

18th Sunday after Trinity, Year C

Psalm 91

12 Like a sword through my bones,
my enemies have mocked me:
while they ask me all day long 'Where now is your God?'
13 Why are you so full of heaviness, my soul:
and why so unquiet within me?
14 O put your trust in God:
for I will praise him yet, who is my deliverer and my God.
From Psalm 42

At first glance Psalm 91 seems a bit like a protective song. It promises protection from the fowler's trap and from the word that destroys. It wards off the terror of the night and the arrow that flies in the day, the pestilence that walks in the darkness and the plague that destroys at noon. It even promises that in rough places you will not strike your foot against a stone, but be carried clear as if borne on the hands of angels. But when we take the psalm as a whole it goes well beyond the bounds of song of protection. The protection it speaks of is for one who lives extremely close to God Most High and utterly trusts in him. The promises, you might say, are for the one who is in the bosom of the Father, or as the opening words have it:

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.'
For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

These are certainly not random assurances, offering luck that people still seek through a mascot for a car or football team. The promises in the psalm respond to an extraordinary love and trust. God says at the end of the psalm:

Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honour them.
With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

You may remember this having been said before, or this might be the first time you'll hear it, but the psalms have been the 'prayer book' and the 'hymn book' of the church for centuries. The psalms are also, if you like, the 'prayer book' of Jesus. It's not always immediately obvious, but the psalms have had a deep and lasting effect on the life of Jesus. His life is constantly framed by these songs and poems to God. They provide depth and colour, background and direction for so much of what he does and says. Indeed one of the greatest examples is when on Palm Sunday we hear part of Psalm 118, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord". That line from the Psalm is a trigger for a spontaneous recitation of the whole Psalm which sings of *victory*. Thus, it naturally forms part of Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem. Psalm 118 also has the great line that so naturally speaks of Jesus: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." The psalms are so clearly part of the announcement of God's kingdom – to know them and know them well is to come to closer to Jesus. To come closer to the spirituality that gave him strength.

He doesn't take the promises of the psalms lightly either. His work wasn't going to be an easy triumph. His temptation in the wilderness has the accuser, Satan, use words from Psalm 91 against him – why not prove yourself by jumping from the top of the Temple?

God will command his angels to bear you up, so that you shall not strike your foot against a stone.

Jesus knew that would be a false way, without real trust. He also knew that his way of closeness to the Father in genuine trust would be a way of vulnerability, and so of suffering to the death. All that loving protection pictured by the psalm was to be hidden in a terrible mystery, to shine forth only beyond the cross.

And what a challenge this is for us as followers of Christ! United to him, we can take the glowing words of the psalm to ourselves. With him we nestle in the shadow of the Almighty, who covers us and shelters us. Through him we know the divine faithfulness that not only protects us but wards off evil. We too are carried by angels over stony places. When we call on God, he is with us to deliver us.

But for us, too, these promises are not to be taken shallowly. Their truth will sometimes be hidden. Our love of God and our trust are proved in patience and in hope that reaches beyond the crosses of this world. It will often seem too hard a way for us. It is only possible in the grace of Christ. With him beside us, we too can stand against temptation, in the face of those enigmas and contradictions that hide the protecting love of God. His hand in ours, we can follow the lantern through the darkness. Then at last we too will be satisfied, filled with God's salvation.