

Notes on Psalm 88 'A Problem Psalm'

This week we had the joy of hosting 'The Great Dronfield Get 2gether'. This was an opportunity for people in our town to connect with service providers who may be able to help them in their lives. For me it was an opportunity to network with different groups as well as chat to people. I had two great conversations with two people who I had not seen for ages and whose lives had been turned upside down by covid and subsequent health issues. This week our news continues to be marked by the conflicts in the Ukraine and Gaza and how the lives of ordinary people have been overshadowed by war. For these two people and these countries the title of Psalm 88, which in my Bible is 'A Cry of Desperation', is just so very appropriate. This week we move from the sunshine of God's love, into the shadowlands of sorrow, where we find this love to be tried and tested and battered and bruised. Yet, in this Psalm we see a demonstration of faith and trust which echoes what Job says in chapter 13 verse 15, 'though he slay me yet will I trust in him.' We are exploring the next set of Psalms, called Psalms of Disorientation, and the common thread which runs through all of them is the question "What does a faith, a people, a life, a hope look like when God seems hidden and far away?"

I love 1920's blues and jazz, such as the Duke Ellington's song 'Mood Indigo', because of their gritty reality and sadness which remind me that our faith must always be one which acknowledges this to be part of life. Psalm 88 is the most bluesy of Psalms, and for me its power and value in our lives is because here is someone who understands and knows life, as we do, but who does not offer us trite answers but dares to remind us that faith needs to include legitimate complaint. What I mean by this is that there are times when we are to cry out to God asking him if he is faithful to us? If he is true to his promises? If he is our rock? If he is good? Because in life it seems, at times, as if this is not true which is why Habakkuk is so right when he says that 'the just shall live by faith', in chapter 2 verse 4, as this is sometimes all that we have.

We first remind ourselves that the 'normal Christian life' is a life which reflects all that we looked at when we looked the Psalms of Orientation. An orientated life is a life which is filled with contentment, security and blessings and this is our normal life. Yet, we need to understand that the 'normal Christian life' is also a life which includes 'Messianic Woes', as described in Colossians 1 verse 24, as well as the disturbing pairings in Ecclesiastes 3 verses 1 – 8 which rightly unsettle us as we would prefer a life which is an either/or sort of life, not a life which presumes both/and. This very bluesy Psalm knows, affirms and celebrates the 'Orientated

God', as in verse 1, and the rest of the Psalm is built upon the known and experienced promises of God that he does listen and that he will listen.

When life is grim the Psalmist cries out to God three times; in verses 1, 9 and 13. When we are disorientated the first thing we are to do is to cry out to God. It is not to ignore him, reject him, refuse him, it is to address him in this heart broken and heartfelt way. The Psalmist knows that this is the right and proper way to speak to God and the reasons he gives us feel very bluesy. He speaks of trouble and the threat of Sheol in verses 3 and 11. He speaks of the experience of God's wrath lying heavy on him in verses 7 and 16. He speaks of his social isolation as God has made repulsive to those who know him in verse 8. He speaks of himself being worn out by tears, by rejection and by suffering in verses 9, 14 and 15 and he speaks to God in such a way because he is looking for God to be just and to respond to him. If such bluntness disturbs you let Jesus remind you, in the parable of the unjust judge in Luke 18 verses 1 – 8, that God can be compared to this unjust judge, and when we pray, we are to be like the widow who never gives him a break. I think whoever wrote Psalm 88 would have approved of such a mindset!!

One of the reasons why I am so involved with Dronfield 2Gether is because it flags up the question of mental health regularly and we need to do the same too. We need to recognise the reality of such disorientation within our lives and the importance of speaking to those who'll listen. This is one of the reasons why 'Doing Life Together' is so important. When we do life together, we know that we will spend time with people who will listen, love, not judge, be patient, kind, gentle and be faithful to us. We know that in such people we will find a refuge and a strength as they bring Jesus into our lives as well as the challenge of being such a refuge and a strength to others too.

Doing Life Together calls us to let God to be God in our lives. When we are disorientated, we are to remember that our God is not a tame God, as the saying goes and the writer to the Hebrews is right when he says that it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of God. But there is nowhere else I would prefer to be even when it both looks and feels unresolved like here in Psalm 88, because I know that when I am disorientated all I can dare to believe is that he loves me and may we all dare to do the same.