

Songs from the heart: Psalm 22

Loving God, as I draw near to you, draw near to me. As I seek your face, speak to me. As I confess my faults and failings, cleanse me through the saving love of Christ. As I am reminded of all you have done for me, challenge me to make my response. As I recognise my lack of vision and courage, inspire me through your Holy Spirit.

I rejoice in the quiet security of God's powerful arms and praise him in the words of Psalm 145:1-3, 8f.

- ¹ I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
- ² Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.
- ³ Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.
- ⁸ The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- ⁹ The LORD is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

Praise and lament go hand in hand in the Book of Psalms. Indeed, it would seem that there can be no genuine, heart-felt praise without an honest recognition that life is not all a bed of roses. Psalm 22 is one of a number of songs from the heart that looks into the dark side of life. It is well known as the Psalm quoted by Jesus from the cross. Its opening words are a cry from the heart.

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
- ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

God-forsakenness is a terrible feeling. To feel totally alone, facing overwhelming odds. Yet even in the depths of such feeling the Psalmist still prays. There is nowhere else to go, for only in God do we find life. When Jesus uses these words as he faces death and feelings of God-forsakenness, he joins the multitudinous company of the afflicted and becomes one with them in their suffering. In praying as they do, he expounds his total identification with them. He gives all his followers who are afflicted permission and encouragement to pray for help. He shows that faith includes holding the worst of life up to God. "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear" (Hebrews 5:7).¹

¹ Mays, J.L., 1994. *Psalms*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

Today, many will feel alone. Even the promise of the gradual lifting of the Coronavirus lockdown will not alleviate the pain, loss and confusion of recent days. But alongside these songs of lament, there is a promise:

... His anger is but for a moment;
his favour is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5)

So, we pray for those who, including ourselves, suffer in many ways at this time, asking that God will reveal himself in grace, mercy and compassion.

Loving Jesus, enfold in your compassion, those who are suffering in body, mind and soul. Lay your healing hand upon the wounds of their soul, that inner peace may be their portion. Revive their failing strength and let life conquer death in their suffering bodies, that, rejoicing in your mercy, they may serve you with grateful hearts all their days upon earth.²

Pause and pray

Some commentators tell us that the next song, Psalm 23, is to be paired with this Psalm. The shift in focus begun in Psalm 22 continues to move from God-forsakenness to quiet trust. We see this in Jesus who later prays, “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” And we hear it in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 2:4–9.

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

*As I go from here, may God go with me. May he shine a light on my path, and lead me into a deeper friendship with himself, so that I might better know his heart, and feel my own being renewed.
Amen.*

² Traditional Anglican prayer.