Defend Your Cause, O God

A Sermon on Psalm 74

The Psalms are Israel's hymnbook, and like many a hymn they have found their place in the Bible because they have proved themselves to be of value in all the different situations in which God's people find themselves. They generally avoid anything that would allow us to pin them down to too specific a time and place. They are – for the most part – timeless pieces of writing, roomy garments which we put on and make our own when singing to God.

This psalm is different. Unlike most psalms, it bears the impress of a very specific moment in Israel's history, and must have been composed in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 586 BC. It is full of raw emotion, of bewilderment and frank disbelief that God should have allowed such a thing to befall his own people. The tone is set right from the very first verse:

> O God, why have you rejected us forever?
> Why does your anger smoulder against the sheep of your pasture?

The poet speaks of his people as the sheep of God's pasture, but God behaves here not as a shepherd but as a malevolent beast. Israel knew the LORD to be a God 'slow to anger,' or 'long of nostrils', as the Hebrew more picturesquely puts it, but here his anger smoulders, his nostrils smoke like a dragon settling in to feast on its prey.

Verses two and three then ask God to intervene, each verse beginning with an urgent imperative. The poet asks God to remember his people, and he grounds his plea in the long history God has shared with Israel: they are 'the nation he purchased long ago,' 'the people of his inheritance, whom he redeemed,' on whose mountain 'he dwelt.' Whether bringing his people out of slavery in Egypt or dwelling in their midst in the sanctuary upon Mt Zion, God has bound himself to the existence of this people.

But now the sanctuary lies in ruins, and who can say whether it will ever be rebuilt? Verses five to eight plunge the reader into the chaotic scenes accompanying the Temple's destruction. God's foes descend upon the Temple like Vikings upon a mediaeval abbey: they hack into the carved panelling of the Temple walls like men trying to cut their way through dense forest; they roar like lions; they set up their victorious battle standards in the very place where Israel ought to have felt most secure. They burn and they defile.

For those who survive among the ashes, there awaits—silence. No one is left who can interpret the disaster, or say when life might resume its course. Judah's great prophets are far away in Babylon or Egypt. God displays no interest in avenging himself on the men who defiled his Temple: his right hand rests in the fold of his garment.

But—and here the poet shifts poignantly from first person plural to first person singular—who is this God? 'God is my king from long ago; he brings salvation upon the earth.' The aloof, wrathful, inscrutable, silent God of verses one to eleven is, nevertheless, 'my' God, 'my king.' How can this be?

The one hundred and fifty psalms in our Bibles are divided into five smaller collections, or books. Many of the psalms in Book III, the book to which our psalm belongs, have in common the theme of faith and experience. They answer the question: What happens when the most cherished tenets of your faith butt up against some of the harsher realities of life? When the wicked prosper? When one's life is overtaken by futility or engulfed in terror? When the darkness is one's only friend? Many of these psalms seem to have been composed in response to the destruction of the temple and the humiliation Jews experienced in the catastrophe of 586. They testify to a sense of spiritual dislocation, of being unmoored from everything that had previously given shape to the life of God's people. For the writer of this psalm, the question became: How can I reconcile the angry, distant God of my present experience with the God who had drawn near to my people in innumerable acts of salvation and who had placed his name in the Temple on Mount Zion? Is he this, or is he that? Who is God—really?

Rather than trying to straddle these two pictures of God, the poet delves, if possible, even further into this strange contradiction over the next five verses. Verses 13 to 17 execute the literary equivalent of a cinematic jump cut. For those of you who know the films, they resemble the moment when the murderous apes at the beginning of Stanley Kubrick's *2001* suddenly give way to a shot of a spacecraft, or, better still, the moment when the grieving mother in Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* looks up into a tree and all of a sudden Malick takes his audience back into the early moments of the universe with footage gathered by the Hubble Telescope. In a religious culture founded upon preserving and handing down stories of how God had rescued his chosen people in the past, the poet reaches beyond that history, beyond human history, even, and takes his listeners back to the beginning of time itself, when God created the world.

Now, some of the poet's creation language bears an obvious resemblance to ideas found in Genesis 1. God creates day and night, and populates them with sun and moon. And as we find in Genesis 9, the seasons, too, belong to God's good act of bringing order to the world he

creates. Some of the imagery, however, feels quite remote from God's orderly work in Genesis 1, and may not even be recognisable to us as creation language on a first reading. Listen with me again to verses 13 and 14:

> It was you who split open the sea by your power;
> You broke the heads of the monster in the waters.
> It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan
> And gave it as food to the creatures of the desert.

Here God brings order, not by speaking the world into existence, but through a violent struggle with cosmic adversaries: the Sea, and the many-headed sea-dragon, Leviathan. Strange as this idea may seem to us, however, it seems to have been common to a number of Ancient Near Eastern cultures which also possessed creation epics in which the chief god creates the world by destroying a dragon, then fashioning the universe from its carcase.

Why delve back in this way into the earliest moments of the universe? And why make use of a mythology common to the peoples of the Ancient Near East, when the writers of the Bible are usually so hostile to mythological ways of thinking? Here are two thoughts. In the first place, and as I've already flagged, talk of God's power in fashioning the universe simply deepens the enigma that this God – *you*, אתה, as the poet says so emphatically at the beginning of verses 13, 14 and 15 – *you* are the God who allowed the Babylonians to run riot in the Temple. In the second place, appropriating the mythology of a rival nation may have been a way of resisting the tendency to equate a god's power with the military successes of his or her people. It wasn't Baal who crushed the Sea, as in Canaanite myth; it wasn't Marduk who slew the sea monster, as in Babylonian epic: no – it was the LORD. Not for a moment does the poet countenance the idea that the LORD God who made the heavens and the earth has somehow been subdued by Marduk or any other member of the Babylonian pantheon. And the militaristic idiom of a struggle between gods at the dawn of creation seems well suited to driving home the point, even as it deepens the mystery as to why the LORD of Hosts, Israel's Warrior God, has allowed the troops of a foreign nation to plant their standards in his court. God himself has abandoned his Temple and his people. But why?

Again, this psalm surprises. As readers of the Old Testament, we are accustomed to thinking of the destruction of Temple and nation as God's righteous judgement upon the Israelites for violating the Covenant he had made with them at Sinai. That, very clearly, is the verdict of prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel and historians such as the writer of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. But in this psalm, if there is to be talk of breaking a covenant, or violating the terms

of a treaty, then the poet's finger seems to be pointed not at the Israelites, but at the LORD: 'Have regard for your covenant,' the poet pleads in verse 20, positioning himself and his countrymen not as sinners, but as those who have been oppressed, as poor and needy, as a dove fluttering helplessly in the maw of a wild and ravenous beast. Quite emphatically, and without equivocation, the poet aligns his and his people's cause with the cause of God. For the poet, when God's people are humiliated, then God himself is dishonoured. The enemies of Israel are God's enemies. If we think of this psalm in terms of rhetoric, as a piece of writing that seeks to persuade God to do something, then a large part of its rhetorical strategy is getting God to acknowledge that his cause is bound up in Israel's cause. Their dishonour is his dishonour. What are we to do with this idea? Perhaps even more problematic for us will be just what the poet wants God to do. He wants respite for God's people, yes, but he also unabashedly wants the destruction of Israel's enemies. What are we to do with that?

I've now raised in quick succession three distinct, if intertwined, issues that will trouble many of us who read this psalm today. Let's work through them in turn.

In the first place, why does this psalm, in striking contrast to so much else in the Bible, fail to see in the Temple's destruction God's judgement on an unfaithful people? Perhaps a big part of the answer has to do with the closeness of our author to the events he describes. In the Book of Lamentations, which was also composed in the years immediately following the razing of the Temple, we also see a relative lack of insistence on Israel's disobedience as the cause of her sufferings. There is also the distinct possibility that Jeremiah and Ezekiel, so important for our understanding of the exile as punishment for covenant unfaithfulness, represented something of a minority report in their day. For the author of Lamentations, for example, the visions of Judah's prophets had proved to be 'false and worthless'; they had not exposed Judah's sins 'so as to ward off captivity'; the prophecies they gave were 'false and misleading.' Jeremiah and Ezekiel are the prophets whose words were preserved in our Bibles precisely because they were the ones to have been proved correct by the passage of time. But in their time, as is clear enough from their own writings, the message they had been given to preach was not one that people wanted to listen to.

Secondly, how are we to evaluate the poet's contention that when God's people are dishonoured, so is God himself? How can he dare to equate the cause of God's people with God himself? Now, at one level, of course, the truth of this is something we all feel. We cringe if we see someone who publicly identifies himself as a Christian doing or saying something that's out of line with God's Word. We ourselves feel ashamed when we let people down at work, or

members of our own family, worrying whether their legitimate frustration with us will make it less likely for them to seek out the God we claim to serve. And that's the appropriate thing for us to feel. But at another level, it feels somewhat ridiculous that the One who made the universe should allow himself to be affected by anything that you or I might do. And, of course, it's true that God is worthy of honour, regardless of whether people honour him or not. And yet, the author of this psalm knew exactly what he was doing, because God *has* chosen to identify himself so closely with us that it his honour *is* impugned when his people look bad before others. *Why* has done this? Because he loves us.

The week my dad got out of hospital with his cancer diagnosis, I flew up to spend the week with him in his house in Molong. It took me right until the end of that week to have the conversation I'd been wanting to have all that time. I told him that God loved him, and that he could know that because God had sent his own Son to die for him. Dad said quietly, 'Why should God want to have anything to do with me?'

And why *should* God want to have anything to do with us? And yet he does. So closely does he choose to identify himself with us that he sends his own Son in human flesh to live as one of us and die the death we deserved to die in our stead. He makes our cause his own. He takes on the shame that properly belongs to us. And he does this because he loves us.

And what of the third of the questions I said this poem might raise for people like us? What are we to make of the poet's frank desire that God destroy the people who had done such harm to Judah? Here we do well to read our poet closely, and with compassion. We read compassionately when we recognise that this is a poem written in the dark, *in extremis*. The author pictures himself as a wounded animal. Reading this poem as a white Australian, in a country which hasn't been attacked in my or my parents' lifetimes means that when I read this poem it requires of me an imaginative leap. But there are many people in the world who need to make no such leap; when they read this poem they can find in it an anger and an indignation that they will understand from personal experience. Anger is a dangerous and troubling emotion and we are right to try never to act in anger, but there *are* times when anger and deep resentment are appropriate things to feel.

Secondly, we read our poet closely when we notice what he is *not* saying, as well as what he is. He is *not* committing himself to avenging himself on the people who had done this to him. What he *is* doing is entrusting judgement into the hands of God. The poet isn't teaching non-resistance, and he certainly isn't trying to excuse or downplay what the Babylonians have done to

his people. Rather, he is asking God to bring them to justice. And that remains a legitimate prayer for all who suffer wrongdoing—including Christians.

Let's pray:—

Heavenly Father, you are the Lord of heaven and earth. We pray for all victims of violence: that you would make their cause your own and that the poor and needy of the earth would praise your name. Father, we pray for ourselves: help us to honour you in our lives and words. Give us words to say to you when we are perplexed and overwhelmed. Thank you for your love for us, and that in Jesus you have made our cause your own. In His name, Amen.