

Monday of Holy Week

Psalm 91 - Trampling the serpent

- 1 Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
and abides under the shadow of the Almighty,
- 2 Shall say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my stronghold,
my God, in whom I put my trust.'
- 3 For he shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence.
- 4 He shall cover you with his wings
and you shall be safe under his feathers;
his faithfulness shall be your shield and buckler.
- 5 You shall not be afraid of any terror by night,
nor of the arrow that flies by day;
- 6 Of the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor of the sickness that destroys at noonday.
- 7 Though a thousand fall at your side
and ten thousand at your right hand,
yet it shall not come near you.
- 8 Your eyes have only to behold
to see the reward of the wicked.
- 9 Because you have made the Lord your refuge
and the Most High your stronghold,
- 10 There shall no evil happen to you,
neither shall any plague come near your tent.
- 11 For he shall give his angels charge over you,
to keep you in all your ways.
- 12 They shall bear you in their hands,
lest you dash your foot against a stone.
- 13 You shall tread upon the lion and adder;
the young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot.
- 14 Because they have set their love upon me,
therefore will I deliver them;
I will lift them up, because they know my name.
- 15 They will call upon me and I will answer them;
I am with them in trouble,
I will deliver them and bring them to honour.
- 16 With long life will I satisfy them and show them my
salvation.

Reflection

Psalm 91 is one of the most demanding poems of the psalter. It speaks of a rare degree of trust. Most of the Psalms are messier than this one. And with its references to pestilence, terror and plague, as well as treading upon lions and snakes, it is not easy to interpret.

Christians may well associate it with Jesus because it speaks of complete trust. He refers to it when he sends out the seventy on their mission (Luke 10.19), and it appears in the account of his temptations when the devil tries to use its promise of unwavering protection to trap him (Matthew 4.6).

Because of this promise, there is a long history of how it has been used down the centuries in very different circumstances. In the sixth century, St Benedict incorporated it into his construction of Night Prayer to pray for God's protection before sleep, and so it is recited in monasteries and religious houses across the world on a nightly basis. In the mediaeval period when Europe was periodically ravaged by plague, the Psalm was often used as a prayer against the sickness that could strike at any time. Because of its reference to 'thousands' falling, it has been widely used in military conflict. During the Crusades the Church 'developed a liturgy of blessing for those setting out for the Holy Land which included Psalm 91'. In the modern period, notably in World War One, soldiers prayed this Psalm for protection before battle.

In all kinds of ways and in very diverse cultural contexts, this Psalm has been used and applied as people have sought protection in the midst of all life's perils and threats.

How can it speak today, and how may we respond to the difficult questions it raises?

First, let us simply try to understand its plain meaning. Note how total is the trust of which it speaks. So many of the Psalms are written from the frayed edges of faith which is where most of us are. They teem with doubts and questions and mirror our confusions. This one is different. The first two verses set the tone. They speak of a relationship of trust in which words are given to say that keep the believer within that relationship. 'Whoever dwells in the shelter... and abides under the shadow... shall say, "My refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I put my trust".'

If this perspective becomes yours, this Psalm appears to insist, you will be protected from every kind of evil. From snares and pestilence, from the 'terror' by night and the 'arrow' by day, from 'the pestilence that stalks in darkness', and 'the sickness that destroys at noonday'. These will have no power over you. '*Because you have made the Lord your refuge ... there shall no evil happen to you, neither shall any plague come near your tent.*' And this deliverance from evil will not be merely passive, says the psalmist, bringing his list of verses 3-13 to a conclusion, you will actively overcome it, treading on 'the lion and 'the serpent', trampling them underfoot.

Full of evocative imagery, its promise seems unequivocal. It is not difficult to see why, down the centuries, it has proved so popular. How can we make sense of this? This Psalm raises all the difficult questions about God and evil.

How particularly can we understand it when we have known good people whose lives have been cut short by disease or died suddenly and tragically in accidents? I remember as a young chaplain at a children's hospital being confronted by a young mother whose child had died. No doubt she had prayed fervently, perhaps she had even read this Psalm. I remember her screaming at me, 'Why did God let this happen?' It is a not uncommon question in the face of such personal tragedy. How many soldiers in World War One who believed in this Psalm - 'righteous' men who prayed it before battles - were cut down within moments of going over the top? How many people in West Africa, where Christian faith is strong, prayed this Psalm in 2014-15 even as they died of Ebola or watched others die? Today we hear many of the refugees crossing the Mediterranean in the flimsiest of boats proclaiming as they land on European soil that God has protected them. How many who drowned might also have said the same? As, in this second decade of the twenty-first century we remember, in a succession of anniversaries, the horrors of the wars of the twentieth century, we may wonder what help this Psalm can give.

How, above all, can we make sense of it after Auschwitz?

These are difficult questions and there are no easy answers. But there is the testimony of lives lived faithfully with the Psalms, including with this one.

Perhaps the most powerful words that Etty Hillesum ever wrote, just days before she went to the transit camp from which all the Dutch Jews were sent to their deaths, concerns this question of trust in God in the face of a truly 'deadly pestilence'.

She comes to realize that the God who in the Psalms promises protection, cannot help them. It is a startling and disturbing insight. But she has seen too much to believe anymore that he can. She has watched too many vulnerable mothers in despair, witnessed too many men being humiliated and broken, heard too many desperate cries for help, seen too many people rounded up and imprisoned, and heard too many stories of what is happening to her fellow Jews in concentration camps - to any longer believe that he can.

But even as she gives up any idea of being helped, she does not give up on God. He remains utterly central to her in her predicament, and so she arrives at a deep paradox of faith. Through, as she puts it, 'defending his dwelling place inside us to the last', she comes to believe that they will be delivered from the terror. For it will no longer have power over them. That was manifestly true in her own life.

Early on the morning of Sunday 12 July 1942, this young woman prays:

Dear God, these are anxious times. Tonight . . . I lay in the dark with burning eyes as scene after scene of human suffering passed before me.... I shall try to help You, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves... Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last. There are, it is true, some who, even at this late stage, are putting their vacuum cleaners and silver forks and spoons in safekeeping instead of guarding You, dear God. And there are those who want to put their bodies in safekeeping but who

are nothing more now than a shelter for a thousand fears and bitter feelings. And they say, 'I shan't let them get me into their clutches.' But they forget that no one is in their clutches who is in Your arms.

It is an extraordinary testimony forged in the crucible of the Holocaust. Through it an entirely different way of comprehending this Psalm is given to us. This young woman lost her life but she was 'delivered'. She triumphed. Through her trust 'to the last' in the indwelling reality of God, she became a radiant presence in the hell of that camp, a person who in a place of death cared for others, particularly the most vulnerable, and so bore witness to life. She trampled the serpent underfoot.

The last sight that we have of her is on 7 September 1943 when she climbed into a cattle truck with 70 others before it was boarded up for its three-day journey to Auschwitz. Before the train left the Netherlands, she threw a postcard through a crack in the boards which was picked up by some farmers and sent on to her friend Christine, to whom she had addressed it. In it she said goodbye, and told her friend how, together with her mother and father and brother, they had 'left the camp singing'. The card begins: 'Christine, opening the bible at random, I find this: "The Lord is my high tower".' It is from the beginning of Psalm 18.

Take the words of verse 2 as your prayer for this day:

My refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I trust.