

The back-to-front Psalm
Psalm 27, Luke 13:31-35
21 the February 2016

What are you most afraid of? Spiders? Heights? Death? Flying? Terrorism? Nuclear War? Going to the dentist? Well, apparently, these are among the most common of our fears. But, according to some US statistics, what people most fear is *public speaking* with 56% of those asked, closely followed by the fear of *getting fat* with 46%. On this basis the cruellest thing you can do to someone is to invite them to give a public lecture, which is preceded by a dinner, where the illustrious guest is seated on a platform, because they are speaking in public *and* getting fat at the same time.

Well, Psalm 27 deals with fear but it is a bit of a headache for preachers. In our sermons we like to move from difficulties towards resolutions, from challenges towards affirmation of faith, from a hard text towards the Good News – and perhaps rightly so. Until that is, we come across an unusual Psalm, like ours today, of which even the acknowledged authority on the Psalms, Walter Brueggemann says, ‘it is a difficult Psalm to categorise under any rubric’. He is thinking mainly, of course, in terms of his own categories: does a Psalm express the praise of God for some past act of deliverance, can it be classified as a ‘lament’, in which the person, or the community bring their needs, complaints, anxieties, like Jesus’ words over Jerusalem in our Gospel reading. Is it a royal Psalm used at the enthronement of Israel’s kings? Is it a song of Creation extolling the marvels of nature discovering the generous, reliable, faithful Creator behind it all? Not counting the Royal Psalms, the full range of human emotions surfacing in all of these songs or prayers chime with us quite well and as such they are very suitable for helping us in our Lenten devotions.

The problem is, Psalm 27 does not fit easily in any one of those groups, though it does contain two parts that might be discussed under the praise and lament categories, but they are, in fact, the wrong way round. It’s a kind of ‘back-to-front Psalm’, as I called it in the title of this sermon. Normally, the lament comes first, after which act of pouring his heart out to God, the Psalmist begins to find his way back to the thanksgiving, praising mode and ends up on a high note, just as we like our sermons to do. But not in this

case: this Psalm starts on a high note, from where the only way is down.

The Lord is my light and salvation, whom should I fear?

We hear the great affirmation in verse 1 and it continues in this vein over several verses after which, the trusting, and praising mood changes and suddenly it sounds as if now a completely different person is talking. Fear and doubt is surfacing, God is being accused of hiding, of rejecting and forsaking the Psalmist. What’s going on here? One solution, of course, is that it is actually two different persons’ prayers that have been brought together by some later editors. The first is the one talking in verses 1-6, and the other in verses 7-12. They are not only different in what they are saying, they seem to have two different ‘audiences’. The first one is like someone talking to ‘people out there’, or as one commentator creatively said: it is as though the Psalmist is sitting across an empty chair and talking to it. The second Psalmist addresses God directly.

Hear, Lord, when I call aloud....do not hide your face from me. (27:7, 9)

Well, this might be a tidy solution, it avoids contradictions, it upholds the pious sentiment, ‘you can’t have fear and faith’ together, they are mutually exclusive, for if you have faith, you can’t have anything to fear. But we are in Lent, a time for going deeper in our faith, a time for honesty to face up to reality about ourselves, about the way our lives connect, or not connect with our faith. This leads me to think of this Psalm as a unity, expressing the complex feelings of one person, the feelings we all recognise in ourselves; It maybe a preacher, or any believing person who is willing to talk about their faith and trust in God, to others. If this were the case the first part might be said in a Sunday sermon, or in an answer to a non-believer’s questioning, when the person expressing confidence in God’s abiding presence, fearlessly talking about the privilege of worship. The second part is said by the same person in the quietness of a study, at home on a particularly difficult weekday, when the real test comes, had the speaker actually listened to their own Sunday declarations? When problems of everyday life are piling up, the computer is not obliging, the adrenalin is not flowing, nobody is listening, unruly questions and doubts arise, aches and pains show up, fear creeps in about the future and even God seems to be on sabbatical.

This sounds more like real life, doesn't it, where true faith lives alongside honest doubt and questioning? We can all relate to that. I think this is not only possible, but even essential if we want to take God and ourselves seriously. As the Psalmist in confident, trusting mode testifies to a well-based, strong faith, he tells others where his strength comes from (and presumably urging them to follow his example): it is in the context of regular worship, *'dwelling in the house of the Lord'* that he finds the resource that keeps him going. This is the equivalent of us saying to someone: Come to church with me and you will see why it's important to me. I am particularly taken with his reasoning, which confirms that this way of looking at the Psalm, of holding together faith and fear, trust and doubt may not be totally 'off the wall'. He mentions two crucial things about worship; it is the occasion 'to gaze on the beauty of the Lord' and 'to inquire in his temple' as NRSV has it.

We have to acknowledge that we may have problems with both of those statements about worship. If I am anything to go by, we don't find it easy simply to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, as we would do with a precious piece of art work, for example or a newly born baby, or a breath-taking sunset. Just to be there, being transfixed by the sheer beauty and magnitude of it all! And to be grateful for it. More often than not, we, like the Psalmist in the following verses, come with an agenda, an agenda of wanting to 'hide in the shelter of God', wanting to seek protection, or to use the phrase from one of the 'prayers for the week' on our service sheet: we come "bearing down with prayer and urgency on our desired future". In other words, it is all about us. Although the Psalmist falls in the same trap, yet he understands the immense possibility of worship as being 'lost in wonder and praise'. I believe, it is our common task, as worshipping people to find the time and place within our liturgies, or within our private devotions to forget about ourselves at least for awhile and to let ourselves be enveloped by the absolute goodness, love and wisdom of God, which the Psalmist calls the beauty of the Lord. We may find this kind of worship unrelated to everyday life, but, in fact, it does leave a mark in our souls, it leaves behind an invisible standard, a benchmark that will affect everything we say or do outside 'worshipping hours'.

The second facet of worship, according to our Psalmist calls for a bit more active participation: it is to inquire in God's temple. Worship is the rightful time and place to raise questions, to bring

doubts, to express uncertainties, to seek a deeper knowledge of God. This is not easy either; even the Psalmist keeps it out of sight and only lets it bubble up to the surface when he is on his own. It can be a challenging part of worship, whether we are talking about formal worship or the private, deliberate act of putting ourselves in the presence of God. Honest inquiry supposes openness, a willingness to forego our wishful thinking about the God we want in order to find the true God who is. Jesus' despairing over the Jerusalem Temple may have had something to do with the kind of worship that was offered there. A worship based on an assumed knowledge of God, rather than the offering of open and ready hearts to hear God's word for their day, or even recognise God's Word in Jesus, whom they wanted to silence.

As we now come to the Lord's Table, we give thanks for the contemplative time of Lent, which we so badly need in our busy lives, in this age of pressures and anxiety. A time when we can bring our confident trust as well as our persistent questions or niggling doubts into conversation with Scripture, with church tradition, with the cloud of witnesses surrounding us and with God's Holy Spirit working through it all. The time of Lent offers us the opportunity to slow down and as the Psalmist arrives at the unresolved resolution, we too might be content to 'wait for the Lord... and put our hope in the Lord'.

I love the poetic way this waiting is characterised in the other prayer on our Service sheet by Joyce Rupp:

*"...sit with confusion,
dance with the paradoxes, and sip tea with the angel of life.*

*Smile while you wait, empty basket in hand
all too eager to snatch the produce of your spiritual path.*

May God bless us as we do.