in the full and complete knowledge that he loves us and cares for us beyond our understanding.

As with yesterday, I conclude today's thought with the Lockdown Prayer:

The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked. (John 20.19)

Ever present God,
be with us in our isolation,
be close to us in our distancing,
be healing in our sickness,
be joy in our sadness,
be light in our darkness,
be wisdom in our confusion,
be all that is familiar when all is unfamiliar,
that when the doors reopen
we may with the zeal of Pentecost
inhabit our communities
and speak of your goodness
to an emerging world.
For Jesus' sake.
Amen.

Wednesday 1st April

The passage from Morning Prayer that I have chosen for today is from Hebrews 12:3-13...

³Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. ⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—
“My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him;
⁶for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he accepts.”
⁷Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. ⁹Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. ¹¹Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.
¹²Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

Reflection

I wonder if you have ever been in a situation with young people, maybe a walk or shopping. It is quite common to hear a, ‘Keep up!’ being yelled, to which the reply comes, ‘It’s all right for you, you have long legs!’ or some such phrase. It is a common reaction in adversity – it’s all very well for you... and then the list comes of the other person’s advantages. It is often common for many to think of God in that way. ‘It’s all right for you, God – away from our suffering. How on earth can you understand how we feel?’ At Christmas, we celebrate Emmanuel – with us is God. The person of Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully God – just how that is the case makes my head spin, but there it is. We might feel that God doesn’t understand our suffering but in truth he completely understands. As Jesus suffered, the Godhead suffered.

The writer to the Hebrews starts with a reflection that Jesus did suffer. In chapter 4 of the same letter we read, ‘For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet he did not sin.’ God knows and understands but also wants us to learn and grow from such experiences. Much of this passage talks of learning; seeing God at work in us in the situations he allows us to face. We might be in a life trial where we make mistakes and, if we are willing and humble, God can use our reflection to build us for a better future.

In these current times, many people are talking about what life will be like when the coronavirus crisis is all over. There are many discussions, I am sure, taking place as to how humans are reacting to the crisis and I hope that there will be some positive outcomes from such reflections. In a way, I hope that we will never be the same again – by this, I mean that as humans we will use this hardship to examine what it means to be human. I hope that the cleaner air and quieter skies will give us added impetus to increase our environmental efforts.

Verses 12 and 13 address spiritual posture – so to speak. Are we going to allow this crisis to bend us over spiritually and limp our way through this? Or do we give all things to God in prayer and worship, asking of him the question, repeatedly, ‘How do you want me to grow and learn in this current crisis? How can I grow closer to you in all this?’

Let it be one of our prayers, that God’s Holy Spirit will be allowed to mould us and shape us throughout this crisis and that we emerge upright and strong – in him, who is our rock and our redeemer.

I close today’s reflection with a prayer from the Church of England website:

God of compassion,
be close to those who are ill, afraid or in isolation.
In their loneliness, be their consolation;
in their anxiety, be their hope;
in their darkness, be their light;
through him who suffered alone on the cross, but
reigns with you in glory,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Thursday 2nd April

For those who pray the Church of England's Morning Prayer, you will have noticed that there are some changes since the start of Passiontide. There is now 'A Song of Lamentation' which combines various verses from the book of Lamentation, written at a time of great distress over the destruction of Jerusalem during Judah's exile in Babylon. It also casts a shadow towards Christ's suffering some 400 years later. The selected verses read as follows:

A Song of Lamentation

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow,
Which was brought upon me,
which the Lord inflicted
on the day of his fierce anger.
For these things I weep;
my eyes flow with tears;
for a comforter is far from me,
one to revive my courage.
Remember my affliction and my bitterness,
the wormwood and the gall!
But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul,
'therefore I will hope in him.'
The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that we should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.
For the Lord will not reject for ever;
though he causes grief, he will have compassion,
According to the abundance of his steadfast love;
for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

Lamentations 1.12, 16a,b; 3.19, 21-26, 31-33

Reflection

These verses are both powerful and current, if viewed through the lens of today's worldwide pandemic. The writer is lamenting the disaster that came upon Jerusalem and, during Passiontide, we view the same text as we reflect on the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ on his way to the cross. The current times are viewed by many in differing ways. Some might see it as God's punishment for some sin, some view it as God teaching us, many might see it as humanity's

fault, whilst others see it as merely part of the trials that beset any species on the planet; the list can go on. Whichever way you look at Covid-19, it is indeed a time of suffering; a time of destruction. We can identify with the writer of Lamentations over the destruction of life and a way of life that was enjoyed by all.

I would urge you all not only to focus on the first half of the verses. Many people are advising others to minimise watching the news – enough to be informed but not to such an extent that we dwell on the situation. The middle section is one that possibly should be written out and placed prominently; maybe on the fridge door or by the screen on your desk.

*But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end*

Despite all the negativity around, the writer's eyes were fixed on God and that gave him hope. His relationship with God gave him the certainty that God was still there and can still redeem a situation. This hope was well-founded as Judah was returned and the city and temple were rebuilt. In the same way, the Passion of Jesus Christ turned into the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope for all humanity – through Christ, all can be saved.

Let us share in this hope. Take a few moments to look at the hymn: 'All my hope on God is founded'. The second line can be turned into a prayer, 'he doth still my trust renew.' And I pray that God will renew your trust in him through a deepening relationship with his Son, Jesus Christ.

To end today's reflection, I will read from St Patrick's Breastplate and hope that, in all that you do today and in the weeks ahead, Christ will be present, at all times, in your lives.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Amen

Friday 3rd April

Psalm 22

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,
and are so far from my salvation,
from the words of my distress?

²O my God, I cry in the daytime,
but you do not answer;
and by night also, but I find no rest.

³Yet you are the Holy One,
enthroned upon the praises of Israel.

⁴Our forebears trusted in you;
they trusted, and you delivered them.

⁵They cried out to you and were delivered;
they put their trust in you and were not
confounded.

⁶But as for me, I am a worm and no man,
scorned by all and despised by the people.

⁷All who see me laugh me to scorn;
they curl their lips and wag their heads, saying,

⁸'He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him;
let him deliver him, if he delights in him.'

⁹But it is you that took me out of the womb
and laid me safe upon my mother's breast.

¹⁰On you was I cast ever since I was born;
you are my God even from my mother's womb.

¹¹Be not far from me, for trouble is near at hand
and there is none to help.

Reflection

The whole of Psalm 22 was chosen for today and can I commend reading all of it despite only including the first 11 verses here. This Psalm will be read quite widely as we begin Holy Week and particularly on Good Friday. The Psalmist is in deep distress and lamenting the perceived distance from God in his time of need. The words, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' are spoken by Christ on the cross and are echoed by many throughout history as they feel that God is far from them.

Many might be in that position today as they reflect on the Covid-19 pandemic and possibly feel that God has abandoned them to their fate but notice how the Psalm unfolds.

After the initial lament, the Psalmist appears to put his suffering into context. Despite his anguish, he still views God as the God of Israel and enthroned. He then thinks back to times when

God did deliver those who trusted in him. This is quite a common tool in Hebrew writing. Known as 'anamnesis', Hebrew writers put before God, the many times that he has acted favourably with the mindset that God will act in the same way again. In other words, 'You did this before, God, so please do it again – I know you can'.

It is just possible that this should be our approach, too, when faced with adversity. The power of testimony – the remembrance of God's past actions – is extremely powerful and helpful. It might help us all to reflect on periods in our own lives or the lives of others and see just how gracious God has been. In coming to God through his Son, Jesus Christ, our journey has been with Christ by our side. The writer to the Hebrews reminds his readers, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.' (Hebrews 13.8) This tells us that the same Jesus who wept for Lazarus is grieving for those who suffer now. The Jesus who took children in his arms takes us into those same arms.

The Psalmist continues to lament and know that it is a good thing for us to lament. God wants us to be in a real relationship with him and that means taking our pain to him. At the same time as lamenting, as with the Psalmist, be encouraged by the constant faithfulness of God and of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, the Psalmist goes further than just the present and speaks, in faith, about his descendants also proclaiming God. If we can, we should try to look beyond this current crisis and look forward to journeying on with Christ, closer to him like never before.

I close with this prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your disciples,
'I am with you always'.

Be with me today,
as I offer myself to you.

Hear my prayers for others and for myself,
and keep me in your care.

Amen

Saturday 4th April

Hebrews 13:17-25

¹⁷Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.

¹⁸Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honourably in all things. ¹⁹I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you very soon.

²⁰Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

²²I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. ²³I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free; and if he comes in time, he will be with me when I see you. ²⁴Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings. ²⁵Grace be with all of you.

Reflection

I must confess to a wry smile coming across my face as I read the first verse of the Hebrews passage. As I sit here in my study – a place that is becoming more and more familiar – I reflect that it is because I am obeying my leaders that I see so much of this room! Even though the context of this passage refers to the leaders of the early believing Jewish converts, I can't not think about the obedience that so many in this country are exercising towards the leadership of the UK to stay inside. It is here that the connection stops as I puzzle at our MPs keeping watch over our souls, but they are, in fact, keeping watch over our health and the health of those on the front line who care for us. I am sure that, for many in leadership, the prospect of enforcing a lockdown does not fill them with joy; nevertheless, they

have taken these measures because they feel that it is the best cause of action.

For the Hebrews, the consequence of keeping in step with their leaders is in their own personal growth – their spiritual health, so to speak. Verses 20 and 21 speak of God making them complete in goodness so that they are better equipped to do God's will. In the same way, we, too, can obey our leaders by staying in and using this opportunity to allow God more time to complete his work of goodness in us.

It is the final verse that, whilst short, carries so much significance. There may be occasions over the coming weeks which will stretch us to the very limit of our endurance. Possibly unbearable loneliness or the total opposite – a lack of personal space – which grieves us. Whatever the afflictions which this lockdown produces, pray for God to give us a greater measure of his grace to cope with all that will come our way. It is grace that saved us in the first place and grace that sustains us. As John Newton penned in 'Amazing Grace': *'T'was grace that brought us safe thus far and grace will lead us home'*

In these most challenging of times, I pray that we will all receive a greater measure of God's grace to carry us through.

To conclude this final reflection of the week with this prayer for our current times:

Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy
in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort
knowing that nothing
can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.