Meditations at the Good Friday ‘Hour at the Cross’ Service
by Canon Simon Butler

Introduction

In these three Good Friday meditations, prior to the moving liturgy of the Cross in an hour, I want to explore the message of three psalm, which take us not just to the emotional core of the Passion Story, but also take us to difficult places of prayer. Two of them, Psalm 88 and Psalm 109 are really problematic for a faith that is only interested in goodness, happiness and going ‘from strength to strength’. The third, Psalm 130, explores what it means to hope in the face of darkness and difficulty.

Meditation 1: Psalm 88

Read Psalm 88

Psalm 88 is about trusting a God who doesn’t seem available. Jesus once told his disciples “to love the Lord you God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.” Listening to this Psalm is like listening to the prayer of someone who continues to pray when God seems to be no longer present. It is difficult to love a God like that.

Listen to the experience of the psalmist

1 O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
2 let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.

Is this an actual night or an experience of deep inner darkness and trouble? This is someone crying out to God for help.

We all know that God inclines his hear, but what if we keep talking and God seems to stop listening? Maybe we can look forward to answered prayer, but not yet. We all know people like that. We all know people whose lives are blighted by struggle and suffering; the families who always seem to be dealt a rough hand. It might even be you.

But just as the psalmist prays persistently and insistently, there is no answer. And, you know what, this psalm isn’t interested in speculating on why that might be. This is an honest prayer of an honest person – it’s a report on the feelings of that person,
not an explanation or theology of prayer. If you’re in a situation like this, you don’t want theology, you want an answer!

Instead, the psalm continues with a barrage of complaint. The sky might be silent, but this person’s prayer continues. How easy it is to believe when things are going well! But, here’s the thing, how easy it is to stop believing when things are going badly. What’s hard is to continue to believe and to continue to pray as though God is there even when it feels like God has gone away.

So the psalmist prays: there are verses and verses of it, but it ends with a summary in verse: “Every day I call on you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.” What it all means is this for the psalmist: all this trouble, God has caused it. And yet, all this trouble, he continues to pray.

No wonder the questioning goes on. Question upon question: seven desperate questions from verse 10 to verse 14. Questions about God’s ability to change things, to change “death, the shades, the grave, abandon, darkness, land of forgetfulness”. And every question is a reminder to God about the way God is supposed to be – a God of “wonders, praise, steadfast love, faithfulness, wonders, saving help. Two sets of words – and the experience of the psalmist is that the answer to the questions is “no”. This is a person who still believes God is faithful and steadfast, but the clock is ticking…imagine in the midst of it all you pray verse 13 “But I, O LORD, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.” And yet there’s still no answer. So the questions begin again.

Finally, exasperated, the prayer moves from pleading to exasperation and accusal. Nothing has worked, nothing has changed, everything remains the same, or perhaps gets worse. There is no hope at the end of the psalm, just a loneliness and an isolation. Nothing has become clear. Nothing.

Who would have thought something like that was in the Bible? Can you pray like this? Isn’t it disrespectful? Is it possible to pray like this to God?

My friend Philippa (not her real name) was raped while on pilgrimage in Israel many years ago. Her attacker was never caught and the trauma was profound. The conventional faith of her church and the familiar promises of God’s love and compassion seemed empty and meaningless to her for many years. When she reflected on this some years later, she realized that this psalm was the only passage of Scripture in the Bible that helped her at that moment. It helped her because the absence of God was the only thing that connected with what she was going through. Philippa is now an ordained priest in the Church of England, and has a particular empathy for victims of all kinds. Had she not found this desperate and unresolved Psalm in scripture, it is not difficult to imagine her never having had the chance to
recover a trust in God that was shattered by one act of evil and a church that had nothing of use to say to her.

So is this a real prayer? Of course it is? Is it faithful to pray like this to God. Better to pray to God like this than not pray at all. Because what I sense in Philippa is what I read in this psalm, that despite God’s absence, his apparent indifference to the needs of the person who can pray this psalm with integrity, the psalmist, like Philippa, is still praying, and still praying to God. God may not be there for the psalmist, but the psalmist is still there for God. He is going to keep his side of the deal.

When Jesus dies on the cross he cries out a prayer of abandonment to a silent heaven. Philip will be talking about that psalm later. But what we can say is this psalm represents real, biblical faith. When we face the cheap talk of ‘resolution’ or the most mis-used pop-psychological phrase in popular culture – ‘closure’ – this psalm avoids that cruel imposition. We may not have to pray such a prayer often – although many do, daily – but thanks be to God that such honesty is as much a part of being faithful as endless words of praise.

Meditation 2: Psalm 109

Read Psalm 109

If Psalm 88 is about how it can be possible to remain in relationship with a God who it is hard to love, Psalm 109 offers what for many of us is perhaps a more common challenge, which is how to care for a neighbour who we experience as an enemy, or how to love a person who seems to be beyond love. If Psalm 88 is about the silence of God, Psalm 109 is all about vindictiveness to other people, particularly people who have acted cruelly or violently or oppressively. It is such a challenging Psalm that it is bracketed in the pattern of readings of the church. You can leave this out of Scripture if you like, it seems to be saying.

It all begins very well. Like Psalm 88 the psalmist has a complaint, a lament against God. Like Psalm 88, the psalmist is going to carry on relating to God even if God’s goodness seems absent. Appeals are made throughout this Psalm to the God we know to be God: “act on my behalf for thy name’s sake” “save me according to your steadfast love” “have compassion”. All well and good. This is the God we know.

But then, as we have just heard, this psalm is, in the main, what one writer has called “a raw, undisciplined song of hate and wish for vengeance.” Something awful
has happened to the psalmist. Some terrible, unspecified, wrong has been committed. The psalmist wants justice. And he wants it in spades.

There is no need to list the demands made of God by the one praying this psalm. But the hatred of the one praying is such that it extends beyond the one accused, but to his parents, his children, his wife. This is someone standing in God’s presence and demanding, basically, that someone be killed and his family and heritage utterly wiped out. Total annihilation.

What are we to make of this? How in God’s name can this be biblical? How on earth can praying like this ever be justified?

I have lost count of the number of news stories in the past year about child sexual abuse. For those of us who have never experienced such a horror – and statistically that will not be all of us sitting here this afternoon – we can empathise with a victim, but we can never imagine how they must feel.

Equally, we have all become inured to the images of suffering of ordinary people in the Middle East and, colonial history and local politics aside, the raw pain of many of the people caught up in this never-ending saga of violence and recrimination is beyond depressing.

So, if we are not ourselves victims, if (as many of us would probably say) we never feel overt hatred to anyone, the presence of this psalm in the canon of Scripture is a challenge. But, often, this is because our rage and anger is suppressed and disciplined, not owned. But, for many people in this world, this sort of fury is real. Many victims of abuse are not only deeply wounded but deeply angry; many who suffer endless violence are full of wrath for those who have done them wrong. Righteous wrath too. So, if we cannot pray these words ourselves with integrity (and maybe that’s what the brackets are about in the pattern of readings), maybe we can imagine people who can pray this psalm with honesty and fierce faith. Those who cry out for vengeance at the death of a child, one who has just discovered that her husband has been serially abusing their children. Perhaps we can pray this psalm for them and with them. Whose psalm is this, we might ask ourselves.

But if we do, then at the same time, perhaps we are invited to address this rage to God because, not only can God take this sort of anger, but that in doing so, we can learn that our righteous anger and our cries for vengeance are best directed, not at others, but at God. We may be uncomfortable if we live comfortable liberal lives in phrases like “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord”, but the person who prays this psalm originally believes that with all his heart. That’s why he prays in the first place.
But when he does that, he also submits his own will to that of God. He leaves it to God to deal out the punishments, to restore justice. When God says (in both Old and New Testaments, by the way), “Vengeance is mine,” the clear implication is “vengeance is mine, not yours”. Seen in this way, praying a psalm like this for ourselves or others, is to allow God to take control, and for us to be set free from the bondage of vengeance, even when (as may well be the background to this psalm) human injustice seems to trump human justice.

There is so much more one could say about a psalm like this, in all its difficulty. But perhaps, on Good Friday, we might observe the following, in all its theological riskiness. That on the cross, Jesus bears the weight of all that accumulated vengeance, that out of love he stands in our place, in the place of the whole world that screams in agony for justice and revenge, and he bears the whole thing. Perhaps this is the depth of his love, not only that he bears it all for the petty forgiveness that most of us need (a friend of mine told me he once heard a nun confess that she had “been wasteful of string”), not that sort of petty forgiveness, but that he bears the screaming hatred of the world, so that the world need not impose that sort of hatred on itself. Truly something extraordinary to ponder...

**Meditation 3: Psalm 130**

**Read Psalm 130**

After the anguish of Psalm 88 and the violence of Psalm 109, the 130th Psalm seems much more straightforward; it is a prayer ‘out of the depths’ of a sinful person confessing and waiting faithfully for God to respond. The psalmist prays with confidence and hope. More of that shortly.

First, though, I’d like to invite us to consider the nature of our own prayer. What do your prayers contain? If they are anything like mine, they are focused on intercession, on praying for the needs of others, and perhaps ourselves; on a good day, I remember to thank God for his many blessings and when we gather for corporate worship, our liturgical prayer reminds us to praise God as well. But, I ask myself, do I ever lament? Do I ever pray for myself or others with a voice of complaint? The answer, for me at least, is pretty much no. There is something awkward and unsettling about prayers of lament.

But there is a profound gain in learning to lament – not just for our own emotional health (we all know that to express emotion freely is a healthy thing, even for us who are buttoned-up Brits). The gain is this: when we learn to lament we become a more equal partner with God in our relationship with him. This may seem strange, but if we think of our relationship with God as the bible does, which is a firm, unbreakable partnership (the theological word for that is covenant by the way, as in ‘new
covenant’), if we think of our relationship with God in this way, then there is the freedom to grow and deepen in that relationship by learning to lament and complain to God.

There is, in psychology, a theory called ‘object-relations’ theory, which basically suggests that our personality formation isn't simply a matter of internal development, but depends upon external factors such as relationship. It says that the development of personality depends not on our internal projections on to others, but on encountering and relating to people who are, what the psychotherapist D W Winnicott calls “unyielding centres of power and will”. We grow when we begin to relate to people who cannot simply be controlled by our own projections.

This helps us to understand why learning to lament is so healthy. As we lament and complain to God, we are able to take the initiative with God, instead of simply being the passive prayer. As the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, “where the capacity to initiate lament is absent, one is left only with praise and doxology. God is then omnipotent, always to be praised. The believer can do nothing, and can praise or accept guilt uncritically where life with God does not function properly.”

Of course, faith in God is not simply about psychology, but it seems to me that this analogy is a useful encouragement to be less reticent, less afraid perhaps, in letting God have it in lament and complaint. Rather than diminishing our faith, praying like this will deepen it.

But back to Psalm 130 for a moment. It's a beloved psalm, a prayer of someone with a deep need of God, prayed from a place – out of the depths – where praying is hard and costly. But, in the light of what I've said, this prayer is not really a prayer for forgiveness, as if we needed to be forgiven in order to have relationship with God. We often make our relationship with God dependent on confessing our sin. I don't think it works like that. Rather, we can confess and find forgiveness because of our relationship with God, which we can – by virtue of our baptism – utterly rely upon. This is not a person who prays in order that he can be readmitted into communion with God. This is the prayer of someone already in communion with God, who is therefore able to confess freely and let go of their sin as a result. The person who prays this prayer is free.

Which is why, in the end, this psalm is a psalm of hope. The person who prays this is not grovelling, but expectant. In fact, “waiting” and “hoping” are synonymous here. This person, like a watchman looking for the dawn, can pray with hope, waiting for the light to come, confident of God’s future, because God’s promise is secure. It is worth pondering that this is the gain of being sure of our faith, not that we know all the right doctrine, but that we are confident and able to trust in God’s faithfulness to his relationship with us; God’s covenant promise.
Which brings me back to a phrase in each of the psalms today, as well as the psalm of Palm Sunday and which will also be in the psalm of Easter Morning as well. And that word or phrase is ‘Faithfulness’ or ‘Covenant Loyalty’ or ‘Steafast Love’. All of these are translations of one Hebrew word, ˌhesed. At the heart of the psalmist’s prayer, is a confidence, a basic trust in God’s keeping of his promises. The unbreakable partnership, the covenant, between God and humanity, is what gives us the ability to trust God, to take God at his word, to entrust God with our darkest feelings and thoughts, to keep holding on when God seems utterly absent. Our relationship with God is secure, because God remains faithful. We are free to be our unrestrained selves in relationship with God, to hold nothing of ourselves back, because God is faithful. We can risk serving God in the world, at the risk of seeming foolish or stupid or useless, because God will be faithful. All we need to do is trust.

And ours of course, is the new covenant. The old symbol of God’s faithfulness was the law, given to Israel. But the sign of the second, or new covenant, the New Testament in other words, the sign of God’s unbreakable, everlasting faithfulness to us, his unshakeable commitment of love, is the dying Jesus on the Cross, to whom we will offer our praise in the liturgy that follows in a few moments.