

From despair to hope

A sermon preached by Revd Tim Bravington at All Saints' Church, Wytham on 10th August, 2014 (the 8th Sunday after Trinity).

Readings: Psalm 88; 1 Kings 19: 9 – 18; Matthew 14: 22 - 38

Every year I go to see the doctor for my annual check-up. One of the questions I am asked is, 'Are you feeling depressed?' Had I been asked that a few weeks ago I would have said 'Yes'. It was bad enough when the Malaysian aircraft disappeared. Then the appalling reports of conflict in Syria were eclipsed by the Israeli/Gaza ones. MH17 was apparently shot down. Then we saw the convoys of hearses. As well as all the other ongoing horrors, it's all too much.

The doctor asks me 'are you depressed?' because I had a quadruple bypass operation in 1998. Before any of us realised there was anything wrong I had dreams in which I was playing football, but I couldn't run across the flat playing field to reach the ball. As I read the Psalms I got stuck on 'why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul, and why are you so disquieted within me?' in Psalms 42 and 43. The next bit, 'put your trust in God for I will yet give him thanks, who is the help of my countenance, and my God', seemed to go straight over my head. The Psalms are full of emotional highs and lows. David, or whoever wrote Psalm 88, must have been pretty well down in the dumps when he wrote it. Perhaps each one of us felt depressed after reading it this morning. I'll come back to the Psalms again later.

Elijah was also feeling pretty low when he ran off to the mountains. It was there that he heard God asking him, 'What are you doing here?' Elijah reels off all the wonderful things he has been doing for God. I'm not sure God was all that impressed. However, things started to happen: there was a strong wind – but God was not in the wind; there was an earthquake – but God was not in the earthquake; there was fire – but God was not in the fire; there was a still small voice, 'a sound of sheer silence' in a recent translation and beautifully rendered in Afrikaans, 'die gesuis van 'n sagte stilte'. Listen.... Can you hear the silence? Remember the third last bar of the Halleluiahs Chorus? There a two beat rest – silence – before the final Halleluiahs. Sometimes God comes to us in the quietest way.

To get back to the Psalms: one way of reading them is to consider that Jesus is reciting them. Some people think he might have been doing this on the cross. When he came to Psalm 22 he called out its first line, 'My God, my God, look upon me, why have you forsaken me?' How much more depressed could anyone be? If he got as far as Psalm 88 he might have found this verse appropriate: 'my soul is full of trouble: and my life draweth nigh unto hell. I am counted as one of them that go down into the pit: and I have been even as a man that hath no strength'.

When we feel depressed, one thing which might be helpful is to look for Jesus in the depression. We might hear him saying, 'Yes. I know. I felt like that too'. When we feel down in the dumps it does no harm to realise that Jesus is with us in the dumps. Not even depression can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. In the storm, Jesus says to Peter, 'Come'. And when the sinking feeling - *sorry* - overcomes Peter it is Jesus who reaches out to save him, brings him to the safety of the boat and calms the storm.

Elijah goes from the despair of hiding himself to hearing the voice of God in the still small voice and being told what to do next. The Psalmist calls out in despair like Jesus did on the cross. Peter cries out and is saved. The same Jesus who cried out on the cross, who died on the cross, on the third day rose again, is alive, is with us. Suddenly the pattern is from despair to hope. The low of depression leads to joy and hope. Jesus is risen.

Also we are raised up out of the dumps for a purpose. It is not only to have our faith renewed. Like Elijah, we are expected to do something. In his case he was sent to anoint Hazael king over Aram and Jehu king over Israel. Peter was commissioned to lead the Apostles and the early church.

What is God's purpose for each one of us? I find it useful to pray, 'what do you want me to do?' It might be to bring your rich friends and your hungry grandchildren to the cream tea this afternoon. It probably isn't to go and anoint someone king. It isn't, for most of us, to lead the local church - we can leave that to Mark, David and Kathy - but we can thank them, support them, encourage them, pray for them. We can pray for peace to come, between Israel and Palestine for example. We can learn more from people who are living there which is why I have given two suggestions on the bookmarks. Pray without ceasing that peace will prevail wherever there is conflict. Do what we can to learn what is really going on. Support peacemakers, by telling them we agree with them, if we can, or perhaps giving a donation to their cause. What is certain is that there is something each of us can do.

In the Psalter in Common Worship there is a prayer at the end of each Psalm. At the end of Psalm 88 it is this: "In the depths of our isolation we cry to you, Lord God; give light in our darkness and bring us out of the prison of our despair; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever."

We could add: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?'

And now to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be glory for ever. Amen.