

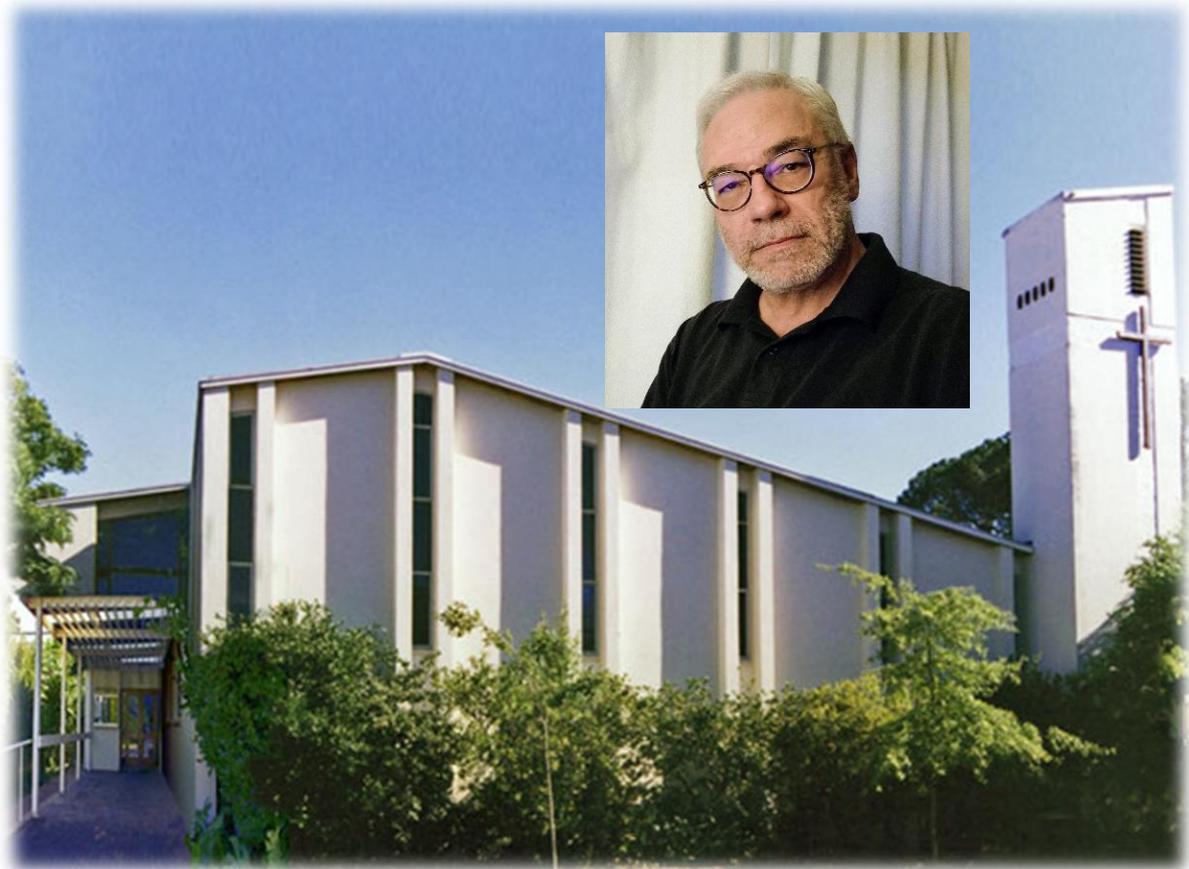
Week of Prayer 2022

Praying the Psalms for dear Life

Foreword

CLF requested Pastor Felix Meylahn from the Friedenskirche Stellenbosch/Somerset West to write the Week of Prayer series. The ecumenical ties between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Southern Africa and the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches are growing; we are therefore grateful that Pastor Felix was willing to write this series. He wrote an excellent and very original Week of Prayer series, inviting us to prayerfully read, no, actually to *breathe* the Psalms – especially in this time of *breathlessness*.

Eddie Orsmond and Gideon van der Watt (editors)



Pastor Felix Meylahn and the Friedenskirche in Stellenbosch

Introduction

Are you holding on for dear life? Let me encourage you to do this by praying the Psalms for *dear Life*. That's what they are there for. Here is some background as to why I think the Psalms are a way to hold on for dear Life.

The author Aoife Abbey, an intensive care doctor in the UK, has written a fascinating book, called: *Seven Signs of Life. Stories from an Intensive Care Doctor*. And the “signs of life” that she then writes about are not the ones one would expect a doctor to be looking for in a patient, like breathing, heartbeat or pulse, but the core emotions of life:

Fear, Grief, Joy, Distraction, Anger, Disgust and Hope.

She says, we all have these emotions at some or other time in our lives, but as a doctor one very often has nearly all of these in a day or less. And she devotes a chapter on each of them with stories from the hospital – very moving, sometimes funny, but always honestly describing experiences that she has had to cope with in her work. Writing them down and finding the words to give raw expression to her experiences and reflect on them helped her to keep going, she writes. As I was reading this book, a thought kept coming up in the back of my mind. These stories describing the various, very human emotions and how they are experienced and expressed, are in a different way doing what the Psalms have been doing for those who pray them for centuries. Giving words to experiences, verbalising emotions, trauma, ***fears, grief, anger, disgust, joy, distraction and hope***. In the Book of Psalms, we have a treasure trove of resources, a medicine bag full of “cures” for all that ails and delights us. An old Chasidic proverb puts it very well: “Verlasst euch nicht auf Wunder, sondern rezitiert Psalmen.” *Don't put your trust in miracles, but recite the Psalms*. And it is meant literally, prayed Psalms are life-changers and life-savers.

Basic information about the Book of Psalms and some thoughts on our situation today

1. Breath

(1) The Psalms are prayers composed in such a way that they can be prayed together or alone – always linked to the rhythm of our breathing.

A reminder that we are “living souls” because God created humans from clay and then breathed God’s breath (the Spirit) into us – so whenever we are out of breath – we can pray the Psalms as a way of re-entering the breathing rhythm of God, of being resuscitated by the power of the Spirit. Prayer is allowing God’s *Ruach* (wind/spirit/breath) to pump up our “papwiel” existence.

(2) And your situation? I find myself literally out of breath – because life in this time is lived under constant pressure and it often feels like my lungs are under constraint – the breath is being squeezed out of me and I struggle to breathe in again. I experience people around me to be out of breath too. When my wife and I had Covid it was literally that desperate feeling you have when someone close to you is struggling to breathe – coughing and wheezing through the night. In many pastoral conversations, I have a similar experience of feeling with others the shortness of breath, the gasping for air, the desperation of life being pressed right out of you.

(3) The Psalms are composed in such a way that the phrases (in Hebrew) are always just the right length to be said with or in one breath (no translation can really have the same effect). Then there’s a pause to draw breath before the next phrase is prayed. The idea is always that the breathing out that happens while you are saying the words takes slightly



longer than the breathing in during the pause – this is exactly what people are taught to do when they are struggling with asthma or with anxiety attacks that cause you to hyperventilate. Breathe out as long as you can – getting rid of the used up air inside your lungs, the air that no longer has oxygen in it, and then breathe in – as calmly as you can under the circumstances – not heaving, rushing or gasping, just enough to start the next phrase, just let the oxygen-filled air flow into you without straining – because in content the next phrase is often a reply to or a restatement of the previous one to let it sink in or find more space within our souls.

(4) We know that in the corporate worship of the Temple, these Psalms were prayed responsively (we still do it in our liturgy sometimes) – and here there is an added element of breathing assistance – because as the other group says a phrase, we have a chance to breathe in the Word of God

they are saying to us and then we have enough breath to tell them, to proclaim to them what they need to hear from God.

2. Life situations

Walter Brueggemann, who has written extensively about the Psalms and their interpretation, suggests that we regularly find ourselves in one of three places:

- (1) a place of **orientation**, in which everything makes sense in our lives;
- (2) a place of **disorientation**, in which we feel we have sunk into the pit; and
- (3) a place of **new orientation**, in which we realize that God has lifted us out of the pit and we are in a new place full of gratitude and awareness about our lives and our God.

These are not just three categories into which we can neatly place the various Psalms, they actually describe the three phases or conditions through which our lives often pass – stages of how we experience our present reality. Often it is a recurring cycle or sometimes even a wild ride back and forth between the various ways we experience reality. The one moment I feel quite certain and content about life and find myself trusting that God is here, in charge and all is well (the words from Psalms of orientation help me to express joyfully, that God is good to me) – and then the very next moment something happens, inside or outside of me, which throws me into complete disarray – all vitality drains out of me, I cannot see anything that gives me hope or trust and I admit (hopefully I have the courage to admit) that I have lost the orientation I thought I had (the Psalms of lament and mourning, of disorientation give me words to verbalise this situation) – and then again, often through those very words of lament, of screaming and shouting at God in despair, I am brought to a state of resuscitation, a kind of mouth to mouth breathing assistance by the word of God in the Psalms of reorientation. So, rather than putting the various Psalms neatly into these different categories, let us practice awareness, let us allow the Psalms to reach out to us in these different stages of our struggling lives to do the work that God's Word always wants to do: Engender **faith** in us, cultivate **hope** in us, nourish and strengthen the new **life** in us, that God's Word, Jesus Christ, has come to give.

Looked at from an experiential perspective the dynamics between these three categories can also be seen as **two movements** – *one* from *orientation to disorientation* and then the *second* from or rather out of *disorientation to reorientation*. This is very close to what Martin Luther

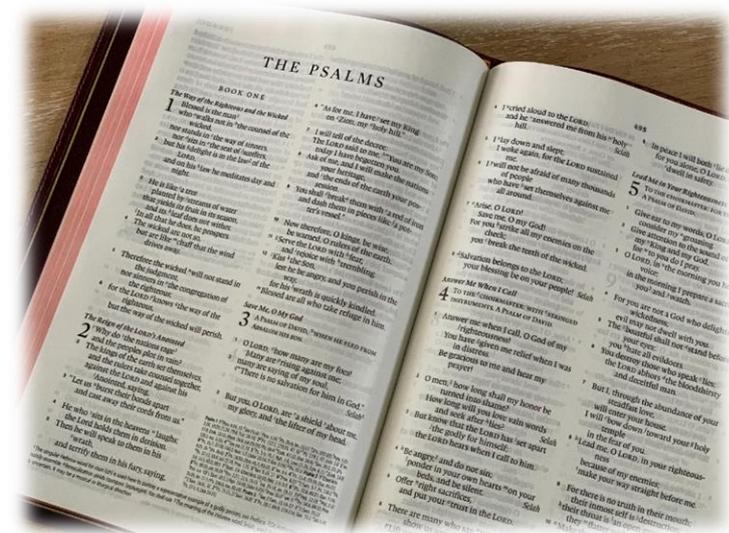
meant when he interpreted the work or function of the Word of God as a dynamic, or even a dialectic tension between Law and Promise (Gospel). Law here not only indicating the texts in the Bible that can be formally recognised as commandments or expectations (see e.g., Psalm 119), although these are included as well, but rather words that hold a mirror before us, that show us that we are in trouble, that we are close to death, that the “wages of sin” are weighing heavily upon our souls, that our separation from God, our desperate attempts at “going it alone” to earn our salvation have landed us in deep despair.

And once we find ourselves there, deeply disoriented and hopeless, crying out to God with the words provided in the Psalms of disorientation, these words themselves are the ones that re-centre our eyes on what God has wrought for our salvation – we discover those things, those “marvellous Acts of the Almighty” that resuscitate and enliven our trust that “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46).

This double movement is also reminiscent of what the Apostle Paul tells us happens in Baptism – we are crucified with Christ and raised with Him. (Romans 5 and 6) Luther spoke of the Old Adam having to be drowned and then a “new creation” crawls out of Baptism. It is the Theology of the Cross, which is not a static faith in certain truths but a lived experience of having the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus. Described in the Christ-Hymn that Paul quotes from the liturgy of the divine services of the first Christian communities (Philippians 2: 5-11).

The psalms are human words addressed to God and yet they are God’s Word to us – the creative Word that recreates broken people, lost people, guilty people, doubting people into trusting people – in my mind’s eye, in

my imagination I can already see these people, and I have seen them in our congregations, people that know, in spite of all the trouble they are in, that they belong to God, that they can trust God. People that get involved in congregational and communal life for reasons far beyond their own interests. They have moved away from the old and



wide-spread belief in blind fate and dumb chance, the idols and powers of markets and stock-exchanges – they no longer believe that this world, filled with methods of brutal exploitation, humiliation and pain, is the only possible world – they no longer believe that there is anything in this old world that is unavoidable, like child mortality, aids, the bitter injustice of poverty and linked to that the terrible tragedy of systemic violence that spawns domestic and gender based violence. They have been recreated and reoriented towards a new world that is in the making, called the Kingdom of God (promised by God) and bit by little bit they plough the fields and plant and tend the seeds of this new world in which the Shalom (peace) of God will reign at last. I see them here and there and I believe my eyes – as my ears hear them praying the Psalms that do the creative, reorienting work in them.

But enough of trying to explain how praying the Psalms can take us from despair to **hope**, from mistrust to **faith** and from death to **life**. Let us allow the Psalms to do this to us – because explaining the Psalms is probably as effective and useful as talking about a meal prepared by a Three Star Michelin Chef. To really appreciate the cooking, you need to eat the meal – to really know in your heart and your body, what the Psalms can do for you, you need to pray them.

In the following five devotions I would like to lead you prayerfully through some of the Psalms to discover with you how to pray them for dear Life. I encourage you to hold on, it will not be an easy ride, but it will take you into a place where you can experience the loving care of God.

Psalm 13

How long will you forget me? (Verse 1)

Let us pray this Psalm first. Allow the words to become linked to our breathing, one phrase at a time, and as we breathe in again, let the words settle in our heart before we recite the next phrase. It is important to do this with our voice, not just in our head; our body needs to get involved in holding on to these words for dear life.

¹ How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I bear pain in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³ Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

⁴ and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵ But I trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing to the Lord,

because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Interpretation

“How long” is not a neutral question about time, but an irritated and audaciously nagging question about “how much longer will this take”. Four times this agonising question is hurled into God’s ears – How long? How long? How long? How long? We’re not asking God for a time table or information about the “time frame” of history, we’re pleading with God to immediately put an end to this traumatic time of feeling forgotten, feeling that God’s face is hiding from me as I bear pain in my soul and sorrow in my heart all day long. “God, put an end to this time in which my enemies are exalted over me!”

“Enemies” / “Foes”?

In the days of the first prayers of this Psalm there were “real” enemies, with violent intent and means. Tribal conflict and warfare were a constant reality for the people of that time. The survival of the clan was at stake and the resources for life were limited. Tribes had to contend with each other



for water and grazing for their herds. Communities that had settled down in a place that had fertile soil and enough water to plant crops were often attacked by marauding nomads, who were desperate for some food.

Although we do sometimes still have “real” enemies, this situation of having to contend with other groups violently for survival is no longer a daily experience for most of us. Let us remember, however, that there are still many people on our planet, people for whom violence and the struggle to survive in harsh circumstances is a bitter reality they face every day. Perhaps for our situation we can “repray” these words in view of other kinds of “foes”. There are the foes within: thoughts and feelings that are for instance afflicting us and driving us to despair. In our world today, depression and anxiety are afflicting more and more people. And there are external enemies of a different kind too. Economic hardship, for example, or the fear of losing our work and the desperate situation of being unemployed. Those of us who are secure in their workplace can hardly grasp what it means both physically and emotionally to not have work – especially in a culture that so blatantly defines who we are in terms of what we do for a living and what we can acquire with the money we earn.

So, we have ample occasion for crying this question out to God: How long? Practice saying these words out loud – and as you say them, perhaps even shouting them out to God, allow the questions to touch those places in your life where you are in pain or anxious for God to do something to save you.

¹ How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I bear pain in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Putting our heart and soul (including our bodies by praying out loud) into these questions, nagging God for an effective answering of our prayers, we find ourselves being prayed into an attitude of expectancy – “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!” The prayer expects God to answer, and indeed to answer with practical salvation – “Give light to my eyes” – in other words, let me see the truth of what is going on, let me see where I need to go, and what I need to do. And even more important, let me see that you, o Lord, are doing something to change the situation that is driving me to death. Arguing with God audaciously as I pray this Psalm, I insist that God surely wouldn’t want the enemies to triumph, to prevail, to rejoice because they have shaken me!

If there is one thing the modern Christian needs to learn from the Psalms it is this boldness in our relationship with God – for far too long we have cowered humbly before the almighty God not daring to raise our voices in protest when things are obviously not going according to the promises of God. The Psalms are full of exactly that kind of praying, audacious, insistent, never letting God off the hook of God’s promises. In the New Testament Jesus fully encourages such praying and explicitly tells us that such boldness is a true expression of faith. (See Matthew 8, 5-13; 15, 21-28 and Luke 11, 5-8; 18, 1-8)

In this audacity we find ourselves growing closer into God’s promises, taking them more seriously, putting flesh to the words of God given to us to pray in the Psalms, allowing our bodies to breathe again the hope of the Spirit, the breath of God and find our way to a life of confident trust. Because we have experienced in prayer that God’s love is steadfast and true. Pray the final phrases of this Psalm, remembering to align your breathing to the rhythm of God’s Spirit, trusting that the words will do what they say.

*5 But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*

*6 I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

Prayer

“Lord Jesus, who by your incarnation became a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, graciously remember us who are yet walking in this vale of tears and on the way to your Kingdom through many tribulations. As you have promised to be with your people and to support them to the end, grant us your Spirit, your life-giving breath, the Spirit of joy and of peace, to comfort our hearts and the hearts of all afflicted people with your everlasting comfort. Amen” (Based on a prayer by Martin Luther)

Psalm 16

You do not give me up to Sheol (Verse 10)

Sometimes it feels as if God has given up on me, and when I look at myself, I can understand why: not much to stand up for anyway, is there? Have you ever felt like that? Or perhaps the people you love or the people you work with or those who work for you seem to give up on you – and they may have good reasons for it: a serious mistake you’ve made or a recurring habit that is harmful to others or yourself – a character flaw that you cannot seem to change. In our culture swamped with the idea that through “the power of positive thinking” you can make yourself and others “proud of YOU!” we miss the small and hidden signs of despair, of loneliness and a deep conviction in many people that they are not worthy enough for God to really care about them.

It is significant how often I meet with people who, after some caring conversation, blurt out to me that they never really feel worthy of going to Holy Communion, thinking that they should first attain to some level of holiness or goodness before they can dare to approach the Table of the Lord. What have we Christians been proclaiming that this is such a prevalent feeling? Perhaps the Christian Gospel has been too well “enculturated” that it has accepted the adage that acceptance has to be earned, that there is no such thing as a free lunch, that you only get what you deserve, not a cent more.

In the face of this “enemy” (to use the metaphor of the previous Psalm), Psalm 16 is a prayer for those of us who are afflicted by thoughts, feelings and often even experiences of rejection – where else should we run to for refuge but to God who is our only good?

I invite you to pray it, linking the individual phrases to your breathing again, allowing the Spirit of God, letting these words of trusting in God’s prevenient goodness touch all those places inside you that are wounded by the “enemy”, the voices inside or outside telling you that you are unacceptable and unworthy, the places also where you are tempted to “choose another god”, a more predictable god, a god that you can manipulate with our “quid pro quo” way of doing life.

¹ Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

² I say to the Lord, ‘You are my Lord;

I have no good apart from you.’

*³ As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,
in whom is all my delight.*

- ⁴ Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;
their drink-offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names upon my lips.*
- ⁵ The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.*
- ⁶ The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.*
- ⁷ I bless the Lord who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.*
- ⁸ I keep the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.*
- ⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.*
- ¹⁰ For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.*
- ¹¹ You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.*

What an incredible amount of confidence this Psalm expresses! This is not only because the psalm enables the reader to pull him- or herself from the pit of despair. Throughout, the focus remains on God's goodness, looking back at what God has already done and trusting that God will continue doing this saving, caring, uplifting work in the future.

The concreteness of what this prayer (in this sense "prayer" means the person doing the praying) has experienced under God's care is significant. The prayer talks about the land that has been given, the heritage received. God has provided the material stuff we need to live. These are not just "spiritual" matters (we should not allow such a division between spiritual and material reality, it is unbiblical) – but earthly matters of life and survival, earthly matters but imbued with God's grace, filled with God's presence – sacramental in a way. Growing up on a farm



in the Northern Cape I know what it means to have good soil to plant one's crops into. I often watched my father bending down low in the ploughed fields and filling both hands full of earth, lifting them up, examining the material intently, and even smelling it, his face a huge expression of pleasure. "It is good earth!" he would say, "it will yield good fruit!" God's intention with

Creation and Redemption is always Life, God's presence and God's work is Life. Read these verses again slowly, breathe them into your soul because the soul of the human being is God's breath, God's Spirit, God's Life in us – as we can learn from Genesis 2:7:

- ⁸ I keep the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.*
- ⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.*
- ¹⁰ For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.*

Notice how the experience of God's presence is embodied – heart, soul and body are encompassed by this source of Life. As this experience finds words in these verses the body-knowledge arises: "You do not give me up to *Sheol*" – God has not given up on me! In the presence of God death has no power over me.

- ¹¹ You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.*

Make these words your own, say them out loud and repeat them until they become part of who you are – a person created by God, living by the breath of God, in the presence of God, in the rhythm of God's wind breathing life into all of creation and therefore full of joy in the pleasures of Life for evermore.

Prayer

O Lord, you did not abandon your faithful one to the pit, but raised him up from the grave. Show me the path of life, as you have redeemed me as your own, so that I may receive the fullness of joy in your presence for evermore. Amen (Based on a prayer from *Celebrating Common Prayer, A Version of the Daily Office SSF*)

Psalm 24

Open up, so that the King of Glory can come in (Verse 7)

In a world that despises vulnerability and therefore encourages us to remain closed to and guarded against anything that may be strange, new, or different, hope has a difficult time surviving. We can readily agree that the world is in a mess and needs help – indeed salvation, desperately – but do we still have the guts to hope that something like that is really possible? Would we be willing to open up for such a change to happen?

Take any of the big topics that are currently endlessly being discussed. Take climate change, for example - apart from some denialists, most people would agree that it is an urgent problem that needs decisive action *now*. However, at climate summit after climate summit, the powerful people get away with their half-hearted attempts at addressing the problem. They seem to be more afraid of the fossil-fuel lobbies than of the already occurring disaster of irreversible damage to God's good creation. Consider the pandemic of gender-based violence, a world-wide scourge that has escalated to alarming virulence in South Africa. There are no signs of the culture being transformed by any of the interventions being implemented. Directly connected to this terror is the abuse of alcohol, where the good gift of wine, given to "gladden the human heart" (see Psalm 104:15), is turned into a substance consumed purely for the purpose of getting as drunk as possible. I have seen this on university campuses across South Africa and the emergency departments of all our hospitals can testify that the abuse of alcohol is the main reason for the serious harm, injury, accidents and deaths they have to deal with far beyond the point of exhaustion. Men in particular seem to think that their masculinity can be demonstrated best by how much alcohol they can "hold". And the drunker they get, the more abusive they become towards others. This is a vicious, seemingly unstoppable cycle.

Let me stop there lest I fall into despair. I do believe that you'll agree that these realities are a very serious offensive against all hope for change, unless we can hold on to the promised help that Psalm 24, the Christian Advent Psalm, extends to our desperately empty hands and hearts. After my description of our desperate situation above, I hope the boldness of these words becomes clear to us.

¹ *The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,*

the world, and those who live in it;

² *for he has founded it on the seas,*

and established it on the rivers.

There's no sign of this being true; in fact, there are people (individuals, corporations, governments and others) who claim that the earth belongs to them and that they can do with it as they please. Those who hold on to the truth of the earth being God's sacred gift to be tended and kept safe by humans as stewards are ridiculed as dreamers and utopians who do not understand the reality of the economy. This leaves nowhere for believers to turn to. We have to "ascend to the hill of the Lord", to go to God for help and dare to stand in his holy place. But can we dare doing that? Are we not so enmeshed in the human predicament and guilt that our hands are not clean, and our hearts are not pure either? No-one can claim to be clean and pure enough to be allowed onto the hill of the Lord.

³ Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?

And who shall stand in his holy place?

*⁴ Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.*

Perhaps that is why this Psalm has become the Advent Psalm – because the "hill of the Lord" changed location when the Man of Sorrows came to the earth and carried His cross up the hill outside the Holy City. There he was crucified among the unclean, the impure and the deceitful swearers of falsity. His death there is the only reason we can give for being allowed to ascend the hill of the Lord. Once we are there, the miracle of grace will be revealed.



*⁵ They will receive blessing from the Lord,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.*

*⁶ Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*

Earnestly seek the face of the God of Jacob, look at your world, your part in the problems of this world, and honestly stand before the God of Jacob. Discern how you should live ... knowing that the God of Jacob, the One Israel wrestled with to gain His blessing (Genesis 32), is facing you, looking at you with holy concern. Let us not kid ourselves, we're bound to get it wrong again, to fail to live up to even our own standards, not to mention the holy standards of God in justice and righteousness. But as we bumble along, having been awakened to our responsibility to seek God's face and to live under God's holy eyes – the final resolution of the trouble our world is in will be found, it will arrive triumphantly; it will be discovered in the Advent of the King of Glory.

*⁷Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.*

*⁸Who is the King of glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle.*

*⁹Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.*

*¹⁰Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory.*

The King of Glory is the One whose arrival on a steed of peace is celebrated on Palm Sunday in the liturgical year. He is the symbol of non-violence, welcomed by the very same crowd that just a few days later calls for his crucifixion. But the King of Glory is also welcomed during Advent; He is the One who comes as a new-born child, vulnerable and exposed to the harsh elements prevalent in the poverty-stricken community in which his incarnation takes place. Once again, we need to hear and rejoice as we pray these final lines of this Psalm that this King of Glory, though “strong and mighty”, goes where the strong and mighty of this world would never go. He goes to the weak, the downtrodden, the marginalised and excluded – and therein lies our only chance of help coming to us too, to our country, our violence ridden communities. Are we going to open up for this King of Glory? Pray this Psalm until your heart, your mind and your body say: YES!

Prayer

O Lord of Hosts, as we recite the words of this Advent Psalm, recreate us, give us open hearts, minds and bodies, so that your Son, Jesus our Redeemer, may come to us and dwell among us as the Prince of Peace and the King of Glory. Amen

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear...(Verses 1 and 2)

Psalm 46 has become famous as the “Psalm of Reformation Day”, the Psalm on which Martin Luther based his famous hymn “A mighty fortress is our God”. Let us pray it first – remembering to breathe in the rhythm of God’s Spirit as we pray.

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.*
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;*
- ³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*
- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.*
- ⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.*
- ⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.*
- ⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*
- ⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.*
- ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.*
- ¹⁰ ‘Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.’*
- ¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

Let's pray it again and experience some of the many re-orienting and life-saving words this Psalm gives to us.

The Psalm starts off by enticing us to make a very strong statement of trust: "God is our refuge and strength!" Then, even as we express this trust, the reason for our trust is revealed: "A very present help in trouble!" You see, that's it. There's trouble in the world, there's trouble in our lives, and we are in trouble! We're not living "the good life now"; no, we're stumbling along, barely getting through each day. We rarely live up to the goals and standards that God has plainly proclaimed for all humans in the Commandments and in the Sermon on the Mount. This Psalm is not just an expression of trust, of feeling comfortable in the faith. It is not based on an ensured sense of orientation; rather, it is clearly rooted in a prior experience of deep disorientation. Once upon a time we may have thought that all is well, that God is in control, and we are fine. However, we have also known trouble, we have failed in our responsibilities, we have not lived as trusting children of God.

Added to our own inadequacy is more trouble: the beautiful creation we live in is in tumult, fast changing into a desert. Mountains shake and tremble, waters roar and foam in destruction, and the very life on this planet is in danger beyond our imagining. And yet, courageously the Psalm-prayer insists: we will not fear! Why? Because "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

The Psalms are prayers that do not exclude any kind of human emotion or experience; they present the most realistic take on human life I have ever found – none of this "hiding the tough bits" that is so prevalent today. Life is viewed honestly and we learn to see ourselves and our situation, warts and all! And yet it does not lead to despair. Despair is honestly considered and expressed in many ways, as the realities humans face in the world are serious enough to make despair a real possibility. Through expressing this, the Psalm-prayers find themselves in a place where they can express and live in trust, despite of the despair we often face. The Psalm-prayers find themselves led to a place where trust can be expressed and lived out of in spite of the terrible despair we often face.

As we continue praying this Psalm, we find ourselves safely in the "city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High". This city has a gladdening stream, a river that delights all those who dwell there. What a beautiful image of living in God's presence. I'm pretty sure that these words are not only meant to be understood as referring to the Holy City of



Jerusalem with its temple. I believe these words are meant to be heard more as an existential description of a life lived in God's presence: God is in the midst of our lives, "The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge!" As "the nations are in uproar and the kingdoms totter", nothing is stable anymore. Life is extremely vulnerable. We have experienced this even more than usual in these two last years of living amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, we do not have to abandon hope and shrink away in fear. We can stand in trust, not because we're such heroes of the faith, but because God

is graciously with us.

As we continue with the Psalm, a marvellous change is engendered in us. As we let this trusting stance of the people of God become ours, we develop the honesty to observe. "Come and behold", the prayers say, see "the works of the Lord". "See what desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire." This speaks of God's powerful, warlike and violent intervention in the history of the world.

I have difficulty seeing such violent and destructive events in history and saying outright that God is behind it all. So much of it does not make sense – it's so arbitrary. If God can prevent wars and put an end to violence, why does God not do it all over the world? I don't know, but I recognise the deep trust and hope that is expressed in these words. It is a trust that does not relinquish the world to blind fate. It holds on to the belief that God is present in all the terrible events in the world – but how? I'm hesitant to make statements about the how, yet I find it compelling to believe that even in the muddled-up history of this planet God is there with us. And here I want to introduce a-historically the Gospel-proclamation that God entered history. He did not do so as a mighty and warlike God, but as a weak, vulnerable, mortal human being moving amongst the equally feeble and defenceless, alongside those who are struggling through life, struggling to make sense of the world – or even just struggling to remain sane and alive.

"Be still and know that I am God.

I am exalted among the nations,

I am exalted in the earth."

Be still. These words indicate the phrase: calm down! Let your anxiety not get the better of you, let go of the thoughts that are driving you mad, the fears that goad you to hyperactivity in self-preservation, which still results in self-loathing and despair. Just calm down and know! Know it, not with your brain power in over-drive, but know it in your heart, as you know that someone cares for you. Because you experience the compassion, know that God is God and that God is present here and now!

It's not so much a matter of thoughts, or of figuring out the existence and essence of God – that we cannot do. It's a matter of allowing God to be your God by holding still, by calming down, by surrendering all your efforts to grab hold of God, because you realise that God is holding you!

“Know that I am God” – and know that “I am exalted!” – Exalted!? Really? A crucified Galilean from Nazareth – screaming in agony to an absent God: “Why have you forsaken me!?” Yes, He is exalted, raised up as a sign and a promise: I am with you even when you are overcome with despair. How and why can I say this? How can we believe that the crucified Jesus is God with us – that poor wretch of a man dying outside the city abandoned even by his closest friends?

Out of my own understanding of strength, I cannot believe that God is with me in the midst of despair, and no amount of arguing will change that. I can only say it. I can only say it, I can only proclaim it because this Jesus was raised from death by God, was seen, heard, touched by and even dined with his followers. He had evening meals and breakfast with them, even joined them in snoek-braais on the beach – showing them his wounds – telling them: “Do not be afraid, I am with you.” You see, resurrection does not cancel out the cross, that lonely death on Golgotha. He still bore the wounds of the crucifixion, but the resurrection exalts that crucified man and proclaims that God was not absent there, proclaims that that is precisely where God is even to this very day. I too have been given the grace to experience that. In deep despair God did not abandon me. So let us pray it one more time:

“Be still and know that I am God.

I am exalted among the nations,

I am exalted in the earth.

The Lord of hosts is with us,

The God of Jacob is our refuge.” Amen

Psalm 84

Finding a home in God's house (Verses 3-4)

Have you ever wondered what it would feel like to be completely at home somewhere? Home, a place that feels just right, where there is no animosity or sense of danger, and you surrounded by peace and goodwill. Paradise! Does such a place exist? If we take the prayer of Psalm 84 seriously, then that place, the place that really deserves the name "Home", is the place in which we celebrate "divine services" – the House of God, the dwelling place of the living God of Israel.

Pray Psalm 84 slowly, linking each phrase to your breathing, letting the words form consciously as you say them with your mouth, your voice, your whole being. Allow your imagination to see and feel what you are saying. These words have creative power – they do what they say – remember, God's word spoke creation into being (Genesis 1). It can recreate you too.

- ¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!*
- ² My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.*
- ³ Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.*
- ⁴ Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.*
- ⁵ Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.*
- ⁶ As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.*

- ⁷ *They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.*
- ⁸ *O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!*
- ⁹ *Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.*
- ¹⁰ *For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.*
- ¹¹ *For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favour and honour.
No good thing does the Lord withhold
from those who walk uprightly.*
- ¹² *O Lord of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.*

It seems the original prayer of this Psalm was left at home when all the members of the faith community were on their regular pilgrimage to Jerusalem, on the “highways to Zion”. We do not know why the prayer could not go along with the brothers and sisters of the faith – perhaps an illness or another calamity prevented this person from joining the throng joyfully travelling to the place where the *Shekinah*, the presence of God dwelt. “I’d be at home there,” he knows, “I’d be safe as a bird in a nest, in that place, where I truly belong.”

The prayer of this Psalm longs for God’s presence, is homesick for that distant place, to which the brothers and sisters are traveling. He knows that, in that place, he can be who he really is, he can receive what he really needs, love, acknowledgement, acceptance, joy. “There I can be what God created me to be: a human being, a creature fully dependent on God and therefore not constantly plagued by fear, guilt and shame.”

With all his heart he longs to go to that place. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem was not just a pastime for the people of Israel, not an interesting holiday you went on when you could afford it and wanted to get away from the grim realities of life. Being a pilgrim was a way of life,

was part of their practices of faith, of going on an annual journey to discern God's ways, God's call, God's intention for them.

*“Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.”*

People who are on pilgrimage like this know that they cannot run away from life; their journey is not a flight from reality, but a search for something that they can face reality with, that gives them strength to shape their daily lives to live in God's presence.

We don't go on pilgrimages regularly anymore – however “going a pilgrimage” has become something of a fashion recently. Perhaps this can help us rediscover our lives as journeys of discernment. But I want to make a different suggestion, because most of us do not have the time nor the money to go on pilgrimages.



Let us learn to sing such songs of longing, of home-sickness, of yearning for a place where we feel at home with God. We need such songs in a world that has become so messy and broken, a world in which the wealth of a tiny group of people stands in stark contrast to a vast majority of people living in abject poverty, starving to death. A world in which the ample resources provided by our Creator are hoarded and exploited by a few by them until nothing but a wasteland remains. A world in which the very technology we have invented to make life easier, hurts and haunts many people with rising hatred, violence, and exclusion. Let us learn to sing in protest and opposition to such a world, let us learn to sing of a different, an alternative world, in which people can live, find a safe home for themselves and their children, shape their own lives according to their gifts and talents to rebuild this world as a home for all creatures to dwell in in safety.

Why this suggestion of singing such songs? The first reason is that this Psalm was also sung and prayed by someone who could not go on the pilgrimage. Secondly, as Christians, we do not have a sacred temple located in a specific place; we do not yearn for such a temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem, as Israel does. But we do have this yearning for a home, for the presence of God among us. The Gospel of John reminds us that the risen Jesus is the “new temple”, in whom God’s presence will be an earthly reality. It is a revolutionary thought: God’s presence in the world is not in a sacred location, but in a human being, one who wandered the earth without a place to lay down his head, one who loved people so inclusively that he was crucified for it. There God is present, John says, pointing to Jesus. Let us sing songs of longing for the home that can be created in Christian communities everywhere, in communities that have learnt to be aware of God’s presence in the weak, the vulnerable, the marginalised and those whose life is a constant struggle for survival. “For a day in such a community is better than a thousand elsewhere”, and “I would rather be a doorkeeper in such a house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness” (verse 10).

Prayer

Lord, our living and present God, sustain us on our journeys through life with the vision of your grace and glory, so that, as we journey in your presence, we may create home-communities for and with each other in the grace and presence of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.