

Lord from the Depths

Our Psalm this morning, Psalm 130, begins in a place which the writer calls "The Depths".

What are these depths,
These dark sunken places
Far from the light
Far from heaven
The places that you get to by sinking...

What are they?

They are the place from which the psalmist, the writer desperately wishes, needs one thing more than any other - to be heard by God.

"Oh Lord Hear my voice
Let your ears draw near
To the voice of my pleadings"

But there lurks a dark fear that the voice not be heard
That the deeps are too deep
Or that psalmist is to be punished, turned back by God,
That the depths are depths of his own making
There can be no sympathy for him being there

This deep anguish of soul
I am in the depths
God is not listening to me
And this is my own fault
And that only thing that is going to happen in my life
Is that I am going to keep on singing
Going to keep on calling and not be heard.

The cause of this sin lurks in the psalm,
It is a Hebrew word that is often translated with an English word that rightly captures and idea of nastiness and wrong - iniquity.

Iniquity is pure disturbances in who we are
It is the wrongness of lack of love and the choice to hate
It is bitterness
Iniquity is the thing we desperately hide from others
But know that it cannot be hidden from God.

I want to dwell in this iniquity a little further
It is more than doing bad things.
Because most of us are quite good at avoiding doing bad things.
We have trained ourselves well.

It is rather a corruption within us

A failure to love

It is the turbulence in our inner life that is the gap between what we present and whom we know ourselves to be

It is our basest of motives, it is our self-centredness

It is our restless lack of peace, it is our envy of others,

It is a profound dislocation from love

Iniquity

I find the writings of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton on this point very helpful. He talked about the difference between the false self - which is driven by pride, envy, resentment, and fear - and that is at the root of much of our iniquity - the determination to believe that this is not a world which is generous, and that I must grab and snatch (whilst not appearing to snatch and grab) what I can. But this is a poison because the false self is never content, and will always seek more.

The True Self, the self created in the image of God, is the one which is grown in love in God, it which lives with peace, which seeks what is good, and is prepared to live with loss, to follow the way of the Cross.

So iniquity at the deepest level is that which divides us from God, from our calling.

And response of God is one of deep distress at this disordered state. The word that the Bible uses is the word wrath, which is the true response of one who loves, to an estrangement brought about by a lie.

So this chasm, this emptiness, is what the Psalmist talks about, what Luther was tormented by.

And the Psalmist knows that this brings about a deep estrangement from God

Which are called the depths

It is a sense of loss of worth

A loss of intimacy

A loss of trust

And the temptation with the depths is to claw ourselves back out

By our own fervent strivings, our pretences

And this is utterly utterly futile

But still we keep doing it

But it is utterly futile

And whilst we try to get out of the sin

We become too prone to two other sins - the sin of pride - a false inflation of ourselves

And a superiority to others

And a determination to hide who we are

And instead of rising to the surface

We sink further into the depths.

No wonder that the bible reaches for its most destructive, disturbing images to describe this experience of the power of iniquity or sin,
It reaches for the most dehumanising, constricting, hope defeating image it can find
The image it reaches for is that of slavery
It speaks repeatedly of the slavery of sin.

And we cry ever more for some intimation of being within God
"With you there is forgiveness"

And then we have the yearning
"I wait for God" - the idea is of a kind of tension
"I wait for God, my soul waits for God"
"More than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning"

This is a deep deep yearning for God.

Someone who famously yearned with this psalm,
For a deeper intimation of God
For knowing what that forgiveness meant
For this forgiveness seems the most unnatural, response from God
For more likely are we that we are sent into the depths, destroyed

Someone who famously yearned with this psalm
With a yearning and pain, and longing
Was a 21 year old German man entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt
His name was Martin, and he strived and strived and strived for this healing
He fasted, he confessed, he went to communion
And yet still he found himself yearning and yearning and yearning
He found himself without hope.

All the striving to get out of the depths seemed to cause him to sink even further

"I was a good monk - if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I" - he later wrote.

But the psalm speaks of waiting, and yearning, like a taught bow string

For what the psalm calls the redemption, the plenteous redemption of God
Oh God, with you there is redemption
Come and give it to me
Oh Israel put your hope in the Lord

And eventually that waiting and yearning took the monk to the book of Romans.

And to a phrase that struck him, that probed at him, whose meaning he could not determine

"The righteousness of God"
And he realised at this moment in his striving

That the righteousness of God was a the movement of God towards him
To make him, through sheer grace and mercy, just, right, true, infused with the goodness of God

Righteousness both describes the action of God in doing this
And the effect of God in making us new

For Luther he said that he felt himself to have been reborn and gone through open doors into
paradise.

You hear the breathless excitement of Paul, words that Luther would have read in Romans 3, Paul
breathlessly writing

“But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God is revealed
Although the law the prophets witness to it
The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ
For all who believe, for there is no distinction [between Jew and Gentile]

“We have all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God
Being righteoused/justified gifted his grace
Through the redemption [there is that Psalm 130 hope] that is in Christ Jesus
Whom God put forward as an atoning sacrifice/propitiation to be received by Faith”

Romans, and specifically Romans 3, was the response that Martin Luther needed to his pain in
Psalm 130 and the articulation of hope in Psalm 130.

I want to say something about that cluster of verbs in Romans 3, which defy syntax but still we
know what they mean

The words borrow a raft of imagery which demonstrate the righteousness of God, to bring us in
To move towards us,
To restore relationship
To wipe away iniquity.
To buy us back from the *slavery* of sin.

There is a richness of imagery in these passages - depths, waiting, watchmen, redemption,
propitiation, expiation, gift, forgiveness, in all of these passages.

I feel that Paul is like an artist, a storyteller, a poet in these passages, drawing on every image to
pull us into this central truth about the move of God to restore us to rightness, the rightness of
God which leads to our rightness.

I want to share three images with you this morning. Which I hope can pull us into this imagery,
and perhaps allow us to sense what God has done for us in Christ.

I want us to sense that this is for us, that we are forgiven, no matter,
And that this is unconditional gift
Given to us in Jesus Christ.

The first illustration is a story told about the remarkable Mayor of New York from 1935-1943 - serving an unprecedented three terms - Fiorello La Guardia, the little flower, the one after whom La Guardia airport is named. He was a short, flamboyant, pugnacious man, it was like when he became mayor, he found the role he was made for, to embody in himself all the aspiration and disquiet of that great and terrible city New York.

There was at that time a little known statute in New York, that the mayor was chief magistrate and was entitled to sit as judge. No previous mayor had ever exercised this statute, but La Guardia was different and shocked everyone one morning on West 100th Street Police station where he told the dumbstruck magistrate to find a seat in the courtroom and he took over - it was a bad morning for those brought before him. One defendant, charged with opening a string of slot machines, expected the usual fine. Instead Guardia sent him to jail. He later posed for photographers, with a menacing smile, and a sledgehammer next to these machines which in his view did so much to dissipate the energies and pennies of the populace. On another occasion he spotted a bus driver going through a red light, had the unfortunate driver hauled before the court and had him pay a \$2 fine.

But one day in winter, a bitterly cold day, La Guardia was doing his occasional stint as magistrate, when they brought in a trembling old man charged with stealing a loaf of bread.

After hearing the case, he turned to the man and said "I've got to punish you, the law makes no exception, I can do nothing but sentence you to a fine of ten dollars", but then the famously strict magistrate did something that completely shocked the court.

He took his famous sombrero hat off his head, and took from his own pocket \$10 into the hat, and then he turned to the court and said "furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this court room 5 cents for living in a town where a man has to steal a loaf of bread in order to eat. Mr Bailiff - collect the fines and give them to the defendant".

Here this story, which speaks of the judge who defends rightness, but also acts with mercy to pay the fine for us himself - this is what Paul means by the redemption in Christ Jesus, the buying back, the cost of giving which God does. This is what is meant by the image of atonement or propitiation - God himself entering into the pain, the wrath, the wrongness of sin, and paying its price by paying the price himself.

The second story comes from the screen writer Frank Cottrell Boyce - a wonderful writer and human being, a very strong Catholic, who amongst other things wrote the script for the Olympic Opening Ceremony at London 2012.

He comments that all the stories that we write about, in the end require some kind of victory, some kind of triumph. The human instinct of resolution, demands that the bad guy is brought down, that the bandit gets his just desserts. There is a natural sense of justice that says that this cannot be avoided, cannot be annulled. It speaks to something deep within us that says that wrong doing must be addressed, cannot be left go, yes - must be punished.

There is a dramatic rule that Cottrell-Boyce points to, which is well known to dramatists, and is called the law of Chekov's gun - the law of Chekov's gun is that in a play or story you show the gun in the first or second act. It's usually a gun in someone's desk, or hidden somewhere. But in

act 1 or 2 you show the gun. And then in act 4 someone must fire the gun. That is the rule. To satisfy the audience you must fire the gun. The potential for violence must be demonstrated, and that violence must be enacted at the end - and here is the problem - very often the violence is portrayed as healing, that by shooting the gun the baddy is got rid of, and the problem is solved. You've got to pull the gun.

Now Cotterill-Boyce says that it is very hard to write a play or a film about forgiveness, because to write about forgiveness, the gun must not be fired. And this leaves the audience feeling empty, there is something in us that needs that gun to be fired. But if you fire the gun you are going to perpetuate the myth of redemptive violence and you leave no space for true forgiveness. How do you tell a story that satisfies and forgives. This is almost impossible.

Except this is what God does, because what God does is takes the violence, but takes it into himself, and also takes God's demand for satisfaction, into God's self, and somehow in the mystery of the Cross, allows this to be turned from a desire for more violence into total cleansing, forgiveness, newness. This is what is meant by this word propitiation here, the taking of God of all the disturbance, all the need for a resolution, the firing of the gun, and God takes it into himself, so that it is taken away. And thus the rightness of God is preserved.

The final story comes from my friend Susan who is a minister in Arbroath, and speaks to me sometimes of her family, which is a farming family, and in whom there are lots of tensions between Dad, her, and her two brothers. All sorts of historic wrongs, and disappointments.

And a few years ago, about ten years ago, Susan had had enough of the family disputes, and the underlying resentments. And got her whole family together and asked them to write down everything that was good about each other. So they did this, and people realised that in the act of writing down there was a whole lot more about each other that they appreciated, than they had previously realised.

But then after this, and all this nice stuff, Susan's Dad turned to her and said "Now, can we write down all the things that we don't like about each other".

And I expected maybe something like

"Yes, now we are ready to do this, now that we have written down the good things"

Or some way of addressing the past, or perhaps seeking to avoid the difficult things.

But Susan said

"No, we are not going to do that, because if you were to read all the things that your sons find difficult about you, you would never be able to cope, and you would never be able to speak to them again"

Sometimes the list is too difficult, for anyone, even a Father to address, it needs some way of being put away, of eve - and I use this word very advisedly - being forgotten.

That I think is what is meant by the line in Psalm 130

"Lord, if you kept a count of sins, who could stand"

The word is actually guard or keep

"Lord, if you guarded sins, kept them, who could stand"

We couldn't. No one could. They have to be let go.

And that is what happens in Jesus' one act of dying for us
The sins are let go,
So that we now can stand.

In Hebrews, God says to the people
"I will be merciful to their iniquities and I will remember them no more" (Her 8:12).

This is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ
May God through his Spirit teach us this deep truth
To know what Jesus has done for us and achieved for us

He has redeemed
He has given grace
He has forgiven
He has atoned
He has not remembered
Our sins are gone
Let us live in newness and forgiveness
And in Gratitude
Of Jesus Christ who died for me
And died for you

AMEN