



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 22nd October 2023

Readings: Isaiah 45.1-7; Psalm 6; I Thessalonians 1.1-10

Trinity XX

A Christian community explores the Word of God together. There are times when one person's understanding feeds everyone else's, but often interpretation is a shared insight. Such is the work of a house group, or of those who undertake *Lectio Divina*, or, at their best, of a committee meeting. And so it is this morning. For a few days now Mark has been wrestling with words from Psalm 6, verse 3 that are echoed elsewhere in the Bible: *'My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?'*

Mark spoke to me of how that verse (in the New International Version) had been shaping his reaction to the horrors of what is going on in Israel Palestine. His anthem setting those words musically embodies a visceral response to bombing, to hostage taking, to revenge, to two political bodies determination to wipe each other from the map, to thwarted humanitarian rescue. Maybe others of us have also been looking at the news in bewilderment, ourselves murmuring, 'How long?' We'd be far from the first to do so, as looking at the developments leaves us aghast, angry, and anxious. For such a time as this, the choir and orchestra interpreted our groaning 'How long?' in order to nourish our encounter with God.

The writer of Psalm 6 maybe speaks for us as we go through other crises than the current Middle Eastern tragedy. There is clearly something upsetting the Psalmist, but we're not told what, and we don't what is upsetting one another, either. Maybe illness, maybe enemy action, maybe slanderous, cursing neighbours who dislike our Leylandii. Or might it be something like the religious persecution which, because of devotion to Jesus Christ, is afflicting those Thessalonians to whom Paul writes a millennium later? Think of the Jewish and Muslim communities in this city at the moment. And Marchiene Vroon Rienstra, a feminist commentator, wonders if Psalm 6's 'How long?' is speaking the unspeakable 'for a woman who was raped'. 'O God, when will you deliver me from my despair?'¹

This breadth of options is perhaps helpful as it saves us from feeling the Psalm is definitively about something that is different from what's vexing us now. And so it is that Psalm 6 could aid us in our reaction to our personal stresses, or the global community's instability, or whatever it is that's churning up our own 'How long?'

At its heart, the Psalmist's reaction is about **prayer**. What else can we do when we feel powerless? To what other action can we turn when nothing else is in our grasp? Yet prayer, too, is a mystery. We can do no other, but we do not always know what we are doing when we pray. Poring over the whole of the sixth psalm this week, four points have helped me in my consideration of how and why prayer matters. On the screen it appears on the *New Revised Standard Version*.

First, in its opening verses, the praying one pleads for God's attention and help. They are not trapped in crippling guilt – sin is not mentioned once. Rather, they are aware how 'stuff' is happening that leaves them feeling entirely discombobulated and at odds – it's a whole-body thing. Their bones are shaking (6.2b), their limbs feel heavy. Recognise that heavy arms and legs feeling, when everything's getting too much? It sort of sums up how personal sadness, international war, the constant bad news that invades our living rooms, leaves us feeling. Another translation, 'My whole being shakes in great dismay',² suggests a disquiet so deep that we feel ill at ease throughout our body and mind. It all makes our writer shout three imperative pleas to God: don't rebuke, be gracious, and heal. Could it be that those three verbs encapsulate so much that we fear, with an

¹ Rienstra, Marchiene Vroon 1992 *Swallow's Nest: a feminine reading of the Psalms* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans page 44

² Goldingay, John 2006 *Psalms: Volume 1, Psalms 1-41* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic p 136

intensity that can throw us off balance? It's true, isn't it, that fearing we have upset God, fearing that we might have done something wrong, and fearing that we or a loved one might be ill are all capable of destabilising us profoundly. Does this model a sort of praying we could adopt? "God, I'm not going to dress it up; this is how I feel. Just meet me where I am, and treat me less as my ordinary flawed humanity deserves, and save me as your 'steadfast love' (6.4b) allows." It's an honest, gut-wrenched spiritual spewing. And sometimes honest gut-wrenched spiritual spewing is what prayer must be, because that's where we are. Repeatedly, the Psalmist sets us such an example, just as they do here.

Secondly, we get to the verse that stirred Mark to compose the Anthem: 'while you, O Lord, - how long?' After a repeat of the 'weakened frame'³ idea, the verse has this incomplete sentence, which one person has translated as 'how long will it be before ...'⁴ It's what Brueggemann calls an 'emotional ejaculation';⁵ halfway through their sentence the person praying has no more to say. And isn't that how *we* sometimes pray? Inarticulate, incoherent, but from the depth of our being? How precious it is that the Psalms model for us prayers with bad grammar. Those of us paid to be wordsmiths need to recognise that sometimes it's the faltering that's most expressive, the ugly that plumbs the depths more effectively. Let that encourage us in our prayers for Re'im and Gaza when words fail us. And in our prayers for the women's refuge, or for the office mate we can't tolerate, or the black dog of depression that will not get off our back. 'How long will it be before ...'

Thirdly, having cried out to God for grace and healing, and asked that God won't rebuke them, the Psalmist's next few verses focus rather more on what they are actually going through personally. In verse 6, the first-person singular is now to the fore: I am weary with my moaning 6.b6a; I flood my bed with tears 6.6b; I drench my couch with weeping 6.6c. And then they're troubled about their eyes becoming wasted by grief 6.7a, and their foes weakening them. 6.7b Notice how full-on this is. I wonder if we sometimes feel restrained in our prayers; worried that we cannot tell it to God just like it is in case it upsets the one who's beyond being upset because they know everything anyway. My sense is that the most authentic believers in God are those who do not hold back. After all, we frequently recall how the Gospel writers highlight Jesus on the cross asking why God has forsaken him.⁶ And surely, the more open we are with God, the more open God can be with us in return – confidently cautioning, or cajoling, or caressing us as we need, until we really are healed.

And **finally**, in the concluding verses attention is back on God. The self-centredness doesn't last forever. The One to whom our writer initially turned with longing for acceptance, healing and grace is the One to whom they go back at the end of the Psalm. And by the end of verse 9 they are rejoicing that God does indeed hear and accept their prayers. The desperate plea of the opening becomes the celebratory song of the close because God has answered the people's renewed trust and faithfulness with God's own determined presence and rescue. How much more the *Christian* believer can trust this, given that Jesus was raised from the dead in order to rescue us.⁷

So, the Psalmist encourages us to prayer. God, of course, has a will all their own. God doesn't often answer our prayers in exactly the way we ask or anticipate. Indeed, God sometimes uses the strangest resources to do what God requires and what we need. I think that is the whole point of Isaiah's word to unbelieving Cyrus. 'You may not know God, Cyrus, but that doesn't mean God can't use you to achieve good and righteous things', we hear Isaiah telling the Persian. I wonder if there might not be a word for us here, too? Just as God uses Cyrus, might God want to use us? Lots of us like to hide behind not knowing God. We pride ourselves on hedging our bets about God just in case we get it wrong. But just as we see with Cyrus, God might have a role for us in pursuit of

³ Daw, Carl P. Jr 2018 *Praise, Lament, and Prayer: a Psalter for singing* Volume 1 Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Psalm 6

⁴ Seerveld, Calvin 2005 *Voicing God's Psalms* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, as in *Psalms for all Seasons* 2012 Grand Rapids: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship page 33

⁵ Brueggemann, Walter and William H. Bellinger, Jr 2014 *Psalms* New York: CUP page 48

⁶ Matthew 27.46, after Psalm 22.1

⁷ I Thessalonians 1.10

the divine purpose anyway. You see, it's not about what we believe regarding God so much as about how we make ourselves available to God. And strangely, I think that is what prayer is doing. It's opening ourselves to the presence and the power and the call of God. That honesty, which the Psalmist modelled for us, is one of the ways by which we tell God we are taking them seriously, however fragile our faith, however insecure our hold on them. And then, in the strangest of spiritual ironies, our praying becomes rather less about God being malleable to our whims, and more about us being changed by God's grace and healing.

When we find ourselves crying out to God 'how long?', we are right to believe that God will hear and accept it. We are also wise to expect that such praying never leaves us where it found us. Instead, we are transformed into being part of the answer to our own prayer, as God works in us and through us so that light might disperse some of the shadows of our day.

May it be so, and to God alone be the glory.

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