

## Looking at the difficult Psalms (4)

### Psalm 88

Having looked at psalms of lament and loss, and psalms that question God's action – or apparent inaction – we come finally to a psalm that is written from a place of depression and despair, one of the darkest in the psalter.

Welcome to Psalm 88

#### **Read it through.**

What is going on here?

What feelings about his situation does the writer convey?

What does he seem to think about God?

There are parallels here with Psalm 22 – a sense of having become despised by others and the object of their scorn, of having been brought to the lowest point of existence. But whereas the writer of Psalm 22 goes on to ask for help from God who can deliver him, and ends with verses of praise, there is no deliverance in Psalm 88 neither is there praise. Instead we find the theme of death and despair running through its verses.

#### **Look closely at verses 1-9**

Pick out the words that give this sense of grim dereliction and grief.

To what or to whom does the psalmist attribute his trouble?

#### **Look at verses 10-12.**

In these verses the psalmist asks searing, rhetorical questions about an afterlife in which he had no belief. There was nothing like our concept of “heaven” or “hell”, eternal joy or eternal torment for the ancient Israelites. Any references to beings in ‘sheol’, ‘the pit’, ‘the abyss’ or anywhere beyond the grave, were references to forms with, at most, a shadowy kind of semi-existence. “Do the shades rise up to meet you?” in verse v10 is a graphic description of people who are barely there.

Life for the psalmist and his contemporaries was all about the here and now.

How does this sit with our understanding of life?

How does it sit with our belief – either that life stops at death or that it continues ?

Are we conscious of this world ... and the next?

How does our belief that life continues after death or stops when we die affect our life in the here and now?

#### **Look at verse 13**

Verse 13 is the classic ‘I cried to the Lord’, we read so often in scripture, particularly in the psalms. And based on our reading, we might well expect verse 14 to read “and the Lord heard my cry”. But there is no sense here that God has heard these cries.

Instead we have passionate questions and statements – not only about being unheard but about a sense of being completely abandoned by God.

We could describe this as the psalmist's 'dark night of the soul', but when he first coined this phrase, the c16th Spanish mystic, St John of the Cross meant more than today's understanding of a time of real pain and trouble when God seems far away. His 'dark night of the soul' was a time of "nothingness". More than God seeming far away, at a distance from us ... there is *nothing* – at any distance from us.

**Take a moment to reflect on 'nothing'.**

Did you manage to do this?!

**And back to Psalm 88.**

What is the "nothingness" here about?

In what way(s) and why does the psalmist experience this?

We are perhaps familiar with the idea that trying to clear our minds of the everyday stuff that clogs up our thoughts is a good exercise before we pray. It makes sense that the less distraction we have, the more we can focus on God and hear what God is saying.

Could it be that the psalmist's experience here, his sense of being utterly unheard and completely abandoned, is an extension of this process, in which God allows this sense to reach a climax, so that God can fill every part of the writer with His being and blessing?

When there is nothing but emptiness, God has all the space to fill...

The monk and poet Thomas Merton had experienced loneliness, depression and abandonment as a boy at boarding school and as an adult, reflecting on St John of the Cross in his 1968 work, *Where Prayer Flourishes*, he comments that the purpose of the dark night is "*to liberate, purify and enlighten in perfect love*".

And we can see the same idea of God in the abandonment in the poem *East Coker*, the second of T.S. Eliot's four poems that make up *The Four Quartets*. ( Find and read the whole poem if you can. It's a bit more accessible than Merton!) Here is an extract

*O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,  
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,  
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters  
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers.  
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,  
Industrial lords and petty contractors , all go into the dark,*

...

*I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God.  
In order to arrive there ...,  
... You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not...*

This poem - arguably a work of religious poetry – was written during the second World War, when all that was safe and familiar for Eliot had been taken away. England, as other countries, was united against a common enemy, there was uncertainty about the future – who would live ? who would die as a direct or indirect result of what was happening across the world? And what would the future look like? Would life return to the old ‘normal’?

Do these questions resonate with us in 2020?  
Do Eliot’s lines offer comfort?

The poem ends with a note of hope: that the traditions and rituals of (English) life will ultimately outlast the horrors of war.

What part did traditions and rituals play in your life before lockdown?  
(How) have you responded to their loss?  
What of these do you want to see again?  
What do you think we need / we do NOT need to see again?

In the last 4 months, many of life’s ‘props’ – things we consider our right ( to go where we want, to spend time with the people we want and so on) and things that previously supported and softened our days – have either been taken away or shown to be inadequate. For many of us, our relationship with God has changed. What did the writer of Psalm 88 really want? Friends? Spiritual comfort? A sense of security? Peace?

**All these are good things** ! And God blesses us with them. ... Yet God wanted to give **more** to the psalmist as God wants to give more to each of us.

So how empty are we?  
How much space do we have to be filled with God?

\*\*\*\*\*

This is indeed a difficult and ‘dark’ psalm, but I think that although it lacks hope, it shouts ‘faith’ and offers us comfort.

We might leave the psalmist still crying out to God and still asking questions but only a person with faith – that there is someone who can hear and answer – will keep shouting. And where there is faith, hope follows.

We also remember that this was almost certainly NOT the psalmist's last word to God. The writer of this psalm undoubtedly wrote others, lighter in mood and tone. Reading the entire Book of Psalms we join close to the full range of human circumstances and emotions and learn that however dark life might be, however empty we are, God does not abandon us forever. We will praise God again.

**Read Psalm 150**

**Thank God for your faith – whether it's strong enough to move mountains or barely there.**

**If your faith is strong, pray for those whose faith is weak.**

**If you are going through a 'dark night' ask God to fill your emptiness.**

**Pray that all God's children will be liberated, purified and enlightened by God's perfect love – Filled with God.**