

I've spent a lot of time with the Psalms. Even before my fascination with the Hebrew language, the Psalms drew me in. "The Lord is my shepherd" - which I knew as a choral piece long before I knew it was Scripture (Thanks to Diane O'Dell). "I lift my eyes to the hills... - the magnificent poetry of Ps 121 - the joyful declaration of Psalm 100 "Make a joyful noise...ALL the earth..." The Psalms have a way - like other bits of great literature - of finding a place in ordinary speech. Because the Psalms, for all they are liturgical - and musical - and poems pointing to God - are also surprisingly...ordinary.

The imagery is present, and urgent, and very relatable. The language, even in translation, conveys the real emotions of real people. This is important to remember as 21st century followers of Jesus, because the passage of time has permitted us to do some strange things to these ancient texts.

One of the reasons I think that Scripture endures is because it reflects real people's responses to divine reality. I'm not talking about a literal seven day creation here, I'm talking about how we react to and reflect on (and how ancient people reacted) the magnificent mysteries of creation, and how we collectively give shape and meaning and LIFE to the power behind those mysteries.

Time (and our own fear) has unfortunately turned those mystic, curious reflections into unassailable points of dogma. We have, over and over again required first century (and earlier) contexts define (and limit) our own experiences of God. That's why I keep going back to the Psalms - because while they certainly had a place of their own, and a context that we don't fully understand - the sentiments expressed seem to be ageless. And Psalm 139 is my all time favourite example of this - and my favourite place to seek comfort in Scripture. Let me tell you why.

My first significant encounter with this Psalm was at my grandfather's funeral. It would be charitable to say that his was a life lived on the fringes of the church, but the local Anglican rector and my grandfather had known one another for a long time, and it was he who showed me - in his sermon that day - how Scripture might cast a wider net into the sea of doubt that we swim in. I began to listen more closely to the way Scripture was being used - I listened more closely to scripture - read it more carefully - and the honest urgency of Psalm 139 has stayed with me ever since.

This Psalm was written by someone who wanted desperately to believe that there might be something like reason and order, not just in the universe, but in their own life, and in the circles they inhabited.

The insistence that God had not only created the Psalmist, but was in constant, relentless pursuit of this individual occupies the bulk of this poem, and that reassuring picture of a kind, creating, compassionate God is all we usually get to hear when this text is read in worship. And if I had stopped at the end of verse 18 (the traditional stopping place when this Psalm comes up in the lectionary or at a funeral) you would be ready to hear me say things about how wonderful God is and how well ordered the universe is (despite all evidence to the contrary...)

But the thing that makes this poem my favourite is the gritty bits...

At the end of so much praise - so much comfort - the poet reveals the disturbing heart of the matter:

“O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from ME-“

Even the most faithful - the most loving - the most tender-hearted among us can admit (however reluctantly) that we have harboured thoughts like this. The poet speaks our language (even in translation) and we don't need to understand their context to have these words resonate within us:

“Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord...

I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.”

This is serious, visceral stuff - a long way from “I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

But what does it mean, you may well ask...? Why should the emotional back and forth of an ancient Hebrew religious poet make any difference at all?

Have you not felt that twisting knot within you lately? The competing urge between praise and profanity...well, it's not an accident that Jesus quotes a Psalm from the cross.

One could argue that this Psalm is a complaint against God's constant surveillance; the whining of someone who would prefer that God concentrate on the 'bloodthirsty.' But what I find here is the frustration of one who believes in the order and certainty of a universe ruled by One who 'searches and knows' all things even though the world they inhabit shows no evidence of that order and certainty.

The Psalms remind me - remind us - that frustration and faith are common (perhaps even constant) companions. To believe in the saving power of God - to profess new life and new hope in the name of Jesus, the risen One, to claim unequivocally the joy of God's ancient promise in the world we inhabit is a very challenging thing. For whom, in this muddled mess, does God care for? If Jesus died for all - if forgiveness is available and grace is free, and God is really interested in the redemption of creation, where are the signs? “O that you would kill the wicked, O God...” so that the faithful could live without worry or injury. “..that the bloodthirsty would depart from... US” - the good, the true, the willing believers - that all would live according to what makes sense to us.

Fearfully and wonderfully made

Wouldn't life be better then?

Wouldn't faith be easier then?

What are you asking of us God?

That is all the Psalmist wants to know. Confident to let faith and frustration mingle together, these ancient words offer us a pattern of thought and action that is essential today. To hold to our faith does not mean we must (or should) ignore our frustrations. God is big enough to receive our joy and our jagged anxiety. Jesus death and resurrection encompass certainty and doubt.

Our ancient ancestors of the faith - those who unwittingly gave us what we call Scripture - did not imagine they were writing bits of holy crystal, fit only for special occasions. Theirs are the words that are meant to help us navigate the magnificent misery of life in God's service - life in the midst of death - faith in the centre of indifference.

You are welcome to reach your own conclusions. For me, the best tonic in a world gone mad is a faith that allows frustration. When hope admits uncertainty - when we can be honest with ourselves about our feelings, and consider that God's grace and God's love are not limited to a narrow range of (so-called) acceptable expressions of those feelings - maybe then there's a chance we might all be healed.